Message from the CEO
Sally Thompson

This edition of Quest continues conversations begun at our recent annual conference held in Melbourne in September. ALA has long focused on the need for policy about adult education to take into account that learning occurs across the entire life spectrum, is intergenerational and occurs informally in families and communities as well as in the formal education system. The theme of the conference was Celebrating Adult Learning Spaces and we attempted to look at those informal and formal places and spaces in which adults learn. Articles based on two of the more popular workshops at the conference are in this edition.

This year is the EFA Global Year of Action on the Education of women and girls and this year’s conference took up the theme with a panel session on the education of Women and Girls. For many of our brother and sister organisations in the Asia South Pacific Association of Basic Adult Education (ASPBAE) access to education for women is the highest policy priority. In Australia women and girls access education in rates equivalent to men and yet the disparity between men’s and women’s wages is growing rather than reducing. As the panel pointed out, the battle for women’s equal participation in the Australian economy and society will be won not just when women have access to an education, but when that education offers women new and valued opportunities rather than reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and power relations.

This year’s conference was held at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) one of Australia’s largest providers of Adult Education and the new home of Adult Learning Australia. After many years of being based at the CIT Southside Campus in Canberra, ALA has moved to the fourth floor of CAE and looks forward to the beginning of a new era based in Melbourne. We are sure that we will be able to continue our national focus and maintain our connections in the nation’s capital.
ALA moves to city
Adult Learning Australia has a new home in the Melbourne CBD. Since October of this year we have been housed in an office on the fourth floor of the refurbished CAE building in Flinders Lane. Sally, Raelene, Debbie and Ilka have been energised by the city buzz and the exciting culture of learning that infuses the CAE ‘precinct’. Our new contact details are:

Adult Learning Australia
418, Level 4, CAE, 253 Flinders Lane
Melbourne, 3011
ph: 03 9652 0853

Denise O’Brien joins ALA Board
ALA is delighted to welcome the CEO of the CAE, Denise O’Brien to its board. Denise is deeply committed to education and learning across the life span and as such strives to ensure that there is parity of esteem between all aspects of learning, informal, non-accredited and accredited.

Under her dynamic leadership for the past three years, Melbourne’s CAE has been well recognised and awarded for its innovative delivery of adult and community education. Quest looks forward to speaking with Denise in the New Year to hear about her background and how she hopes to contribute to the work of ALA.

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ALA Conference 2011
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ALA Conference 2011
Melbourne turned on two beautiful spring days to welcome the participants of the 51st ALA Conference in September. The theme of this year’s conference was Celebrating Adult Learning Spaces and this inspired a wide range of national and international presentations from keynote speakers about how the physical and conceptual spaces of learning are created.

The overall response to the conference was very positive with most of the surveyed attendees rating the presentations as ‘very engaging’ and finding a good balance between presentation and discussion.

The atmosphere over the two days was friendly and stimulating with reports of successful programs from Kathryn Gilbey, Alice Springs, and Peter Lavender, UK, being particularly inspiring. It was not all good new stories, however, with the women’s panel discussion highlighting ongoing gender inequalities in training and employment. A report on this panel discussion is featured in this issue of Quest.

The conference papers from each of the presenters are available online [here](#) and we invite you to have a browse. The next ALA national conference will be hosted by the Byron Region Community Centre in Byron Bay, NSW, in October 2012.

**NIACE Videos**

The National Institute of Adult and Community Education (NIACE) in the UK is one of the most highly respected national adult education bodies in the Western world and ALA was delighted to present director, Peter Lavender, as a keynote speaker at this year’s ALA conference. NIACE have had enormous success with their innovative Transformation Fund (reported in Quest September 2011).

In his presentation at the conference, Peter emphasized the power of film documentation as one of the key learnings of the Transformation Fund project and many audience members were moved to tears by the short film documentaries he presented. Please take a moment to view them [here](#).
National Australian Training Awards announced

Three DEEWR scholarship winners:
Damien Pearce, Vocational and Professional Learning Consultancy, 2011
Martin Riordan, Chief Executive Officer of TAFE Directors Australia, 2009
Mark Brophy, Director, Australian Study Circles Network, 2006

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) have announced the winners of their National Australian Training Awards for 2011.

The Australian Training Awards are the peak, national awards for the vocational education and training (VET) sector, recognising and rewarding organisations and individuals for their outstanding contribution to skilling Australia.

ALA board member, Mark Brophy, was a judge on the national newly introduced Community Pathways to VET award, which was won by Western College in Dubbo NSW.

Mark was also a recipient of a Fulbright Professional Scholar in Vocational Education and Training (VET), sponsored by DEEWR, in 2006.

For a full list of award winners and runners up, click here.
Learning centre helps community heal after Victorian bushfires

If you walk through the bush around Marysville in regional Victoria, you will see the vibrant re-growth that has emerged since the devastating bushfires of February 2009, but what about the local community? What is required to help it regenerate? As one Learn Local provider in the region has discovered; it needs space, time and the opportunities for people to give as well as receive support.

It is not often that an ACE provider is required to work with a community of people in grief and trauma with almost no physical community spaces for learning. When the Continuing Education and Arts Centre of Alexandra (CEACA) went to work with the survivors of the bushfires in Marysville in 2009, they were faced with the most fundamental problems such as how do you make contact with someone when they have no home, no landline and the mobile towers have been burnt?

Background
The Marysville triangle was one of the areas most comprehensively devastated in the 2009 bushfires. In addition to the loss of human life, most community infrastructure was wiped out—schools, sporting club rooms, scout and community halls, churches and the many cafes, guest houses, restaurants and hotels that bring people together. In Marysville only fourteen of over 400 buildings were left standing. In a very real sense, the community itself was destroyed.
"We could not replace the lost facilities," says Rowena Naufal, Executive officer of CEACA, "but we aimed to find ways to replace the community spirit that every one of the lost buildings had housed."

Unlike most Community Learning Partnerships, it was difficult for CEACA to gain input from the target groups about the project design because most people were too traumatized to look beyond immediate needs and grief. "We made contact with disparate groups who were under massive stress and explained the project, then moved on to other groups if it seemed more appropriate," says Rowena. "We took the attitude from the beginning that we could be flexible where others could not. If another group could fund a session, we looked to see if we could support it through promotion, childcare, transport or follow-up sessions. This allowed us to make the money go much further and expand the activities on offer."

A community helping itself

CEACA discovered that the physical spaces were not as important in rebuilding community as people having something to contribute. "People didn't want to turn up to accept assistance," Rowena explains. "They wanted to be a contributor to their community."

After the fires, Australians were desperate to help but sometimes the donations just weren't a good fit. "What use is a new fridge when you haven't got anywhere to put it?" Rowena explains. "People actually didn't want to be asked: 'How can I help?' This is a very independent community. Almost every person we asked was adamant that they did not want to be treated as victims. It worked much better when they were asked how they could help somebody else."

It was this spirit of reciprocity and 'healing by giving' that led to one of the projects enduring successes; the Community Harvest Swap 'n' Meet. The Harvest meets one Saturday a month at CEACA to share garden produce and ideas. Initially it was residents missing their gardens who would come to share produce, often grown in pots at rented flats or the sheds they live in. Now it is rapidly expanding, with non-gardeners offering massage, childcare or other skills and it is drawing interest from the community garden group and an environmental action group. CEACA will continue to provide the free venue, cups of tea and promotion to keep this going indefinitely.

Learning Spaces

Learning took place in the few buildings that had survived as well as people's homes, cafes and the temporary village facilities in Marysville.

During and after the fires, the hotels that remained became places of refuge. "Their personalities changed and they were now seen as significant to the community in a different way," says Rowena. Interestingly, the buildings that were specifically created for the community after the fires were sometimes avoided. "They were a reminder of what had been lost," Rowena explains, "often people preferred to go to someone's home."

Initially, the most popular courses were those that provided immediate support, such as First Aid, relaxation and cooking. As the project continued, a diverse range of vocational and recreational courses were offered such as Barista training, Responsible Serving of Alcohol, Online Business training, French and Mosaics. But according to Rowena, the two most important things that were offered were time and social activities.

"The conditions of the ACFE grant were unusual in two vitally important ways," explains Rowena. "We had an 18-24 month time frame instead of the usual 12 months and we were permitted to fund social activities. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how critical these two factors became to our success."

The importance of time

For the first term, the project was run like a Neighbourhood House, rather than a training centre. "We just listened and listened," says Rowena, "People simply needed time."

In the aftermath of the fires, many offers of help came with tight conditions. Money had to be spent quickly, by people who had little capacity to cope with their day-to-day lives, let alone the pressure of additional decisions. Rowena explains: "Our assurance that they had a second year to guide us in what they wanted made all the difference in how we were accepted."

This de-pressurised approach became a cornerstone of the project's success. "I think in any project where you are developing student/learner interest you need at least 12 months for it to even begin to work, and that's usually when the funding runs out," says Rowena. "The timing of many other offers of help and the community's greatest need did not always coincide, causing great frustration and resentment. Our project could adapt so that we ensured that we delivered activities when and where they were really wanted."
Social activities

After the fires, most survivors were unemployed. The need for vocational training was high, but the ability to engage in it was very low. Shock, grief and resulting poor concentration meant that those who were still working were averaging a 15-hour week, without the physical and emotional reserves to cope with any more. “We would have nine sign up for a Barista course and three would turn up – they’d simply forget,” says Rowena. “We eventually ran the class four times. It wasn’t efficient, but it was very effective.

Holding social activities provided a way to ease people into classes and bring them together for a shared experience. “Activities such as cooking in the shared kitchen area of the temporary village were very popular and addressed many needs, including social contact and new cooking skills for men,” Rowena explains.

Many individuals chose to avoid the government and non-profit counselling services to discuss the fires and emotional aftermath. However, when CEACA ran a massage session over 12 months after the fires, the group talked about their experiences for two hours, without a single massage. “They were ready to talk and the situation was right for them,” says Rowena. “The same thing occurred in an Expressive Art workshop. This has been the great benefit of using local trainers wherever possible. They are not outsiders offering help; they are insiders sharing the burden.”

Evaluation

In an effort for the whole project design to appear as ‘normal’ as possible, CEACA did not set up formal evaluation mechanisms, however they sought and received a great deal of feedback throughout the delivery period. “Since the community did not have the usual input into the project design, their ideas were absolutely critical to our success,” explains Rowena. “We found many who were much more confident requesting activities for their friends rather than for themselves. The general desire to help, rather than be helped, drove much of our planning and presentation of activities.”

Sustainability

Recovery from fire is still in the early stages. Rowena is seeing a new round of trauma taking affect since late 2010. “We had trainers and students dropping out because of nightmares and simple exhaustion. Many of those who threw themselves into recovery earliest have become overwhelmed and are now going through struggles that others faced much earlier. The need for the learning activities is still there.”

Most people were adamant that they wanted to pay for training, however fees were kept very low. “We will need to slowly move closer to a fee for service model,” says Rowena, “but with local trainers, some free venues and a much higher profile, there is great potential to continue many of the courses that have been established.”

Under the CEACA auspice umbrella, many of the social groups are beginning to thrive. Employer groups are requesting training, like MYOB, web design and Excel and CEACA are discussing the possibility of running the Certificate III in Children’s Services in Marysville next year.

Reflections

It is a key role of ACE to assist individuals to overcome disadvantage and improve the quality of their lives and CEACA achieved this for a significant proportion of the affected community in Marysville. However the project went beyond this to make a real contribution to the beginnings of recovery of a community.

Rowena cites patience as the overriding lesson they have had to learn in delivering an ACE project in a crisis environment. And this lesson reaches beyond the context of crisis. “I believe the experience with CEACA in Marysville has accentuated the things that ACE we should be doing anyway. Like not rushing in to ‘help’ and allowing people more input and to do things at their own pace,” she says.
Well-being team helps young people re-engage in learning

With between 15 and 25% of young people disengaged from education or employment across Australia (ABS, 2009), an innovative research project is finding out what VET and ACE organisations are offering young people at risk that schools might not: a ‘well-being team’ approach.

Dr Annette Foley from the University of Ballarat, Victoria has recently completed a research project called ‘The Value of Adult Teaching and Learning Practices,’ which involved interviewing twenty young students between the ages of 16 and 21 years enrolled in alternative out of school programs.

The statistics Annette cites of current youth disengagement levels are far from encouraging. 15% of kids aged 15–19 years and 25% of young people aged 20–24 years are disengaged. By ‘disengaged’, Annette explains, we really mean ‘at risk of disengagement’. “To be truly disengaged means we don’t know who the kids are or we can’t find them,” says Annette, “so the numbers would be even higher.”

That’s a lot of kids disengaging from the school system. So, is it failing these kids?

Having babies is another key factor that can cause young women to disengage from the school system. 11–12,000 babies are born to school age mothers every year. This adds childcare, social isolation and financial pressures to the list of barriers that may prevent young people from going to school. Barriers that include: low literacy and numeracy, family issues, transport, mental illness and housing. For almost all the students Annette interviewed, bullying at school was a huge concern.

Annette’s research project involved students enrolled at the Young Mums program located at Wendouree Community Centre, the Stepping Stones program at Daylesford, and the Link Up program and local youth programs located in Ballarat. All of these ACE and VET organisations provide practical training in lifeskills such as cooking and health related programs as well as providing outcomes such as returning to school or TAFE or, in some cases, getting a job.
Project Aims

The aim of the project was to understand the learning practices within an ACE / VET context. "We wanted to look at pedagogical culture," says Annette, "and see how these adult teaching and learning pedagogies might inform mainstream schools."

Findings

So what was revealed in the interviews? "We found a very holistic approach," says Annette. "In the Young Mums and Link Up programs, for example, for every five teachers or so, there is a welfare worker attached to the team, who will work with the students needs outside the classroom such as health or housing."

For some young men, having councillors available on-site meant that they can leave the classroom for some individual support if things gets a little heated, and return again when they are ready to recommence learning. "This type of one on one support would rarely be available in a mainstream school setting," says Annette.

Teachers talked about finding the 'hook': the thing that kept kids engaged. For the young mums it was being able to have their babies with them while they learnt. In most of the centres studied, the learning was focused around a specific project such as a Debutante Ball for the young mums or a canoeing or camping trip. "Link Up used music," explains Annette, "which was incredibly successful."

"The physical learning spaces were also seen as very important," continues Annette. "For the young mums, the house itself represented a safe space." Every one of the programs studied has a bullying rule. For almost all the students Annette interviewed, bullying had been a big problem prior to enrolling in these alternative learning settings.

Perceptions

Annette explains that there has been some criticism that programs such as these are further marginalising already marginalised kids. But Annette rejects such criticism. "At least they're learning," she says. "The model of learning that incorporates a 'well-being team' approach or a model that mixes welfare and education are essential components to the success of these programs."

Around twenty-five per cent of kids who attend the learning organisations studied in this research project hook back into mainstream education. It appears there is a great deal of value in adult teaching and learning practices for disengaged young people.
If you travel through the small Gippsland timber town of Heyfield, Victoria, you may wonder why almost half the homes and businesses are flying white, green and blue flags. The reason is an innovative sustainability program run by the local community learning centre.

After Heyfield Community Resource Centre staff member, Judy Doolan, read about the 20-year population prediction for her region, she decided it was time to do something serious about the town's energy use and lifestyle.

"We decided to survey the community to see if they were interested in sustainability before we attempted anything," explains Judy. They surveyed 300 people over two days outside the local supermarket and identified the two main barriers to taking action on climate change: lack of information and cost. Thus the Gippsland Green Centrepoint project was born.

"We decided to trial a pilot program as a whole community," says Judy. "The goal was to provide residents with information on how to reduce their carbon footprint and to promote the town as a sustainable, smart town." They also wanted to support people in improving disability access in their homes and businesses and generally achieving a healthier lifestyle.

The concept was simple: three different coloured flags to be flown outside people's homes and businesses, with each colour representing the level of sustainability achieved. "An assessor would come through and assess each stage," explains Judy. "You had to be doing at least 8 things from the 'white flag' stage before you could move on to a blue flag." When the green flag is flying, that home is sustainable for the future.

"It became a talking point for the whole community and fostered some healthy local competition," says Judy. "Males tended to dominate the transition from blue to green stage!"

The assessor provided motivation and tips to help people 'move up' to the next coloured flag. It generally took about four months to make the changes required for the next stage. "When people started hitting the 'blue-flag' stage, we provided a solar bulk buy for the whole community, making it affordable for most," says Judy. "This was our way of helping people to get to the final stage where solar panels is one of the criteria. Over 200 houses now have solar power in Heyfield."
The project was a huge success with 380 rooftops flying flags out of 700 homes and businesses. It received a high level of media coverage and government interest and there was high demand for presentations about how it worked.

But the Gippsland Green Centrepoint had important local benefits as well. "It united the town because people were participating as a community and sharing in a sense of achievement," says Judy, "and kids motivated their families."

Judy believes that the project shows that everybody is interested in climate change and sustainability, given the right opportunities and support. "Heyfield is a town with over 200 locals working for Gunns," she explains. "If we can do it, anyone can."

And what would she do differently next time? "Change the flag material," Judy laughs, "it didn’t last the eight months!"
Australia's job training myth: there's no gender issue

What happens when a group of informally employed, home-based textiles workers are given the chance to receive high quality training that will improve their employability and work conditions? In the case of one group of Australian women, not much.

Dominant media discourse in this country says that skills and literacy training will lead to jobs, but it seems that amongst our most disadvantaged, unsupported and mostly female workers, this does not ring true.

Helena Spyrou is an educator and advocate at the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFU). At ALA's recent national conference, she was part of a panel discussion that looked at why education and training is not necessarily leading to positive employment outcomes for women in Australia.

Helena spoke about a group of women she had interviewed who worked at home sewing clothing. "Homeworkers represent a highly skilled workforce able to meet the demands of the Textile, Clothing and Footwear sector," she explains. "Despite this, their skills remain unrecognized and their services underutilized."

Women who have been working from home for many years have said that they want their existing skills to be recognized and remunerated with better pay and conditions and they want to extend their knowledge and skills in order to find better paid work outside the home. As one woman put it;

'I've had enough. The work I do is of a high standard, but it's still not worth anything. I don't get holiday or sick pay. I have to work by myself and then when I am sick and when there's no work in the slow season, I don't get any money. I want to work outside (the home) and then people might treat me equally and I might get more rights. I have a lot of experience (Nhu)."
In 2007, the Union partnered with RMIT University in Melbourne and the Textile and Fashion Industries Association to offer a group of 15 homeworkers from the Vietnamese community a one-year training course in pattern-making coupled with language and literacy to build their experience and industry knowledge; improve their English language in order to get better paid work and conditions; and offer work experience with a view to possible employment.

At the time there was anecdotal evidence from the industry that there were skills shortages and that formal recognition of existing skills and further training and English language development would enable homeworkers to enter the formal labour market.

Helena interviewed the participants (13 women and 2 men) at the beginning of the project and they were excited about the training and hopeful that they would find work outside the home. It was a challenge for these participants to integrate fulltime student life with their family responsibilities as well as continue their work from home in many cases, however despite this, all did exceptionally well and many gained a high distinction;

'It's like going to a new world, you get stuck inside and you don't know anything outside. I feel my future now. I can grow (Hai).

Since I've been a student, my life at home, has changed completely. I feel more active, more outgoing. I'm not always inside my house. Now I go out for me. I go out to do my study (Nhu).

However, when the women undertook 40 hours work experience in fashion houses at the end of the course, they hoped that they would be given opportunities to practice patternmaking and that this may actually lead to employment. Instead, they found themselves being exploited by being given 40 hours of sewing and sampling work to do without pay;

'I didn't learn anything and I didn't earn anything and I had to pay for my train ticket. If employers know they that will get experienced workers to work for nothing they will say, "Welcome." They don't need to pay. We are very experienced and we can do a lot of things. ... It's a big benefit for them, but not for me (Nhu).

When Helena interviewed the participants 12 months after the training had been completed, most of them had returned to home-based work or started studying aged care, as they were told there is employment in that area. Only one of the fifteen people felt that the desire for change in her life had been fulfilled by the training opportunity she had been given.

This outcome challenged the dominant discourse in both Federal and State training policies, which still argues that skills and English literacy development will lead to gaining jobs in the labour market. "These women did not get jobs, despite their training, because employers would have to pay them award wages and it is cheaper to pay women who work from home," explains Helena. "Sadley, this study exemplified the way the rhetoric of the skills agenda and literacy training is thwarting the aspirations of women like these."

Spyrou believes that the issues affecting women homeworkers are systemic in globalized capitalism. "People who do low paid, informal work at home and at the same time look after their family and household are assumed to be in unlimited supply," she says. "Most homeworkers are women migrants who came to Australia with young children and needed to start work straight away in order to support their families. They did not take up opportunities to formally learn English nor did they have access to free or affordable childcare. Sewing from home was a way to earn money and simultaneously look after children. Not only are they not paid for looking after their children and family, they are also paid much less and have less power than men or even other women who work within formal spheres of production such as factories," Helena explains. "What we discovered through the interviews was that women have a variety of complex skills, but there is a disjuncture between their perception of their skill needs and the way the training system views those needs."
With over 70% of Australia’s existing Textile, Clothing and Footwear industry workforce currently working from home, it is clearly essential that their needs are accurately understood and addressed.

Helena Spyrou is not the only one asking the question: if we are doing so well in educating women why is it not translated into equal pay and conditions?

Elaine Butler, Executive Officer of WAVE (Women in Adult and Vocational Education), also believes that there are a number of mantras and myths around women’s and girl’s education in the Australian media. “We’re fed the story that there is no issue around gender in Australia,” Elaine says, “but it is widely recognized that Australia has one of the most gender-segregated labour forces in the OECD countries, both by industry and by level of appointment.”

“Women’s enrolment is engineering is currently at 15%, with even lower participation rates for construction management. Similar gendered enrolment trends are replicated in trades areas,” explains Elaine. “There is a dominance of women in low productivity sectors of the economy, particularly health care and training, a bias to clerical roles and a bias to working short hours.”

This fact is echoed by Rowena Allen of ACFE who quotes Julia Gillard’s inaugural oration for Emily’s List in September of this year, “If we took female workforce participation to the level of Europe, it would see $180 billion coming into our gross domestic product—this is equal to the mining boom.” In her presentation on the conference panel, Rowena pointed out that Australia is 44th in the world for female workforce participation with only 60% of Australian women in employment.

Elaine believes that skills shortages is the dominant media message and Australia has a reputation for being a ‘fair-go’ society, clouding the evidence that there are still gender-based inequalities embedded in education enrolment patterns and labour patterns in Australia. “There has been no national policy that looks at women and girls education and training since 1996.” It is Elaine’s view that over the past fifteen years, Access and Equity policy has been lost to social inclusion. “Social inclusion in VET does not ‘do’ gender equality,” she says.

As Rowena points out: “Adult and community education is well placed to make a significant contribution to the training of women. Hopefully this will lead to jobs.”
Faten Chendeb, a Language, Literacy and Numeracy student from Melbourne’s Community West centre, has won shares in a $45,000 prize pool and national acclaim in a writing competition designed to encourage adult learning and highlight the fact that ‘it’s never too late to learn to read’.

Held during this year’s Adult Learners’ Week, the short story competition was the launch event for National Year of Reading 2012 and drew out inspiring stories from new and established writers about the struggles and triumphs experienced by people learning to read as adults.

National Director of Writing Australia, Mary Delahunty, said the exciting new competition had set the stage for the National Year of Reading 2012. “The competition was held to find and record stories, true or fictional, which would inspire adults to learn to read or improve their reading”, she said. “There is an amazing range of settings and characters in the winning stories, which will be produced as recordings to help reach the 45 per cent of Australians who struggle with literacy.”

Judges included Australian author Leonie Norrington, who herself returned to study literacy as an adult and went on to become an award-winning author.

The competition and prizes have been funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations through Adult Learners’ Week National Grant Funding.

Faten Chendeb’s prize-winning story is published below.

**When English made my future better**

My name is Faten Chendeb and I was born in Lebanon. I have four brothers and three sisters. We lived in a village, which was a very nice place, because it had fresh air, fresh fruit and a very nice weather in spring and summer.

I went to study at Arabic school, because my country only speaks Arabic and I also learnt French. I went to university for four years and then became a teacher for primary school at my country. I loved my job.

After a few years I got married. My husband is Lebanese. He lived in Australia before I got married to him. He took a holiday just for one month and stayed with me in Lebanon. After one month my husband went back to Australia, while I was in Lebanon, I was waiting for my husband to send a form to the immigration apartment in Australia, because I wanted to come to Australia to be with my husband.

While everything was happening I found out that I was pregnant. I waited one year in Lebanon until I received my visa. Before I received my visa my baby was born in Lebanon. It was a baby girl. My husband had never seen his daughter.

When my visa came I got it but my daughter didn’t get the visa, because someone made a mistake with her birth certificate in Lebanon. I couldn’t stay because, in Lebanon after I took my visa it had been limited time. I couldn’t take my daughter with me so I was forced to leave her, when she was 3 months old, so I had to leave her with my family in Lebanon.

I had to fly to Australia in September 1997 by myself. I was crying because I left my daughter back there and I missed my family. I was never happy in Australia because I didn’t speak English and I didn’t have my driver’s licence. Everything was different and difficult.

I was always upset and crying because my husband worked night shifts with long hours. After one year my daughter finally got the visa and came to Australia with my friend. When I saw her I couldn’t believe that was my daughter she changed everything in my life.
After a while, I studied two months of English at Community West. Then I stopped because I had four kids and had no time to learn or work. After my kids went to school I started to study English at Community West because the first time I went I was very shy because I never talked English before, and so I needed to learn and speak English for my future, so I could get a good job.

My kids had been helping me how I say a word and what that word means and sometimes I got to the library with my kids to read books and learn new information’s. Sometimes I even read newspapers and it often helps me and I even learn new words.

English was hard for me to understand because I didn’t know how to speak or read English because at my country I never read or spoke English, so that why I decided to come to Community West. Sometimes if I don’t understand a word I ask the teacher to come and help me and to tell me what it means.

I am very happy now because my English is not bad, all thanks to every teacher and especially Community West, because English had changed all my life and it is much easier for me to talk to people at Shopping Centres and if I have appointment.

I wrote this true story for use to see how much I have improved my English.

The National year of Reading 2012 will raise awareness of Australia’s 46% illiteracy rate and bring together libraries and other organisations working to build a culture of reading in the community. With a year-long program of events and supported by high profile ambassadors, the National Year of Reading is an opportunity to link all the great things that are already happening around books, reading and literacy, and give them an extra boost, with inspirational programs and events across the country.

Further information is available at the National Year of Reading website.
The 2011 ALA Conference theme, Celebrating Adult Learning Spaces, evoked a wide range of responses from presenters about the physical and conceptual spaces of learning. Conference presenter, Peter Willis, senior lecturer in education from University of South Australia, looks at how the spaces of learning; room, bench and table, can activate the basic elements of a compassionate civilization.

In a compassionate civilization, according to Peter, our personal, working and social lives are infused with a mixture of courtesy, creativity and conviviality. "The elements of such a civilization," he explains, "include safety and comfort; making or growing things; and social linking."

These elements, Peter believes, can be symbolized by three archetypal spaces of human learning: the room—a space of shelter and comfort; the bench—a space for shaping, making or creating things; and the table—a space of welcoming and sitting together, eating, talking, arguing and connecting.

Peter reflects on how these three spaces of learning have been mobilised in the pursuit of a more compassionate civilization throughout his life:

**Room**

Room spaces range from classrooms to churches, town halls, community centres, libraries, sheds and studios. "Rooms define spaces," says Willis. "They protect their inhabitants and their pursuits and they enhance these activities when their design and decoration speak to the people in the room."

Peter Willis: I spent a few years in a university college in Canberra as chaplain to the community. During one of the term breaks, I was visited by Mum Shirl, an Aboriginal leader activist from Redfern in Sydney, with a group of women on their way for a consultation at Parliament House.

The nuns in charge of the college (who were strong on social justice and hospitality) found enough rooms vacated by the students for these unexpected but welcome guests. At breakfast the next day, the Aboriginal people, while appreciating the sisters' kindness, had said privately that the single student rooms had made them very afraid—too many strange spirits and no relations staying with them. They had spent the night crammed into just one of the rooms, sleeping on the floor.
The spaces that students so valued for their privacy and design had a different message for the Aboriginal guests. They were more than places of shelter. They faced out and in. The ‘out’ face of the roofed room signified separation from the rest of the world. This represented and effected the classic separation between nature and culture. The ‘in’ face of the roofed room symbolized privacy, singularity and concentration.

Bench

The benches associated with shaping, making and creativity. "The bench is where physical things are worked on and polished," Peter explains, "it is associated with tools, technology and all the different kinds of making: carpentry, metalwork and, of course, cooking." Related to the bench is the desk, a space where ideas are imagined, written, drawn and communicated.

Benches enhance the human ‘making’ desire. Workbenches and desks can be the catalysts for the creative work that feed a compassionate civilisation. "Desks can connect people through correspondence and illuminate the world through art and writing," says Peter. "Computers and social media programs have been wonderful fruits of desk."

Peter Willis: My father in law, Tom, was a carpenter joiner. He had promised his daughter (my spouse) that he would fix up her kitchen in her newly married life in Alice Springs.

When he came to Alice Springs to fulfill his kitchen promise, he arrived in a new four-wheel drive station wagon with a huge flat box attached to the roof rack containing all his tools. He was a great one for clearing the decks and sweeping his working space. During the first few days of his visit, he measured the dimensions of the new kitchen and then got to work to build a workbench for the job and for the various types of timber and processes he would be dealing with.

When it was finished it gleamed with purpose, precision and elegance. It sat under the extended verandah promising only the best from its creator and others wanting to make things on its pristine surface. Tom said that that measurements made on this workbench for various carpentry and joined tasks would be spot on and the workbench would sustain precise, robust and enthusiastic use.

The precision of the solid pine kitchen furniture which emerged with its carefully framed cupboard doors and jarrah bench tops drew its perfection from the work bench that had the same quality and capacity. It had been the working space from which the civilized product was created combined with the love he bore for his daughter and grandchild.

When he died unexpectedly we had the coffin brought to the house and laid out on his bench. It was spot on.
The third learning space is the table, which, as distinguished from the bench, is the designated space for convivial actions; sitting, eating and conversing together. "The learning of the convivial table begins with the pedagogy of manners around eating and drinking and caring for each other," says Peter, "and then moves to the pedagogy of conversation, debate and dialogue."

Peter Willis: When we lived in Alice Springs, a group of us young families used to meet at one another’s houses for a shared meal. There was so much value in these gatherings in a place to which most of the young people had come for work at the cost of leaving familiar places, family and friends.

The couples, with children playing close by, would sit around a communal table and share food that they brought leaving the main course to the host family. In the routine fortnightly gathering, members of the group came to know each other and to value the connections.

One of the few members of the group, who was single and without children, was concerned with national and international politics and had a tendency to hold forth at length on pet topics, so that the group could become reduced to an irritated but kindly audience. He had taken the floor and had created considerable tension.

One of the less accommodating participants had complained to some of the others about the effect of this intervention on the convivial group and was concerned that the group might become so frayed that people would not come. The next gathering was held at the house of the woman who had complained privately. Without being consciously at the front of their minds, the general ‘success’ of the meal was tacitly on the minds of the host couple. They felt responsible for the wellbeing of the guests and the dinner as a mini-event under their care.

The longwinded speaker, who was entering into what looked ominously like the beginning of a prolonged exposition said, by way of preamble: "Stop me if I’ve spoken about this before". At this point the woman who had complained, intervened swiftly and said with the slightest abruptness that, yes, he had spoken about that at the last meeting. The interrupted speaker paused and then stood up with some distress. He then said that did not want to sit at a table with people where he was not welcome. There was an uncomfortable silence as the group could see that a walkout was imminent and a return from such a sundering event unlikely.

At this point the companionable spouse of the blunt intervener said to the aggrieved man that no offence was meant at all and his spouse was a Sagittarian and took things at face value. She was, in fact, exclusively referring to conversations at the last gathering where indeed some of the matters about to be talked about had been mentioned. He then said that his spouse if required could provide a fine array of insults, but that was not what she had been doing, and would their friend (who was after all their friend) please sit down again. The invited man had the grace to sit and apologise for misreading the signals and the conversation slowly picked up.

The table once again had been exposed as a special arena for a creative and compassionate civilisation and not without its risks as well as its joys and benefits.

ALA thanks Peter Willis for his conference presentation and for reminding us to be reflective on the value and meaning of the spaces that we use everyday.
Men in the St Arnaud Men’s Shed, Victoria, 2011

I have been privileged in late 2011 to undertake a three month period of academic study through University of Ballarat in Australia called an Outside Studies Program (OSP) that included 8 weeks working overseas. My research work and reconnaissance in relation to men’s learning and wellbeing during this OSP, specifically in relation to the spread and development of men’s sheds in nine nations in late 2011 leads me to a number of tentative and different conclusions in these nations that I think should be of interest to those involved in adult education in Australia.

The phenomenal growth of men’s sheds (in terms of numbers and types) in Australia (the number of Australian men’s sheds registered with Australian Men’s Sheds Association in early October 2011 is over 650 and still rising) is not yet matched by sufficient critical, recent and independent research about who participates and what the outcomes are for men, their families and communities.

Though the benefits are obvious and numerous to those involved, governments and auspice organisations will need access to such research if they are to begin or continue to support men’s sheds. It is important to acknowledge that sheds have developed in different ways across different states and territories in Australia and are at different stages of organization, partly as a result of different early shed histories, size and geography and partly because of different leadership. Victoria and Tasmania have achieved government support for shed start up and annual funding respectively. It would appear timely for other Australian states to try and make similar advances.

The spread of men’s sheds in New Zealand progresses steadily though they have not achieved the same traction as in Australia. Aside from the need for research from New Zealand there is a pressing need for the shed sector there to be more strategic and organized nationally if it is to get the attention and support of governments. There is a need for new people involved to help and lead those who have already done the early ‘hard yards’. Academics in New Zealand have to date displayed a reluctance and conservatism about getting involved in movements to do with access and equity of men in relation to learning or wellbeing, though there is separate concern there for boys and women higher education graduates in New Zealand already outnumber men two to one and ACE Aotearoa is well aware of and sympathetic to the issues.
The spread of sheds in Ireland is recent, rapid and phenomenal. As in Australia, men's sheds have struck a strong community chord and the attention of the media, very much a consequence of excellent shed leadership and understanding of design features underpinning the Australian model by John Evoy from County Wexford. The Irish Men's Sheds Association (notably supporting the island of Ireland) is already robust and united. As in Australia, the importance of annual events and forums that bring shedders together to share their experiences cannot be overstated. As in Australia, the Shed tour (that we trialed in Victoria in August 2011 and later renamed a 'shed crawl') will also become feasible there and in England when sheds reach a critical, minimum density. It is likely that the Dr. Lucía Carragher and the Netwell Centre at the Dundalk Institute of Technology, with the support of other academics and practitioners across Ireland, will soon begin the necessary and ethically appropriate Irish Research. Ireland, like Australia, is at the cutting edge in the world on men's health and wellbeing by being the only two nations in the world with a men's health strategy. The current and severe economic crisis in Ireland, with high numbers of people (including men) out of work makes the men's shed model particularly timely.

The spread of sheds in England was given a 'jump start' on 2010 by full funding of pilot 'Men in Sheds' program in a small number of sites. While this has been excellent at quickly raising the profile of sheds in England, the initial 'top-down', fully funded model is not appropriate and not sustainable, even for a large and not for profit organisation like Age UK with shops and outlets right across most parts of the UK. Age UK and others involved in the embryonic sector now recognize the need to let shedders and sheds take the lead and for the model to become more grassroots and 'bottom up'. While it is too early for definitive research on the relatively small number of bottom-up sheds in the UK, there is an opportunity and need for this research to occur on the sample of sheds that currently exist. The forum in Leicester in late September 2011 organized by Age UK, NIACE (the most highly respected national adult education body in the Western world) and the Men's Health Forum will prove to be very important in setting things on a good and firm course forward. The recent support of Prof John Field for sheds in Britain (see website) is important and significant.

Though I have not had a chance to see a Canadian shed first hand, one Canadian participated in the 2011 AMSA Brisbane Conference. The first shed to open in North America (an incorporated, not for profit organization in Winnipeg) almost three years ago reported recently that:

... slowly and surely the shed movement is being acknowledged on a Federal basis in Canada. ... The Centre for Aging, University of Manitoba and particularly Dr. Corey MacKenzie, have continued to show extreme interest in the Winnipeg shed.

The Minister for Seniors, for Canada, the Honorable Alice Wong has acknowledged the men's shed work started in Canada as has the Minister for Seniors, for the Province of Manitoba. Honourable Jim Rondeau. Doug Mackie from the Winnipeg Men's Shed wrote that:

The challenges presented in expanding the shed movement in Canada are enormous. Seven different time zones, two official languages, -38C weather in the winter and +38C weather in the summer and so much more. Where do our opportunities lie? Certainly they lie in the rural area of western Canada as well as the urban areas. Certainly in the fact that the Baby Boomers have started to turn 65 this year and many more are coming. Certainly in the fact that we are living longer and that increases the health issues, the possible loneliness and isolation of men in particular, and I don't know where or how to address the aboriginal issues in Canada. How to raise awareness of the shed program? How to increase our local membership? How to secure a woodworking shed? All these opportunities are discussed regularly at our planning meetings. We are taking action on all these fronts and more each and every week. We are part of the world wide shed movement and are proud of that fact. Yes, our significance in the larger scheme of things is very small but we are surviving and moving forward. We do want to be part of the International Federation of Men's Shed Associations (IFMSA) and recognized by the Association.
Whether, when, where, how and in what form ‘men’s sheds’ type organisations and movements develop in countries other than those in which English is a first language in Europe (or elsewhere in the world) is difficult to predict at this early stage. However many new seeds have recently been sown in late 2011 during my time working in Finland, Portugal and Greece and there are indications of strong interest in several other parts of Europe. It is important to note that the recent ‘State of Men’s Health in Europe’ report (2011) identifies a marked difference between the health of men and women in Europe as well as between countries that comprise Europe, with high levels of preventable and premature illness and death amongst men. While men’s health issues are particularly acute in northern and Eastern Europe in nations such as Latvia, the report urges a departure from focusing on men’s deficiencies and negative portrayals of men and creating health enhancing environments, such as Australian men have arguably created in men’s sheds in community settings. Again, there is a need for baseline research in different nations across Europe of men’s learning and wellbeing in community settings similar to that we have conducted in Australia in order to see what attributes men’s sheds (or their approximate equivalent) would need to adopt in these very different cultural and national contexts.

Importantly, while shed-type principles are likely to apply in Europe (and other places where workshop-type activities are popular for men to do things together socially for their own good, the good of other men and the community) they will not necessarily be called ‘men’s sheds’. Research reconnaissance in Europe suggests that most nations are at pre-problem stage: ‘men’ and masculinity’ are largely taken for granted and the gender spotlight (including policy, practice and research health and wellbeing) is still mainly and firmly on women, and in terms of age, mainly on younger people of working age. Is it important that AMSA, shed organisations and shedders are aware of what a new and important Australian invention they have created, independently of governments and experts, though in recent years with the support and recognition of both. It is clear to me it is a model that will transfer to well some men in many other nations. As always, it will not work for all men in all cultural or national contexts and no two sheds will or should be the same.

Finally and importantly for adult educators, our suite of research in the past decade suggests that men’s sheds work well when there are multiple outcomes and where the purpose and activity (including adult education) is neither foregrounded nor named. Men’s Sheds work precisely because the mostly older men feel comfortable gathering informally and socially and shaping their own shed and its activities as equal participants in a shared activity, without being treated as students, customers, clients or patients from sometimes deficit and ageist models of provision more typical of formal education.