

# 21<sup>st</sup> century literacy ... still no single measure

Dr Alan Bundy

Just a decade ago saw the release of the first national survey on adult literacy in Australia. *No single measure* (Canberra, DEET, 1989) defined literacy as:

*Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.*

The survey recognised that there are many types of literacy, and that 'function in society' is relative to individual needs.

*Prose literacy* was defined as 'the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from text that include editorials, news stories and the like'

*Document literacy* was defined as 'the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in job applications or pay slips, bus schedules, maps, tables, indexes'

*Quantitative literacy* was defined as 'the knowledge and skills needed to apply arithmetic operations ... such as balancing a cheque book, figuring out a tip, completing an order form or determining the amount of interest from a loan advertisement'

*No single measure* found that many of the 1496 adults surveyed had difficulties in one or more of these literacies and that literate and illiterate people are not two distinct categories. Its author, Rosie Wickert, suggested that at least two clear messages came from the survey

- Parents and other community members have a vital role to play in promoting literacy acquisition by creating the opportunities for positive early literacy experience; and
- The maintenance of literacy would seem to be related to the continued active use of literacy, that is, what is significant about *document literacy* is that most documents require some *action*. Document literacy is active literacy.

The year after the release of *No single measure* was International Literacy Year (ILY) and saw a major supporting initiative by ALIA's Public Library and Literacy Sections. On 2 April 1990 Margaret Whitlam, in her capacity as chairperson of the National Consultative Council for ILY, opened the conference *Libraries and literacy: read all about it*. The proceedings [Available from Auslib Press PO Box 622 Blackwood SA 5051 (also published as *Australasian public li-*

*braries and information services* 3(3) Sept 1990] of that conference are still a good read, with eighteen papers which explore the issues and responses to them by a range of public libraries in particular. As vice president of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy, Rosie Wickert in her paper suggested that the implications of these issues

*...whether you are teacher librarians, public librarians, academic librarians — are many, because you are among the 'frontliners', the few professions who have direct contact with the public and can initiate more. Who, if we act together may be able to achieve something in the quest for a more literate Australia.*

However defined, literacy is — inescapably and importantly — an issue for libraries and the profession. The question is, over the last ten years have libraries and librarians acted together with others in that 'quest for a more literate Australia'?

The broad intent has certainly been there, as conveyed in ALIA's *Statement on libraries and literacy*. This was adopted in 1979 and amended in 1996, and includes the concern of the profession 'for those who lack the skills necessary to make appropriate use of communication resources ... a natural outcome of libraries' educationally-oriented role'. Has the reality met the rhetoric? In some outstanding instances, yes, as contributions to this issue of *inCite* demonstrate. And anyone who attended Heather Fisher's paper on family literacy at the Adelaide biennial conference would have been most impressed by what has been achieved at Gosford City Library in New South Wales, with major support from the State Library of NSW and *Reader's digest*.

Yet, overall, libraries have a very long way to go before their full potential for support of a literate Australia is achieved. Consider, for example, that of the 533 independent public library services in Australia only fifty-four claim to have an adult literacy program, and consider that only 257 provide that most basic of reading supports, storytelling (*Directory of Australian public libraries* 5<sup>th</sup> ed Adelaide, Auslib Press 1999). The reasons for these major deficiencies can largely be attributed to sheer lack of professional staff with the knowledge and time to develop and promote such programs, and perhaps also the lack of reference to the issue in the technology dominated curricula of library schools.

Ironically, it is the technology which has helped bring to the fore an issue well described in the March 1999 issue of *Smarts*, that fine journal of the Commonwealth Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (available free from the Department, PO Box 596, Fyshwick 2609). In describing the Australian Centre for Youth Literature to be launched at the *Reading matters* conference in the State Library of Victoria on 14 May, Janet Miller asks the question whether technology is reducing the importance of reading and suggests that the

*... flood of highly accessible information puts increasingly greater demands on a young person's ability to read, understand and analyse than in any previous era*

Which leads nicely into the latest literacy — one which is arguably inclusive of all others — and which will endure through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Information literacy* is the ability to recognise when information is needed, and to identify, locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information. The term was coined in 1970 by a non-librarian. It confirms that the definition of literacy itself has changed over decades, but has retained as its core the ability to function well in society.

Information literacy is no passing fad — it is being pursued vigorously in many countries including the United States, Canada, South Africa, Singapore and New Zealand. And Australia is well to the fore, with the fourth ALIA sponsored national information literacy conference to be held in December (convener Irene Doskatsch phone 08 8302 4447 fax 08 8302 4695, e-mail irene.doskatsch@unisa.edu.au). In its booklet *21<sup>st</sup> century literacy* the American Library Association describes literacy as one of its five key action areas for the next century. ALIA has yet to make a similar meaningful commitment. If it does not do so as a major plank of its advocacy program for the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it will deny a central part of our profession's unique societal, educational, economic and democratic mission.

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