The realities of Indigenous adult literacy acquisition and practice: Implications for capacity development in remote communities

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ACAL	Australian Council for Adult Literacy
ANU	The Australian National University
CAEPR	Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
CARHDS	Central Australian Remote Health Development Services
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
JET	Job Education Training (Centre)
NARU	North Australia Research Unit
NRS	National Reporting System
UHS	Urapuntja Health Centre
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WELL	Workplace English Language and Literacy

Abstract

The future sustainability of remote communities is being questioned with increasing frequency. The current state of welfare dependency is fragile. Significant work is being undertaken to develop the capacity of Indigenous communities to govern their own services and adult literacy is clearly seen as a major factor in the participation of Indigenous people in community development and the capacity building processes. Yet little research on adult literacy practices and competence in remote Indigenous communities has taken place in Australia.

This paper reports on findings from a collaborative study involving two remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, one in the Top End and the other in the Central Desert. The project, involving a collaboration between the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and Central Australian Remote Health Development Services, used an ethnographic approach, drawing on ideas developed internationally by anthropologists and linguists associated with the New Literacy Studies to explore the social context of literacy acquisition and use in these communities. In this paper we analyse the findings and explore the implications for training, employment and capacity development in remote Indigenous communities.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

This paper reports on an exploratory ethnographic study of adult English literacy acquisition and practice in two remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. In the paper we set out to provide a glimpse of the realities of everyday literacy in these two communities, the skills and abilities of individuals and perceptions surrounding the use of literacy. While recognising that the research is not based on any sort of rigorous statistical sampling, we will discuss what we believe are some important implications for adult training, employment and community capacity development in remote Indigenous communities.

Surprisingly, little is known about the reality of adult Indigenous English literacy in remote Australia. There have been no thorough surveys of Indigenous adult literacy in the Northern Territory and the national survey of Australian adult literacy, *No Single Measure* (Wickert 1989), neglected this area. A 1992 survey of adult literacy in the general Northern Territory community did not include non-urban areas, Indigenous communities or town camps, because the construction of a tool to test competence in these contexts was found to be too difficult (Christie et. al. 1993). We argue that there is a need for a better understanding of Indigenous adult literacy in remote areas.

What is known about Indigenous adult English literacy in remote areas is primarily anecdotal. While there is a small amount of data available through entry level English language, literacy and numeracy assessments carried out by training providers, such data are inconsistent, difficult to locate and biased in providing only a glimpse of those individuals who have enrolled with training providers. Ironically, while the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments are committed to assessing and benchmarking literacy and numeracy among Indigenous children, there is still no such national commitment to adult literacy (Cataldi & Partington 1998; Collins 1999).

The Indigenous adult English literacy research literature is similarly thin (Freeman & Seabrook 1999; Seabrook 1999). While there are some useful discussions about the need to take forms of non-alphabetic literacy practices into account (e.g. Biddle 1996), the role of adult education and literacy (e.g. Harvey & McGinty 1988; Jimbidie 2001), Indigenous people and vocational education in the primary health care field (Every & Young 2002; Kral 2001) and curricular approaches to enhancing English literacy in the workplace (e.g. Wignell & Boyd 1994) there appears to have been little research into the nature of adult literacy on the ground in remote Indigenous communities.

The problem of literacy and capacity development

Literacy research in remote Indigenous communities has tended to focus on finding solutions to the 'problem' of teaching literacy. Most research has looked primarily at classroom practice—making teaching fit Indigenous learning styles, developing more 'culturally appropriate' curricula, increasing community

participation and so forth (Christie 1985; Harris 1984; Heslop 1998; Nakata 2000). Educators, literacy experts and policy planners too often appear to assume that literacy, once introduced and taught using the 'right' methodology, will be the panacea that leads to improved outcomes in education and hence a pathway to further training or employment options and, by implication, community development.

The future sustainability of remote communities is increasingly being questioned. The current state of welfare dependency is fragile. Significant work is being undertaken to develop the capacity of these communities to govern their own services (Dodson & Smith 2003; Martin 2003; Westbury & Sanders 2000) and adult literacy is clearly seen as a major factor in the participation of Indigenous people in community development and the capacity building processes. Yet reports on outcomes in Indigenous education perpetuate a bleak sense of failure. Literacy and numeracy benchmarking in remote schools reveals levels far below commensurate age levels in the mainstream. Separate compartmentalised models of literacy learning in primary, secondary, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) sectors are not leading to improved literacy outcomes. Furthermore, with the introduction of the national competency standards and accredited training, adults entering VET sector training in remote communities are facing an increasing set of barriers as many do not have the required literacy and numeracy skills to meet the competency standards in, for example, the Certificate III in Aboriginal Health Work (Clinical) or Certificate III in Indigenous Education Work.

The limited research that exists in this area continues to show how important social context is for literacy acquisition. In 'literate' communities children are constantly exposed to the plethora of ways in which adults use literacy to enact everyday processes that fit cultural priorities; in these ways literacy practices are transmitted intergenerationally. It would appear, however, that people in remote Indigenous communities are subject to the belief that literacy can be learned solely through the process of regular participation in formal schooling. It appears to be assumed that through regular school attendance (if only primary school), young adults will have learnt the required English literacy and numeracy for ongoing participation in adult education and training and thus will have gained the skills necessary for 'getting a job' and 'running the community'. Practitioners and researchers have done little to alert community members to the role that the family and the community play in the acquisition and transmission of literacy practices in a social context that is meaningful for people's cultural priorities, aims and aspirations.

The Western education and training system rests on an implicit philosophy of investment in the human capital of individuals on a pathway towards labour market employment, whereas in many remote Indigenous contexts the most important investment is in the social capital of the communal whole (Schwab 2001). In this paper, rather than making an assumption that the education and training system currently being implemented in most remote communities will lead to desired outcomes—once improvements are made to teaching methodology and classroom practice—we are advocating that adult literacy practitioners

should become more aware of the social context of actual literacy use in the adult world and should build on the everyday literacy practices in which adults are already engaged, and the purposes for which literacy is used and needed. We ask what range of skills and knowledge Indigenous people want for the 'educated person' in remote Aboriginal Australia. In this paper we argue that if capacity building is to be achieved, and if literacy learning and education are key factors in the capacity building process, then approaches to education and training in remote communities must be informed by a better understanding of the realities of literacy acquisition, retention, transmission and use in these contexts.

Theoretical framework for the project

The operational definition of literacy in our research is drawn from the definition used by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL). This is the most widely accepted Australian definition of literacy and is appropriate in the context of our research:

> Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society. ACAL Policy Statement, 1989, cited in Wickert & Kevin 1995)

A useful analysis of the evolution of contemporary research on literacy has been provided by Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz. They describe three theoretical perspectives (Hull & Schultz 2002). The boundaries between these three perspectives are porous, but they do reflect distinct orientations and provide the backdrop for the theoretical orientation of our work.

The ethnography of communication

The research that falls into this theoretical framework draws together anthropological and linguistic perspectives on language and literacy. It arose in the USA in the 1960s when researchers were beginning to look outside of schools to family and community as part of the push to better understand and provide programs to support students from non-mainstream cultural, linguistic or socioeconomic backgrounds. Until that time, literacy was essentially school-focused and deficit theories blaming students and families provided the explanations for poor engagement and performance in school. Anthropologists, with their interest in language and their notion of culture, helped shift interest outside the walls of the classroom and onto the process of acculturation and socialisation in homes and communities.

Anthropologists with linguistic interests (such as Dell Hymes) and linguists with anthropological interests (like John Gumperz) opened up new understandings of the interrelationship of culture and literacy with the application of ethnographic methods to the study of communication and the development of concepts like 'the

ethnography of communication' and the 'communicative event', focused on setting, participants, norms and genre (see Gumperz & Hymes 1964). These concepts provided new ways to analyse and think about language and literacy. What was new and insightful about them was the conceptualisation of literacy as a social activity, a realisation that was taken further a few years later.

Another important advance in this area came through the research of Shirley Brice Heath who focused on the 'ethnohistory of writing', paying particular attention to the ways writing is used within particular groups (Heath 1981). Her classic study of language and literacy in three interconnected communities in the USA (a black working class community, a white working class community and a racially mixed middle class community) provided glimpses into the place of language in each group and highlighted the interplay of language, culture, race and class (Heath 1983). Heath's work provided deep insights into the nature of language development and the effects of history, culture and tradition on literacy and oral language.

Activity theory

Activity theory grew out of attempts to bring 'the mind' into studies of social activity. While theories of the ethnography of communication blended anthropology and linguistics and explored the links between language, literacy and culture, activity theory focused on learning and human development. The key theorist for much of this work was Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, who posited that symbolic systems such as language, writing and mathematics have a direct influence on how we think and interact with the world. In other words, literacy structures mental activity and mediates thought and action. Drawing on these theories, many researchers began to explore the links between cultural change (e.g. the acquisition of literacy) and thought and action (Cole, Engeström & Vasquez 1997; Engeström 1987; Scribner & Cole 1981). The major advance in this body of work is the positioning of literacy as a purposeful, context-specific and socially organised practice. It also demonstrates that literacy is a multiple not a unitary construct.

New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies is a tag for a theoretical framework that draws together much of what emerged from earlier anthropological, sociolinguistic and psychological studies of language and literacy. 'Characterised by their focus on an understanding of literacies as multiple and situated within social and cultural practices and discourses, these studies point to the central role of power' (Hull & Schultz 2002: 21). The work of theorists in the critical literacy arena should be acknowledged here as well, particularly the writings of Paulo Freire (Freire 1970). Predating the New Literacy Studies theories, Freire's writings have an explicit political agenda, and promote literacy as a tool through which individuals can empower themselves and reshape their lives.

There are a number of distinct and significant threads that run through the New Literacy Studies approach. Brian Street, for example, portrays literacy as 'ideological practice', tightly bound to notions of identity, economic, social and political power (Street 2001). He shifts the focus to literacy practices, comprising both Heath's literacy events, those observable behaviours around literacy, and the concepts and meanings that are brought to those events and that give them meaning (Street 1999). This notion of literacy is totally distinct from the technical skills that most associate with the word. James Gee widens the concept even further by arguing that reading, writing and meaning are situated within specific social practices and discourses (Gee 2000). These discourses are instantiations of particular roles by specific groups of people (Gee 1996). In this way the New Literacy Studies are focused on the means by which identity and social and political relationships are negotiated and instantiated through action, language and text.

Education ethnography and literacy as 'situated practice'

While most assessments of literacy programs and interventions focus on 'effectiveness' in terms of skill-based outcome measures, a number of researchers have taken a different approach, deriving their perspective from the theoretical orientation of activity theorists and researchers in the stream of the New Literacy Studies. Employing an ethnographic approach, these researchers reject the assumption that literacy is a set of technical skills and believe that for literacy programs to be effective they need to be based on full understandings of existing local, everyday literacy practices within the target community (Street 2001). Such research is focused on discovering and understanding the everyday acquisition, uses and meanings of literacy practices in those communities. Research of this type has been carried out around the world—including for example Kulick and Stroud's (1993) research on the conceptions and uses of literacy in a small Papua New Guinea village; Reder and Green (1983) and Reder and Wikelund's (1993) research on literacy development and ethnicity in an Alaskan fishing village; and Besnier's (1995) investigation of the social, ideological and textual characteristics of literacy on a Polynesian atoll. But to our knowledge little comparable sociocultural research exists on the literacy of Australia's Indigenous people. Where research has been published, it tends to focus on vernacular literacy, not English (e.g. Ferguson 1987; Goddard 1990; Kral 2000).

The notion of literacy as situated practice underpins our research, and as a theoretical base it is crucial to our understandings of adult English literacy among Aboriginal people in remote Australia. David Barton and Mary Hamilton (2000: 8) have set out a number of propositions about the nature of literacy as social practice that we take as a starting point for our work:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.

- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

An overview of the research sites

The research reported on below was carried out in two remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory in mid 2003. A third research site has been identified and we hope to extend the project in the near future. Inge Kral worked with the Central Australian Remote Health Development Services (CARHDS) in Alice Springs and the Urapuntja Health Service (UHS) in the Sandover River region, some 250 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs. This project originated out of an ongoing relationship between the researcher, CARHDS and UHS concerned with addressing literacy issues in the training of Aboriginal Health Workers. Fifty Indigenous community members were interviewed over three months, as well as ten non-Indigenous key informants. Jerry Schwab conducted research for this project in Yok, a small but typical outstation community in Arnhem Land within a half-day driving distance from the township of Maningrida.[1] The outstation comprises two extended families in two houses. Three other habitable houses are currently vacant, a reflection of high mobility in this community. The six adults who reside permanently in the community were interviewed for this project. The total population over the course of the ten-day study ranged between 18 and 27.

In this section of the paper we provide a brief overview of these two sites. Our goal here is to provide some additional context and some sense of the educational history of the places in which we carried out the research for this project.

The Sandover River region

Occupation of the Sandover River region by pastoralists began in the 1920s. Most Alyawarr and Anmatyerr speaking people of the region stayed living and working on the stations, so the connection to traditional land has remained relatively intact. In 1978, under the *Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth), local Indigenous people became the legal owners of one station in the area (Devitt 1994).

Western education came to the Sandover River region later than in other areas in central Australia. It was only in 1969 that a government Native Welfare Branch school was established for children living on the station. Some adult education including literacy, numeracy and arts based activities also started soon after. As this was the only pastoral station school in the area for some time the 'majority of

adults and school-aged children living in this region did not have access to any form of state education whatsoever' (Richardson 2001: 176) until after the land and the station were reclaimed and families started drifting back to establish the 'community' in the early 1980s. Although people began moving out to establish homeland outstations soon after, the school remained centralised where the original station school had been. In the mid 1980s extra staff were allocated and Homeland Learning Centres were erected on five outstations.

Consequently many children did not have access to formal schooling until the mid to late 1980s or later, with the final outstation school building erected as late as 2003. No secondary schooling facility has ever existed in the region, although over the years a number of secondary age students have been sent away to board at Yirara College in Alice Springs (Richardson 2001: 221). Thus, the short history of education in the region has contributed to a widespread lack of literacy and numeracy among adults who have spent the majority of their time in the area.

Adult vernacular (or first language) literacy competence is also low. In recent years limited work has commenced on developing orthographies, or spelling systems, and dictionaries for the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr languages (Green 1992). However few vernacular texts exist and the dictionary is not easily accessible for most language speakers. Although missions were never established in the region there is nevertheless a strong Christian presence associated with the Finke River Mission and other groups, and Christian texts in English and the vernacular (Alyawarr Translation Project 2003) are available.

The community now comprises some 1000 people living on 17 decentralised outstations. Key services are distributed among these outstations (for example, the clinic is located in one community and the store in another) necessitating high mobility across the region in order to access services. Adult education and training has been provided in the region, but it has been short-term and ad hoc. Moreover, the adult education and training that has been provided by various agencies over the years has been compartmentalised according to the sector concerned (in particular health and education). It has not been provided in a manner that systematically takes account of any overarching community development or strategic planning processes interlinked to community aspirations, cultural priorities or real employment outcomes. As it is, few employment opportunities for Indigenous people exist in the region aside from health, education and the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, and the burgeoning art industry.

Yok

Yok outstation is located in north-central Arnhem Land near one of several major rivers draining a vast stretch of savanna woodlands between the Arnhem Land escarpment and the Arafura Sea. The region is ecologically diverse with eucalyptus forests as well as swamps and mangrove jungles, sand dunes, dense bushland and mud flats. It is subject to the Asiatic monsoon cycle, with distinct wet and dry seasons, dramatic storms, floods and occasional cyclones. The region

is remote and isolated and Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land have enjoyed long periods of isolation from the rest of the world punctuated occasionally from the sixteenth century onwards by interaction with Macassan trepangers, the arrival of European explorers and pastoralists in the 1880s, and crocodile hunters, Japanese pearlers and missionaries from the early 1900s.

In 1949 the Australian Commonwealth's Native Affairs Branch established a trading post at the mouth of the Liverpool River where Maningrida township is situated today. Maningrida is the largest regional township and is within driving distance of Yok. The original vision for Maningrida was that of a regional centre where Indigenous people in the surrounding area could come to trade goods, particularly crocodile skins and Indigenous crafts, and receive medical care. The government was unabashedly trying to stem the flow of Aboriginal people to Darwin, about 375 kilometres to the west, in a post-war context where the jobs that had drawn people to Darwin were disappearing. Maningrida was not originally envisaged as a new town drawing people from the region into a permanent settlement, but that was the outcome (Hiatt 1965: 11–12; Meehan 1982: 19). The township is the largest permanent settlement in the region and the main resource centre for the people of Yok.

Missions were established in Goulburn Island in 1916 and Milingimbi in 1925 (Methodist Overseas Mission) and Gunbalanja (Oenpelli) in 1925 (Church Missionary Society). A school was established in Maningrida in 1960 and children from the immediate area studied there. Adult education and training have been provided in Maningrida through various bodies over the years. At the moment the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education has a permanent presence in the community and there is also a Job Education Training (JET) Centre, which an adult education facility. Yok was formally established as an outstation in the mid 1970s. The first school was a tin shelter built in 1976. This was upgraded to a simple open-sided shelter on a concrete slab in 1983. A new building was completed in the late 1990s. There is not now nor has there ever been adult education or training available in the community, although some individuals have travelled from Yok to Maningrida or to Batchelor to participate in training.

Methodology: The interviews and literacy assessments

As mentioned above, we made no attempt to draw up a statistically valid sample of respondents for this study. This research is exploratory and our goal was to collect data from two or three remote communities of varying size in different regions. We are well aware of the fact that local histories and contexts can result in very different levels of literacy, and that there is a discrepancy in sample size, community size and fieldwork periods between the two sites reported on here. However it is our belief, based on many years of accumulated experience working with Indigenous people in remote areas, that the patterns we have identified are common to many remote Indigenous communities across the country. Although the research was essentially ethnographic, and included semi-structured

interviews, participant observation and artefact collection, we have also attempted to quantify some of the findings.

During the fieldwork phase of the project we engaged research assistants who were speakers of the local languages, and with their help conducted 55 semi-structured interviews with adults who were resident in the two sites. The methodology was somewhat opportunistic in that we carried out interviews when it was convenient. In some cases this meant scheduled interviews, whereas in other cases the interviews were carried out 'on the spot'. Although sometimes this meant that the most literate people were suggested for interviews by their family members, this was not uniform. The interview schedules and data collection instruments were standardised for both sites. Interviews incorporated a National Reporting System (NRS) (Coates et al. 1995) assessment of language, literacy and numeracy competence (see Fig. 1). In cases where the skills were very low, written instruments were not used. All of the interviews were conducted in conjunction with language speaking research assistants.

Fig. 1. Completing a literacy assessment activity, Arnhem Land

The interview questions included topics such as:

- place and date of birth
- languages spoken
- languages known
- mother's language
- father's language
- attendance at school as a child
- if and/or when the respondent finished school
- who else in the family went to school (siblings, parents, grandparents)
- a self-assessment of English literacy (complemented by an assessment—where appropriate—using instruments adapted from the NRS)
- post-school education and training
- paid work since attending school
- perceptions of the need to write and/or read English
- children's participation, if any, in school
- perceptions about the importance of children learning to read and/or write English

In order to gain a snapshot of everyday literacy practices individuals were also asked to describe 'literacy events' (Heath 1982) they participated in (in English and/or their vernacular) on a typical day and in a typical week. Respondents were asked what activities they did at home with the children in their camp and what papers or texts they kept at home and what they did with them. Another strategy that we used to explore the 'literacy environment' was to ask people to draw a diagram of the literacy artefacts kept in their camps (see Figs 2 and 3).

Findings

In this section we present some of the key findings from the research. First, we detail the individual self-assessments of literacy ability and compare these to the outcomes of the NRS assessments. Next we trace how literacy is used among the individuals we surveyed, focusing on both reading and writing and comparing men and women. We then show the types of literacy practices individuals engaged in. Finally, we comment on what we learned about the ways literacy was acquired in these communities.

Literacy levels

As mentioned above, the NRS is a nationally recognised assessment mechanism for identifying adult English language, literacy and numeracy competencies in industry, facilitating student pathways, and generating curriculum and assessment procedures. Components of the NRS system were used to assess the reading and writing competence of individuals who participated in our project.

Fig. 2. Diagram of literacy artefacts in an Arnhem Land house
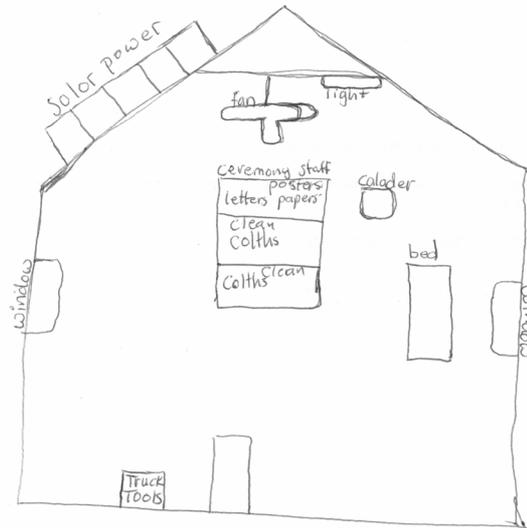
Fig. 3. Diagram of literacy artefacts in a Sandover River region house

Table 1 provides a summary of the self-assessments and the corresponding NRS levels based on our assessments. The table shows a breakdown by both gender and age groupings.

Table 1. Adult English literacy

Profile of community interviewees	Adult English literacy proficiency				
	Identifies as literate		NRS assessment		
	No	Yes	1 NYC	1 C	2 C
Males	9	14	15	4	4
Females	6	26	14	10	8
Age groups:					
16–20	0	5	1	3	1
21–25	2	8	6	1	3
26–30	1	6	2	3	2
31–35	3	6	6	3	0
36–40	0	6	1	2	3
41–45	2	5	3	2	2
46–50	1	3	4	0	0
50+	6	1	6	0	1
TOTAL	15	40	29	14	12

Note: The NRS assessment criteria were used. These are:
        1 NYC = Not Yet Competent at NRS Level 1 Reading and Writing;
        1 C = Competent at NRS Level 1 Reading and Writing;
        2 C = Competent at NRS Level 2 Reading and Writing.

In the interviews, 48 out of 55 respondents stated that they had been to school. Of the total, over 70 per cent stated that they could read and write in English, yet when assessed it was found that 65 per cent of males and about 44 per cent of females were not yet competent at NRS Level 1. At this level individuals are able to identify specific information such as personal details in a text with familiar content, *or* are able to write personal details such as name and address or a one or two phrase sentence conveying a simple idea or message. Overall only 12 of 55 adults were assessed competent at NRS 2. The following text, provided by one of the individuals who participated in the study, is indicative of unsupported writing competence at this relatively higher level.

> In *** people need to stay healthy by cleaning, picking up rubbish eating good Food Washing hands using good Blankets Clothes and Cleaning laundries disher's. Family likes to look after thair Country taking old people to country to visit telling

stories about olden days is a healthy ways to learn and *** needs lots of houses same for outstation they need houses training center to work for jobs is a healthy way.

The findings from the NRS assessments indicate a large discrepancy between people's perception of their literacy competence and their actual competence. We can draw two preliminary conclusions about people's perception of their literacy levels:

- It appears that people are reluctant to self-identify as non-English literate, perhaps because of some perception of social stigma related to 'illiteracy'. Alternatively, the conception of what constitutes literacy differs from that of the NRS; people consider themselves to be as literate as they need to be for their own purposes.
- People's experience of the literate world and what it really means to be able to read and write in English is very limited. In everyday life people in these regions have had minimal exposure to the infinite range of what can be read and what can be written and the myriad ways and contexts in which texts can be interpreted, comprehended, composed, drafted, redrafted, and refined. Thus, in comparison to those who cannot read and write at all, those with very limited English reading and writing competence are likely to describe themselves as literate.

How is literacy used?

Fig. 4 portrays literacy practices among males and females, detailing both reading and writing on the day before the interviews as well as in the previous week.

Our analysis of reported literacy activities suggest that:

- females do more reading and writing than males, perhaps as a consequence of having had more education, or their role as primary caregivers or because more females have had employment experience in domains requiring literacy competence, most commonly education or health;
- males were more likely to have read or written English in the last week than the previous day, perhaps because the need to read or write is sporadic rather than constant.

Types of literacy practice

Fig. 5 shows the breakdown of literacy practices according to a typology we derived from interviews and observations in the two sites. Our analysis of literacy activities reported in interviews or observed in practice indicates that literacy activities can be classed according to five 'types:'[2]

- *functional literacy*—for example filling in agency forms, reading bank documents, clocks, calendars, diaries or medicine labels;
- *home literacy*—for example reading magazines or books, reading or writing letters or cards to family, writing notes, reading stories to children;

Fig. 4. Literacy practices: males and females
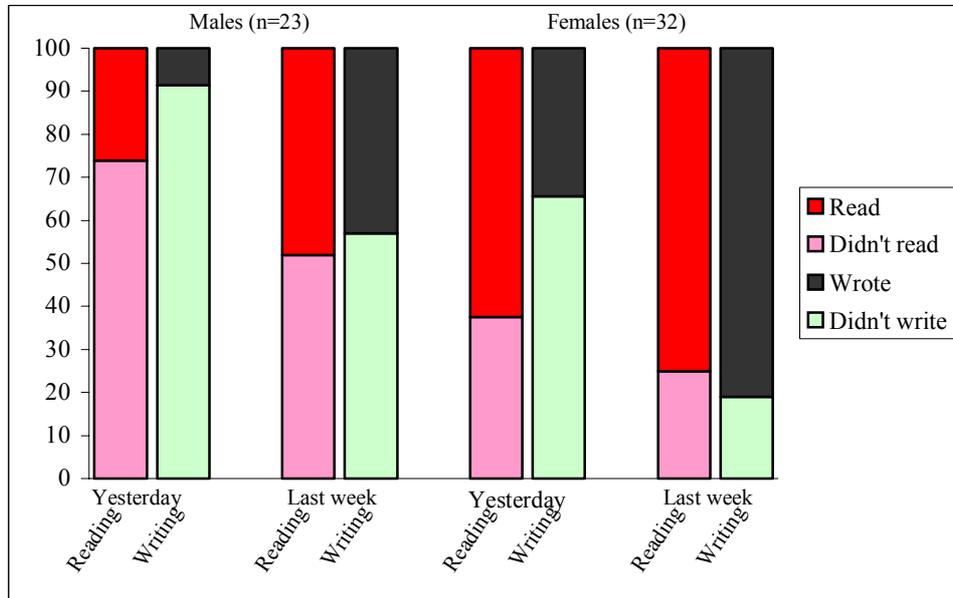
Fig. 5. Types of literacy activities
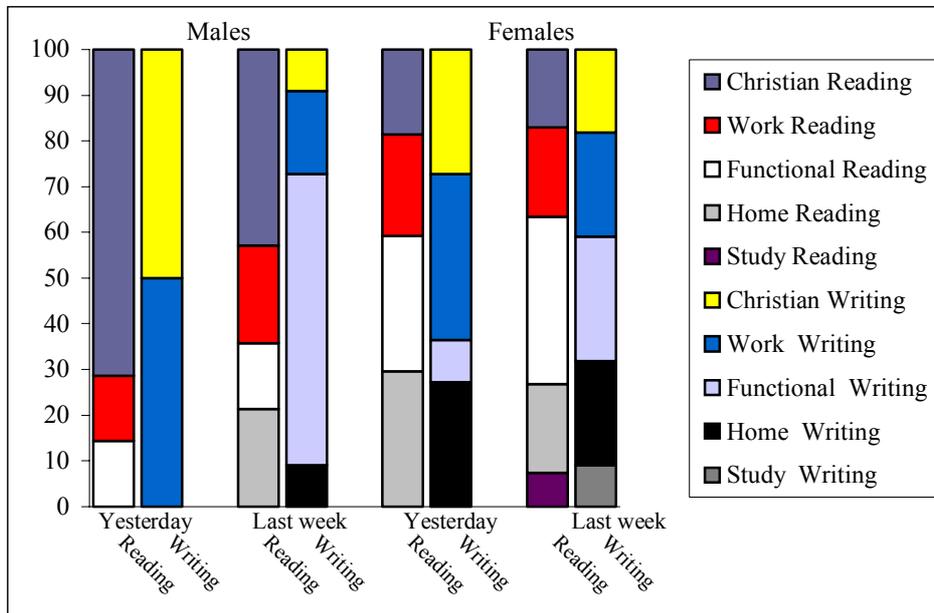
- *work literacy*—for example reading payslips, filling in forms; filling in timesheets, reading jobs list for the day, writing phone messages, poster making, sorting mail and reading names;
- *study literacy*—for example reading study papers or books and writing stories;
- *Christian literacy*—for example singing in the vernacular or English from songbooks or hymnals, reading the Bible in English or the vernacular independently, prayer writing, reading Bible stories and transcribing hymns.

One needs to be cautious in interpreting these data given the very small number of cases. For example, of the 23 men interviewed only 6 (26%) reported reading the previous day. Keeping this in mind, the data indicate the following for individuals who reported participating in literacy activities:

- among males, 'Christian reading' is the most prevalent type of reading;
- among males, 'functional writing' is the most prevalent type of writing;
- as with males, females reported more literacy activity in the 'last week' than the previous day;
- among females, 'functional' and 'home' reading is slightly more common than 'Christian' or 'work' reading as reported for the day prior to the interview;
- females reported 'functional' reading as the most common reading task in the previous week though 'Christian', 'work' and 'home' reading were also undertaken;
- among females, 'work' writing was the most common writing activity on the previous day (36%) though 'Christian' writing and 'home' writing were also common (27% each);
- females reported a fairly even distribution of writing practices in the week prior to the interviews with 'functional' reading comprising 27 per cent of writing activities while home and work writing comprised 23 per cent each. 'Christian' writing accounted for about 18 per cent of reported writing activities the previous week;
- reading or writing related to 'study' was absent among males and almost non-existent among females.

Overall, females appear to read and write across a broader range of categories, whereas males report participating in more sustained reading of Christian texts (in English and the vernacular) at 'home', possibly as a consequence of having more free time than females. Males seem to do more functional writing activities, however appearances are deceptive as the large percentage is inclusive of the majority who mentioned signing their name on a Centrelink form as a literacy event. In many instances of 'functional literacy' adults described some form of literacy mediation whereby the literacy broker—storekeeper or relative—gave an oral interpretation of the text.

Fig. 6. Example of 'home literacy': personal note to aid ordering items by telephone
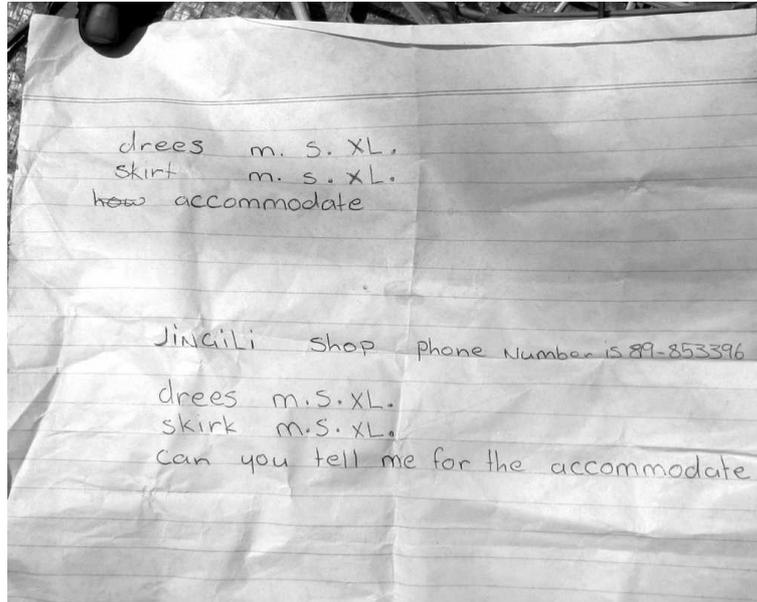
Fig. 7. Example of 'work literacy': poster for a Men's Health Day made by an Aboriginal Health Worker (text copied)
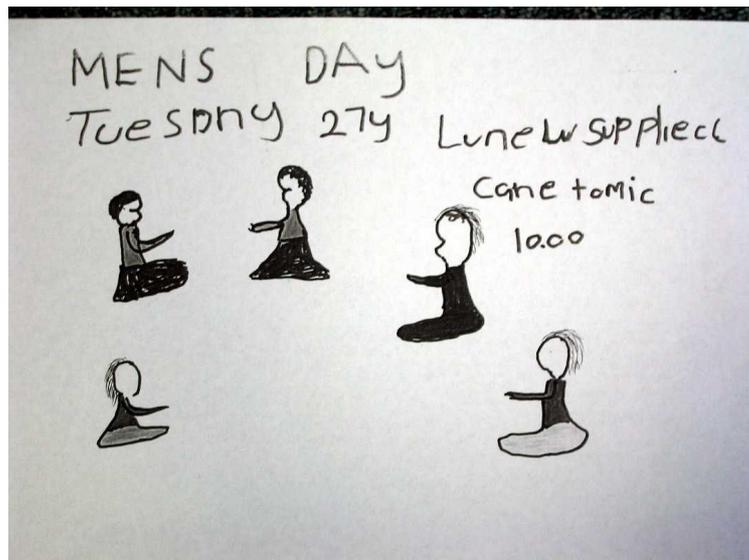
In general, our study shows that adult literacy levels are generally low, and in several cases much lower than was assumed by some non-Indigenous people who live and work with members of these communities. This captures the complex tension between expectations about the skills of Indigenous workers, who are often also senior leaders in their communities, and the realities of their limited abilities with English reading and writing. Conversely, the perceptions of several non-Indigenous people working in areas requiring a certain level of adult literacy proficiency (e.g. education, health, office and store work) were also confirmed. As these individuals had noted, a lack of literacy is affecting the ability of Indigenous people in those contexts to operate as fully competent workers.

How is literacy acquired?

In the case study sites, literacy learning is primarily within the context of formal schooling (mainly primary school). Only recently have all children in these communities had access to school. In most local families only two generations at the most have experienced formal schooling. Some literacy learning also takes place in adult education—literacy courses, Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) courses and incidental work place literacy activities, as well as through Christian literacy teaching. Christianity is evidently a key motivating factor for many people in acquiring and maintaining reading skills in both English and, where materials are available, in the vernacular.

Some preliminary conclusions and recommendations for policy directions

In both communities we found that there is demonstrated trust that the institution of Western education will deliver worthwhile outcomes. People believe that the purpose of school is 'learning' and that learning is intrinsically important. School attendance and community participation in education is high in comparison to other remote Indigenous communities.

Learning English is seen as a necessity and this is interrelated with an individual's cultural obligation to assist old people and family at the English language interface. In particular this means negotiating a way through interactions—by mail, or in person—with 'government' in its myriad forms, for example Centrelink, pensions, tax, and so forth. Education is also seen as necessary for meeting basic needs of everyday community life such as talking to the police and going to court. Functional literacy skills are regularly needed for these activities, but other meaningful, purposeful literacy practices are evident in the Christian domain. Significantly, while people evidently value education, it is not seen as part of the 'core business' of the Indigenous world. The Western-oriented attitude to education as an individual 'investment' which leads ultimately to employment, runs counter to other cultural priorities.

Our research shows that individuals who are from families where a parent or grandparent is literate are more likely to exhibit a greater range of literate behaviours than those who are at most the first or second generation to have passed through formal schooling.[3] Experiential knowledge related to training and employment is also transmitted from one generation to the next. Furthermore, if an individual has continued to engage in meaningful, purposeful lifelong learning through adult experiences in training, employment or Christian activities, then he or she is also more likely to exhibit literate behaviours. These individuals are also more likely to understand the sociocultural context of literacy use, to be able to discuss embedded literacy concepts and to perceive the relevance of literacy to later training and employment activities. There is little evidence to suggest this generational shift can be speeded up.

Most education funding in remote Indigenous communities goes into primary schools. Early childhood and adult education are the neglected ends of the education spectrum. In both sites, community perception is that if education is to be successful and to lead to sustainable outcomes, it must be integrated in to the social and cultural framework of the whole community, and must address community goals and aspirations.

For remote communities, the challenge for education and training is to provide the skill base required for achieving a level of economic sustainability, without sacrificing the core values of Indigenous Law, culture and language that are integral to the maintenance of a state of social and emotional wellbeing. If education is to be meaningful it must be part of the whole cultural and social framework of the community and it must be linked to community goals and aspirations. Training and employment are essential elements in this scenario, however models must also allow for alternative definitions of training and employment that reflect the community reality. Literacy, therefore, becomes relevant only if it is linked to meaningful roles and responsibilities in the community.

Some practical suggestions to encourage everyday literacy practices arise from the research. These include the need to support the development of an environment for the creation and storage of literacy materials and finding a means to ensure that such materials are made more accessible in remote communities. Although literacy is the long term goal, it is important that practitioners and policy makers understand that in many remote communities there is a widely held belief that not everyone needs to be literate. Our research suggests that in many ways this is true; many critical literacy activities are carried out by individuals who act as literacy 'brokers'. These are people who are recognised by the community as literate and who assume the role of mediating the literacy needs of others who have limited or no literacy skills. Clearly, greater attention needs to be paid to supporting the literacy brokerage role. In addition, we need to consider how we support and raise awareness of the role of family and community in the acquisition of literacy.

Adult education courses for Indigenous adults can provide effective training in English language, literacy and numeracy, as well as a foundation for capacity development for community life. In addition they can promote lifelong learning and provide vocational training for local community work—both paid and unpaid. A few practical suggestions include:

- negotiating purposeful training pathways for roles that are negotiated with the community, not imposed upon the community from the outside;
- customising Training Packages so that they reflect the real contexts of English language, literacy and numeracy use in remote communities;
- customising Training Packages to allow for training and assessment tailored to specific local Indigenous needs and contexts, and/or assessment by local Indigenous assessors working in tandem with registered training organisations;
- providing for community-based adult educators who are not tied to accredited competency based training courses, and who can provide targeted English language literacy and numeracy support.

In remote communities maintaining cultural competence is a key element of sustainability. This may be included in adult education and training by incorporating cultural outcomes into relevant training. Such outcomes might include, for example, looking after country, maintaining language and participating in cultural activities, having cultural outcomes customised by the local community according to local needs and contexts, and encouraging government and training bodies to acknowledge existing Indigenous authority structures in communities.

Furthermore, training and employment must be relevant and fit into long-term community development planning. The community development potential of CDEP could be expanded by linking it to community planning processes. Also potential employment activities that fit into the existing sociocultural framework, for example arts-based activities and tourism, could be identified, as these appear to fit with the core values that matter to adults in remote communities, as well as being vehicles to generate income and provide further employment.

Finally we recommend that a thorough survey of adult English literacy be conducted in remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory so that we can start to see the literacy landscape for what it really is.

Appendix: Everyday literacy practices

Work literacy

General:

Reading payslips; filling in forms; filling in timesheets; reading jobs list for the day; writing phone messages; sorting mail; reading names.

Specific:

Community teachers/tutors/childcare—reading stories to children; writing simple words/phrases on the board for children to copy; helping individual children with reading and writing; reading correspondence.

Aboriginal Health Workers—reading / writing lists of names; using tick box proforma for noting patient details; reading medicine labels; reading health information; writing health promotion posters.

Functional literacy

Filling in and signing Centrelink forms; reading letters from Centrelink, bank, etc.; listening to letters read or interpreted out loud; read reading signs, notices and posters; money transactions; using Keycard pin numbers; reading speedometers, clocks, calendars, diaries, medicine labels, food labels, supermarket leaflets; maintaining folders of plastic cards—business cards, membership cards, or important papers e.g. bank, tax, superannuation; signing names on paintings.

Home literacy

Individual:

Reading magazines (e.g. *Women's Weekly*) and newspapers (*Land Rights News, Centralian Advocate*); reading books borrowed from school or trainers; copying words; writing stories in notebook; reading and writing letters or cards to family or friends; using calculator to add numbers.

Family:

Reading and writing letters or cards to family or friends; story or song writing for children; reading stories to children; watching TV, video or DVD and reading covers; drawing, singing songs, reading, writing, and copying words with children.

Christian literacy	**Home:**
	Singing in vernacular or English using songbooks or hymnals; song writing; reading Bible in English or vernacular independently; prayer writing; reading simplified adapted Bible stories, writing Bible stories; doing Christian reading and writing Bible study activities.
	Church:
	Singing in vernacular or English using songbook or hymnal; reading Bible in English or vernacular as church leader/Pastor; listening to Bible or religious posters being read or interpreted out loud.
Study literacy	
	Reading study papers or books; writing stories.

Notes

1. Yok is a pseudonym.
2. See Appendix for a full description of this typology.
3. This finding is supported by research that shows that Indigenous young people are much more likely to attend school regularly and remain at school (and presumably gain literacy skills) if they come from a household where adults have educational qualifications (Hunter & Schwab 1998; Schwab 1999).

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