



THESE ARE TIMES WHEN THE ROUTINE OF COMMENCING ANOTHER
EDUCATION YEAR SEEMS LESS IMPORTANT.

Learning our way out

The fractious atmosphere surrounding last year's election had barely eased before we were dramatically confronted by the disturbing realities of Australia's detention centres. And overlaying these local realities is the lingering aftermath of the September 11 atrocity and the promise by the American President of unilateral and potentially ongoing war.

In this context the business of organising an adult education program, a timetable, classes, tutors, advertisements, reports, audited statements and so on remains necessary. But how can we do more? How can we assist adults in our communities to question what is going on, to understand the emotional responses, to gather the information needed to come to informed judgements, to discuss with others in order to feel some confidence in taking control over the forces that shape their lives?

For isn't this claim of education for social change one of the enduring articles of faith of adult educators?

I recently read a book that claimed that adult education was at the crossroads. The authors, Matthias Finger and Jose Manuel Asun, believe that adult education has been tremendously successful in terms of practice – its methods have been widely embraced – at the same

time as it is disintegrating as an intellectual discipline. They point to adult education as being increasingly commodified, marketed, customised, modified for organisations, and sold worldwide. It embraces everything from grass-roots activism to top level management training, and because of this it has lost its way, it has lost its sense of purpose and the values that direct it.

Their challenge to adult educators is that we need to 'learn our way out' of this situation. It's an argument that won't be shared by everyone, but it is a challenge that can't be ignored. How can adult educators facilitate discussion and learning about the most pressing issues facing us all today with the purpose of shaping a fairer, more just society?

There are promising examples of small groups coming together to distribute information and discussion sheets about the refugees, immigration and the war. ALA's February website of the month highlighted one group's activity and another's booklet *The Truth Hurts* also features on the site. Can similar activities be organised between the computer and Thai cooking classes?

This immediate challenge for adult education coordinators is also relevant for other issues. For instance young (and older) people

continue to join environment groups to learn and act on global warming, deforestation and to consider ways of responding to the Rio and Kyoto agendas. Will they see the adult education centre as a site for this learning? Will adult education be seen as a place where the issues that people really want and need to know about will be discussed or will that occur elsewhere?

ALA wants to respond to these challenges. We will again this year convene a learning leadership program that will take up these issues and challenges. The aim will be to bring together current and aspiring leaders who believe that adult education and learning is vital in building community learning and action in order to develop a growing cohort of activist learning leaders. Details can be found on page 9.

This is my final editorial in my role as ALA Director. I would like to thank ALA members for their support over the past three years, for the warm welcome I received when visiting centres across the country, and for sharing your experience and expertise. I now return to the practice of teaching and learning. ■

Tony Brown