

# Libraries, literacy and technology in the Centre

**Kym Ritchie, teacher-librarian  
and computer co-ordinator,  
Yirara College, Alice Springs**



*Rosena Leo, deep in concentration in  
the computer lab*

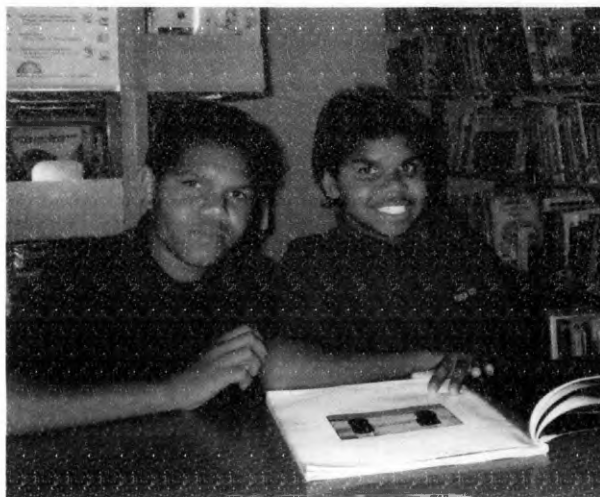
**Y**irara College is situated eight kilometres south of Alice Springs. It is a boarding school for Aboriginal students from remote bush communities around central Australia. Students come from places as widely separated as Tarlton Downs near the Queensland border, Daly River in the north, and Docker River near the Western Australian border (and just about anywhere in between!) They range in age from twelve years up to about twenty, and come from about fifteen different language groups. For most students English is their second, third or even fourth language! All of the teaching here is in English, so, as well as learning English, they have to learn in English.

Since 1993, the school has been owned and operated by the Finke River Mission of the Lutheran Church of Australia. However, the school is the result of a three way partnership between the Lutheran Church, governments (Territory and Federal) and the Aboriginal people of central Australia. The Governing Council of Yirara College contains about half Aboriginal members. These Aboriginal parents have determined that it is our role to teach their children English and how to survive in mainstream Australian society; it is their role to teach their Aboriginal language and culture.

The college library is well-stocked with books, videotapes, audio cassettes and kits. These have been selected to support the curriculum and provide recreational reading for the staff and students. The curriculum is broad and students literacy levels range from Year

1 to Year 10, so we need to have quite an extensive range of material.

Attached to the library is a computer room, with twenty-five computers running Windows95 and networked to a central file server. Students have access to about a hundred computer programs, graded according to their literacy level. The major purpose is to help students improve their literacy in English. Students use word processors and desktop publishing to publish stories and projects. Drawing packages are available for technical drawing classes.



*(l-r) Norman Hagan and Jamie Walker enjoy a book in the library*

Each computer is in a small space, partitioned from the next one by a low screen. This ensures privacy, as students hate to make mistakes. The sound from each computer is channelled through headphones to the students.

This helps students with hearing problems and makes the room a quiet place to work! The headsets have a microphone built in, so students can talk

to the teacher at the front desk. The image on each student's screen can be viewed on a monitor on the front desk. So from the front desk, the teacher can monitor the progress of the class. Instructing the whole class is also possible. The setup is like a cross between a computer and a language laboratory.

Aboriginal students take to computers fairly quickly. Using a computer can make a mundane task like practising spelling much more interesting! Like most adolescents, the students are willing to experiment and take risks (in private!). Because they learn well through visual means, the graphical user interface of a computer program is particularly suitable.

We are also connected to the Internet — our e-mail address is [yirara@topend.com.au](mailto:yirara@topend.com.au) — although we have not used electronic communications much. However, I can see e-mail being used to encourage 'writing for a purpose' to a pen pal in another school or country.

As teacher/librarian, I have done some searching on the Internet for students and teachers. I hope to train more teachers and students to use the Internet as a further source of the information they need in their life-long learning.

Ours is a very different library, serving a possibly unique clientele, using many different media in an attempt to give our students the ability to choose and use the parts of non-Aboriginal culture appropriate to their needs. Yirara College is an interesting and challenging place to work. ■