

# ▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

## Integrated approaches to teaching adult literacy in Australia: A snapshot of practice in community services

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▶ **PRACTICE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY** instruction has broadened and deepened over recent decades, as has the conceptual base underpinning emerging practice. This change has resulted in the growth of 'integrated training', in which the acquisition of literacy skills are 'built in' to broader skills development, and where literacy learning is placed in authentic and real-life settings.

In Australia the major development has been the integration of adult language and literacy education into vocational education and training (VET), and specifically into workplace and work-related training. While this is only one way in which literacy training has become an integrated discipline, it is an important one, as new ways of thinking about how language and literacy is taught have coincided with fundamental policy change in the VET sector.

### ▶ Concept of the integrated approach

The development of national training packages presented an opportunity to integrate language, literacy and numeracy explicitly into industry standards. However, this has not meant that literacy standards are sufficiently specific, and research has suggested the need for greater consistency across training packages and clearer guidelines for both their developers and practitioners in understanding how to use them.

The extent to which language, literacy and numeracy is delivered is dependent on the ability of facilitators and assessors to interpret training packages and to develop appropriate teaching and learning strategies.

The complexity of these issues makes it important to gain a better understanding of what actually happens in Australia when putting integrated literacy into practice, especially in the workplace. How is literacy conceptualised in practice by registered training organisations? What literacy practices are developed in an integrated approach? What teaching and learning strategies are employed? What are the key factors which might describe the 'integrated model' of adult literacy delivery?

### ▶ The research

The research used a qualitative methodology, combined with a historical overview of adult literacy, language and numeracy education and the development of competency-based curriculum. Three workplace learning sites delivering the Community Services and Health Training Package were also examined.

### ▶ The findings

The study identified the use of integrated practices in the delivery of the Community Services and Health Training Package. Facilitators saw the teaching of language, literacy and numeracy as a continuum, where different levels of knowledge are taught as required.

The research verified that the extent of integration of language, literacy and numeracy with vocational competencies depended on the facilitator's ability to understand training packages and to develop appropriate teaching and learning strategies. For some, actually understanding the packages was a challenge.

There was little difference in the strategies adopted by specialist literacy and language teachers, and generalist vocational facilitators. However, industry specialist teachers recognised the importance of both technical and language skills and tended not to differentiate them in delivery. All facilitators recognised that many students need to be supported through simulated approaches, and all integrated 'learning to learn' strategies.

## ▶ Implications for policy and practice

Professional development is extremely important. Both industry specialists and literacy specialists have advantages from their backgrounds, but each needs to acquire some of the other's skills.

There are policy implications for funding models that do not provide for specialist professional development, leaving registered training organisations to make commercial decisions about levels of support required by learners. In some instances, specialist funding is restricted by type or level of program or trainee.

The importance of support materials was highlighted, especially as some facilitators rely on these rather than on the training packages themselves.

The following features were identified as central to successful integrated models:

- using a constructivist approach, which acknowledges that learning is affected by the context in which it is taught as well as by students' beliefs and attitudes
- developing an explicit model of language
- using a multidisciplinary approach
- providing a framework for describing language, literacy and numeracy
- conducting an analysis of training packages and workplace context
- ensuring the capacity to identify critical points of intervention
- using direct instructional activities
- considering the needs of learners.

The full report of *Integrated approaches to teaching adult literacy in Australia: A snapshot of practice in community services*, by Rosa McKenna and Lynne Fitzpatrick, will be available from the NCVET website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au>.

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