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## THE ABC AND ADULT LITERACY

The year 1990 was the United Nation's International Literacy Year, as proclaimed by the UN General Assembly. As the leading UN agency, UNESCO specified the following objectives for ILY: to increase government action to combat illiteracy; to increase public awareness of the scope and implications; to increase popular participation in efforts to combat the problems; to increase co-operation and solidarity among UN member States on the issue; to increase co-operation within the UN system; and to use ILY for launching a plan for eliminating literacy problems.

Publications edited by Josee Valois (1989) and Traber and Lee (1990) describe literacy and broadcasting activities around the world. In Australia in February 1989 the ILY Secretariat was established within the Commonwealth Department of Employment Education and Training to co-ordinate national efforts during 1990.

For many years Australia was believed to have no problems of illiteracy. However a survey undertaken by Judith Goyen (1977) in metropolitan Sydney concluded that about 10% of people over the age of fifteen were functionally illiterate. This survey has been widely used to estimate that approximately one million adult Australians suffer from reading and writing difficulties in English. (Commonwealth Government documents such as the December 1990 literacy 'Green Paper' assume the one million figure to be correct.) Of this group, about 700,000 are of English-speaking background, and about 300,000 of non-English speaking background, many of whom can speak English very well but cannot read or write it accurately.

During 1989, in the lead-up to International Literacy Year, Rosie Wickert conducted a face to face survey of 1496 adults in 33 Australian cities, towns and rural communities. The final report *No Single Measure*, 1989 made the point that: 'There is no single measure or specific point on a scale that separates the "literate" from the "illiterate"'. The survey analysed three different kinds of literacy — prose, document and quantitative — in a number of ways. The survey found that one in three adults could not fill out a cheque correctly or find the correct heading in the Yellow Pages. Almost half of the adult population could not determine the correct medicine dosage for a child or calculate a 10% surcharge on a meal.

Australians who have the most literacy difficulties tend to be older, have less access to literacy materials and work in unskilled occupations. The reasons that some adults did not learn to read or write at school include poverty; illness or accident; undetected sight or hearing problems; English as their second language; books and reading not encouraged at home; large class sizes; or rural isolation.

The findings of *No Single Measure* underline the necessity to see literacy as a continuum of skills, and that literacy problems are not limited to those 10% who have basic reading and writing difficulties. A 1978 UNESCO definition is that: 'people are literate when they have acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable them to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in their group and community'. Thus in Australia, higher literacy skills are needed to function effectively than in many less industrialised

countries. Some people may function very well with prose, but be unable to understand documents or be able to calculate well (numeracy or 'quantitative literacy').

Despite the estimate of one million Australians with literacy problems, as of mid-1990 only 28,000 adults were enrolled in any kind of literacy program. The ILY Secretariat calculated that low literacy costs \$3.2 billion annually in lost productivity, solely based on the extra time taken to communicate in the workplace. It also means that many unskilled and semi-skilled workers are unable to learn new skills, a particularly important issue with the introduction of new technology in many areas. Industry experts estimate that over 20% of metal workers and over 50% of food workers are functionally illiterate.

#### **Electronic media and literacy**

Illiteracy in a developed society such as Australia is characterised by shame, embarrassment, and concealment. Non-readers are often very adept at hiding their inability to read and write even from family members. They are extremely difficult to contact and to encourage to seek assistance. Obviously, this cannot be done through the medium of print.

The widespread nature of literacy problems in Australia and the consequent difficulty in reaching people with these problems means that television and radio are two of the most valuable tools for promoting literacy. Programs can stimulate viewers and listeners to develop motivation to a point at which they want to start to learn. While extensive individual learning from a broadcast is unlikely, broadcasting can be extremely effective in developing confidence in non-readers and in introducing people to learning experiences. Programs can also be particularly effective in raising public awareness of, and galvanising community support for, literacy issues.

Indeed radio and especially television broadcaster involvement in literacy efforts is worldwide. An International Media Colloquium on Literacy held in Paris in May 1989 heard about literacy activities

from broadcasters in the United Kingdom, the USA, France, the Soviet Union, India, Brazil, Senegal and Mali. Of particular relevance to Australia are two very different campaigns: the UK's *On The Move* and the USA's *Project PLUS*.

#### **The United Kingdom: *On The Move***

The acknowledged leader of literacy and broadcasting is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which commenced a major literacy action campaign in October 1975 after two years of extensive planning. *On The Move* was a series of 50 short (ten minute) television programs intended to stimulate interest and motivation rather than provide direct teaching. Although not conceived as a teaching program, *On The Move* included some teaching material in order to show people who had difficulty with literacy that they could learn. The series was fast-moving, humorous and revolved around two removalists who were 'on the move'. One of the two main characters (played by Bob Hoskins in his first starring role) was functionally illiterate, and the series explored his trials and tribulations in slowly learning to read.

*On The Move* was intended for a general audience and broadcast on BBC-1 on Sundays at 6.05 pm (and repeated twice each week during the day) from October 1975 for a full year. It was repeated in its entirety during the following twelve months. The series was widely acclaimed at the time and won a British Academy for Film and Television Award for best specialised television program.

*On The Move* was followed by *Your Move*, a series of twenty half-hour programs for daytime transmission designed specifically for non-readers. It was intended to deliver more teaching and to be effective as a recruitment/encouragement vehicle for people who did not respond to the first series. It commenced transmission in October 1976 along with the repeat of the first series. BBC Radio commenced with an eight-part series for tutors of adult literacy students, and followed with two series of adult radio readings (*Next Move* and *Move On*).

A referral service was set up by the BBC and a contact number was displayed on the screen after each transmission, for both potential adult literacy students and volunteer tutors to ring. A total of 43,775 people (27,690 students and 16,088 volunteers) rang the number during the first twelve months, and 18,026 people (15,035 students and 2991 volunteers) in the second twelve months.

The BBC *On The Move* campaign has been extensively documented in books by David Hargreaves (1980) and by A H Charnley and H A Jones (1979). The BBC continues to be active in producing literacy materials for television since the early public campaign: *It Figures* (10 x 25' programs) on basic numeracy; *Write Away* (20 x 12'') on spelling; *Write Now* (8 x 10'') on letter writing; *Spelling It Out* (8 x 10''), *Stepping Up* (8 x 10''), *Stepping Up to Wordpower* (20 x 25''), and a number of different English as a second language series.

#### **The USA: Project PLUS**

A less ambitious broadcasting effort for literacy, but equally groundbreaking is that being undertaken by the American Capitol Cities/ABC network in conjunction with the Public Broadcasting System, led by WQED Pittsburgh and including a number of public television stations around the country. Other participants include National Public Radio and the (American) ABC Radio network. The main objectives of this campaign are to raise awareness of illiteracy in America and to increase local community action to help solve the problem.

*Project PLUS* commenced in December 1985 after a year's research, and is unprecedented in that it is an alliance between two networks and their local affiliates. While the initial commitment was for eighteen months, the campaign has continued to evolve and it appears that it will become ongoing. The strength of *Project PLUS* is in its continuing commitment to a wide range of on-air programming on various aspects of literacy. This has included ABC News *Closeup* documentaries, a number of different series of community service

announcements, production of television movies such as *Bluffing It*, and — most effectively — incorporating literacy issues throughout the wide range of programming and news/current affairs coverage: from breakfast programs to children's after school specials to sports to literacy themes in weekly drama series.

Since *Project PLUS*'s national toll-free telephone line went into operation, over a half million people have called it; the number of literacy students has increased by a factor of three or four; and the number of literacy volunteers has doubled.

#### **The role of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in adult literacy**

There has long been an awareness that the ABC has an important role to play in the provision of adult literacy programs. In the late 1970s ABC Education production staff followed the success of the *On The Move* program closely and considered attempting to imitate it in Australia. While this did not proceed through lack of funds, both *On The Move* and *Your Move* were piloted by ABC Education officers with a view to possible Australian broadcast. Both were deemed too British to be suitable. This awareness was reflected in a 1979 Report of the (then) Commonwealth Department of Education's Interdepartmental Working Party on Adult Literacy and Numeracy, which recommended that: 'The ABC give consideration to the possible use of broadcasting in the adult literacy/numeracy field not only as a teaching medium but also as a means of increasing public awareness of literacy and numeracy issues'.

Throughout the 1980s ABC Television and ABC Radio had explicitly identified adult literacy as a high priority for their educational programming. The ABC was — and still is — the only truly national television and radio network in Australia, with the ability to reach over 98% of all Australians through its television and radio broadcasts. Although it has recently been cut back, the ABC historically has had an extensive television and radio education service, with comprehensive support material available from its marketing arm.

The ABC was therefore uniquely well-placed to become a prime contributor of educational resources for adult literacy and a major means of extending public consciousness about the problems.

Three things were needed: organisational will, resources and funding (particularly for television programs), and a network of government and community organisations to work with for referral of potential students and other queries likely to arise with any mass publicising of literacy. With a constantly decreasing funding base, commencing a new activity which would cost some millions of dollars for an untried 'warm inner glow' issue was not a decision which management readily wished to make. But the greatest problem was the necessity to find organisations which would support the ABC's activities as a broadcaster. Unlike the BBC and *Project PLUS*, the ABC was unable and unwilling to take on the role of the literacy referral service. That activity, and all of the other associated community development roles, needed to be done elsewhere.

The ABC would not have become involved with adult literacy were it not for International Literacy Year, and the Commonwealth Government's commitment of special funding for ILY projects. This meant that government and community support would come for those roles which the ABC could not fill, and that there would be extra funding to assist literacy program making.

As it turned out, earlier (1988/89) literacy-related funding from the National Policy on Languages had funded the development of an adult literacy video series (*Between The Lines*), produced by NSW TAFE. Through this series, a special national toll-free telephone number was set up in 1989 for queries, run by TAFE's Adult Literacy Information Office (ALIO). The Commonwealth later funded the expansion and continuation of this number nationally to deal with all queries relating to seeking literacy assistance. This enabled the ABC to proceed safely knowing that its own switchboards would not be flooded after it broadcast literacy messages. This

number — 008 02 1184 — will continue until the end of December 1991.

#### **ABC TV literacy programs: *Fresh Start***

The 'flagship' of ABC literacy programs for ILY was the television series *Fresh Start*, which consisted of two strands: a six-part documentary series entitled *Fresh Start: Literacy 1990* of short (seven minute) programs for evening prime time transmission, and a twelve-part half-hour drama series for daytime transmission, intended primarily for adult literacy students. Both series were intended to raise public awareness and understanding of literacy issues and its implications for individuals and for Australian society. The drama series was also intended to provide motivation for students and potential students, but specifically excluded attempts to teach any aspects of reading or writing other than showing a number of techniques in classroom settings.

The ABC committed over \$1,000,000 for the production of *Fresh Start* and received \$500,000 from three Commonwealth Government agencies: the ILY National Consultative Council (\$300,000), and the Departments of Social Security and Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs (\$100,000 each). In addition, NSW TAFE contributed a part-time advisor. An advisory group was formed consisting of representatives of the funding organisations and the Australian Council for Adult Literacy. Pre-production on the programs commenced in July 1989 and a pilot program was completed and extensively tested with adult literacy students late in 1989.

The *Fresh Start: Literacy 1990* documentary programs commenced broadcasting on Tuesday July 31, 1990 at 9.20 pm (just after *G.P.*) and continued each Tuesday evening at this time until September 4, 1990. The programs were also repeated during the day in November/December 1990 and again in February/March 1991. The *Fresh Start* drama programs were always anticipated as daytime educational programs and premiered on Monday August 13, 1990 at 2 pm, and

continued until November 5, 1990. The drama programs were repeated at 6.30 pm on Monday to Thursday during late December 1990 and early January 1991.

In addition, during the day ABC TV repeated a half-hour ABC-produced documentary entitled *A State of Illiteracy* and broadcast two BBC-produced literacy-related series: *Write Now!* about how to write letters, and *Write Away*. A short Community Service Announcement (CSA) on adult literacy was made by ABC TV Promotions Department, and was broadcast a number of times during the second half of 1990. A version of this CSA was also provided to all of the commercial television channels, although used by few of them. The national reading and writing help number was shown on the screen at the end of all of these programs and at the end of the CSA. Aside from these programs, the only other inclusion of literacy in ABC TV programming was in one episode of the series *G.P.*

Commercial television did relatively little on adult literacy during ILY. With encouragement from the ILY Secretariat, a number of long-running 'soaps' included literacy themes, although generally no mention was made of the national literacy help number. Commercial channels (especially those in regional areas) also showed a CSA promoting the NSW TAFE *Between The Lines* series, and less frequently the ABC-produced CSA. For some years, Channel Ten has noted International Literacy Day (September 8) with the screening of literacy-related films such as the (American ABC-produced) telemovie *Bluffing It* with Dennis Weaver.

The ABC's Radio Education Department was also active during ILY, producing a number of specialist programs on adult literacy for transmission on Radio National and regional radio stations. The ongoing adult education series, *Offspring*, *Connexions*, *Education Now*, *Managing Matters* and *Relationships* all included extensive coverage of ILY and adult literacy issues. A number of specifically targeted series were produced for parents (*From Babble to Books*), teachers and

tutors of adult literacy (*The Experience of Reading*), and people from non-English speaking backgrounds (*Work Is A Four Letter Word*, produced with the assistance of the Adult Migrant Education Service in Perth).

In addition, ABC Radio made 'listen and read' programs for adults of works by Barry Dickins (*My Grandmother*) and Kay Cottee. The *Self-Starter Kit* for adult literacy was prepared for free distribution on audio cassette through the national 008 literacy number. ABC Radio received \$25,000 from the ILY National Consultative Council for production of literacy programs. In conjunction with the ILY Secretariat, ABC Radio also made a series of adult literacy promotions featuring famous Australians promoting the literacy message. These promotions were also offered to commercial radio. Aside from occasional literacy promotions, there was very little systematic coverage of adult literacy on commercial radio; the greatest coverage tended to be in regional areas in conjunction with local activities.

#### **Response to the ABC programs**

The press response to *Fresh Start* was outstanding, with feature articles appearing in many daily newspapers and weekly magazines. This occurred despite the fact that the drama programs had their 'first run' during the day when few people were watching. Much of the reason for the excellent press response could be attributed to two ILY launches by the ABC (in February and July 1990), very hard work by the ABC TV publicity department, and the 'newness' of the programs: no-one had ever undertaken literacy programs on television before, and this caught the imagination of many television critics. *Fresh Start* was also the highest profile activity of International Literacy Year and benefited from general ILY promotion.

The Melbourne people-meter ratings (Sydney ratings were not available) for the *Fresh Start: Literacy 1990* evening documentaries ranged from a high of 15 (24% share) to a low of 10 (17% share). In general these documentaries 'kept' the

audience 'delivered' to it by the program which directly preceded it — *G.P.*, which was rating quite well at that time. When the *Fresh Start* drama series was repeated at 6.30 pm in December and early January, the ratings ranged from one to three, with an average of two (approximately 4% share). Most ABC TV programming in this timeslot has had difficulty gaining a substantial audience, when the commercial channels are showing news, current affairs, Australian soaps and popular overseas comedy series.

In December 1990 an evaluation was conducted of the *Fresh Start* drama series by a graduate student at Sydney's University of Technology. This report concluded that: 'The series can be seen to have fulfilled its stated aims and objectives very effectively in terms of the impact of the production'. Literacy students and teachers surveyed all concurred with the value of raising of general public awareness. A persistent comment, however, was that the drama series provided very little actual 'teaching'. When asked 'If the ABC were to make another series about reading and writing what would you like to see?', one fifth of the literacy students replied unprompted that they wanted to see 'more learning ideas for reading and writing'. One fifth also wanted to see 'how people learn'.

The number of telephone calls to the national literacy help number was probably the most effective measure of the ABC's activities for ILY. Over the twelve month period from January 1990 to January 1991, there were approximately 12,000 calls. Roughly 30% were due to ABC TV programs or promotions, 11% due to ABC Radio, 48% due to commercial radio and 11% from other sources. Of these commercial radio calls, the great majority related to requests for ABC Radio's *Self-Starter* kit (47% of all calls to the 008 number). This number of calls compares favourably with the first year of calls to the BBC's literacy help lines in 1975 and 1976. When asked their 'preferred source of literacy assistance', almost half of all callers specified television, video or radio,

strongly supporting the early assumptions that many people wanted to use 'anonymous' forms of literacy assistance.

The other qualitative measure for evaluating the effectiveness of the ABC's activities during ILY was the presentation of the 'Commonwealth Literacy Achievement Awards' in December 1990. The ABC 'swept' the electronic media awards, with ABC TV winning the award for *Fresh Start*, and ABC Radio winning seven separate awards, one for each specific literacy program produced.

#### **Literacy and Australian broadcasting: The future?**

By most accounts, the involvement of ABC TV and Radio in ILY was a great success. What was not substantially tested, however, is the ability of television to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills. The 'Green Paper' released by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training in December 1990 suggests that this form of teaching could occur on the ABC and the SBS; as yet it still remains largely untried and a desirable policy innovation.

What ILY and the ABC's involvement has shown is the natural affinity for broadcasting for adult literacy. It has also shown that the Government-broadcaster partnership is an effective means of tackling what is increasingly recognised as a national problem. When the broadcaster's roles are clearly identified — when it does not have to take on roles that are naturally the province of governmental and education authorities — the broadcaster is freed to do what it does best: provide information, entertainment and enlightenment to the general public. Australian experience during ILY has shown that radio and television programs and promotions can also be very effective in motivating people to seek assistance to overcome reading problems.

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