

# Adult Literacy: Towards a new paradigm

Paper for ACAL National Literacy Conference, Alice Springs, 19-20 Sept 2003

Rob McCormack

In odd moments over the last few weeks I have been mulling over what tenor or mood of discourse this speech should have. When I wrote the initial abstract it was with this angry thought in mind: *I have deliberately kept away from the Adult Literacy field for eight years now, because I fundamentally disagree with the direction in which ACAL has been taking it. Now that I am nearing retirement, perhaps I should take the opportunity to speak my mind?* A speech like this would according to ancient rhetoric be *forensic*. It would be making a case against someone or something. The mood or tenor would be what ancient rhetoric calls *diatribe* and it would be keyed in what they call the high style—lots of emotional *pathos* designed to communicate my feelings of frustration, anger and indignation at the social injustice the field seems blind to.

However, as I thought about it I realised the speech could also take on a quite opposite tenor and mood. It could be a cool and careful description of the larger social, political and educational context or landscape, of the conjuncture of social forces engulfing Australia as we enter a globalised multicultural world, a world of trade, refugees and human rights. And then after expounding this big picture of the situation in which the field of adult literacy now finds itself, the speech could evaluate how successfully it is addressing 'the new needs' brought on by this transformation in the social landscape. Such a speech would be much more *expository*, and its key would be what ancient rhetoric calls 'the low style'. It would concentrate in describing the facts in a clear and rational light. The Royal Society called this kind of discourse, *plain style*. It is a style that is careful not to use figures of speech or any text patterns that heighten emotional involvement. It is a discourse that is only answerable to telling the facts. Language as representation. Today we would call it *factual discourse*, or *expository discourse* and if it's turgid and technical enough and indexes itself to a body of theory in a systematic way then we call it *academic discourse*.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that the speech could adopt yet another tenor of discourse —what ancient rhetoricians call *deliberative discourse*, discourse dedicated to formulating an interpretation of the practical situation being faced by the community and then recommending a course of action to deal with that problem. In this case I would analyse the problems, dangers, opportunities and so on facing the field of adult literacy and suggest some solutions or directions. A speech of this tenor would be keyed to what rhetoric calls the *middle style*. That is, it would

contain clear analysis and argument plus moderate levels of emotion but this emotional charge would intensify towards the end of the speech to ensure that the suggestions carry adequate emotional and ethical weight.

However there are still other ways of framing the rhetorical context of this speech. Rather than seeing it as attacking what is wrong as in forensic rhetoric, or as providing a theory of the field as in academic rhetoric, or formulating what is to be done as in deliberative rhetoric, there is another way of construing a speech such as this, a way that is vital for the health of human society, but a way that has been largely banished from the official curriculum of modern education, including adult education. This is *epideictic rhetoric*, the rhetoric of special occasions when a community is celebrating and intensifying its sense of itself.

Epideictic discourse is a discourse which calls on the audience to reconnect with the values, the history and the hopes that bind that community together into a fellowship of humanity. Without epideictic rhetoric a community inevitably becomes alienated from itself and falls into factionalism and routinisation that is unmindful of the spirit, of the horizon of meaning and ideals that give that community, its soul and heart. Without epideictic discourse, a community for example the field of adult education, tends to lose contact with its origins, its essence, its hopes, its aspirations, its loyalties and its ethics. Post 9/11 we have all—I am sure—experienced a heightened need and awareness of epideictic rhetoric and its importance. We all—I am sure—despaired at the narrowness and lack of generosity of some epideictic and on the other hand have been uplifted when our private emotions have been captured in epideictic and attuned to public emotions that capture the occasion, its meanings and emotions.

Epideictic discourse is a discourse of memory, discourse of hope and a discourse of witness. It is a call to fellowship, a gesture towards the laying or re-laying of a common ground, what ancient rhetoricians call a *sensus communis*—a sense, or feeling, of community, a basis for community, a feeling of friendship and respect sufficient to underpin the productive dialogue of difference and dispute as different voices articulate different ways of seeing and interpreting where we are, where we have been and come from, what we could do and what we should do. This *sensus communis* has been re-explored by contemporary theorists under such headings as 'civil society', 'social trust', 'communicative reason', and 'dialogism'. Other educational theorists have also drawn on this ancient tradition of *sensus communis* with the term: community of practice, however it needs to be remembered that a community of practice is not only a community of practice, nor even just a community of inquiry: it is also a community of memory and a community of hope;

it reflects and keeps in touch with its past and it constantly reflects on its possible futures; it does not simply share cognitive practices.

As an exercise in epideictic discourse, this speech would have to be highly stylised in the manner first pedagogically defined and demonstrated by Isocrates and Gorgias. It would have to be written evocatively with carefully balanced *isocolons*, what today we would call 'information units' (Halliday), and carefully weighted *numerus*, what we today would call 'end stress'.

Notice that this decision about mood or key, about the rhetoric of the situation, is not in any way determined by trying to define the genre of the speech. Defining the rhetorical context, that is the larger background or horizon of intentions against which the speech will be posited has to take place before the question of genre. To jump straight to the issue of genre is to predetermine the definition of the occasion. The whole point of a rhetorical analysis of the occasion of discourse is to explore the uniqueness of the occasion, the state of play, the things that are in the air, the uniqueness of the place and time of the text. Even when there are institutional parameters constraining a speech there is still room to move in keying it to different moods or modes. Take William Dean as Governor General appointed by Howard, and the way that he was able to use purely ceremonial occasions as occasions to raise uncomfortable questions about white Australia's capacities to acknowledge and recognize the reality of Aboriginal Australia.

However, defining the rhetorical context is not enough to determine the speech as a whole. According to *inventio*—which is the part of ancient rhetoric that deals with matters of deciding what to say in a speech—as well as defining the rhetorical context you also need to define the key issue, the pivot on which your speech will hinge and your claim or stance in relation to this key issue.

So, having decided that the occasion is epideictic what is the key issue to be addressed by this speech. What is the issue at the heart of what I want to say? This is what I would say: this speech is going to address the question: Has the field of adult literacy lost its soul? Has the field of adult literacy lost contact with its underpinning wellsprings of cultural, spiritual, ethical and political energy and motivation? As we will see later: given my definition of literacy this question could be reframed as: Has the field of adult literacy become illiterate?

Having decided what the key issue is, we now need to do what ancient rhetoric calls *partitio*. We need to divide it up somehow so that things can be dealt with one at a time in an order that makes sense logically and emotionally. This second area of preparation for a speech is called *dispositio*, disposing not in the sense of throwing away, but in the sense of putting things into their best place or position.

The speech has to be both a whole yet made up of parts. In ancient rhetoric these parts are called headings. So, we need to divide the speech and its content into headings. There are many ways of doing this: we could divide the question into sub-questions; we could divide the topic into sub-topics; we could frame the topic as a space that we explore place by place; we could assemble positions or points of view around the key issue and deal with them one at a time, rejecting some, espousing others. We could construct a narrative history of the central issue and responses to it.

In fact we have a whole range of genres to call on in deciding how to arrange or structure a speech. For example, and I am sure you're aware of it, I have been playing genre games, indulging in genre metaphor, in this introduction. My way of introducing this talk has been by telling you about the decision-making process I engaged in, but even worse my description of that decision-making process has been couched in terms of ancient rhetoric. So in fact I have been giving you a lesson in ancient rhetoric and how it goes about preparing a speech. This tactic of deviating from the straight and narrow, from the literal, of getting at something through something else is called by ancient rhetoric, *tropes*. Metaphor is a trope, irony is a trope. If you say something by saying something else—you are saying two things at once. Tropes speak with a forked tongue; they say two things at once, the text thus contains both a text and a subtext and even worse it is unclear which is which.

For example, am I just taking a long time to get started on this talk or have I all along been engaged in epideictic discourse, in trying to bring you back into contact with the wellsprings of the field of adult literacy? Perhaps the continual references to ancient rhetoric which just seem like an annoying subtext, perhaps these are the real text—not just the subtext. Perhaps really what I'm saying is that the soul of adult literacy is ancient rhetoric? Or perhaps I'm saying that if adult literacy is to reconnect with its soul then it has to reconnect with the soul of ancient rhetoric? Perhaps I'm saying that ancient rhetoric is an essential interlocutor, a key dialogic partner, for any field of language education, especially a field committed to empowering adults. So, perhaps there's method to my madness?

However, I have decided on a genre, a way of unfolding the meanings I want to adduce in addressing the issues at the heart of this speech as a speech intent on calling us back into contact with the wellsprings, the sources, the energies, of our field as a community of adult second chance language educators. I will simply subdivide the central issue: has adult literacy as a field lost contact with its soul? into a number of sub-issues or questions and arrange them in such a way that answering them will lead to an answer to the central question.

I will divide this speech into three headings, three questions: first, what is an adult? second, what is literacy? and third, is the field of adult literacy itself literate?

But let me forewarn you: everything I say from now on will be provocative and preposterous. Yet if I succeed in my rhetoric, I hope it won't be only preposterous or outrageous. I hope it also sparks a sense of recognition, a sense of 'yes! that's right!'. For if I am right in thinking we have strayed a long way from our roots as a field, then although we need a shock to reawaken the memory of our roots and origins, we will also have a sense of homecoming and recognition, even though we may not know what to do about it.

That completes what ancient rhetoric calls the *exordium*, what we call the introduction.

**First question What is an adult?**

For those of us who have been involved in naming wars, it is noticeable that national governmental agencies have reverted to the older terminology for naming our field. During the early 90s we named ourselves ALBE - adult literacy and basic education. This was to signal a commitment to second chance general education. As this is the name I continue to use to name our field which is a field of adult language and literacy second chance education, I will use the name 'adult literacy' with both reluctance and sadness.

So, what is an adult? Here is my stab at a definition: *an adult is someone who has to take responsibility for themselves, for others and for the state of the wider world they find themselves in.*

Let me point out some features or implications of this definition. Notice it is a phenomenological definition, not a bureaucratic definition. It does not mention any measurable attributes or thresholds such as age, length of schooling, financial independence. Notice also that there is an ambiguity about 'having responsibility'. You may 'have responsibility' but not 'take it' or 'know it' or 'acknowledge it' or 'want it'. You may try to 'evade it', 'avoid it'. And so on. Notice also that who and what you have responsibility for is not a matter of choice. There is an element of fatedness, of thrownness as Heidegger called it. Your life and your responsibilities are not totally in your own hands, they are not a matter of choice. Notice also that taking responsibility means that you have to make decisions, high stakes decisions, without any assurances about what will come out of it. One of the tragic situations now endemic to our world is adults having to decide that they or some of their family need to flee their homeland, become refugees and try to establish a life in another country.

But let me say a little more about this issue of uncertainty of outcome. This realm where the outcome is uncertain was called the realm of '*praxis*' and the realm of the 'probable' by ancient Greeks in order to distinguish it from the realm of theory which dealt with the realm of predictable and necessary. And for the Greeks only the world of the cosmos was predictable, the world of stars and planets. on this earth here below, you could not assume anything. Although something should happen, there can always be lots of glitches. For the Greeks, the world of human beings and human relationships are fundamentally unpredictable, subject to misunderstanding and breakdown, and always in need of repair and careful nurturing.

Now what this means is that language addressing this realm of the probable, this realm of social life, this realm of social relationships in all its unpredictability and uncertainty has to be different from language addressing mathematics or astronomy. For the Greeks, language attempting to bring order to human social relations is fundamentally rhetorical. The long 2300 year dominance of rhetoric as a pedagogy and cultural practice derives from the insight that language intent on bringing order to social life, reconciling difference, establishing a *sensus communis*, finding a voice that people feel at home with, straightening out the tangled emotions of conflict—all these uses of language require the 'talking cure' of rhetoric. Otherwise people will turn to physical violence and war. Throughout European history and I suspect for all other societies and cultures too, the choice is stark: rhetorical speech or physical violence. I believe that today this is still clearly the choice and it's sad that the current leaders of the English-speaking world have chosen the path of military intervention rather than rhetorical discourse.

Now of course during modernity and until recently, rhetoric itself has been a rejected culture and practice. I cannot go into it fully here, but one way to define the modernity of the Enlightenment as opposed to the modernity of the Renaissance would be to say that whereas the modernity of the Renaissance was a rediscovery and revival of ancient rhetoric in opposition to the academic theory of the Medieval scholastics, the modernity of the Enlightenment was a renewal of academic theory as natural science and a rejection of rhetoric together with its ways of healing social conflicts and cultivating a *sensus communis*.

The modernity of the Enlightenment was thus committed to knowledge and believed that the knowledge discovered by the natural, social and psychological sciences would produce ways of making life predictable. We would be able to fix things up with cause and effect knowledge, we would be able to use magic bullets to straighten things out. We would be able to use logic and proof to make people all believe the same thing and thus wipe out conflict and difference. Religious differences and cultural difference will all slide away. Linguistic differences will all slide away as we

all come to speak the universal language of knowledge, fact and commerce. Oh! and I nearly forgot!... And of course the language associated with a virtual monopoly on weapons of mass destruction. Don't forget that Hobbes' modern state is a Leviathan, and part of the definition of citizenship for him is that citizens agree to hand over all weapons of violence to the State. The state becomes a monstrous lion, the citizens become lambs. In fact right before our very eyes in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq we can see modernity attempting to enact its own theories of how the social contract and the transition from the state of nature in which all war against each other to the state of civilization where there is peace and security.

Now of course this secure world of modernity and its predictability based on the expertise of the social sciences has been losing legitimacy for about 30 years now. In one sense it is almost gone. The welfare state which held out the promise that one never ever need become an adult and make risky decisions or suffer the tragic effects of history is nearly gone. Now with the marketisation and globalisation of life our sense of risk has increased. We are forced to be adults and take responsibility for ourselves whether we want to or not.

*But of course, our students have always been adults because they have always lived at the mercy of poverty and the arbitrary power of social engineers, welfare agencies and other such agencies of the modern state. They have always lived in a world shot through with unpredictability and risk, and they have had to try to take responsibility for their lives and the lives of others 'in a world not of their own choosing' (as Karl Marx would put it). The postmodern world is forcing more of us into the ranks of this 'reserve army' and the risk economy we now live in makes many of us realise that we are only one turn of fate away from being caste into that world or having our children consigned to that world. This insight into the failure of modernity by the silent majority of Australians is what underpins the rhetorical power of Pauline Hanson; it was not just her racism as some like to think. It was her sense that she cannot hand on a life of respectable trade in the railways or associated industries to her children. Her children are unemployed, on the dole and into substance abuse and she is powerless to offer them any better future. Her children are heading in the direction of the Indigenous ghetto—not moving up to the comfortable ranks of middle class free settlers.*

Now I have another point to make about this definition of an adult. 'Taking responsibility' does not mean making just any sort of self-serving decision or trying to get things to go your own way or for the sake of sheer survival. Being responsible means what Aristotle called making a judgment based on a reflective sense of the situation taking into account the background values and loyalties one is answerable to. Aristotle and the whole rhetorical tradition called this practical wisdom - *phronesis*

or prudence—to distinguish it from certain theoretically grounded knowledge on the one hand and skilled based know how on the other. *Phronesis* is being able to discern the conflicting ethical imperatives and practical possibilities of a situation and find a way forward.

For the last 2000 years this education into and for phronesis has constituted the heart of secondary and higher education for forming the ethical substance and habitus of the ruling elite so that they would make practically wise decisions. However in the era of democracy and human rights it is not only leaders who have to make decisions, everyone has to. Everyone is an adult now, whereas in the past only a small elite were—the rest of the population were considered to be dependents and had no will of their own—the rest were only women, slaves or chattels, closer to animals than to free human beings who had to deal with tricky situations calling for fine judgment and political tact.

Notice another consequence of this definition of adulthood. It does not see the only duty of adulthood as consisting solely in being part of the paid workplace. Although the neoliberal government may see its primary responsibility as the maintenance of a globally competitive workplace and workforce, adults have many other things they are responsible for: like family, like culture, like language, like the environment, like the local community, like political parties and so on and so on. Contemporary efforts to define adult education as basically reducible to vocational training in or for the workplace are absurd.

But, although many workplaces try to demand that workers leave their adulthood at the gate and become akin to slaves in exchange for a weekly wage, these same people on leaving the workplace then resume their responsibilities as adults for their own lives as a meaningful narrative, their families as an intergenerational community, their cultures, religions, and bodies of knowledge as communities and the earth itself.

### **Second question: What is literacy?**

These days we literacy practitioners all know that literacy is more than decoding grapho-phonic symbols, but what that more is is still a matter of contention. But once one has cut the term 'literacy' away from being focused on written English or from a focus on the bottom language strata, it is important to notice a fundamental ambiguity in the term 'literacy'. Under one interpretation it can be defined as mastery of the procedural semiotics of a medium of communication and so we get terms like information literacy, mathematical literacy, scientific literacy, graphic literacy and so on. In all of these cases it is being interpreted as mastery of a semiotic code. This is the view of literacy embodied in the current notion of 'multiliteracies'. It relies on a

structuralist metaphor which posits rules or conventions appropriate to the different semiotic media for making meaning.

However, my definition of literacy is different again. Here is my definition: *literacy is the capacity to read and write the texts that express the cultural archive—the wellsprings—of a community. And by 'read and write' I mean perform and interpret.* Texts are where societies reflectively perform their ways of life and the horizons of value and meaning defining their ways of life. So, literacy is learning to participate in the interpretation and performance of these texts.

Texts take many forms—they can be inscribed in performance, in dance, in shadowplays, in the land, in body art, in sand-paintings, in art, in music, in singing, in written literature, literature, in orature, in crying, and so on. In other words any semiotic medium can be used as a medium of cultural articulation and reflection.

Literacy means coming into contact with the sources of self as a participant in a community, to use the phrase coined by the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor. Halliday calls this background dimension 'the meaning potential of the context of culture' which is instantiated in texts.

By defining literacy as performing and interpreting the texts that underwrite a way of life, I am insisting that literacy means engaging with the substance, the wellsprings, of a way of life, not simply the conventions of a particular semiotic or form of representation. This more substantivist account of literacy which focus on what Gadamer call *Sache*, that is the stuff or substance, the human being, of a culture, does not mean a submissive rote learning or recitation of the texts of a culture.

Instead I would insist, again by drawing on Gadamer, that there is always a fundamental difference, dialogue and dialectic at work in any reading or writing. In reading a text we are always and inevitably creatively misreading it in terms of our current situation and agenda. We can't help projecting our own histories, concerns and realities into the text and our understanding of it. But the text is also projecting its meanings into us. This is why reading and writing, performing and interpreting, are ways of renewing, reawakening and transforming both ourselves and our cultures and ways of life.

So now let me put this definition of literacy together with my earlier definition of adult and this is what we get as a definition of adult literacy: *adult literacy is learning to interpret and speak on behalf of one's culture and community in order to deal with an uncertain situation at hand requiring practical wisdom.*

There you have it: my definition of adult literacy.

And notice that it does not even mention language as such, and certainly not written language. Certainly there is no way it could be aligned with the NRS or with levels of

English language. The gradings of competence on this notion of literacy will depend on those authorised in the culture or tradition, let's call them cultural elders, to evaluate the depth of understanding and judgement, the practical wisdom, of students faced with dilemmas, conflicting interpretations and competing principles or values within or between cultures and ways of life. And these judgements are concerned with matters of cultural substance, not matters of linguistic form.

In short one of the advantages of my interpretation of literacy is that it reintegrates literacy back into the larger educational process. Literacy becomes what rhetoricians call a *synecdoche*, a way of capturing a larger whole in terms of a single element or part. It is not literacy that anyone really cares about, literacy is just a sign of larger things. And what it signifies is how much education you have had. And this is how it should be.

The worst fate that can ever befall someone from this point of view is to be stolen from the grounds of ethical judgment. To be robbed of one's culture. To be brought up without any cultural horizons, without any education, without any contact with the wellsprings of a humane life. Such a person is condemned to illiteracy and can never become an adult and make their own decisions, they can never be really free or exercise self-determination. Colonialism tried its hardest to reduce millions to this condition—but failed. The failure of that attempt to ensure that people lost their cultures and forgot their ways of life is the reason why we now have had such an upsurge in the multicultural politics of recognition to complement the socialist politics of redistribution. The victims of centuries of colonialism managed to keep the memory of culture alive and relatively intact.

### **Third question: Is adult literacy as a field itself literate?**

I now come to the third question: Is adult literacy as a field itself literate? Given that literacy means participating in the creation and interpretation of texts expressing the cultural archive of a community, the question is asking: is the field of adult literacy engaged in creating and interpreting texts that articulate its cultural archive? In short, is the field itself performing and interpreting its founding texts, its canonical texts? For that matter what are its founding, grounding texts, the texts that underpin the *sensus communis* holding the field together as a field? Political communities have their constitutions; religious communities have their sacred books; academic communities have their paradigmatic texts; but what does adult literacy have? What are the founding texts constituting us as a community and where is the tradition of reflection and interpretation through which these texts are brought down onto the ground to help form practical wisdom in specific situations and contexts?

Some language pedagogies such as ESL see themselves as essentially modern. They mainly write to each other in the genre of research report and thus construe themselves as creating new knowledge and new practices, rather than keeping true to canonical traditions of text or praxis.

Although I have not the time to prove it here, what I am suggesting is that adult literacy stands heir to a long tradition of language pedagogy. Behind adult literacy stands the entire tradition of humanist practices and reflective texts concerned with using language education to shape the character and ethical attributes of people and the quality of social life generally to be free, disciplined and responsible.

In my PhD I was able to trace the history of this extensive but little known tradition which is concerned with the cultivation of wise persons and wise speech, a tradition known as '*civile sciencia*' or 'practical philosophy'. The reason this tradition of practical philosophy connects with language pedagogy is that the education of and for *phronesis* actually took place through a training in the powers and skills of oratory. I traced this tradition from ancient Greece, through the Byzantium Empire, through the Middle Ages, to a huge revival in the Renaissance, to its gradual demise at the hands of the Enlightenment, and then its recent resurgence across the whole spectrum of liberal arts and social sciences. I was able to look at Aristotle's distinction between *episteme* (theoretical knowledge) and *phronesis* (political and ethical judgement), Vico's concept of *sensus communis*, Kant's distinction between determinant judgment and reflective judgement in his third critique, *Critique of Judgment*, Hegel's notion of *Bildung*, Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life' and 'language games'. I finished up with Gadamer's recovery and construal of this whole humanist tradition as philosophical hermeneutics.

In that thesis I argued that *phronesis*—the exercise of ethical and political responsibility and leadership—should be reinstated as a primary outcome of adult basic education, not just academic knowledge and technical skills. Such a reinstatement of *phronesis* would bring modern adult literacy education back more into line with the traditional *Trivium* of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric which embodied the language education component of the classical Liberal Arts degree.

It seems to me that, although largely forgotten, the cultivation of *phronesis* is historically and structurally a fundamental underpinning reality or background standing behind classical and modern European education, as well as European educational, political and cultural life. But the pedagogy for this cultivation of *phronesis* was not just grammar, nor just dialectical argument, it was a training into the power of language and the language of power through primarily a training into oratory—rhetoric.

Rhetoric is the education of orators, of citizens who can engage in that special kind of performative speech that calls a community to one mind. Probably, only the role of priest, ceremonial leader or the like would rival it in status. Because of its importance, its inherent powers of persuasion for good or bad, its power to lead the community along the right path or down a wrong track, societies have highly developed pedagogies for handing on the powers of oratory. For example, for 2300 years the secondary and university education systems of Europe and the Middle East were dominated by rhetoric as the study and training in oratory. In fact the whole education system converges on producing orators who are highly skilled in their mastery of language and all its ways, deeply attuned to the traditions, the stories, the texts and themes of their culture, ethically mature and responsible, and politically astute, insightful and committed to justice, not simply the advancement of their own interests.

Ancient European rhetoric was originally concerned with developing the oral skills of leadership and public speaking of small ancient city states, which were not unlike many contemporary Indigenous communities in terms of size, diversity and family-based politics. There are, I suspect, deep analogies between the political exigencies confronting the ancient Greek *polis* and contemporary Indigenous communities. In my view, *sensus communis* is integrally bound up with regular gatherings for public speech, whereas the nation-state (despite parliament and media) is more bound up with regulation, codification, surveillance and policing.

It might occur to you that a focus on performative speech could result in a lack of attention to literacy. Let me assure you that the skills of oratory underpin the skills of writing. In fact the grammar of writing is a simplification of the grammar of oratory. The grammar of oratory is far richer and far more intricate than the grammar of writing. Even so, at the most basic level, the principles at work in a written text are the same as those in oratory. The reason for the common view that the grammar of writing is radically different and more complicated than the grammar of speech is that the sort of speech in question in this comparison is casual conversation, not the highly stylised oral performance of oratory. Apples are being compared with oranges.

When we compare oratory and writing we get a whole different story. What we are finding at Batchelor is that in fact there is no conflict between developing the powers of oratory and the powers of literacy. In fact my view is that oratory provides a deeply motivating context for engaging with language in all its aspects - both oral and literate.

My claim is that the wellsprings of adult literacy as a field lie largely in that long tradition of language pedagogy that preceded the language pedagogies of modern mass schooling for children—the tradition of rhetoric. I suspect that child-centred pedagogies are designed to produce slavish domesticated populations, not citizens who are adult in the face of uncertainty and responsibilities.

Adult literacy in its concern for education as reading and writing the world, not just the word, as Friere puts it, places people in the same active adult role as ancient rhetoric placed leaders and ruling elites, as citizens condemned to be free and to make judgements. Both are condemned to praxis, to action based on ethical judgement, not demonstrable knowledge or proof.

In my view if the field is to become literate itself, if it is to perform and interpret the texts articulating its wellsprings, its fundamental concepts, themes and practices, then it needs to re-engage with the texts of ancient rhetoric. These texts form a major segment of the cultural horizon defining our field.

Every adult has a right to participate in the discursive exchanges that articulate, formulate, transform and critique the world in which we live. This is the real meaning of democracy, as opposed to tyranny or authoritarianism. By the way, according to Quentin Skinner the notion of democracy as the free and active participation of citizens in the articulation and formation of the common good and public good of the republic, is carried within this very same tradition of practical philosophy and rhetoric. So, like Friere, I believe that literacy is not just a matter of reading and writing the word or being able to decode a text, but a matter of reading and writing the world, being able to understand the conditions and contours shaping one's world and being able to participate in the discourses shaping how to act within and on these contours. This is why I still believe a *sententia* I coined many years ago: *what adult literacy students need is not something called literacy, what they need is an education.*

I believe that this second chance education must be accountable to emerging international human rights regarding cultural rights, linguistic rights and educational rights, especially for Indigenous peoples. I also believe that this second chance education should be planned and delivered in close cooperation with the community and its definitions of appropriateness of time and place.

Let me conclude. In this paper which is titled *Adult Literacy: towards a new paradigm*, I have in fact been trying to bring back to mind, to perform and interpret, things that we have forgotten, things that we need to re inherit. I have noted the lurching of modernity into what some call 'the risk society' and others 'postmodernity' and how this has renewed the relevance of older ancestral forbears of adult literacy. Suddenly

the distinction between the realm of theory and the realm of praxis has become real again; and this means that rhetoric as a form of communication concerned with generating agreement in uncertainty becomes relevant again; and because everyone must now live their own life, the attributes of *phronesis*, of wise judgment, is not just relevant for leaders or princes, but has become relevant for everyone. For the same reason an education into the grounds of their own cultures, ways of being and forms of community becomes the right of everyone, and this must include adults who were unable to make substantial contact with their cultural roots and / or the contours of their world in their initial schooling.

And so the new paradigm of adult literacy I am pointing to could be summarised thus:

*Adult literacy is a second chance education which through performative and interpretative engagement with the canonical texts and textual performances of cultures and communities aims to cultivate phronesis for responsible adulthood.*

In this way adult literacy is a field dedicated to enabling people to be adult: that is, enabling people who have responsibility for their own lives, for the lives of others around them and for the community or world they live in to do this more responsibly by bringing them into contact with the wellsprings of their community and way of life, the values and meanings, that provide the principles needed for practical wisdom in these uncertain postmodern times.

**Biographical note:**

Dr Rob McCormack spent many years in Melbourne in the Language Development Centre at Footscray College of TAFE working towards the formulation of a theory and practice of Adult Basic Education as a substantive education for 'second chance adults'.

His PhD (*Adult Basic Education as Practical Philosophy: an hermeneutic account*) argued that ABE should construe its primary outcome as *phronesis* (practical wisdom), not *theoria* (academic knowledge) or *poiesis* (technical skills), and thus as the *sensus communis* of a *polis*, not simply apprenticeship into the paradigms of academic disciplines or into the procedures of institutions of work.

Over recent years, he has been working at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, NT, Australia adapting ancient European rhetoric in order to form a ground on which the different cultures of Australia can meet, dialogue, and exchange understandings, thereby forging a place where differences can be acknowledged and respected, a space where dialogue and negotiations answerable to shared values such as social justice, self determination and 'both ways' can be pursued.

**Publishing details:**

McCormack, R 2004 'Adult Literacy: Towards a new paradigm', *Fine Print*, vol 26, no. 4, pp. 3-10.