

Yes, I Can! Yo! Si Puedo comes to Aboriginal Australia

By Dr. Bob Boughton, Associate Professor,
Adult Education & Training School of Education, University of New England, Armidale NSW 2351, Australia

Located on the Barwon River in far-western NSW, Baiames Ngunnhu, known in English as the Brewarrina Fish Traps, has been an Aboriginal gathering place for millennia. It was fitting, therefore, that over 100 local First Nations people of Brewarrina and the surrounding region met here on the morning of Wednesday 26th August 2015, to launch the next stage of the Literacy for Life Foundation Aboriginal adult literacy campaign.

Acknowledging the continuous occupation in this region by the Ngemba and other First Nations, Ms Pat Anderson, an Alyawarra woman from Central Australia who chairs the Lowitja Health Research Institute, and is a Director of the Literacy for Life Foundation, told the crowd: "Learning English literacy is the most recent adaptation we had to make, to enable our survival."

She joined campaign leader and Ngemba man Jack Beetson in thanking the local Ngemba and Murruwarri men and women who have come forward to lead the campaign in their town - Grace Gordon, Chair of the Ngemba Community Working Part, Mary Waites, Campaign coordinator, and Janelle Frail and Norman Coffey, campaign facilitators.

The Literacy for Life adult literacy campaign began even further west along the river, among the Bakindji people of Wilcannia, in February 2012. From there it flowed east, to Bourke and Enngonia, before reaching Brewarrina a few months ago. The campaign utilises a Cuban model called Yes, I Can!, (Yo! Si Puedo in Spanish) which has been deployed in 29 countries around the world and taught more than 8 million people the basics of reading and writing.

Beetson learned about this model when he was part of a University of New England (UNE) research project in Timor-Leste from 2007-2009, evaluating that country's national literacy campaign which was using the same model. With his UNE colleagues Bob Boughton & Deborah Durnan, he reported on this experience to a workshop of Aboriginal health and education leaders in Alice Springs in 2009, sponsored by the Lowitja Institute which Anderson chairs, where it was decided to seek funds for a pilot in Australia. After much lobbying, they eventually received funding under the Commonwealth government's Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program.

The Wilcannia community, where Beetson was working as Acting CEO of the Local Aboriginal Land Council, agreed to be the first community in Australia to run the campaign, and they hosted a Cuban adviser Jose 'Chala' Leblanch, who came to live in the town for 8 months and help to train the local staff. The next year, a second adviser, Lucia Nunez Peres, arrived to help run the campaign when it was extended to Bourke and Enngonia. Lucia had previously worked on the Greenlight program in New Zealand. In a few weeks, 'Chala' will return to Australia, to work on the campaign in Brewarrina, and in nearby Walgett, where it is due to start in 2016. This arrangement is part of a licensing agreement negotiated between the Literacy for Life Foundation, the Ministry of Education in Cuba, and the Institute for Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) at the Jose Varona Pedagogical University in Havana, where Yo Si Puedo was developed.

Despite its extraordinary global reach, the Yo! Si Puedo adult literacy campaign is little-known in the world of English-

speaking adult education and adult literacy professionals. While mass literacy campaigns which were a feature of many newly-independent countries' development strategies in the last century, international agencies like the World Bank withdrew support from them in the 1980s and 1990s, claiming they had proven ineffective. This policy change coincided with a shift in the focus of academic adult literacy writers towards more localised, small-scale literacy experiments, and today few adult literacy professionals have even read of the great mass campaigns in India, Southern Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the historical experiences from which Yo! Si Puedo sprang. Paulo Freire, whose writings on adult literacy still inspire many adult educators and helped launch the modern popular education movement, also drew much of his inspiration from such campaigns, including his own efforts to mount such a campaign in Brazil, and his work in later campaigns in Africa and Central America.

What distinguishes a campaign like Yo! Si Puedo from a literacy programme, of the kind which government and non-government adult education providers regularly offer in most countries of the Global North? The most important difference is that while the program is directed towards individuals, a campaign seeks to mobilise whole communities, regions and even nations in a collective effort to address the problem of low literacy. A campaign, as Beetson says, treats low literacy as a problem for everyone in the community, not just the people who experience it. The community organises the campaign, the community provides the teachers, the community supports the teachers and the students and the community regularly gathers together to celebrate the achievement of raising its literacy level. The community also takes responsibility for providing 'post-literacy' activities once people have gained the basic skill, so they can consolidate their learning and become part of a 'culture of literacy', often in association with other community organisations which are addressing urgent community needs, such as health services, housing providers, legal services and schools.

There have been eight separate class intakes across the first three communities since February 2012. The results are encouraging: 89 people aged from 17 to 67 achieved basic literacy skills, a



Jack Beetson and Pat Anderson at the campaign launch at Brewarrina

graduation rate of nearly 70%. This compares well with completion rates of 12-15% in formal accredited courses offered at this basic level (Certificate 1 & 2) through the vocational education and training system. Just as importantly, fifteen community members, including some graduates, were trained to work in the campaign as organisers and literacy facilitators.

The campaign has won broad community support and praise from MPs, senior public servants, magistrates, senior police officers and school principals. They include the member for Murray-Darling, John Williams, who told the NSW parliament: "In my time in politics I have not seen another program that will deliver more benefit to the community of Wilcannia than this literacy program."

Another supporter, NSW Police Superintendent Greg Moore, the Darling River Local Area Commander, said Yes, I Can! has produced "tremendous outcomes among some of the most vulnerable people in our community."

Though assisted by Cuban and other non-Aboriginal advisors, the pilots have succeeded because of the high level of Aboriginal control over the campaign - from the national level down to day to day local operations.

Perhaps most importantly, the pilots have created within the three communities a group of perhaps 200 people - participants, local staff and their families, and people from supporting organisations - who have discovered that it is possible to build new community solidarity by campaigning to overcome illiteracy.

As Bourke Yes, I Can! coordinator, Lillian Lucas, puts it: "It's done amazing things. It's brought families back together. It's bringing our community back together. It's making us become one again."

100 years of Continuing Education at Victoria University

By Sally Rawnsley, Programme Manager, Continuing Education, Victoria University

One hundred years ago in 1915, Victoria University, together with the Worker's Educational Association (WEA), began providing adult education courses in Wellington. The first courses offered were on the topics of Economics, Electricity and English. The relationship between Victoria University and the WEA in continuing education continued till the mid-70s.

At its peak Victoria Continuing Education or University Extension as it was known also had a base in Palmerston North and offered classes as far afield as Taihape.

While today's Continuing Education unit is a much smaller one, we continue to run about 80 short courses and at least 2 study tours per year and have a loyal following of around 2000 students.

Course topics range from Creative Writing to Chemistry and Archaeology to Art in War and we specialise in the teaching of Te Reo Maori and New Zealand Sign Language.

We are lucky at Victoria that the University recognises that adult continuing education - be it WEA classes, night classes at high schools, university continuing education, adult literacy or any of the many forms it takes - has a value to individuals and society that is not measurable in the narrow financial terms used by governments who have cut funding over the years.

We are certainly facing challenges and competition. What are the challenges for the next 100 years?

The internet offers free online courses and acres of information. We need to remember, though, that information is not the same as knowledge - and many of our students enrol with us precisely because we are a community based programme.

We no longer receive government funding for continuing education at the university level. This has meant a rise in course fees but we are very aware that if course fees rise some of our students can no longer enrol. It's a constant juggling act.

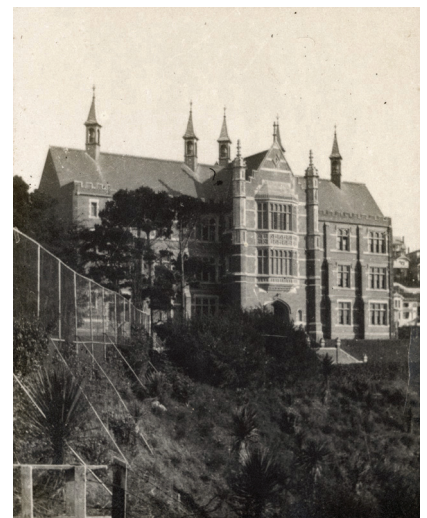
There is always a need for new kinds of offerings. We must maintain relevance to a fast-changing world. For example, at

Victoria we're looking at the provision of professional development type courses using a continuing education financial model for sectors where money is tight e.g. education, healthcare, the NGO sector.

The baby boomer generation is set to live long healthy lives after retirement and will want and need intellectual stimulation.

University continuing education might be seen as elitist but the need for it is very real and growing.

Victoria Continuing Education improves knowledge and understanding in the community, helps shape public opinion and contributes to social well-being. We are proud to be part of a history of public engagement between Victoria University and the public and we look forward to the next 100 years!



The old Hunter Building, which opened in March 1906

Join us to celebrate 100 years of Continuing Education at Victoria University with drinks followed by a free lecture: Neoliberalism and Energy Poverty: Why corporatisation, deregulation and privatisation doubled the cost of electricity for New Zealand households - with Geoff Bertram. Monday 19 October, Reception 4.30pm-5.15pm, Lecture 5.30pm-6.30pm. Register on our website www.victoria.ac.nz/conted or call 04 463 6556.