Unsent letter of thanks to *Fine Print*

Because I left the ABE field in Victoria quietly with a deep sense of failure and bitterness over the direction in which ABE was being taken by a governmental focus on 'outcomes' and assessment, in place of a concern for 'curriculum 'inputs' and pedagogy, I was deeply moved by the interpretations of my work in *Fine Print, Vol 22*. I thank colleagues and peers who remember my work and for their insightful comments.

I can now confess that my motivation for writing *Framing the Field* in such dense language and so deeply woven into the theories of the social and human sciences, was an effort to write a canonic text that may be a locus of remembrance for a dispersed diaspora of ABE practitioners and a potential rallying cry some time in the future long after these 'dark times'.

At the time it seemed to me that politicians from both sides of politics were intent on pressing 'adult literacy' into service as primarily a vehicle of governance. I, by contrast, wanted to formulate at least the memory of three further meanings of literacy: a narrative literacy of identity and personal transformation; a cognitive literacy of academic knowledge and scholarship, and a civic literacy of public participation and discourse.

My hope was that by situating 'literacy' in more substantive forms of life and by explicitly naming that situatedness, decision-makers could be forced to acknowledge the narrowness and reductiveness of their single-minded focus on a governmental literacy of norms and statistical outcomes. I was hoping that they would be at least forced to say, 'We are not going to have any stories, nor discussion, nor theorising around here', thereby unconsciously acknowledging the reality of these discursive practices and forms of life that they were other-ing in the very act of excluding them from adult education.

Unfortunately I was naive. Even though the VET system is committed to reducing all human capacities and all discourse to the formats of the governmental and procedural, this reductiveness and narrowness is never explicitly stated. Instead we are presented with the two card trick. We are told: 'You can invent whatever goals and processes for your pedagogy you like—so long as they can be expressed within the genres of our CBT regime!' But of course these genres are precisely the genres of procedural rationality, formats that Kant himself would have been proud to have devised.

One could waste one's life away trying to reformulate the practices and meanings of adult education so they can squeeze into the shapes and forms adapted to these protean genres. And yet, if there is a deep connection between the different construals of the meaning of education and different families of genre, which I believe there is, then attempting to reconstruct the educational practices, values and meanings of the three other literacies—literacies concerned to institute, renew and enact ways of life that value identity and personal meaning, public life and academic knowledge—so they can fit within the generic practices and imperatives of proceduralism, seems to me to be a doomed exercise, an exercise in tragedy. Instead of working to reformulate matters in a richer way that give

new meaning and significance to one's life and work, one would be condemned to paring away the richness of these other-ed ways of life.

Even so, I did hope that *Framing the Field* (together with the other texts I wrote) could contribute to a canon supporting a community of memory and hope, even if not a community of practice or of inquiry. I still view these texts as promissory notes that may be redeemed sometime in the future when governments have learnt to find ways to nurture communities of practice and reflection, instead of reduce them to 'industries' identified as abstract taxonomies of competence.

Returning to the issue of educator of significance during the 20th century: while honored by the comments from readers of *Fine Print*, I would like to comment on the significance of individuals in the emergence and constitution of communities. The focus on individual rather than collective may imply that ABE as a field is a matter of individuals, not groups or collectives. There is a Cartesian assumption that persuasion is a matter of one mind inscribing a text that persuades other individual minds to the same belief.

I have a quite different view of both persuasion and of minds. Minds are not personal private things that entertain or submit to arguments. Minds are public performances. They exist in the telling, in the discussion, in the to and fro of social life. Of course, as adults we can internalise the inherently dialogic character of mind and discourse and imagine new audiences, future audiences, other audiences. Similarly, persuasion is not a logical operation through which the reader is taken from premises to a necessary conclusion; rather, persuasion arises from the fact that a text successfully invokes the underpinning values, instincts and habitus of the way of life of the reader, and brings them to bear on the topic at hand.

A focus on individuals also occludes the fact that social life principally operates at a level of practices and habitus, not at the level of explicitly formulated beliefs or texts. It is this fact that the entire 'CBT industry' is unable to acknowledge because governmentally their fundamental imperative is to formulate the shared capacities of communities of practice in grids of logically consistent taxonomies and thresholds.

But what matters is not individuals, it is practices, ways of life. It is these that define who we are, what we care about, what we know and what we can do. And practices are elusive; they resist formulation, they resist capture by academic theorists and governmental proceduralists alike. Practices are local, situated and embedded in the stories, history and habits of place, not the categories, concepts and grids of universals. This is why governments cannot deal with them ...

And so, I would like to deflect the kind words said about me by ABE practitioners and redirect them to their true target: the Language Development Centre at Footscray College of TAFE from the late 70s to the mid 90s. The sense of authorisation needed to formulate a framework for ABE at the end of the 80s did not arise out of some private thought process or personal insight, but out of the collaborative and communal work of the LDC, its

members and the colleagues and practitioners who attended workshops and engaged in talk about teaching. The right to 'frame the field' grew out of this concrete 'sense of the field' as a constellation of practices, practices in which traditions, procedures, allegiances, canons, concepts, strategies, stories, habits and intentions are woven together in the dense and infinitely readable tapestry that forms the cultures and worlds in which we live. Insofar as the LDC participated and exemplified this richness, I felt 'authorised' to speak to and for the (emergent) community of ABE.

However, two developments have undermined this sense of authority. One, the intrusive obsession of governmentality with assessment frameworks for statistical reporting in lieu of pedagogic frameworks for teaching and learning seemed to distort and even destroy the fragile consensual emergence of ABE as a community of practice. This meant that statements addressed to the ABE field as a whole took on a tenor, tone and authority of governmentality, a 'voice' I refuse to adopt.

The other development that undermined my sense of speaking to and for a community was a deepening sense of my own mono-culturalism. We had initially been deeply influenced by Mina Shaunessy's *Errors and Expectations* which formulated the values, concepts, intentions and practices of 'teachers of basic writers' as a community of pedagogic practice that emerged when the City University of New York (CUNY) embarked on a policy of open entry which meant that large numbers of African Americans and Latinos whose secondary schooling had been a failure, turned up at the doors of CUNY campuses demanding 'a second chance'.

However, just as there is now deep controversy about whether the community of practice spoken for by Mina Shaunessey was assimilationist, so too I became consumed by doubts about our own work. Without question, we knew how to teach someone the games of mainstream academia quickly and effectively, but what was the meaning of apprenticing someone into these forms of life and language games. The rise of the politics of identity and culture in response to the universalising claims of globalism has problematised our definition of the situation.

For these two reasons, the increasing impact of governmental systems and the rise of identity politics, I decided to find a new context in which to be a teacher. I chose Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, a 'contact zone' where I can engage in a history of practice and reflection organised around these two issues: the inherent colonialism of governmental systems and processes, the exploration of a both-ways education that protects and nurtures indigenous ways of life, and the cross-cultural responsibilities of educators.

And to find a 'footing' within my own culture and practices that can 'bridge' to these realities, I have written a PhD arguing that ABE should construe itself as appropriating, renewing and reconstructing the unbroken 2500 year tradition of rhetoric and practical philosophy formulated by Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, a tradition of 'oracy' focussed on the founding and refounding of consensual communities of self-

determination. A different form of governance is implicated in this tradition of practical philosophy, a form of governance deeply at odds with the textualist rationalism of Plato and his modernist offspring.

Rob McCormack, 2000