

ALIA National Conference 2022 presentation:

Adult Literacy - the missing piece in the Information Literacy Landscape

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SUMMARY

This paper and its accompanying PowerPoint supports the presentation delivered by Libby Levett and Andrea McMahon at the ALIA National 2022 Conference. It explores how Information Literacy and Adult Literacy must intersect to meet the diverse needs of the people who use our public library services.

The first part of the presentation explores the relationship between libraries and Information, Media and Adult literacies. The second part provides information about the ALIA Adult Literacy Group, what we know about how adults learn to read, and the imperative to approach library literacy programs with the same commitment to research and evidence-based practice as other parts of our service.

PART 1. The Information Literacy landscape

In 2020, while working from home during lockdown, I was tasked with writing a discussion paper for Libraries Tasmania about Information Literacy. Because I was in lockdown I had lots of uninterrupted time (apologies to those who didn't) and the luxury of not only doing a literature review but also (quite a lot of) reflective practice.

Some time into researching the paper, I was asked to re-focus it, and it became a paper about Media and Information Literacy (MIL). And Libraries Tasmania began a year-long, organisation-wide discussion about it.

But over time I noticed that in casual conversations the information literacy part of MIL was often overshadowed by the media literacy part. And I started to wonder if at some point the overarching concept of Information Literacy had dissolved into one of its parts.

So I get it. I get why some people are talking about MIL as the latest sexy iteration of Information Literacy. Because it is! By adding 'Media' to it it's become not only important to the Media but important in it. And that has the potential to raise the profile of Information Literacy - think Nancy Pearl crossed with Kim Kardashian.

And I'm not saying MIL is not important - it is, VERY important. Not least of all because it is presenting the Library and Information Sector (LIS) with a legitimate opportunity to raise its profile, leverage political influence and collaborate with some powerful stakeholders. But also because most of us know how it feels to be taken in by a scam, or commit to a 'fact' that turns out ... not to be.

Take my experience with online shopping for example. It's something I had only done once before COVID and my main concern used to be that my banking details might be compromised. But now I'm bitterly aware that the images of the items may be digitally manipulated. The reviews faked. And the company could be nothing more than a little puff of virtual 'blink and you'll miss it' sorcery. So for me, online shopping is very stressful and time-consuming because now I'm always checking and double checking and second-guessing and adding new security and basically buying very little – which my bank balance thanks me for.

The opportunities and skills we need to check the transparency and legitimacy of 'news' and information are being sorely tested too. It's a struggle to 'know what we don't know'; to be aware of constantly evolving and sophisticated subterfuges about the source of information and its manipulation; to be at the receiving end of mis-, dis- and malinformation. To feel (sometimes very accurately) that we're making decisions about our life, our friends, family and community based on wrong, distorted or insufficient information. To not trust the information available to us or the people peddling it.

My concern is that in our focus on MIL we are forgetting that it is one aspect of something fundamental to our profession - Information Literacy. And the foundation of Information Literacy is something that is not 'sexy', it's the ability to read and write.

Because even though we might occasionally be concerned about the source of our information, or how to sort the facts from fiction, people with low-level reading and writing skills struggle every day. And this makes them very vulnerable to exploitation - physically, mentally, emotionally, financially, politically and socially.

Let me give an example: The other evening as I was driving home I was listening to a tech expert talking about the current wave of scams doing the rounds. He finished with a couple of easy tips to recognise a scam and check the legitimacy and level of risk a text message or email might pose. One of these was: if the message starts with 'You [space] ve' instead of 'You've' then you can be pretty sure it's a scam text. Why? Because one way scammers can get around your security is to separate 'you've' into two parts.

Now this type of spelling mistake, coupled with a message too good, or too bad to be true, and from someone you don't recognise would usually and immediately ring alarm bells for us and we'd ignore it, block it and possibly report it. But what if you didn't recognise that the word was misspelled? And what if you couldn't recognise that the web link was missing standard or expected information?

The word 'literacy' is added to many areas of knowledge: health, music, digital, financial, scientific, emotional, ecological and cultural literacy to name a few. It's often a signalling word, letting us know that we need specific and or transferable information and skills in a knowledge area.

It also infers the need for a conscious and planned education intervention, or creation of an environment in which learning can be facilitated. And when we talk about our role in supporting MIL, we're advocating for trusted and reliable sources, the conscious and deliberate creation of spaces and places where people can

choose to learn, as well as the skills people need in our 'media-saturated and information rich society' (Martzoukou & Elliott) to navigate the complex media landscape (AMLA).

These skills include reading, writing and numeracy. These skills empower individuals and communities to engage with, learn and communicate information, create and share knowledge and 'think critically and click wisely' (MIL CLICKS - UNESCO). These skills also underpin Information Literacy in our digital age. They are a part of the ecology and landscape of it and we need to acknowledge them, understand them and work to support them in library literacy programs and partnerships.

So who, in Australia, is more likely to have lower levels of Media and Information Literacy? People living in regional areas, people with disability, First Nations people, people over fifty-five, people for whom English is not their first, second or even third language, people with low levels of education and people on low incomes (AMLA). These cohorts overlap with and bear similarities with those who have low levels of Digital Literacy (ADII) and, or functional literacy. And this is important because the OECD cautions that people with low literacy skills are, 'more likely to be unemployed or in precarious jobs, earn lower wages, have more health issues, trust others less, and engage less often in community life and democratic processes' (PIAAC).

This lack of trust and disengagement with the community and democratic processes by people with low literacy skills spills over into MIL. People just don't know what to believe and which expert - if any - to trust (Sullivan).

But guess what? Public libraries are (in the main) trusted social institutions. We offer spaces, places and services that develop community and connections. Opportunities to increase skills and confidence across multiple literacies and opportunities to find information and create knowledge on and offline. That's what we do.

We help people find and use credible information. We pride ourselves on our ability and willingness to adapt our services to meet the prevalent values and needs of our community or society, including its knowledge needs (Atkinson). The challenge is in the 'how', because we know there are elements of Information Literacy that stay the same, and there are elements that change. Therefore our approach, our response and yes, our thinking about it has to adapt too. But let's not forget reading and writing, and let's commit ourselves to them with the same frisson of excitement that MIL is generating. Remembering that a valuable point of difference in our service is our commitment to evidence-based practice, the trust placed in our services, and our willingness to see, hear and respond to the diverse needs of individuals and communities at so many points in their learning life in so many ways.

PART 2. Applying evidence-based practice in library literacy programs

Libraries support a range of different literacies, including health literacy, financial literacy, digital literacy, media and information literacy, and of course, libraries have always been involved in promoting literacy through our early learning programs, our collections, and our English conversation groups for people from non-English

speaking backgrounds. And increasingly, there has been interest in one-to-one volunteer literacy tutoring in libraries which, as Libby has highlighted, underpins efforts to ensure equitable access to information literacy skills.

And this is one of the reasons why the ALIA Adult Literacy Group was established. To enable library professionals around Australia to work together to share knowledge and expertise around library adult literacy in its varied manifestations. There's no one size fits all for a library adult literacy service, so it can be a daunting proposition for those tasked with introducing this new service.

Research into how we read, both children and adults, is extensive. How our brains function when we learn to read is one of the most studied aspects of human cognition. French neuroscientist, Professor Stanislas Dehaene, has established that adults use the same brain structures as children when learning to read (Dehaene, 2015). This does not, however, mean we teach adults in the same manner as children. Adult learning principles are respected.

The findings of this extensive body of reading research unequivocally support one approach. This approach acknowledges the importance of acquiring a group of five sub-skills or elements when we learn to read - for both adults and children. Phonemic awareness (to ability to hear and manipulate the sounds within spoken words), phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Australian academic, Dr Deslea Konza argued for a sixth element - oral language, because no matter how well we decode, if we don't have good oral language skills we won't be able to comprehend what we're reading (Konza, 2014). And of course, promoting oral language through our early learning programs is one of the cornerstones of our public libraries.

The statewide service I worked in, the Libraries Tasmania Adult Literacy Service, introduced volunteer adult literacy tutoring in 2009 and at that time our training and resources were heavily embedded in the Whole Language approach. This approach has been used widely to teach both children and adults for the past forty years. Briefly, Whole Language is an instructional approach that involves the use of semantic, linguistic and grapho-phonetic cues along with the learning of words as unanalysed, global wholes using visual memory.

The Libraries Tasmania Adult Literacy Service uses a 'Literacy as a Social Practice' model where literacy is understood as the way that people apply reading and writing skills in the context of their everyday lives, enabling civic participation and personal fulfillment. Tutors support learners to work towards personal goals and to practice their skills with everyday tasks.

Both Libby and I were amongst the first batch of Tasmanian literacy coordinators and we've both come from a background of traditional library work - I've been a cataloguer, Libby's been a children's librarian, we've both managed public libraries. It was a massive learning curve and we trusted those in the adult literacy sector to provide us with the knowledge and resources we needed to improve the literacy of our clients.

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But being library professionals we also reflected on our practice and so after a few years of working away - motivated learners working with trained tutors - we became aware of clients who simply weren't making the progress expected. So we started asking questions, reading research, and undertaking action research, which in 2016 led us to change from a service based on Whole Language ideology to one based on contemporary research informed by the Science of Reading.

And everyone breathed a sigh of relief: our coordinators, our tutors, and especially our clients. Comments from Libraries Tasmania clients and coordinators after working with research informed approaches include:

'That's brilliant', I get it now.'

'I have been learning English for years in lots of different classes, and I've never been shown how to spell English like this before. It makes it easy for me to know how to say the words properly and spell them.'

'I now have a little suitcase of learning skills that I can lean on and correct myself, to be able to spell, read and write.'

'Max (not his real name) comments that reading is somehow so much easier now. He feels he has a better understanding of words and his reading speed and fluency have improved markedly. Best of all, he enjoys the drills and thinks they are fun.'

'He broke it down into 5 syllables and sounded it all out correctly. James couldn't stop smiling. He kept staring at the word and said, 'I never thought I could spell something like that.' (McMahon, 2021)

We were fortunate in Tasmania that our wonderful TasTAFE teachers who deliver our volunteer tutor training also embraced this research-informed approach to adult literacy. In Tasmania the VET sector, the library sector, the community sector, and our statewide adult literacy and numeracy strategy, 26TEN, are all aligned in support of research informed practice.

However, in other Australian states, much visible adult literacy practice is not research-informed and is out-of-step with what is happening internationally. Whole language methodologies and strategies are still being promoted, despite a lack of evidence that these approaches develop sustained literacy skills in adult learners.

In the bibliography below you will see a reference to a podcast by American journalist, Emily Hanford, who interviewed Kenneth Goodman, father of the Whole Language approach, just prior to his death aged 91. You will hear him say 'My science is different.' Goodman would not, or could not, acknowledge the vast amount of scientific research into how our brains function when we learn to read. The message here is that it's not easy to get a leopard to change its spots. In negotiating the complex Australian adult literacy environment we need to ensure that our library ideals and values are not compromised by people and organisations who have a very different ethos and approach to adult literacy practice.

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As Library professionals we are committed to evidence-based practice. It matters to us. Libby and I have both undertaken courses in Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, which has the rather awkward acronym EBLIP. So the message I'm keen to communicate is that as library professionals we must apply the same rigorous standards to adult literacy programs and resources as we do to acquiring and delivering other library resources and programs. I think that we, as library professionals, have been very trusting when it comes to adult literacy. And in some cases we may have even abrogated responsibility for the quality of our service. If you're keen to learn more about the research on how adults learn to read please refer to the bibliography below. A great place to start would be the research of Dr Janet McHardy.

So what do we mean by poor adult literacy practice? The simplest way to explain it is that it's any strategy or resource that takes a learner's attention away from the letter-sound correspondences in the word they are either trying to decode or remember. Any strategy that relies on visual memory. Any strategy that encourages guessing.

Here are some examples:

Example 1 [Welcome to the library teacher resource](#) p.5

Welcome to the Library: Develop vocabulary

Put the correct word in the word shape.

friends books library film computer listening
connects study speaking job craft free

The image shows a word shape puzzle activity. At the top, there is a red header with the text "Welcome to the Library: Develop vocabulary". Below this, the instruction "Put the correct word in the word shape." is displayed. A list of words is provided: friends, books, library, film, computer, listening, connects, study, speaking, job, craft, and free. Below the list, there are 12 word shapes represented by grids of boxes. The shapes are as follows:
1. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.
2. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th boxes are taller.
3. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.
4. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.
5. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th boxes are taller.
6. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.
7. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th boxes are taller.
8. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.
9. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th boxes are taller.
10. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.
11. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 7th, and 9th boxes are taller.
12. A 1x10 grid with a 2x10 grid above it, where the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th boxes are taller.

Example 2 - [Garage Sales Workbook](#) p. 9

What is each person doing?

sell



buy



Activity:

Write the best word in each space.

buy

sell

Garage sales help people *b*_____ and *s*_____ old things. People can *b*_____ things like clothes, tools, books and bikes.

✓ Answers

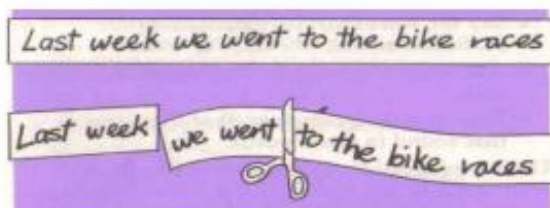
Garage sales help people buy and sell old things. People can buy things like clothes, tools, books and bikes.

Example 3 - [Literacy face to face: a handbook for volunteer adult literacy tutors](#). 2nd ed. 2022. Section 2, p. 5

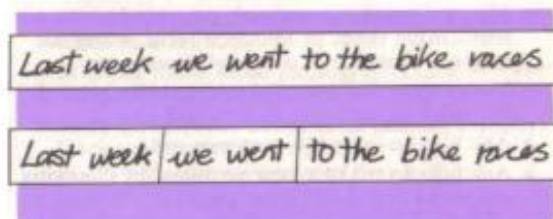
- **Help your student learn to recognise individual words**

Write the sentence again on a piece of cardboard. A manila folder is good. Remember to say each word as you write it.

Cut this sentence up into phrases and read each phrase as you cut it off.



Now ask the student to reassemble the phrases into sentence form, using the original as a model if necessary.



Ask your student to cut the phrases into separate words and help them name each word as they cut it off. You now have some word cards to work with in a number of ways:

- Give your student one of these words at a time, name it and ask them to place it on top of the same word in the original sentence.
This is the word week. Put it on top of the same word in that sentence.
- Now ask the student to point to a word that you name.
Which is the word week?
If they have trouble identifying any of the words, encourage them to read (recite) the whole sentence in order to work it out.
- Now do it the other way around. Point to a word and ask them what it is.
What is this word?
- Mix the words up and ask your student to reassemble them in sentence form, using the original sentence as a model if necessary.
- When you think your student is ready, repeat the last step without the help of the model.

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A research informed approach to learning words such as those identified in the above examples would include strategies based on phonics (letter-sound knowledge, e.g. /w/ee/k/) and morphology and etymology.

We need to get it right. The costs associated with poor life outcomes for those living with low literacy are high at both the population level – health, mental health, incarceration, welfare – and at the individual level – stigma, marginalisation, fewer opportunities in education and employment. Becoming victims of online scams.

We need to be brave and be advocates for research informed practice - and this means questioning partner organisations on the methodologies and strategies they are using with learners. I've done it - and I'm still waiting to receive the research that supports the continued use of Whole Language and whole word approaches. But we need to go one step further than this. We need to become, and see ourselves, as specialists in the provision of library literacy tutoring. When someone says, *I know all about phonemic awareness and phonics*, but then proceeds to promote resources based on visual memory, such as guessing from the first letter or from pictures, we know something doesn't quite add up.

Library literacy is a specialised area of adult literacy provision that provides reach, flexibility and evidence-based learning to clients through our amazing network of public libraries. The focus of library adult literacy is developing foundational reading, writing and numeracy skills with the assistance of a volunteer tutor workforce. We don't cover the range of learning that adult literacy teachers undertake and I'm not suggesting that we should. We're focussed on offering clients the opportunity to develop good old-fashioned reading, writing and numeracy skills informed by their own learning needs and interests and by the demands of the online world we live in today.

Libraries are very experienced working with diverse clients with complex needs, we've been doing it for a long time. I remember delivering digital literacy to clients in Burnie Library back in the 1980s when online catalogues were first introduced. We should feel confident in our ability to deliver adult literacy services in our public libraries.

So the question I think we need to start asking is: *Is it time to start offering Adult Literacy and Numeracy as elective units along with digital literacy and information literacy in Library and Information studies courses?* To ensure there are no missing pieces in the Information Literacy landscape.

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About the authors

Libby Levett has spent most of her LIS career as a Children's and Youth Librarian. In 2008 she was appointed to one of the first Libraries Tasmania Adult Literacy coordinator roles and witnessed how evidence-based literacy support can make a long-term difference to individuals, families and whole communities.

In 2017 she became a member of the Central Literacy and Learning Team and currently works in the Strategic Improvement and Client Experience unit at Libraries Tasmania.

Libby is the current ALIA Island Group convenor and a member of the ALIA Children's and Youth Service Group and ALIA Adult Literacy Group.

Andrea McMahon was, until recently, the Senior Literacy Coordinator with Libraries Tasmania. She was responsible for the professional learning of Tasmania's network of adult literacy coordinators and volunteer tutors. She has a special interest in evidence based reading methodologies that are informed by the science of reading, and reflect how our brain functions when we learn to read.

Andrea has presented on adult literacy topics at national and state events and recently delivered an Adult Learning Australia webinar, 'Orthographic mapping and its role in reading fluency'.

Andrea is the convenor of ALIA's Adult Literacy Group and a member of ALIA Island. She was the 2021 winner of the Engaging Our Learners (Adults) category in the Together We Inspire Awards (Department of Education, Tasmania).