

## **'Making It Stick'. The Post-literacy Phase of the Literacy for Life Foundation Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2012, seven western NSW Aboriginal communities have utilized the Cuban-developed *Yo, Si Puedo!* (Yes, I Can!) campaign model to raise English language literacy levels in their adult populations. A participatory action research (PAR) evaluation was undertaken at the same time to assist communities and the national campaign leadership, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), to adapt this model, originally developed for the Global South, to the Indigenous 'fourth world' conditions in which the work must proceed. The three-phase campaign model has been described in detail in previous publications. In this paper, we analyse the campaign's Phase Three, known as Post-literacy. During this phase, local Aboriginal staff and community leaders, supported by professionally-qualified LFLF employees, develop and deliver a coordinated strategy to consolidate and extend, over a 3 month timeframe, the newly acquired literacy of those participants who successfully complete the 13 week basic skills course which comprises Phase Two.

### **Background and method**

Across western and north western New South Wales, there are dozens of small to medium size towns, many of them including Aboriginal communities as a significant part of their population. In 2012, the authors began working with a national Aboriginal steering committee on a pilot project in one of these towns, Wilcannia. The aim was to investigate whether a mass adult literacy campaign, based on the Cuban Yes, I Can! (or *Yo, Si Puedo!*) model, could be effective in increasing the rate of adult literacy in these communities (Boughton et al 2013). We had learned about this model by working alongside a team of Cuban education advisers in the national literacy campaign in Timor-Leste in the previous decade. By the time it concluded, the Timor-Leste campaign had enrolled over 200000 adults in its classes and reached into almost every village in the country (Boughton 2018). The initial pilot in Australia, funded by the Commonwealth's Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program, was sufficiently successful to attract further funding to extend the pilot to the nearby towns of Bourke and Enngonia in 2013 and 2014. A new National Aboriginal organization, the Literacy for Life Foundation, was then established to roll the campaign out across NSW and into other states and territories. By the middle of this year (2018), the campaign had run in seven communities with a total Aboriginal adult population of over 2000. Almost 300 Aboriginal adults with a self-identified low level of literacy had joined the classes and 175 (64%) had completed and graduated. At the time of writing, the campaign is moving into two more NSW locations, and planning has begun to trial the model in a remote Northern Territory community.

The campaign roll-out has included a participatory action-research (PAR) evaluation, managed through the University of New England, and is also now the subject of an Australian Research Council Linkage Research Project. In

previously-published papers, we have described the three-phase campaign model in some detail. In this paper, we focus on one aspect only of the campaign model, Phase Three, Post Literacy.

Following a short introduction to the model, we review some international writing regarding post-literacy and its role in mass literacy campaigns. The remainder of the paper looks in detail at the way the Literacy for Life Foundation has designed and implemented this phase in the campaign communities, to take account of the specific and diverse circumstances of the communities, while also operating within the complex education, employment and training field with which these communities must interact. We conclude by reviewing some of the ideas and theory which have informed this work, and which we have developed further through this experience.

### **Mass campaigns and the Yes, I Can! Model**

Mass adult literacy campaigns have played central roles in the national development strategies of countries in every part of the world for at least the last two hundred years (Arnove & Graff 2008). The country which developed the Yes, I Can! (YIC) model, Cuba, had its own national literacy campaign in 1961, and this campaign inspired many which followed, including the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil, and campaigns in Nicaragua and in several newly independent countries in Africa. It was during this period, from the 1960s to the 1980s, that UNESCO became active in promoting such campaigns, until this work was stopped through the intervention of the World Bank and the United States. At this point, interest in such campaigns in the more industrialised countries of the North, and among literacy academics and practitioners in those countries, especially in the English-speaking world, began to recede.

However, in parts of the Global South, such campaigns continued, often through mechanisms of 'south-south' solidarity and cooperation, in which countries including Cuba which had completed their own successful campaigns, assisted other countries to initiate and conduct theirs. From these international experiences, Cuba developed the Yes, I Can! model which was capable of being replicated at fairly low cost in other countries of the Global South. Here in Australia, as in Timor-Leste and every other of the 30 countries where it has been deployed, the model has to be contextualized to local circumstances, but it nevertheless follows the same basic three-phase model

Phase One, called Socialisation & Mobilisation, runs for the duration of the Campaign. A local Campaign Working Group is set up; a household literacy consultation is undertaken; local Aboriginal staff are recruited and trained to deliver the Yes, I Can! lessons; a public launch is held to raise the community's awareness about adult literacy and its impact; an office and classroom is established and participants are enrolled. Throughout the campaign, local staff continue to 'socialise' the campaign in their communities, including holding regular graduations to celebrate the achievements of each intake and invite the next group to join. Phase Two, the Yes, I Can! Lessons, consists of sixty-four (64) basic reading, writing and learning lessons delivered utilising a set of DVDs. The lessons typically run over 13 weeks for 12 hours per week with a maximum of

20 people in each class. The local Facilitators and Coordinator undertake continuous training and capacity development by the LFLF team of professional educators who also monitor and review student progress and validate data collection. The Coordinator networks within the wider community to build partnerships and pathways for the students to follow when they complete the Campaign. Phase Three, post-literacy, which is the subject of this paper consists of 12 weeks of structured literacy based activities for approximately 8 -10 hours per week, designed to consolidate participants' literacy competence, extend their learning confidence, and build their citizenship and work skills.

### **What is post-literacy?**

While we first learned the concept of 'post-literacy' from the Cuban education mission in Timor-Leste, we have since discovered an extensive international literature on the topic (e.g. Rogers 2002), much of it associated with UNESCO's efforts to support adult literacy campaigns and programs in the Global South. Like many concepts in adult literacy education, there is considerable debate over its meaning, but what most authors have in common is the view that 'post-literacy' refers to the need to consolidate and extend the very basic literacy skills that are developed when people with minimal literacy first begin to acquire it. For example, a 1993 UNESCO manual describes it thus:

This idea (post-literacy) generally refers to processes and activities especially developed for neo-literates, which are designed to help them become fully functionally literate and to be autonomous learners. The essential aims are to prevent regression to semi-literacy or worse and to develop those higher-level literacy skills which are essential for autonomy in learning (UNESCO 1993).

Putting aside for a moment the now-outdated terminology (e.g. 'neo-literates', 'semi-literacy'), the fundamental concept is that literacy, while it involves specific learned 'skills' and 'operations', is only built and consolidated to become sustainable through social practice. Agneta Lind, who has been working on campaigns in the Global South since the 1975 campaign in Mozambique, reminds us that "the term 'post-literacy' is misleading", in that it disguises the fact that literacy is a continuum:

Literacy skills are a continuum and develop throughout life in literate environments, but without literate environments and useful application, they stagnate and are easily lost (Lind 2008, p.83).

The key term here is "literate environments" (Easton 2014). However, unlike in many parts of the Global South, Australian society is saturated with 'literate environments'. The problem of post literacy in the communities where we have worked is that people with low and very low literacy are excluded from effective participation in those environments, including, for example, their local schools which their children and grandchildren attend. In fact, their lack of literacy often makes having to engage with such environments a major source of oppression and stress. An extreme example is when people with low and very low English language literacy must interact with the police and court system.

Lind also rightly points to the need, well-known to adult literacy practitioners, for 'practical application'. Adults will choose to join a campaign and build their basic literacy for specific reasons, to improve their lives and that of their families

and community. Unless the basic skills learned in Phase Two are applied fairly quickly in circumstances where their value is demonstrated, they are less likely, as we say, to 'stick'.

To summarise, post-literacy takes place once people have acquired very basic reading and writing skills. Its aim is to practice and consolidate the literacy and learning competence and confidence students gained in Phase Two, through active participation in available 'literate environments' in ways that have immediate practical application. The Post Literacy phase of the campaign, as with the previous phases, must therefore be contextualised to the specific situations in which the campaign is operating. Equally important, it is about strengthening a culture of literacy and learning within the community as a whole, which is the ultimate aim of the mass campaign model.

### **How Post-literacy is implemented in the Yes, I Can! Campaigns**

Although each phase of the campaign is different, the phases feed into and support each other. For example, during Phase One, the local campaign team have already mapped the local community, identifying potential partners who can be called upon in Phase Three. As the campaign rolls out, they build up their understanding of the local context, identifying available expertise and resources, potential family and local history resources, significant cultural sites, work experience placements, logistics such as a computer lab, library, or 12 seater bus. They also gauge agencies interested in participating in the program either directly e.g. local health service may like to deliver a women's health workshop or indirectly e.g. the Police Citizens Youth Club offers access to a kitchen for a cooking class. Several weeks before Phase Two finishes, planning begins in earnest.

The next step involves collaborating with both the students and the Local Campaign Working Group to design a curriculum which meets the needs and aspirations of students as well as community priorities and fits within the available resources and budget. The *Network of Campaign Supporters*, established in Phase One, is consulted about access to possible activities and resources identified during the mapping exercise. The curriculum development process begins by working with the students and the Working Group to nominate three or four out of eight key literacy 'impact domains' identified from previous evaluations, namely culture, education, community, economy, politics, justice, health and housing. The aim is to achieve impact over the longer term by targeting a few high priority areas. The group is led through an interactive process of identifying possible indicators of impact as result of improved literacy for each of the selected domains e.g. if health is selected as a priority domain, one indicator is improved access to the health service when self or family are unwell, and before illness develops.

The nominated domains are then aligned to eight *Thematic Areas* namely language and culture, family and local history, health and nutrition, computing, legal issues, community and citizenship, housing and core work skills. This last one includes a work experience component, and if possible, an accredited VET module delivered by a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). The next step is

to decide the actual workshop topics related to each theme, identify local resources and people, and prepare a series of session plans which enable students to experience literacy as a social practice. We have found that each theme works best if it continues for at least four weeks with one topic per day.

Sessions are designed to connect back to and reinforce aspects of the Phase Two Yes, I Can! lessons, e.g. the 'positive messages' with which each lesson begins; tasks such as completing forms, basic punctuation, using a dictionary, writing a paragraph and a personal letter; and to the student's assessed ACSF literacy level. Each session seeks to mirror the *YIC* lessons in terms of being a learner, working well together, taking ownership of one's own learning as well as the structure of the session and literacy tasks including self-editing of work. This consolidation and repetition enables students to continue to strengthen their identity as learners, practicing basic classroom and literacy processes which were previously unfamiliar and even intimidating.

When the program is at the final draft stage, usually three weeks before the Phase 3 start date, it is presented again to the Campaign Working Group and students for feedback. Final adjustments are made before distributing to partners and referral agencies such as Job Active agencies and Department of Corrections. Once started the students are provided with a copy of the weekly program of learning activities every two weeks. Over 10 to 12 weeks, a one hundred hour program of social context literacy learning is delivered, as a series of interrelated structured activities utilising local expertise and resources, with literacy development embedded in each session. Students complete a minimum of 70 hours tuition to meet graduation requirements. During this phase, the team continues to work to identify pathways for each student into relevant formal VET or school education, driver education, community work, social enterprise and/or employment or other opportunities to fulfil the personal goals they set at the beginning of Yes, I Can! and revisited at the beginning of Post Literacy.

### **How do we make it stick?**

Successive evaluations have found that, according to the participants, local Aboriginal leaders, and other agencies which become involved, the key to the effectiveness of the Campaign Model is that local Aboriginal people are on the front line, coordinating and facilitating the lessons, with the professional educators in the background. As a result, people say that 'their own mob' are really in charge of the Campaign and are trusted to do it. This approach means the learning and literacy development gains traction quickly. People want to learn, they want to be in class learning together, gaining what they feel to be really useful knowledge to improve their own and family and community life. Literacy is more likely to stick because, as discussed above, local staff, students and community members are actively involved in designing the curricula and in its delivery. The mass literacy campaign model builds from below and leads from behind.

The glue making literacy stick comes from ensuring that Post Literacy contributes to the existing community-driven development strategies and

programs. This, in fact, has always been an aspect of the mass literacy campaign, as expressed in the words of one writer from the 1970s:

Literacy creates and post-literacy reinforces the possibility for new literates to have access to information, to decisions and responsibilities concerning their own development (Kessi 1979; cited Rogers et al 1999).

The model calls for Post Literacy to bring the various domain sectors together to enable participants to envisage the possibility of a better future, and begin to take small steps towards a safer, more secure, and healthier and more productive life. For many participants so far, the Post Literacy Phase of the Campaign has been the first time they have been offered an opportunity to do a genuine work placement; or invited to meet with the Mayor to discuss a pressing issue such as non-potable drinking water; or talk to a local Police Superintendent about police intimidation; or meet as a class with the school Principal to discuss ways to improve teacher-community relationships.

Embedding the Post Literacy inside everyday community life under the leadership of the local team means the Campaign quickly evolves into being a "hub for community". The students value the fact that the staff work with them, support them, witness their lives. Students are safe to bring their lives into the classroom. Their issues and interests are the curriculum. People know that it will be understood, that they don't have to explain things and that they will get the help they need. Students are not asked to leave their world to begin the process of learning but rather the team works together with the class to build the road into that 'other world'. The local team helps people begin that journey, that transition. Rules of respect pervade the classroom, "the number one rule", say the local staff. Valuing student knowledge and experience from the outset and building upon it is critical to learning *to be a learner* which in turn impacts on people's identity and sense of dignity. Not only are low literate students gaining new knowledge, critically reflecting on their life experience but they also grow confidence to dialogue with the literate world on a more equal basis. It is this change in self-perception as a literate person capable of having voice and being heard which has proved to be so powerful in terms of impact. This change resonates with Freire's "learn to read the word, to read the world".

## **Conclusion**

In many ways Phase 3 is the most critical component of the Campaign Model, in that it opens another gate or gates into the world of further learning, productive community participation and importantly, improved decision making over one's life. During this phase participants are prepared to walk from the safe and secure Aboriginal space through the next "gate" into the wider mainstream world of learning, social life and possibly paid employment. Post Literacy provides opportunities for participants to apply their newly acquired literacy in a diverse range of contexts seeking to make it stick so that the literacy gains are sustainable over the longer term.

The Campaign model is about providing a solid bedrock upon which the community can slowly build its future in collaboration with each other and the agencies which serve them. Success depends on nurturing a culture of literacy in

everyday life; otherwise the likelihood of impact will be minimal. The experience of using literacy to make informed choices or decisions in the context of their own life is for many, in the words of Freirian scholar the late Paula Allman, an “abbreviated experience of transformation” (Allman 2007, p.272).

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