

WORKING FROM STRENGTHS

Venturing towards strength-based adult education

Peter Waterhouse
Crina Virgona

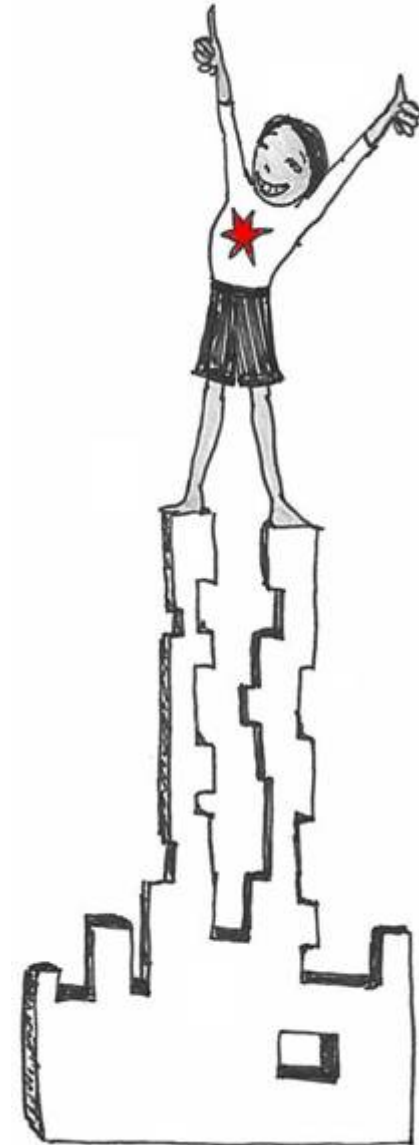
A resource for adult education practitioners

Working from strengths

Venturing towards strength-based adult education

Peter Waterhouse
Crina Virgona

A resource for adult education practitioners



Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Working from strengths: Venturing towards strength-based adult education: A resource for adult education practitioners: Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1956.html>>.

© Lulu Wilson, 2008 – illustrations



Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations

© Australian Government, 2008

This work has been produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on behalf of the Australian Government. Funding has been provided under the Adult Literacy National Project by the Australian Government through the former Department of Education, Science and Training (now the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations). Apart from any use permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of this publication may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Requests should be made to NCVER.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government or NCVER.

The author/project team was funded to undertake this research via a grant. These grants are awarded to organisations through a competitive process, in which NCVER does not participate.

ISBN 978 1 921170 83 6 print edition

978 1 921170 89 8 web edition

TD/TNC 92.03

Published by NCVER, ABN 87 007 967 311

Level 11, 33 King William Street, Adelaide, SA 5000 – PO Box 8288 Station Arcade, Adelaide SA 5000, Australia

ph +61 8 8230 8400 fax +61 8 8212 3436

email ncver@ncver.edu.au

<<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>

<<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1956.html>>

Foreword

This practitioner resource has been developed to introduce adult literacy educators to the principles of strength-based practice. Strength-based practice is a technique that concentrates on the strengths, capacities and aspirations of individuals and uses these as a catalyst for positive change and growth. The practice is more commonly used in the health and welfare sectors.

The resource is based on a project undertaken by Peter Waterhouse and Crina Virgona and was funded by the former Department of Education, Science and Training (whose responsibilities have been assumed by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments, as part of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Research Program, a national program managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

This practical guide for adult educators highlights the relevance of strength-based practice for the adult literacy and basic education sectors. It provides examples of key strength-based practice processes and techniques, as well as information about where to access additional resources relating to strength-based practice.

Tom Karmel
Managing Director, NCVER

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of the following people and organisations.

Lulu Wilson – illustrator

Industry consultations

Linda Wyse and Associates

Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre

NMIT Foundation Studies Department

VALBEC

Bernadette Glass and Associates

Groupwork Institute of Australia

Melbourne Institute for Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy

Terra Firma Services

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction: Getting it wrong | 6 |
| So what is strength-based practice? | 9 |
| A working definition | 9 |
| It's all about values | 12 |
| What relevance does strength-based practice have for adult literacy? | 14 |
| Alignment to adult learning principles | 14 |
| Re-thinking purposes in adult literacy and basic education | 16 |
| Re-thinking practices in adult literacy and basic education | 18 |
| Is the system a help or a hindrance? | 20 |
| Developing strength-based practice | 23 |
| Techniques and processes | 23 |
| The strength-based practice process | 24 |
| Further reading and links | 37 |
| Summing up | 39 |
| References | 42 |

Introduction: Getting it wrong

Edward 'Chip' Anderson, a professor of educational leadership at Azusa Pacific University, confesses he got it wrong (Anderson 2005). For 15 years he worked with low-achieving university students to help them to become better prepared to meet the academic expectations of their university courses. In an attempt to locate the source of their difficulties, Anderson conducted diagnostic tests and then provided students with remediation classes to correct their deficits ... until he discovered that he was actually interfering with their learning.



Then in 1978, he attended a conference where researchers announced that 'more students leave [university] because of disillusionment, discouragement or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by the school administration' (Anderson 2005, p.183). So it wasn't about skills, knowledge and abilities after all!

With the help of Donald O Clifton, Anderson made a study of the practices of high achievers. He discovered that:

Top achievers build their academic and personal lives, and later their careers, on their talents. They develop talents into strengths and apply those strengths, and they manage their weaknesses.

(Anderson 2005, p.185)

So Anderson changed tack. He concentrated his attention on talents and assisted students to identify their unique qualities, which they can then transform into strengths.

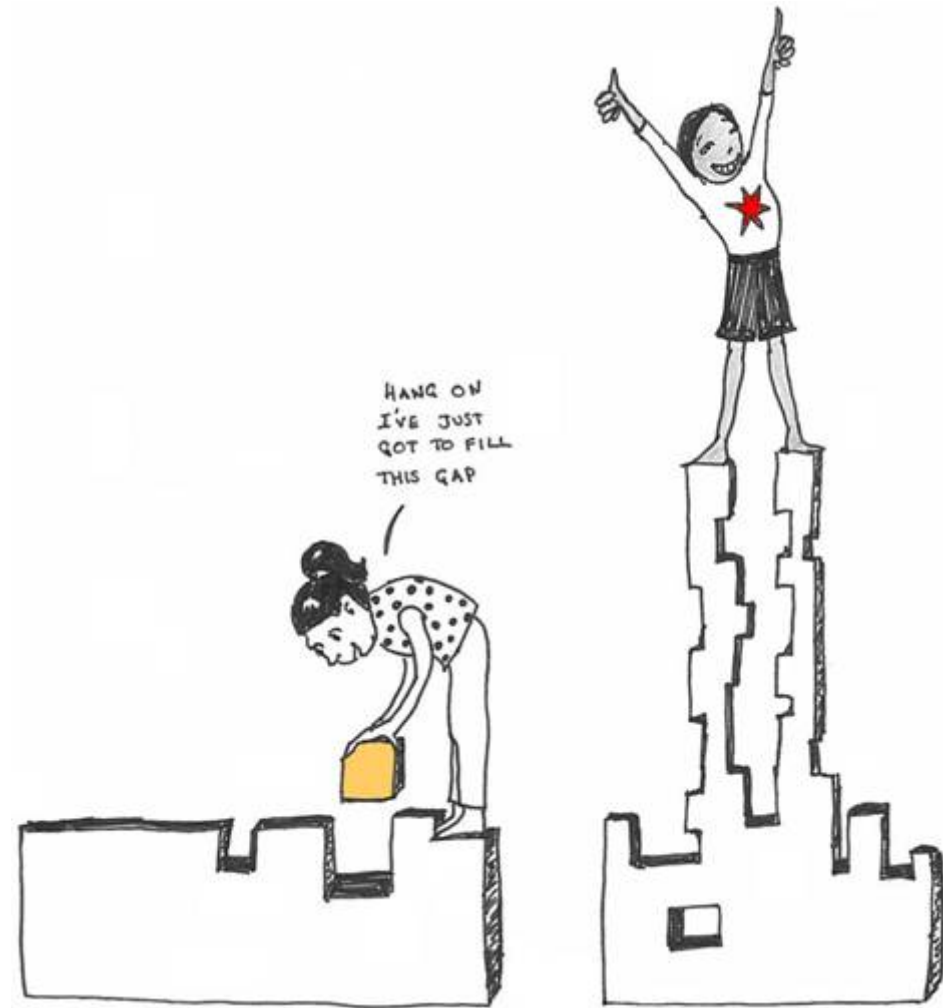
Our research is pointing us in a similar direction. We conducted a study of ten adults with significant literacy difficulties who were successful in life and work. We found that many had 'contradicted the stereotype' by achieving significant wealth and personal success. They worked somewhat unconventionally, but that was how they capitalised on their strengths and managed their weaknesses. (For more information on this earlier project see Waterhouse and Virgona 2005.)

Our exploration of the literature exposed us to material on resilience (Deveson 2003), appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) and learned optimism (Seligman 1990). Resilience theory looks at the way strengths are developed, particularly in the face of adversity. Appreciative enquiry was also useful for its emphasis on identifying what has gone right. Positive evaluation exposes strengths and illuminates a way forward.

Lakoff's (2006) discussion of frames and framing became central to our thinking. Our frames are the preconceptions, beliefs and

expectations that colour our experience. Often our framing is unconscious—we are not fully aware of the assumptions we carry, the ‘truths’ we take for granted and the things we fail to notice. If we can articulate the frames that orient our perceptions, we can lay bare the baggage that prejudices these perceptions. That’s not to say that our perceptions will not be coloured. There is no such thing as an entirely objective perception, but if we are conscious of the values we carry, we can be more transparent and move our practice closer to our espoused values.

Our perceptions dictate our actions. Anderson offers us a fine example. Having been well trained in educational thinking, he brought a deficit analytical perspective to his failing students, and hence spent his energy on meeting the needs of learners, as he perceived them. This meant building the missing skills and knowledge. Then, after reframing his analytical framework to focus on talents and strengths, student needs became latent abilities or aptitudes. Anderson is currently working with students to discover their unique qualities and how these can be applied to their learning environment.



Our 'stereotype contradictors' (Waterhouse & Virgona 2005) knew about frames that excluded them in learning environments. When the essential feature of the frame was competence in reading texts and writing essays, our research subjects found themselves quickly discarded as learners. However, when the frame was on achieving the outcomes they had embraced, the result was often resounding success (despite their continuing literacy difficulties).

Our 'contradictors' recounted heart-wrenching stories of humiliation and failure in the mainstream education system. They battled with educators and most of them eventually looked *outside* the educational system to achieve the skills they needed in life. They built up vocational competence through stealth, observation and experimentation.

The insights from this research led us to investigate questions surrounding individual learning strengths, personal competence and aspirations. The step into 'strength-based practice' seemed almost inevitable.

Strength-based practice (SBP) within the welfare context is an approach to counselling and problem-solving that is now widely applied. This approach is particularly attractive because, while it is grounded in a strong theoretical base, it has been formulated into very practical guidelines.



So what is strength-based practice?

A working definition

Strength-based practice is a methodology for interaction with welfare clients, based upon a set of clearly articulated values of respect, self-determination, social justice and the sharing of power. It is grounded in the following beliefs.

People want to change.

The solution is already there (although not always immediately visible).

The focus is the future and the present, rather than the past.

The professional–client relationship is very important.

The practitioner shifts the client's thinking and language from problems to solutions.

There are times when the problem is not obvious or is constraining; these times can be retrieved and extended to become the way the client normally functions.

Insight and knowledge of the problem is not necessary; the focus is on solutions (based on Osborn 2006).

Strength-based practice involves a line of questioning that assists clients to identify their strengths and to devise a way forward which is based upon their knowledge of themselves and the resources available within their community. The principles and practices are similar in a cluster of therapies, including:

- ▲ solution-oriented therapy
- ▲ solution-focused therapy
- ▲ European brief therapy
- ▲ possibility therapy
- ▲ positive peer culture
- ▲ narrative therapy
- ▲ resilience therapy.

These therapies arose as a reaction to the lengthy and soul-searching psychoanalytical approach. Although psychoanalysts find 'culprits' and explanations for behaviour, solutions are slow to be realised and to bear fruit.

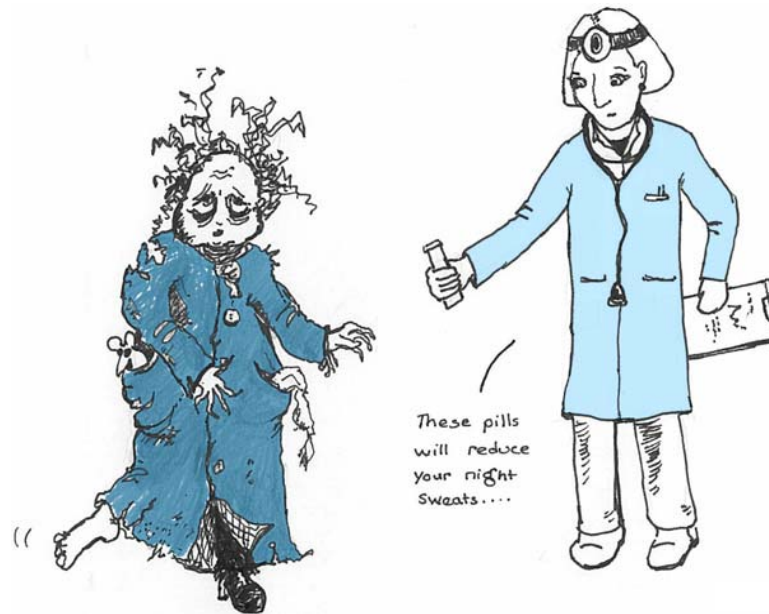
Strength-based practice is said to have originated in couples and family therapy through the work of Milton Erickson (Zimmerman, Prest & Wetzel 1997), who was working within the systems therapy framework adopted by family therapists. The influence of narrative therapy is also clearly discernible in these approaches. Narrative therapy is closely linked to cognitive behavioural therapy because it works with the 'story' of yourself that you act out in life. Like most modern adaptations, strength-based practice is a hybrid form. The

more recent proponents of the movement have been the European Brief Therapists, Steve de Shazer (1988, 1991, 1994) and Insoo Kim Berg (1991, 1994), who speak of it as a model rather than as a therapy.

Strength-based approaches are a result of a *zeitgeist* or a cultural trend which has moved through the Western world over the last decade or so, rejecting traditional deficit models of understanding needs and of behaviour change, achievement and development. This shift in thinking is largely a product of postmodern influences which tell us that there is no single, external, objective truth and that we, in fact, construct our realities.

And so individual world views have gained greater legitimacy, and behavioural change has moved out of the realm of expert control to that of individual agency.

Consistent with postmodern views has been the rejection of top-down authority structures. In the health industry, for instance, the traditional medical model symbolised the ills of the old system, in which the patient, as a human being, is powerless and almost invisible. Based on professional 'power over' models of interaction, the 'medical model' was characterised by dependence and servitude rather than resilience, autonomy and personal responsibility. Reaction to the medical model that treated the illness, but not the person, fuelled another way of viewing health needs and gave rise to person-centred therapies. These therapies seek answers and directions from *within* individuals and their communities, where their self-esteem and personal rewards are oriented.

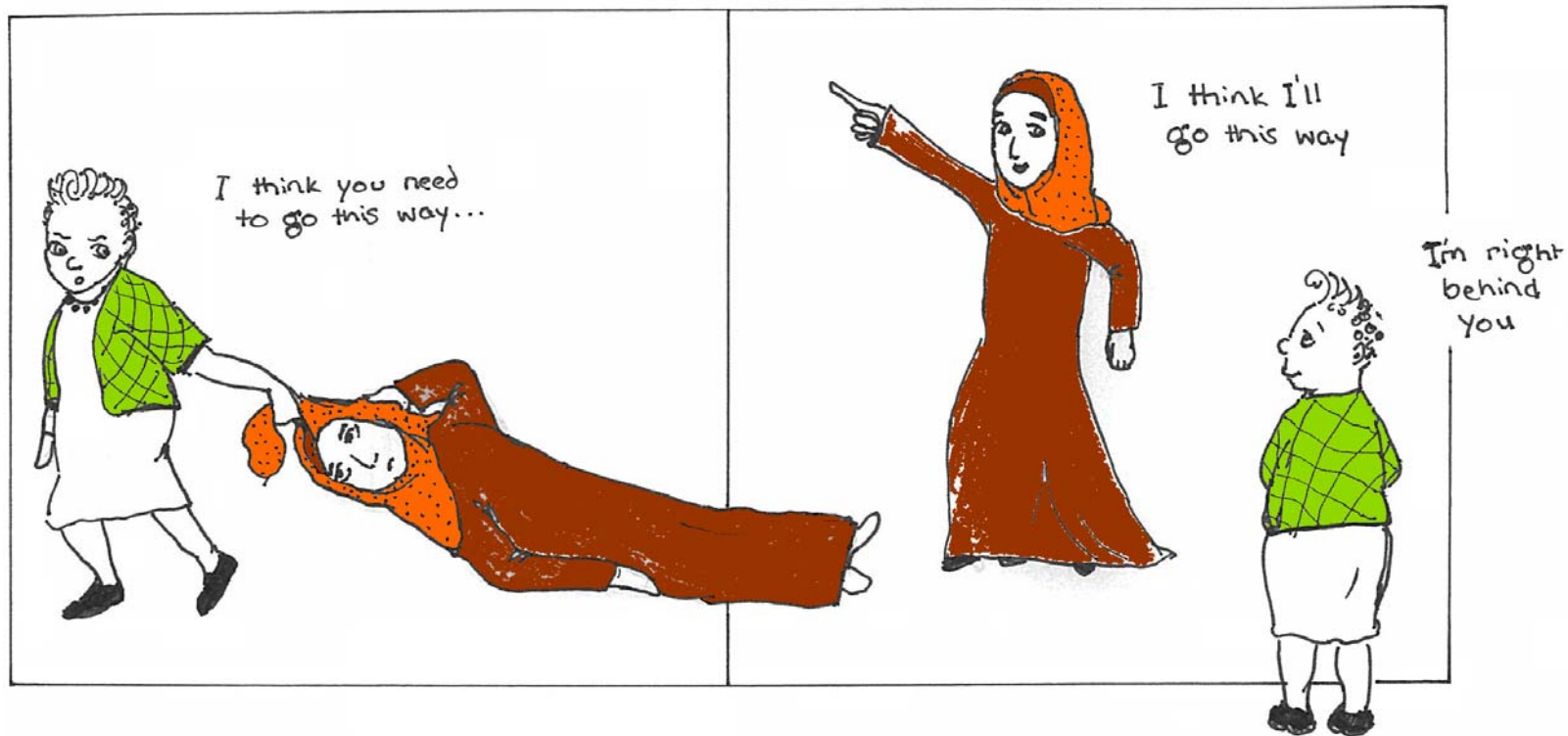


The uptake of strength-based practice in the welfare sector has been widespread, at least in policy if not fully in practice. It envisages the client in the powerful position of a customer who negotiates the type of service they seek and the outcomes they expect. The mission statement of the Disability Attendant Support Service Inc. (DASSI) is an example.

DASSI supports the right of people with a disability to live according to their own values and standards; respects the right to privacy, confidentiality and dignity; and the right to an individual and effective service.
(Disability Attendant Support Service 2006)

As a client-managed business, the Disability Attendant Support Service states that its clients:

are able to manage their own attendant support, have the final say in the employment of their attendants, manage their rosters, participate in training of workers and specify the terms and conditions of their support contracts.
(Disability Attendant Support Service 2006)



It's all about values

Strength-based theorists tell us it is all about values. If you don't have the right values orientation, you can't do the practice—it won't work. Strength-based values are a complete reversal of the traditional deficit-medical model. In strength-based practice, clients are appreciated as the experts on their own lives. They know their circumstances best. They are steeped in their issues and know what will work for them in reaching for change. Positioned as the central change agent, the client is supported to draw upon personal power and a heightened sense of self to activate a new way of being in the world. The practitioner's role is a facilitative one.

Does that sound similar to the role of an adult educator to you?

Strength-based practitioners believe that the client, any client, has the ability to improve their situation, resolve their difficulties and lead a fulfilling and satisfying life. They do not need advice, but they may need a new perception of themselves and their circumstances. This new perception will reveal achievable strategies for improvements they want to make.

Practitioners are no longer the authority on what is best for the client and how to achieve it. Strength-based practice distinguishes between 'power *with*' and 'power *over*', and practitioners aid clients in recognising their power and embracing it.

Practitioners listen to their clients and are curious about their experience and their versions of reality. Clients become the drivers of their own recoveries. They decide their own goals, map their own steps to improvement and mark their progress, applying their own evaluation criteria—while the practitioner supports and questions.



What relevance does strength-based practice have for adult literacy?

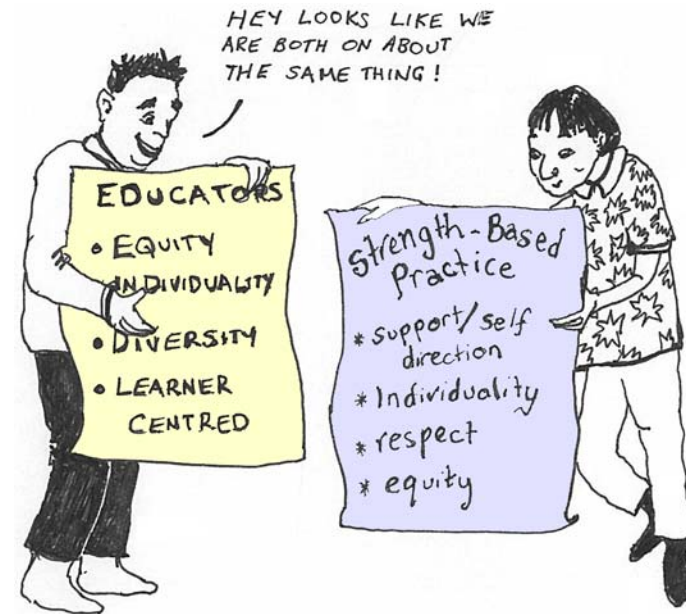
Alignment to adult learning principles

Strength-based practice is not a huge leap for educators committed to adult learning principles. We know adults learn best when they can relate learning directly to their lived experience. They are motivated when their learning answers the questions that bother them and assists them to master specific situations in their lives. Adult educators understand the relationship between performance and self-esteem. Most adult literacy educators share the values of strength-based welfare practitioners.

These values are not new. They were the messages of the work of Rogers (1961, 1969), Maslow (1968) Knowles (1990), Shor (1987) and Freire (1977a, 1977b). Notions of unconditional positive regard, learner-centred adult education and equity in the teacher–learner relationship are well established in the rhetoric and literature of adult education practice.

Vella (2002) more recently reiterates these values in a current context. She emphasises the importance of the teacher–learner relationship, upholds the right of adult learners to be decision-makers and champions the authenticity of the learners as judges of their own accountabilities.

The two value sets, strength-based practice and adult learning principles, are markedly similar. The differences lie in emphasis. Strength-based practice places social justice as a foundation principle. The client's culture, preferences, world view and autonomy are fostered, provided of course they do not involve breaking the law!



Adult educators in general and adult literacy teachers in particular often demonstrate exemplary client relationships. Teacher–learner relationships are a central priority for educators.

Teaching and learning with and from the learners is part of their own personal journey, their own life project ... Fundamental to their work is the building of positive relationships and creating environments and classroom cultures in which authentic, relaxed yet respectful and supportive relationships will flourish.

(Sanguinetti, Waterhouse & Maunders 2004, p.34)

For example, the 2004 report, *The ACE experience* by Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders, offers numerous anecdotes of intense and passionate exchange, and learning in environments where trust allows vulnerabilities to be exposed and risk-taking shifts learners into new spaces. This same research also confirms the political consciousness of adult educators who teach in ways that empower their learners.

So what could strength-based practice add to a field where relationships are already a celebrated strength?

Re-thinking purposes in adult literacy and basic education

Our first concern is for those learners who fall outside the net. Only some have the opportunity to experience the riches that the adult literacy field offers. Camouflaged behind well-constructed disguises are those who believe they cannot experience success in formal learning environments. Classrooms are intimidating, and returning to print is a rerun of former failure. Even adult literacy programs are seen within this frame of reference. Yet we know that every individual has the capacity to learn and has a range of strengths in many domains of intelligence.

Many individuals with literacy difficulties/frustrations fall through the net—‘disengaged youth’, Indigenous groups, some older workers and large numbers of people who hide their literacy difficulties with great efficiency. Most go unaided in developing their potential, except for some. Some strength-based educators have found ways of including disenfranchised learners; for example, a number of Indigenous programs and arts-based programs seem to have crashed through the barriers. The results of these programs demonstrate the transformative power of radical education, but ‘the how’ of such programs is difficult to decipher. There are few records about the conversations that characterise the interactions generating change.

However, reports of these breakthroughs—mostly publicised only at conferences—indicate that the power differential of teacher and student is challenged and that the educators mentally relocate their thinking to a place within the client’s individual and community value schema (Staley 2007; Macrae 2001; Gunn 2005). The parallels with strength-based practice are all but named.

Sharon Brown from the adult and community education (ACE) sector in Murwillumbah in New South Wales has spoken at adult literacy conferences about her work with disengaged Aboriginal youth (see Gunn 2005 for a summary of the address). Brown spoke not about the curriculum, but about grounding the program in the context of the young people’s lives, negotiating the learning process and supporting emerging identities, as her students reached out for self-selected goals that would change their way of life. She talked with her students about how it would feel to abandon at least part of their old selves and take on new responsibilities and relationships.

The program began by affirming who they were. Brown grounded the program in their ‘home’ on a graffiti wall. This was where their identity was anchored. Here they expressed their shared animosities, sense of worth, knowledge of one another and life expectations. Aspects of their identity would change if they embraced new literacies.

As they moved slowly into new and threatening domains, they struggled with their new personas, taking risks all the way. Inch by inch, new selves took shape and the young people tried on their new identities, retreated and then tried again. They often returned to the wall to once again experience their old sense of belonging. However, they gradually came to know themselves as legitimate members of other communities, where they could make a contribution, have a job and take on leadership roles. In time their visits to the wall became unnecessary, as they affirmed their identities in other locations.

Brown's task was to facilitate and support the shift in identity negotiated by the students by providing the skills they needed to take command of their lives.

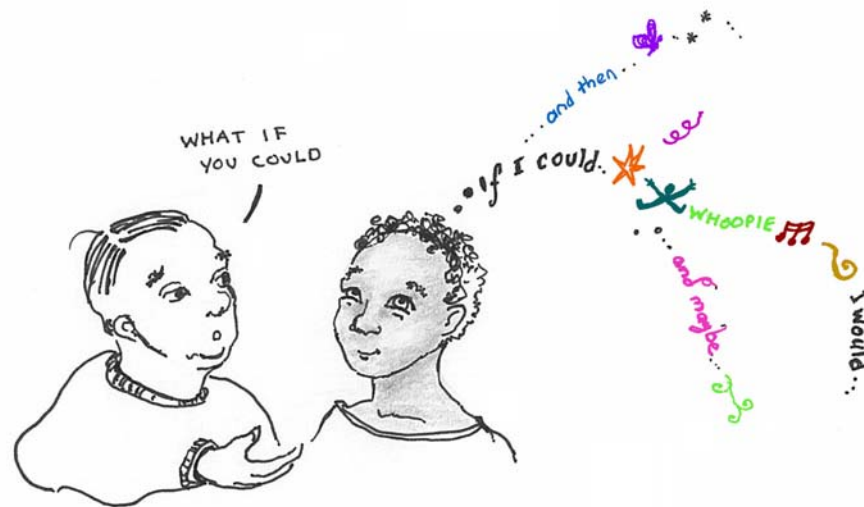
Other Indigenous education programs provide further examples of genuine training partnerships (Make It Real). Located within the communities, these programs drew upon the strengths of the local culture to produce thriving enterprises.

What makes these programs different is that the clients set the goals in much the same way as a strength-based therapist might use the 'miracle question' (see below) to assist clients to shape a vision of the future. The unique culture of the learner group guides decisions about what should be done and how. This vision is the launching point for the educator—not externally set competencies and benchmarks. Individual and group strengths form the essential building blocks of a different future. The educator is the service provider who works with clients to achieve outcomes they are

constantly refining as they journey towards their goals, often accomplishing more than they had expected.

The educators are facilitators who prompt the clients to articulate their perceptions, who probe their clients' experiences for insights, who make the learning journey conscious, who support experiences with new skills and, finally (if appropriate), match the achievements to nationally accredited competencies.

So it appears that strength-based education is alive and well in some adult basic education contexts. However, the questions that perplex educators in staff rooms around metropolitan centres are concerned with transferability. Case studies tell us of aspirations, outcomes and general methodologies for strength-based education, but the 'how to' remains hidden. How do you conduct the conversations and how do you form the relationships? This is where welfare models of strength-based practice can assist us.



Re-thinking practices in adult literacy and basic education

Strength-based practice in welfare settings offers an interactional model and set of techniques that are readily adaptable to adult education. The approach begins by developing a mind-set where genuine partnerships are possible.

Mahlberg and Sjoblom (2002), two Swedish educators, explain this approach. They have applied strength-based practice in a primary school education arena. Using the metaphor of rowing a boat, they highlight the relationship between learner and teacher:

Let us assume that together with the pupil and the parents, we share a goal, but that the pupil has his own idea about how to get there, in his own boat, going his own way. In order to fully support the pupil, we believe that it is meaningless sitting shouting from our boat that he should jump into ours.

We find it far more productive to jump into the same boat with the pupil so that we can help each other to row the boat. When we row together, we will reach the goal faster, and it is easier to talk about how we do that when we sit next to each other. With this more creative style of collaboration, we can help each other to build solutions.

(Mahlberg & Sjoblom 2002, p.56)

To sit in the same boat, educators need skills in investigating how the world looks through the eyes of the client. They need techniques to work with the learners to enable the identification of the individual strengths and resources that learners can apply to new tasks. Learners themselves need a way of recognising their incremental progress. The meta-cognition skills of reflective learners are essential equipment.



The National Reporting System for adult literacy already makes provision for reporting and developing these skills under the heading of 'Learning strategies'. This competency has been side-stepped in the past. However, recent changes to the reporting guidelines give greater legitimacy and prominence to the development of learner autonomy.

Despite some very good work done in this area (McCormack & Pancini 1991), educators have been groomed for different accountabilities (Sanguinetti 2000; Foley 2005). Educators working in the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA) and accredited courses rarely have an opportunity to report against the outcomes that individuals nominate as important.

There is no place to report on subjective indicators of success, such as greater community integration, or a parent's improved participation in supporting their children's education, or increased self-sufficiency in learning. It seems that the pressure upon adult literacy educators to demonstrate outcomes in relation to externally devised competencies has worked against the aspirations of strength-based practice.

However, we need to bear in mind that the welfare sector has also been subject to similar pressures and accountabilities. Most programs in this sector are funded on the basis of successful client outcomes and these often relate to their independence from further agency support.



Is the system a help or a hindrance?

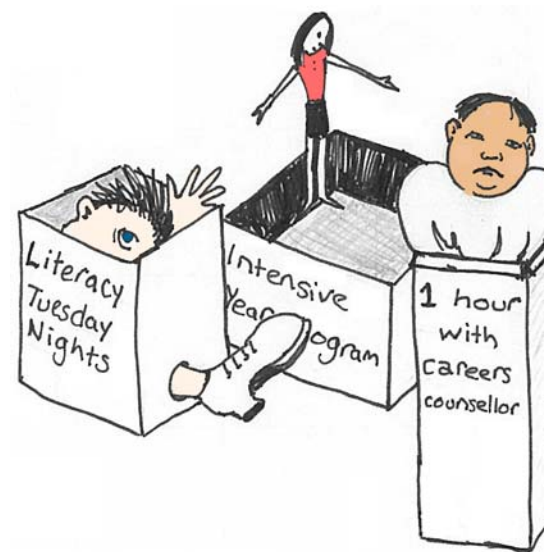
Our initial study of strength-based practice observed the way teachers handled their first encounter with adult learners attending an adult literacy centre. The study provided only a snapshot of a small set of participants involved in role plays.

Nonetheless, the analysis of the interviews highlighted three key points.

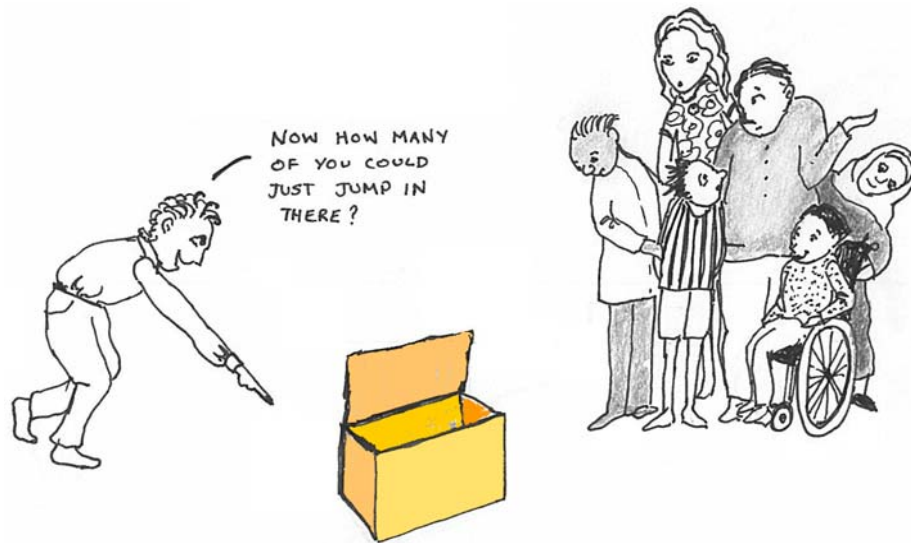
First, our exploration revealed that adult literacy educators *may be unaware* of their departure from the espoused empowerment values of adult education. Their preoccupation with meeting administrative and bureaucratic obligations meant that the initial encounter with their prospective client/learner was dominated by explanations about the centre and its offerings, rather than a focus on the potential learner and his/her aspirations or concerns.

Teachers questioned interviewees about their past learning experiences, but strength-based discussions were not on the agenda. Indeed, the study showed that, when interviewees ventured into explanations about themselves as learners, their discussion was often interrupted by the interviewing teachers. The teachers were intent upon *classifying* the learners' skills and allocating them to classes.

The financial viability of adult education centres depends upon the reportable outcomes of student performance. Hence, working under time constraints, almost invariably with paperwork to be completed, the quality of the relationship on most occasions fell short—in an industry with a reputation for excellence in relationships.



Secondly, even when practitioners were aware of the limitations of their interview and engagement process, they still felt constrained by their organisational contexts. The interviewer's frame was predetermined by the organisational policy, its offerings and its administrative requirements. There seemed to be an unspoken expectation that the learners would join the journey being offered by the learning centre—and climb into the educator's 'boat'. During the interview educators focused predominantly on their agenda.



Based upon these observations, it would be easy to conclude that espoused adult learning principles have been rendered unworkable under the weight of budgetary, administrative and bureaucratic constraints.

This observation draws us back to our earlier discussion about framing. How do we conceptualise or frame our practice? At a fundamental level adult literacy and basic education practitioners quite reasonably frame their practice around the achievement of set goals in literacy, numeracy and related study skills. Their classes and programs are targeted to this end—and this is what they are offering.

During the life of this project we often returned to what we call the 'florist's analogy'. If you are not interested in buying flowers, why go into the florist's shop? Why should we criticise adult educators for doing their jobs to the best of their ability, often under difficult circumstances, with limited resources? We shouldn't!

We are not aiming to criticise adult literacy practitioners. Indeed, we pay tribute to those practitioners who are brave enough to put their professional practice under the microscope and to share their experiences with our researchers.

Our point here is how we define our practice. What gets legitimised? What gets ignored? What is cast *inside* the frame of professional practice—what is left *outside*? The insights from strength-based practice and our recent investigations suggest there are times when we may need to 'reframe'—or bend the frames if we are truly going to address our clients' or learners' needs.

This expectation is not unique to adult literacy and basic education. The adult and vocational education sector as a whole is being called upon to innovate and change in response to new demands. Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) suggest that there is a need for 'shifting mindsets' to enable these changes to take place.

Mitchell and Young (2001) discuss the challenges of developing a 'high-skilled, high-performing VET system'. Change and change management are recurring themes in their overview. They note that:

Traditionally change management focussed on resistance to change and finding ways to overcome the resistance. Contemporary approaches to change aim at creating visions and desired futures, gaining political support for them and managing the transition ... towards them.
(Mitchell & Young 2001, p.10)

This contemporary approach is consistent with what we are arguing in this introduction to strength-based practice.

This leads us to our third and final key point.

Many adult literacy and basic education practitioners have not been encouraged to read the client's body language or engage fully with their learning 'story' in this initial meeting. *They have not been trained to do so.* 'We're not counsellors; we're teachers', they might say. This is a reasonable response at one level. However, the demands of professional practice are changing. As personal coaching and emotional intelligence layered by cultural complexity inch into prominence, the adult learning culture is called upon to respond.

Much of our recent professional development energy has been poured into assessment and monitoring for accountability. The consequences of this were evident in our intake interview simulations. This begs the question: have adult literacy and basic education teachers had sufficient exposure to contemporary thinking about relationship development. A further question arises: has there been sufficient energy and space for developing interactional skills?

We are not arguing here that adult literacy and basic education teachers need to become counsellors. However, we do believe that strength-based practice, as it has been developed in some counselling contexts, offers insights that could enrich, enliven and empower adult educators and adult learners.

The following section provides some notes on developing strength-based practice in the context of adult literacy and basic education practice.

Developing strength-based practice

This section will outline some key techniques for developing collaborative relationships using strength-based approaches. The examples are set in an interview context and, yes, they are concerned with one-to-one questioning, but the heart of the techniques revolves around building relationships, not interviewing. These conversations could take place in a classroom—or anywhere. We draw upon one-to-one conversations to demonstrate how strength-based practice works.

And what about a strength-based conversation with a class? Well, it should be possible and is certainly important in establishing group values and culture, but let's get the individual conversations going first.

Techniques and processes

Earlier we stressed that the approach we are discussing is based upon values and commitment to empowerment and self-determination—without either, the approach is empty. However, strength-based practice is also about technique.

The techniques of strength-based practice rely on the sensitive combination of careful questioning, active listening and selective positive reinforcement, all of which build the client's self-determination. *Every point of interaction* in the development journey

is conducted with genuine curiosity and seeks to understand what the client thinks, and why they have reached these conclusions.

The challenge for the practitioner lies in identifying, highlighting and amplifying the strengths in the client's account—so that these are made explicit and developed as the basis for subsequent growth.

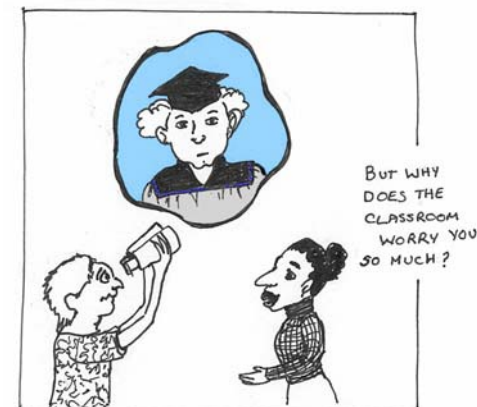


The strength-based practice process

Share the client's world view

Strength-based practitioners begin by trying to see the world through the client's eyes. They will watch the body language and listen for the adjectives and metaphors the client uses in their story, always attempting to understand the underlying message behind the words.

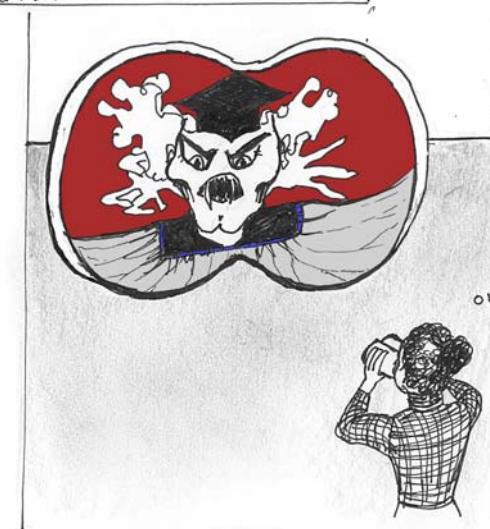
For example, 'You said you could see the "light at the end of the tunnel". You seem to be brighter today.'



Observe and hold a mirror to the client

Strength-based practitioners will tease out their client's impressions with further probing, holding a mirror to the client, and perhaps feeding their observations back.

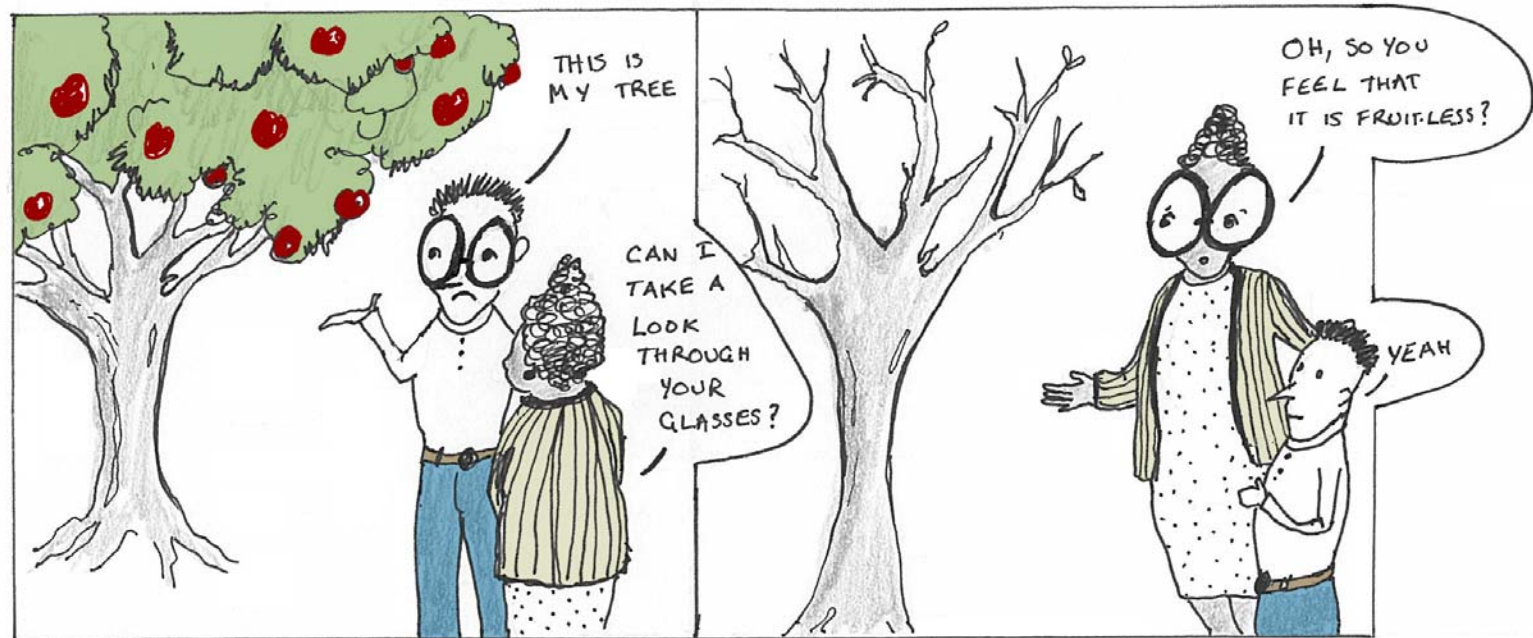
For example, 'I could see your hands were tightly clenched when you talked about the school teacher yelling at you and the other kids laughing. It sounds like you were feeling very humiliated.'



Encourage the client to clarify his/her feelings

Practitioners may work with the client to acknowledge their feelings more vividly.

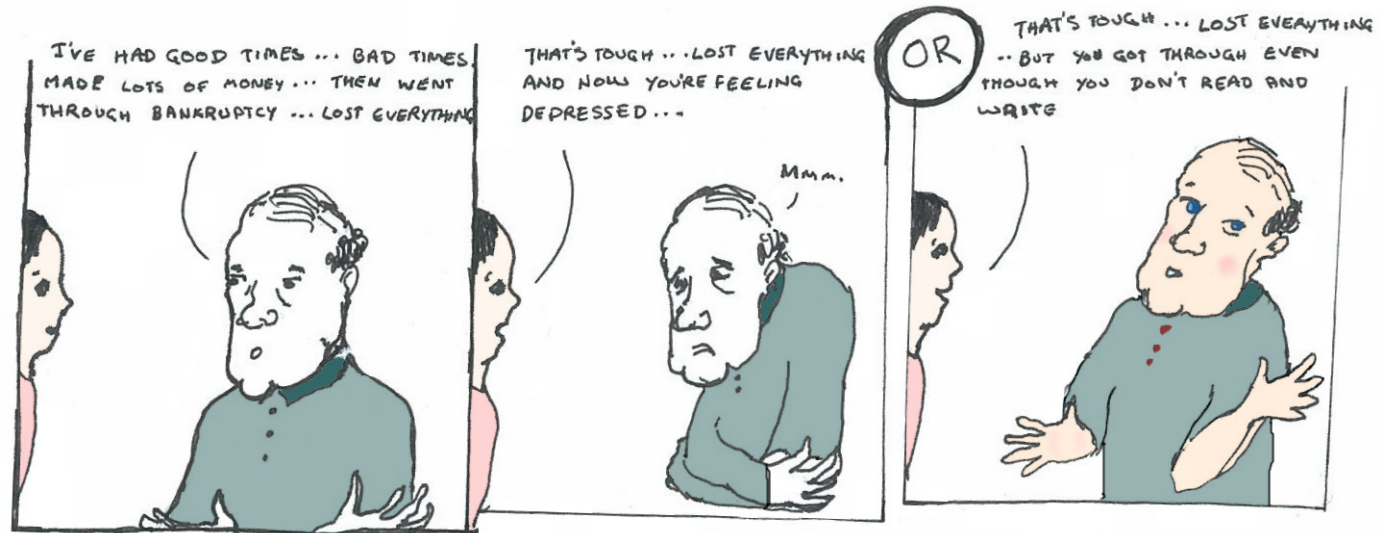
For example, 'You said you were angry, but you smiled at me when you said that. What does that mean?'



Positive reflective listening

Reflective listening is common practice within human relationships work. Strength-based practitioners put a positive spin on their reflections.

For example, 'You said it was a real struggle getting through your course, but you did it. You overcame the hurdles that your literacy put in front of you.'



Seek out the client's strengths

Once the practitioner has a good understanding of the client's experience, he/she may move on to exploring the client's strengths. Again, sensitive observation and questioning are the key resources for the practitioner.

For example, 'You said you had an awful time at school, but you still kept turning up every day. How did you manage that?'

Name the strengths

Identifying and naming strengths is a key skill in strength-based practice. For instance, the client may talk about learning to be a 'ratbag' as a survival skill. While investigating what 'ratbaggery' might mean to this individual, the practitioner may uncover attributes such as quick-wittedness, an ability to read a situation deftly, good communication with peers, and perhaps leadership skills. The practitioner will test these perceptions with the client to see whether he/she thinks they fit.

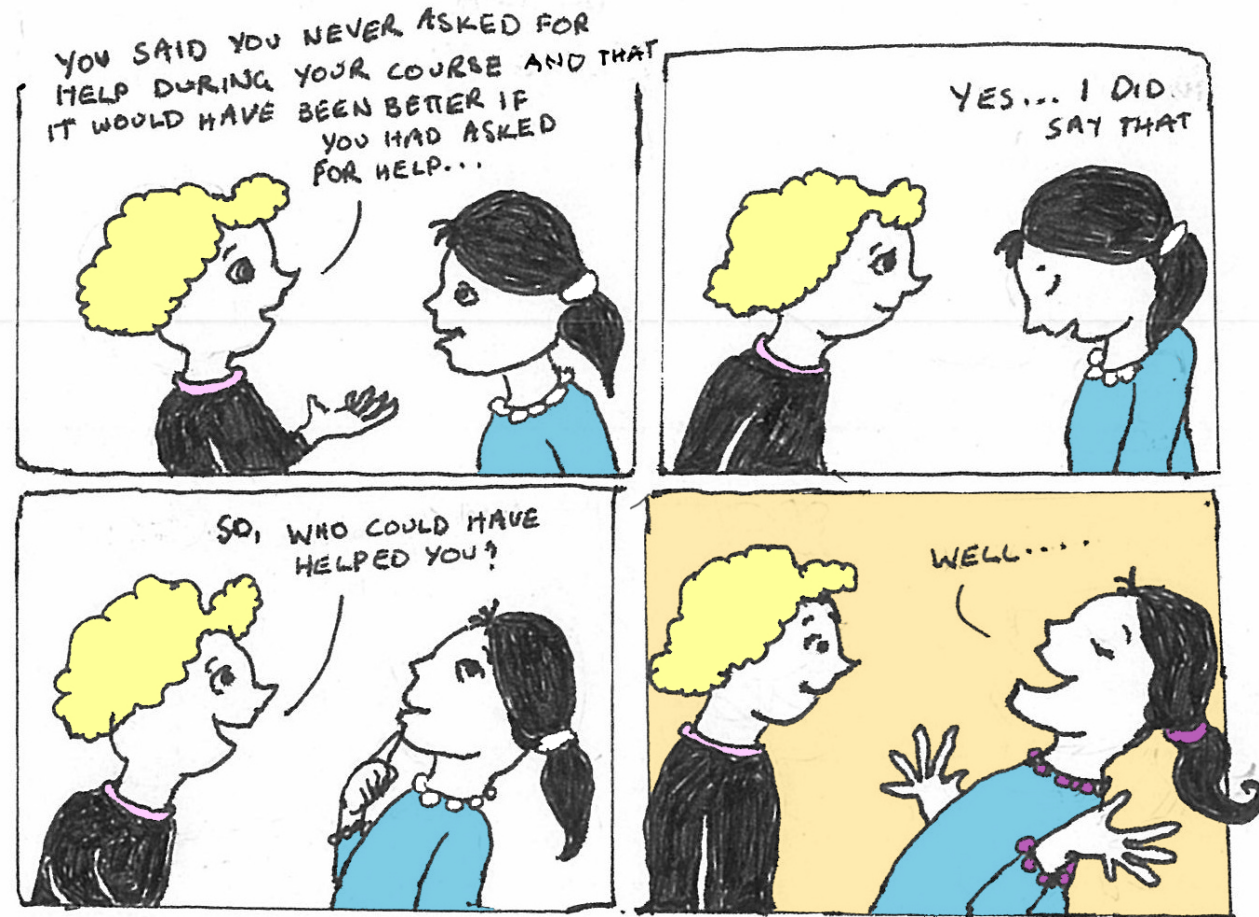
For example, 'It sounds like you are quite good leading your mates, even if it's leading them into trouble. Is that true?'



It is important that the client takes on the particular strength as part of their identity and applies it in their life. Therefore, they need to own the perception that they have a strength. The practitioner's opinion is of no consequence beyond being an aid to insights. It is the client who grapples with the ownership of strengths.

Clarify the vision

The client is seeking change in their life. What is it? What would it look like? Use the 'miracle question' (see below) to make the vision as concrete as possible.



Understand the strengths

While investigating the identified strengths, the practitioner may explore with the client how these strengths have previously played out in his/her life. What was their source? How have they helped in overcoming difficulties? What relevance could they have for the present situation? How could they be strengthened?

For example, 'You talk about not being so timid and trying new things when you were in England. It sounds as if you found you had new abilities despite your limited literacy. Could these help you find a solution to your employment problem?'

Build the resources

Using a strengths' perspective, the practitioner probes for the resources the client can draw upon to assist them in the changes they seek. The resources may be people, beliefs or networks.

For example, 'Your football experience has taught you a lot about keeping up your morale, and your friends at the football club may have some useful contacts.'

Build the resources for progress

The strength-based practitioner prompts the client to think of recent times when the problem was not there. Why was this situation different? This is the 'exception question' referred to below. Practitioners maintain the focus on solutions and avoid discussion of the causes of the problem.

Seek solutions

Strength-based practitioners resist the temptation to offer solutions. They are careful not to take the steering wheel from the client. Developing the client's independence and a conviction that they can manage their own lives is a fundamental premise of this approach. Remember the boat metaphor? It's about empowerment. It's also about appropriateness—other people's solutions won't necessarily work for different clients. Work with the client to identify the next small but achievable step.

For example, 'What can you do in the next week to make progress?'



Monitor progress

Strength-based practitioners train the client to notice the first signs of change; recognising signs of change will assist the client to build upon them. The first signs may only be small, like overcoming a barrier for a while, or taking a risk doing something new—even if the outcome was disappointing. Nonetheless, these are the beginnings of new thinking and possibilities that need to be nurtured.

For example, ‘So you had a go at talking to the boss. It must have been hard to actually start that conversation, even if it didn’t get the result you wanted. What gave you the strength to do that?’

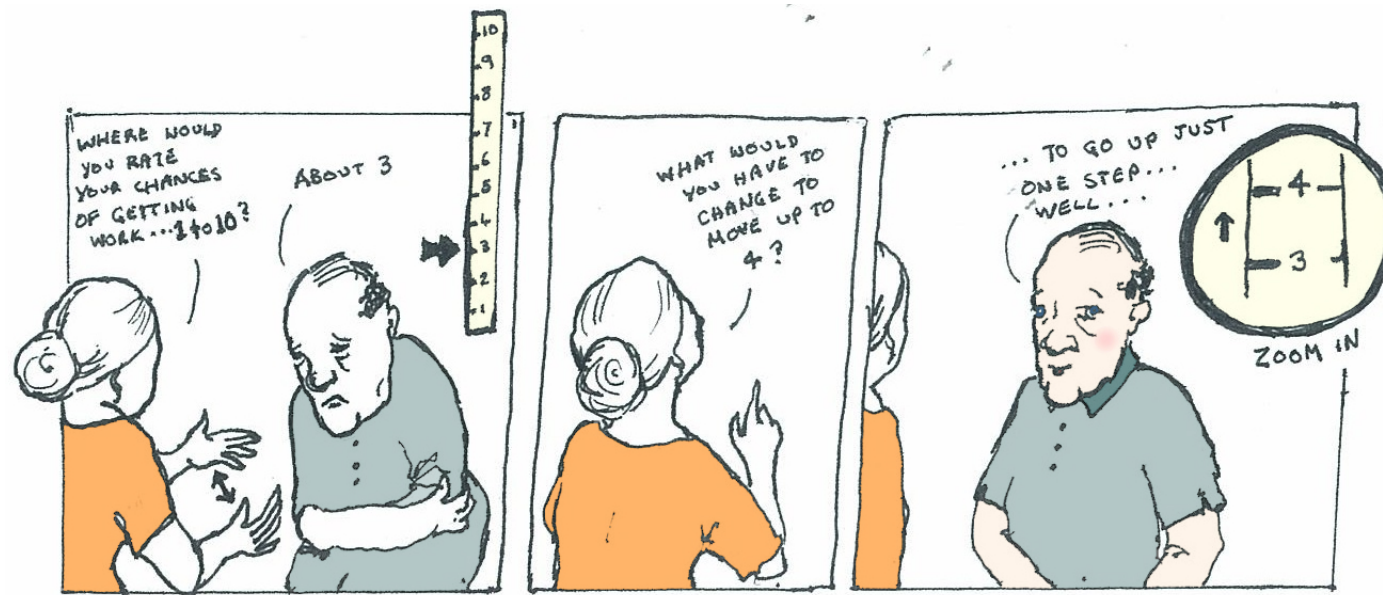
Techniques

The scale

There are certain techniques that strength-based practitioners have in their kitbags. They are standard tools used in their practice.

This is one of the conversational devices that indicates the magnitude of the client's feelings and motivations. It also helps practitioners to get inside the head of their client. Practitioners may use the scale when asking about the client's sense of despair, optimism, feelings of achievement or rate of progress, or anything that assists clients to better understand themselves.

For example, 'How important is it for you to learn to read and write? On a ten-point scale, if one means it doesn't matter that much and ten means it is one of the most important things in your life, where would you stand?'



When rating progress, the practitioner may ask the client what it would take to move up a point. This question will reveal the next step, although the practitioner must always be mindful of the client's need to control their own destiny.

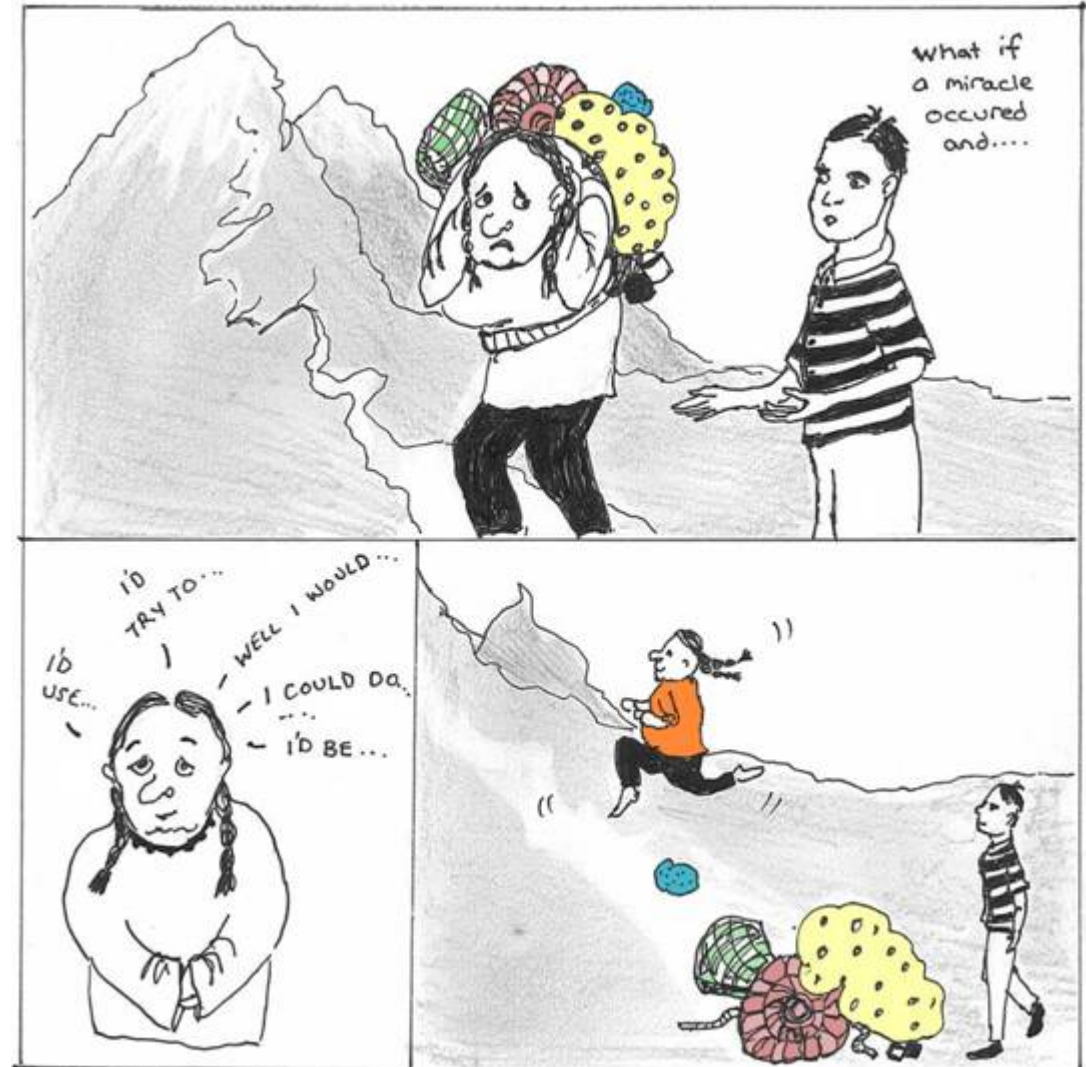
At the end of the consultation, the client usually goes away with a plan of what *they* will do to create change in their circumstances. The agency for change is not handed over to the practitioner. It is the responsibility of the client.

The 'miracle question'

Another technique is what is called 'the miracle question'.

For example, 'If you woke up tomorrow morning and found the problem had gone away completely, how would your life be different?'

This technique assists the client to envisage another world and stand in a different space. The practitioner works with the client to probe the vision. What would look different? What would people say to you? What changes would they notice? How does it feel? What is it like in a problem-free space?



The 'exception question'

The 'exception question' directs the client's attention to the times, past and present, when they didn't have the problem that now preoccupies them. The practitioner probes how this situation came about and how they contributed to the 'problem' not being around. What strengths and resources were working for them on that occasion? How can they re-apply those skills and strengths? By exploring these times, the client finds that they have the capacity within themselves to overcome the problem.

Arts-based approaches

Strength-based practice is a heavily 'language'd therapy. Clients need to find words to explain their experience. Many clients, however, are not articulate or reflective. For this reason, practitioners often use arts-based approaches. This may involve drawing, role play and images.

These are tools to make past experiences accessible and to provoke metaphors or images which describe experience, visions of the future or feelings. Metaphors are reference points that contain the essence of a discussion. While the tools of drawing or role play may assist the process, the advice to practitioners is that the best metaphors are those that the clients, or learners, create themselves.

The practitioner will then question the client to enable the client to understand what they have produced.

For example, 'You have drawn this person very large. Can you tell me why?'

'It seems we are looking down on this scene. Is that significant?'

'You've chosen this picture which is very dark. Did you think about that when you chose it?'

In Australia, St Luke's Innovative Resources publishes cards with pictures, questions, words and ideas for stimulating this type of discussion. They also have staff development resources such as Name the Frame cards to assist communities and workplace groups in socially just decision-making. The cards probe the principles at work in framing the power dynamics, the focus issues, the barriers to full participation and the unwritten rules of inclusion and exclusion.

Embedded conversational tools

There are a number of techniques or tools that are not particular to strength-based practice but are related to client respect and positive regard. There are just three mentioned here, but the list could go on.

Offer choice

This is important if we want to establish greater equity in our relationships. The choice may concern a really trivial issue such as 'Where would you like to sit?', or something more significant such as 'Do you want to tell me about that?', or 'Are you happy to continue or would you prefer to finish this later?'

Establishing this level of consultation right from the beginning is empowering and reduces the client's sense that something is going to happen to them to which they must submit. It can change the dynamics of what is to follow.

Normalising

Normalising is a common conversation practice which attempts to counteract the 'Robinson Crusoe syndrome'. It feeds back to people that they are not freaks—others have been in similar situations before and found a way out of their difficulties. Adult basic education teachers know the curative power of this and observe that it happens automatically in most classes.

An example may be (after a hesitant attempt at navigating): 'Lots of us have trouble reading maps. It is quite a special task and we don't train people for it. A majority of women seem to find it difficult.'



Avoid platitudinous responses

It is often difficult to avoid the 'oh no, no' response when someone comes up with the familiar cry, 'I'm too old to learn' or 'I just can't make progress with this stuff', or 'I really don't want to do a literacy test'.

The stock responses to these statements, such as 'You're never too old to learn', 'You're doing fine' or 'Don't worry, it's nothing', are not appropriate. On hearing these, the person feels they are not being heard or taken seriously.

A skilled response takes into account the genuine anxiety and frustration that underlies the comment and applies the techniques described above to explore it. A reality check may well be part of it, particularly at the point of positive reflective listening and in identifying strengths (see above).

Further reading and links

If you want to know more about strength-based practice you might try the following.

St Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, runs workshops and also sells books and resources on strength-based practice.

McCashen, Wayne 2006, *The strengths approach—a strengths-based resource for sharing power and creating change*, St Luke's, Bendigo.

This is a comprehensive text which provides a thorough rundown on the values and beliefs that underpin the approach, as well as an explanation of strategies. McCashen is a trainer and consultant in the area of strength-based practice. The book is the culmination of his experience and wisdom. It is oriented to people working in the welfare sector, so adult educators will have to extrapolate to their environment. There is a review on the website, <http://www.innovativeresources.org/display_details.aspx?productcode=8007>.

Mahlberg, K & Sjoblom, M 2004 (2002), *Solution-focused education*, Mareld, Stockholm, Sweden.

This book is also available from St Luke's, although it may have to be ordered in. The book demonstrates the application of strength-based approaches to education. However, it is probably most useful to those working with children. It gives very concrete advice about

managing the behaviour of children and in involving parents in their education. It draws strongly on the key techniques of strength-based practice and provides very tangible examples by presenting dialogues of the way situations might be resolved in classroom and playground environments.

Waterhouse, P & Virgona, C 2005 *Contradicting the stereotype: Case studies of success despite literacy difficulties*, NCVER, Adelaide.

This study, referred to earlier, highlighted for us the potential in 'alternative' strengths and intelligences. While the report does not discuss strength-based practice explicitly, as we have done in this guide, it does provide the life stories of individuals who have managed to achieve success by drawing upon their strengths. The case studies are presented on CD-ROM as digital stories, using pictures and the voices of those who participated in the study. The CD-ROM and report are available from NCVER, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1590.html>>.

Other websites

Pi Lambda Theta produces an online education magazine: <<http://www.pilambda.org/horizons/volumes.html>>.

This has a number of articles on strength-based education. Although their approach to strength-based education does not

encompass many of the techniques used by the strength-based practitioners we have discussed in this guide, it appears to embrace many of the values. This group seems to have a greater interest in lists of strengths and in involving students in identifying their strengths, using their list for guidance. There are a range of articles, with the context being secondary and post-secondary education.

Other sites take a similar approach.

Katz, H & McCluskey, K 2003, 'Seeking strength-based approaches in Aboriginal education: The "three stars and a wish" project', *McGill Journal of Education*, Winter, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3965/is_200301/ai_n9228235>. This article describes strength approaches to Canadian Aboriginal education. The authors decry deficit approaches to education and stress programs based on what students can do and on what assists them to understand their identity. However, it is difficult to grasp a methodology that contains the means to the strength-based approach they advocate.

Brief Family Therapy Center website <<http://www.brief-therapy.org>>. Meander around this website for short essays written by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, both seminal figures in the Brief Therapy movement.

Solution-focused change website

<<http://solutionfocusedchange.blogspot.com/2007/04/more-than-miracles-yvonne-dolan-steve.html>>.

This website explores strength-based approaches applied to business environments. There are a number of PDF files available for download in a number of areas.

Dulwich Centre website

<<http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/alicearticle.html>>.

This website gives a great rundown on narrative therapy. It discusses our 'multi-stories' which are very similar to our multi-literacies. It also explains how we enact the stories of our lives.

Summing up

This booklet is just the beginning. It does not presume to be a comprehensive training resource on strength-based education and does not supplant the need for workshops and guided practice with an experienced strength-based facilitator.

This booklet is designed to stir the pot, whet the appetite and provoke a new head-set for the way we might frame and conduct our adult learning relationships.

Perhaps our exploration could begin by probing the frames that determine our practice. Let's look at the assumptions we make and the unconscious rules we follow.

Principles of equity and access are fundamental pillars of adult learning centres.

- ▲ Who could benefit from the centre but does not come?
- ▲ Why?
- ▲ What styles of learning are accommodated and which are not valued or given a place?
- ▲ What values are embedded in the design of the classrooms, the seating arrangements, the display boards etc.?

Discussion of quality in education is important to funding and accrediting bodies as well as to educators and students.

- ▲ How active are learners in deciding the goals of their learning and the criteria by which these will be assessed?

- ▲ If learners were empowered customers and teachers their humble service providers, how would the service be conducted?

Assessment is a key point of accountability for educators, accrediting bodies and for learners.

- ▲ What features would different learners name and measure if they were assessing themselves?
- ▲ What identity shift do different learners aspire to and what do we know about their progress towards it?
- ▲ Who is excluded by the assessment practices conducted at the centre?

The learning journey is the primary preoccupation of educators.

- ▲ What values are embedded in the way learning is conducted?
- ▲ What learning and signs of progress are noted and rewarded?
- ▲ What learning might go unnoticed?
- ▲ How would learners assess their progress?
- ▲ If we were to play a genuine partnership role in the students' learning, how would things be different?

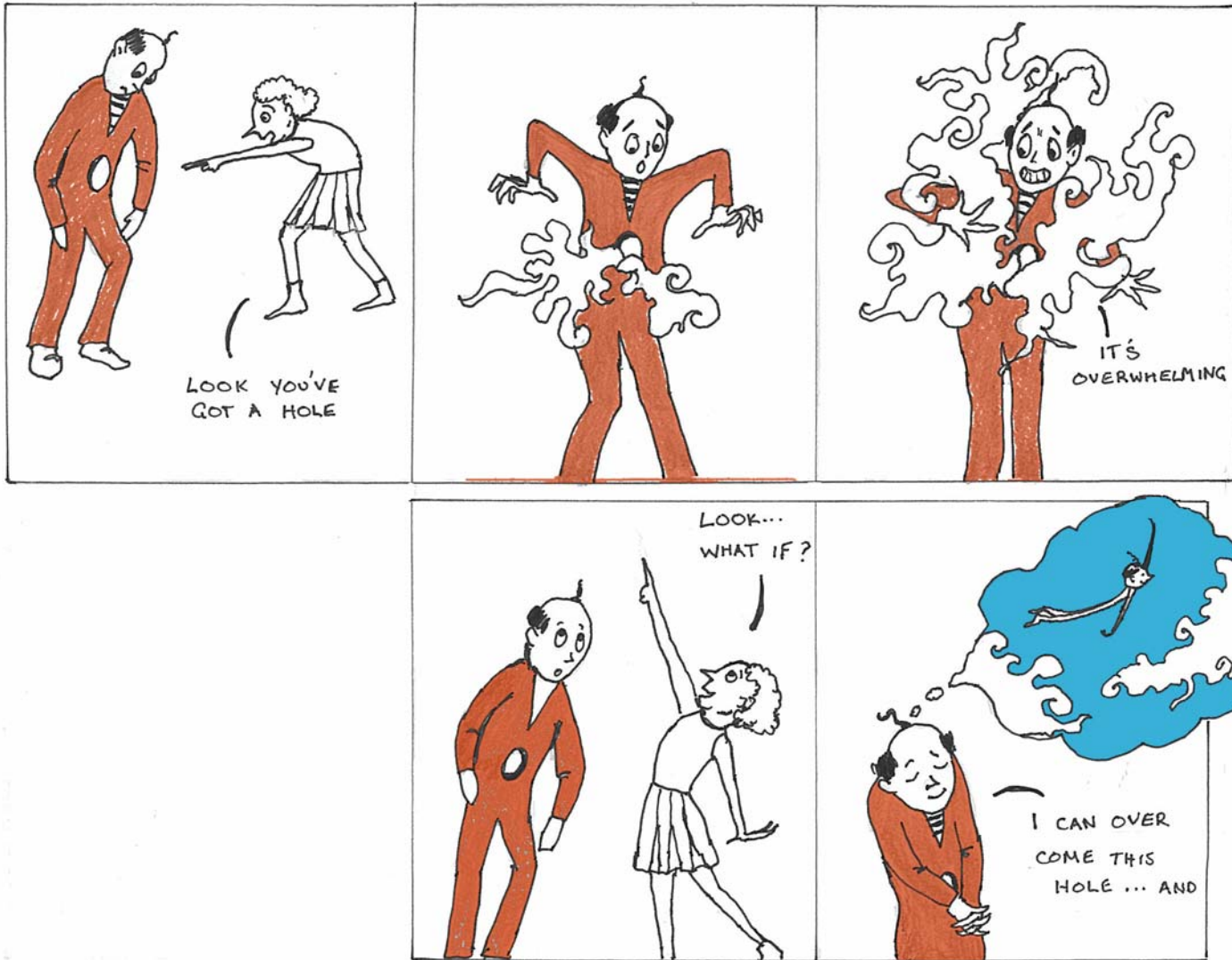
Principles of adult learning place great stock upon the learner as an individual with valuable experience to bring to the learning.

- ▲ What do we know about the individual student's learning strengths, successes and resources for future progress?
- ▲ If self-understanding is an important skill in determining and monitoring goals, what do educators contribute to the development of this quality?
- ▲ What role do educators play in supporting the student's transition to new identities?

There may well be other questions educators need to ask themselves to shake out the assumptions that underpin our processes. A brainstorming activity could realise great riches. The discussion may lead educators to new priorities and a restating of values.

Strength-based education is founded on establishing and sustaining conversations with learners, which sharpens their self-understanding, enabling them to utilise their strengths to realise their goals. It is also about establishing a culture where these values and conversations take place between group members and with larger groups of people. This approach goes hand in hand with those seeking more emotional intelligence in our education system, both as a valuing of the culture and an educational outcome.

- ▲ Do we educate for emotional intelligence?
- ▲ Do we educate for self-understanding?
- ▲ What role do we consciously play in supporting our learners to make the identity shift inherent to literacy learning?
- ▲ How do we understand the quality of our conversations with learners?
- ▲ How do we rate the quality of these conversations?



References

- Anderson, E 2005, 'Strength based educating: A concrete way to bring out the best in students – and yourself', *Educational Horizons*, vol.83, no.3, pp.180–9, viewed 21 December 2007, <<http://www.pilambda.org/horizons/v83-3/anderson.pdf>>.
- Berg, I K 1991, *Family preservation: A brief therapy workbook*, Brief Therapy Press, London.
- 1994, *Family based services: A solution-focus approach*, Norton, New York.
- Berg, I K & de Shazer, S 1993, 'Making numbers talk: Language in therapy', in S Friedman (ed.), *The new language of change: Constructive collaboration in psychotherapy*, Guilford, New York.
- Cooperrider, D & Srivastva, S 1987, 'Appreciative inquiry into organizational life', *Organizational Change and Development*, vol.1, pp.129–69.
- de Shazer, S 1988, *Clues, investigating solutions in brief therapy*, Norton, New York.
- 1991, *Outing difference to work*, Norton, New York.
- 1994, *Words were originally magic*, Norton, New York.
- Deveson, A 2003, *Resilience*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Disability Attendant Support Services Inc. (DASSI) website, viewed March 2006, <<http://www.dassi.com.au>>.
- Foley, A 2005, *Searching for the 'C' in ACE*, School of Education, University of Ballarat, Victoria.
- Freire, P 1977a (1970), *Cultural action for freedom*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria.
- 1977b (1972), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria.
- Gunn, J 2005, 'Rethinking literacies: Literacy and numeracy across the domains of social life', *Literacy Link*, vol.25, no.5.
- Harris, R, Simons, M & Clayton, B 2005, *Shifting mindsets: The changing work roles of vocational education and training practitioners*, NCVET, Adelaide.
- Knowles, M S 1990, *The adult learner: A neglected species*, Gulf Publishing Co., Houston, Tex.
- Lakoff, G 2006, *Simple framing*, The Rockridge Institute, viewed July 2006, <www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects>.
- McCashen, W 2006, *The strengths approach*, St Luke's Innovative Resources, Bendigo, Victoria.
- McCormack, R & Pancini, G 1991, *Learning to learn: Introducing adults to the culture, context and conventions of knowledge*, Division of Further Education, Melbourne.
- Macrae, H 2001, 'Three ACE cards in Australia's pack', *ALA Commentary*, vol.17, no.4.
- Mahlberg, K & Sjoblom, M 2004 (2002), *Solution-focused education*, Mareld, Stockholm, Sweden.
- Maslow A, 1968, *Towards a psychology of being*, 2nd edn, Van Nostrand Co., Princeton, NJ.
- Mitchell, J & Young, S, 2001, *High-skilled High-performing VET: A report on change management and staff development strategies required to build the capacity of the VET sector to facilitate the achievement of an integrated, national VET system*, ANTA, Melbourne.
- Osborn J 2006, 'Solution-focused therapy', viewed July 2006, <http://edweb.csus.edu/edc/class_downloads/osborn/edc234_brief.pdf>.
- Rogers, C 1961, *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.
- 1969, *Freedom to learn*, Charles E Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, Ohio.

- Sanguinetti, J 2000, Abstract: 'Performativity, professionalism and power: An adventure in "postmodern" participatory action research', AARE/NZARE Conference 1999, Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne, p.107.
- Sanguinetti, J, Waterhouse, P & Maunders, D (& 22 teacher co-researchers) 2004, *The ACE experience: Pedagogies for life and employability*, final report, Victoria University & Adult Community and Further Education Board of Victoria, viewed 29 December 2007, <<http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc/publications4.html>>.
- Seligman, M E P 1990, *Learned optimism*, Random House, Sydney.
- Shor, I 1987 (1980), *Critical teaching & everyday life*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Staley, J 2007, "'Art as Voice": Community storytelling through film and theatre', paper presented at Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Conference, *Living literacies*, Melbourne.
- Vella, J K 2002, *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Waterhouse, P & Virgona, C 2005, *Contradicting the stereotype: Case studies of success despite literacy difficulties*, NCVET, Adelaide, viewed 29 December 2007, <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1590.html>>.
- Zimmerman, T S, Prest, L A & Wetzel B E 1997, 'Solution-focused couples therapy groups: An empirical study', *Journal of Family Therapy*, vol.19, pp.125–44.



This report is part of the Adult Literacy National Project, funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. This body of research aims to assist Australian workers, citizens and learners to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

Research funding is awarded to organisations via a competitive grants process.

National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd

Level 11, 33 King William Street
Adelaide SA 5000

PO Box 8288 Station Arcade
South Australia 5000

Phone +61 8 8230 8400
Fax +61 8 8212 3436
