

From the Editor's desk
Tony Brown



Welcome to 2017 and the 57th volume of Australia's adult education and learning journal. It's been a start to the year unlike any other in my memory.

Even before 2017 the level of disenchantment with the political process had become more entrenched especially as the inequality gap grew in Australia and in other similar countries. There is a widespread lack of trust, and it goes beyond politics to encompass many institutions some of which were once the most trusted.

Finding solutions to deep-seated and ongoing problems such as extreme climate and the planet's health, indigenous reconciliation,

immigration, security, marriage equality and violence are bogged down in recrimination, point scoring, hostility and a lack of imagination and courage. Confidence in the society being able to discuss these issues in a way that relies on tolerance and is informed by reason and a civil discourse is understandably very low.

Then, on top of this came the US Presidential election campaign and in January the swearing-in of a President unlike any other seen before.

Not surprisingly there is a sense that things are very different, and very unsettling with consequences that are hard to imagine or frightening to imagine. How did this eventuate? Why? What are the causes? These are all questions that many are grappling with.

In thinking about this new environment I was reminded of Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning and in particular the concept of the 'disorientating dilemma'. For Mezirow the meaning we each make of the world around us is shaped by what he called 'habits of the mind' or 'habits of expectation', which adults acquire over a lifetime. These meaning structures are 'frames of reference' that are based on the totality of individual's cultural and contextual experiences and they influence how we behave and interpret events.

But what happens when something comes along that does not fit in with these frames of reference that we use to know our world, that we use to guide our responses to everyday events and relations, and help us to understand how things fit together?

When something comes along that can't easily be comprehended by our usual frames of reference it leads to what Mezirow referred to as a 'disorientating dilemma'. Usually these dilemmas are not freely chosen. They are often triggered by an event or a change where what is held to be most important has to be questioned because it no longer fits with what has been previously known and experienced.

Mezirow theorised this with individuals in mind or with small groups of people who shared something in common. But are we today experiencing a collective, or social, 'disorientating dilemma', something that makes it hard for us as a much larger polity to understand what is going on around us? And if so, something that then requires us to

look for new answers and new understandings to explain this different world?

Being taken outside of the norm, of our comfort zone, presents an opportunity to critically reflect, and potentially lead to some sort of change. It is here that adult educators can play an important role in fostering spaces conducive to inquiry, discussion and learning.

Like many I was trying to make sense of the Trump phenomena over the summer holidays. I had been very surprised that enough of the American population would give him their vote after what had been said during the campaign. I was thrown by realising that a new discourse was being created, one where the word 'facts' needs to be written in inverted commas and clarified before continuing. Where we were being asked to consider 'fake news', alternatives facts, and post-truths. These are all problematic terms for educators and for those seeking knowledge.

These things were on my mind while I was also watching some of the big screen films that opened in the new year, three of which are based on important historical events - *Hidden Figures*, *Loving*, and *Denial*.

In the first two, accounts of overt discrimination against African-Americans in the 1960s are shown, firstly for women working in the fledgling space industry at NASA, and secondly through laws preventing the marriage of a black woman and a white man. They show us just how recently this discrimination was legal and also how these individuals' determination and integrity helped overturn it.

Denial is an account of the libel trial that David Irving, the infamous British holocaust-denier, took out against an American Jewish academic Deborah Lipstadt (played by Rachel Weisz) and Penguin books. The trial took place in London in the 1990s and one of the expert witnesses was Richard Evans, a Cambridge Professor and historian. Evans' painstaking research exposed Irving's claims and helped in him losing his case.

Evans says that one of the positives to come out of the film making the case better known to a wider audience is that might convince people watching it 'that there is such a thing as truth and you can discover it'. His 1997 book *In Defence of History*, famously challenged the postmodernist rejection of objectivity that became increasingly popular

from the 1980s especially in social sciences in the Universities.

Towards the end of *Denial*, Rachel Weisz's character argues passionately that there are facts and there is historical truth – 'slavery happened, the Black Plague happened, Elvis is not alive'.

Now that the supporters of Donald Trump, broadly known as the 'alt-right', have managed to make mainstream terms such as 'fake news', alternatives facts and post-truth, it must raise questions about how educators can work to help people analyse, and develop their own critical knowledge that takes into account facts and historical truth.

The times can make it feel that developing a reasoned argument built on accumulating information and acknowledging differing perspectives has become redundant. Yet it is in such an environment that education is even more important, not an education that tells people what to think, or gives ready-made answers to questions, but one that enables people to consider, contest and develop one's own understanding, not a fixed unchanging position but an understanding that remains open to evolution, greater depth and insight and even change.

In somewhat of an understatement for our times Mezirow believed that disorientating dilemmas are usually 'not freely chosen'. He also conceived of the resulting 'perspective transformation' as being one that was positive. Out of the crisis and disorientation came a new perspective, implying a personal development, an improvement, or awakening. Yet the events of the past year show that there is no automatic 'positive' development. For many the US elections pose a dilemma because they fear what might happen as a result. But for many others among those who supported Trump the disorientation had been accumulating for the twenty-five years leading up to last year's election. It was the election that provided the catalyst to 'let out' a pent up dissatisfaction.

In this febrile atmosphere working as an educator to help people understand what is going on around them, to develop their own ways of analysing events, of questioning their own pre-conceived attitudes and beliefs – their habits of mind and habits of expectation – can be a difficult task as there is so much emotion in the air and the default of looking to apportion blame to some 'other' is often so readily grasped.

Mezirow's suggestions for how educators can work in this heightened atmosphere are still worth recalling. He suggested educators should help learners focus on and examine the assumptions that underlie their beliefs, feelings and actions; help them to assess the consequences of those assumptions; identify and explore alternative sets of assumptions; and test the validity of assumptions through effective participation in reflective dialogue. In this way adult educators might 'help others, and perhaps ourselves, move toward a fuller and more dependable understanding of the meaning of our mutual experience'.

Fostering those places where adults can come together to learn and carve out spaces for their own and their community's development becomes ever more important. The papers in this issue of AJAL point to some of the variety of those learning opportunities.

Tracey Ollis, Karen Starr, Cheryl Ryan, Jennifer Angwin and Ursula Harrison from Deakin University take up from previous research into Victoria's Neighbourhood Houses by investigating the particular learning spaces in the Barwon and South West regions adjoining Geelong in Victoria. Like many other rural areas of Australia the region has been hit by job losses associated with manufacturing factory closures and simultaneous growth of new industries such as hospitality and tourism providing often less secure ongoing work. The research here points to the possibilities that exist to reconstruct new identities due to the special characteristics of the formal and informal education on offer in the community-based houses.

Second chance education is also a focus of the paper by **Harry Savelsberg, Silvia Pignata and Pauline Weckert** from the University of South Australia. They have looked at four TAFE programs that set out to provide access and equity pathways for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The paper focuses on the strategies used to support positive engagement in these second chance equity programs. They found that the programs' participants faced complex and often multiple barriers, which highlighted the importance of delivering programs with sustained and tailored approaches. They argue that while tangible educational and/or employment outcomes were delivered, it was the associated social and personal development that made these programs especially successful.

How higher education institutions can assist adults in their transition to university study is the subject of **Cheryl Bookallil** and **Bobby Harreveld's** paper. Students from groups with low representation in higher education are being supported through a variety of new enabling, or pathway, or transition-to-study programs. What works in helping to retain those students is the focus of this paper. Drawing on the 'insider' perceptions of those students who have been relatively successful with enabling study the paper presents insights into factors behind high attrition from enabling programs and the low rates of articulation into university study.

Feedback from student surveys in higher education is intended to help lecturers improve their subject content and their teaching. However the benefit to current students in undertaking the survey is not so apparent. How can those receive immediate point-of-contact feedback that encourages students to reflect on their own learning is the subject of **Warren Lake, William Boyd, Wendy Boyd** and **Suzi Hellmundt's** paper. They trialled a modified two-factor questionnaire with students and conclude that what was once a researcher-focussed tool can be adapted to be oriented towards current students while retaining its usefulness as a diagnostic research tool.

The final two papers in the refereed section are drawn from overseas teaching and learning experiences. From South Africa **Celestin Mayombe** from the University of KwaZulu-Natal outlines the results of a qualitative study that investigated adult non-formal education and training (NFET) centres in providing post-training support for the employment of graduates. Many adults continue to face long-term unemployment even after completing the NFET programs. The study found that links between the centres and external agencies such as employers, community resources and other services were not strong and that without these links the likelihood of remaining unemployed remained high thus limiting the chances of reducing the chronic poverty that currently exists.

Jen Couch in her paper 'On the borders of pedagogy', uses an auto-ethnographic approach to explore the reflections and insights gained while teaching a subject in adolescent development on the Thai Burma border. Drawing on critical pedagogy as an underpinning framework

for her teaching practices this paper outlines the personal changes that arose from the very particular socio-political context of an Australian woman teaching a university subject on the border of Thailand and Burma.

In the non-refereed section of this issue, **Michael Small** provides an interesting practitioner-based reflection on the operations of a U3A in outer Melbourne. The paper looks at the Mornington U3A in both organisational terms and as a loosely coupled system. He poses two inter-related questions - are U3As in Victoria operating as bureaucracies and so need to be loosened up? Or are they run as organisational anarchies and need to be tightened up?

This issue's book review by **Rob Townsend** is of the impressive, self-published *These Walls Speak Volumes: A History of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria*, by Pam Baragwanath and Ken James.

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