



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 14, No. 2
September 2017

Communities Acting for
Sustainability in the Pacific
Special Issue, guest edited by
Anu Bissoonauth and Rowena
Ward.



© 2017 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International [CC BY 4.0] License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Correa, L. E. 2017. From Little Words, Big Words Grow: Annotations on the Yo, Sí Puedo Experience in Brewarrina, Australia. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 14:2, 103-123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v14i2.5392>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://portal.epress.lib.uts.edu.au>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Little Words, Big Words Grow: Annotations on the Yo, Sí Puedo Experience in Brewarrina, Australia

Liliana E. Correa

University of Technology Sydney

Corresponding author: Dr Liliana Correa, Professional Tutor, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007. LilianaEdith.Correa@uts.edu.au

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v14i2.5392>

Article History: Received 05/02/2017; Revised 12/09/2017; Accepted 16/09/2017; Published 05/10/2017

Abstract

This article is a reflection on the application of the Cuban literacy methodology Yo, Sí Puedo to the Australian setting. The Yo, Sí Puedo / Yes, I Can! model developed in Cuba by the Instituto Pedagógico Latinoamericano y Caribeño, IPLAC (Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean) has been successfully implemented across the Global South as a strategy of adult literacy. It is a legacy of our Latin American revolutionary roots, with its origin in the Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed. Expanding across continents this model continues to teach reading and writing to disenfranchised adults in marginal and Indigenous communities, from the Argentinean Chaco to Brewarrina in northern NSW, Australia. Its aim is to contribute to the hope of improving the health and educational outcomes of the country's First Peoples. This article is indebted to conversations with the Cuban advisor of Yes, I Can!, José Manuel Chala Leblanch. Observing him working in the classroom setting of Brewarrina touched me at different levels: personally because it reminded me of my own family experiences with the education system in my country, Argentina; and professionally as an educator negotiating different languages and cultures. It also reinforced my belief in the importance of incorporating Indigenous ways of learning and teaching to Western styles of teaching and learning. I built this reflection moving from personal and poetic—visual and textual—narratives and observations to academic interventions informed by researched literature on adult and Indigenous education.

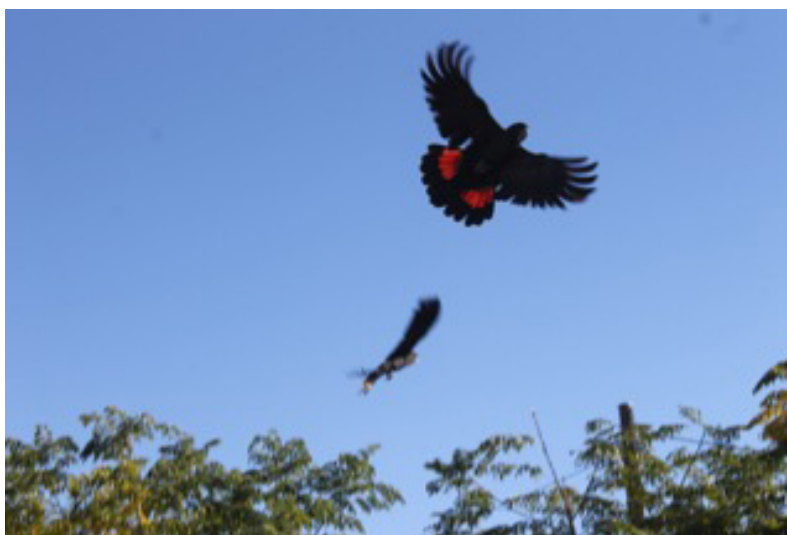
DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Keywords

Adult literacy; Indigenous adult literacy; Yes, I Can!; Yo, Sí Puedo; Cuban model of literacy education; Brewarrina; Australia; Indigenous Australians

Introduction

A CURIOUS OFF-SIDER



Black cockatoos waking the morning sky, Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

In December 2014 I submitted an expression of interest to become part of a team of community educators and administrators to work in the Yo, Sí Puedo (Yes, I Can!) campaign in NSW. Subsequently those of us who applied were invited to attend a seminar presented by the Literacy for Life Foundation, at Sydney University. The session was informative but the pedagogical process was only partially disclosed. In turn this created further curiosity about the program and its methodology as applied to the Australian setting. In the summer of 2016 a second presentation was given by Cuban educator José Manuel Chala Leblanch, who provided a firsthand account of his experience in Wilcannia. He was about to begin the roll out of the campaign in Brewarrina in northwest New South Wales (NSW). I approached him with the idea of conducting a short interview for the Spanish media in Australia; instead, my subsequent visit to Brewarrina and our shared passion for education, and Cuban and Latin American culture, inspired me to write this piece. Literacy, and in particular adult literacy, are issues very close me, coming from a family of self-taught women and being the only one in my close family to gain access to a higher education. Before coming to Australia, I was attending teachers' college in Buenos Aires (Instituto de Educación Terciaria, La Plata). My aim was to return to Corrientes and Chaco, in the north east of Argentina, to learn Guaraní, my father's language, and to move around the different remote communities as an educator.

Due to political and economic instability, I left Argentina without finishing my teaching degree and travelled to Sydney under a family reunion visa. After many years of working in the community arts sector I enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts in theatre studies and later completed further studies in Adult and Community Education. During the 1990s and late 2000 I worked as community artist in a number of roles, from performer to director to interpreter

on a number of educational, research and arts projects alongside diverse communities and professionals. These experiences provided the foundations for my later research on Latin American cultural articulations in Sydney and in 2012 I submitted my thesis, 'The Politics of Cultural Visibility: Latin American Arts Practices in Sydney,' and obtained a Doctorate of Cultural Research from Western Sydney University.

The personal is political

Crossing from north to south on a late afternoon, tilting my head to the guts of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, I noticed an enormous Aboriginal flag floating over busy traffic—a red, yellow and black sunset marking my departure. Twelve hours later the cityscape changed into the classroom space set up at the old back packers in Brewarrina, NSW. Walking to the classroom each morning José and I talked about education and the need for transformative pedagogical processes that can affect change regardless of geographical location and language differences. Our professional experiences, marked by mutuality and distinct cultural lenses alike, have informed our different ideas about education. Coming to terms with a rapidly changing Cuba, embraced by a globalized economy marked by socialist values and Caribbean entrepreneurial flavor, José's career as an educator has taken him outside his beloved island to Russia, England and, since 2012, Australia. In contrast, my subaltern learnings of a different kind afford me some interesting opportunities as I thread the in-between waters of diasporic living while falling into the perils of casualization, with its tiresome struggle of 'becoming' into academia, community or contracted jobs of sorts. Somehow our trajectories mirror ingrained differences between education in Cuba and Australia. Yet, with us two distant islands meet on common ground, mobilized by the belief in education as emancipatory.

But what does this really mean? Can education really overcome the incommensurable social and political challenges faced by Australian Indigenous peoples? Would taking the first steps to control a language of sustenance—English—facilitate overcoming systemic inequality? Can songlines be mended by learning new conceptual frameworks? Another question remains: would the master's tool ever dismantle the masters' house? (Lorde 1984). It is impossible not to question what being literate really means and in what ways literacy affects the lives of the most vulnerable peoples, in an increasingly technologically and financially mediated world. My life experiences and choices have been framed by the politics of everyday struggles, growing up in an Argentina under dictatorship and living in Australia as a migrant. Early in my career as educator and theatre practitioner I learnt that my conviction about the transformative power of education is anchored in the link between the personal and the political. The educators and artists of my generation saw that link in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and of the Brazilian dramaturge and director Augusto Boal. Their ethical and philosophical frameworks underpin the work of Cuban educators in developing literacy methodologies that can be applied across continents and diverse cultural and Indigenous groups.

A brief note on the origins of the Australia campaign

The Yo, Sí Puedo / Yes, I Can! program is a legacy of our Latin American revolutionary roots, with its origin in the Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed. Expanding across continents this model continues to teach reading and writing to disenfranchised adults in marginal and Indigenous communities, from the Argentinean Chaco to Brewarrina in NSW, Australia. In Australia the Yo, Sí Puedo Campaign was introduced in 2012 by the Literacy for Life Foundation's (LFLF) Steering Committee in partnership with the Wilcannia Local

Aboriginal Land Council.¹ Aboriginal leaders worked with academics from the University of New England to bring the project to Australia, and in 2012 Cuban educator, José Manuel Chala Leblanch, established the first pilot program in Wilcannia, western NSW (Boughton 2013b: 5). The program's aim was to contribute to improving health and educational outcomes of the country's First Peoples. As has been historically demonstrated improvements in education can affect change at many levels: developing awareness, a sense of empowerment and an increase in the impact of capital on social conditions (Boughton & Durnan 2014a, 2014b; UNESCO 2006; Torres 2009). The success of this pilot prompted the establishment of the program in Enngonia, Bourke, Brewarrina and, most recently, in Weilmoringle (Boughton, Ah Chee, Beetson, Durnan & Leblanch 2013). And in 2013 the Literacy for Life Foundation began formally to lead and coordinate the national roll out of the literacy campaign. At the core of the program lies a pedagogical practice that intends to be humanistic rather than humanitarian. As Paulo Freire asserted: 'the pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be developed or practiced by the oppressor. It would be a contradiction in terms if oppressors only defended but actually implemented a liberating education' (1970: 8). A humanitarian program would deliver momentary relief, thus creating a culture of dependency; to the contrary, the humanistic approach aims at transformation and self-management.

Cuban educator José Manuel Chala Leblanch took part in the initial pilot in Wilcannia in 2012. I asked José to reflect on this experience:

After a couple of months, I was entering the Wilcannia RSL Club with Bob and without being asked William Bates, from Wilcannia, approached us and said: "The YIC is the best thing that has happened in Wilcannia in the last three years." Bob said to him: Can I quote you and use what you just said?" And he went: "Yes, of course." The lovely and late Ray Jackson, whom I met at the end of my first visit to Australia in 2012 while handing me the second Aboriginal passport ever handed to a non-Aboriginal person said: "This is what I have been waiting all my life for our people." (Personal communication, August 2016)

José's recollection of that particular encounter makes reference to hope and expectation: hope about effective programs to assist a community, in this case through adult literacy, and the fulfilment of an expectation, that the program would be successful. Numerous researchers have argued for the importance of implementing programs that make sense to a community's goals and aspirations, and that are neither dislocated from their daily struggles nor detached from their aspirations about career goals and potential employment opportunities. As Kral and Schwab state:

Education must be part of the cultural and social framework of the community, that is, linked to community goals and aspirations. Training and employment are essential elements in this future scenario, but emerging models for remote Indigenous communities must integrate training and employment pathways that reflect the community reality and tolerate alternative definitions of employment that are characteristic of the locality. Literacy, therefore, becomes relevant only if it is linked to roles and responsibilities in the community that are meaningful within this schema. (2003: 14)

1 LFLF is a partnership between the National Health Research Institute, the Indigenous campaigner Jack Beetson, and the Brookfield Construction Company.

Literacy is fundamental to the transition from dependency to agency; an illiterate adult who has survived by depending on others to navigate everyday life, bureaucracies and personal relationships may be powerless, subject to choices based on someone else's understanding of the social and political world around them. A literate person is a person with potential for critical engagement with the social world, with agency and empowerment.

Reflecting on this, José recalls the following encounter:

When Sister Mary and Ruth went to see Clarence to interview and fill the survey form, he said he had been waiting for that moment, because he wanted to learn proper reading and writing and he is not good at it. He has been struggling with that since the beginning; one day, after going through half the course lessons he stood and began looking at every poster on the wall with the positive messages and he said: "Now I can read them all. I used to pretend I could, but I could not. Now I can." Now he feels more confident and is eager to continue learning and improving. He wants to write a letter to his former partner. (Personal communication, August 2016)

Literacy is a fundamental right; its implementation is the responsibility of those in power who can facilitate literacy projects where needed. But the question remains: how to implement a program that makes sense in a technology mediated culture and, in particular, in countries such as Australia, which has a dynamic first world economy?

The 2004 UNESCO 'Education Position Paper: The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programmes' offers the following definition of literacy:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, using printed and written (and visual) materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goal, to develop his or her knowledge and potential and to participate fully in the wider society. (UNESCO 2004:13)

Literacy as defined by UNESCO is the outcome of a natural progression for any person from early schooling to adult life. The unfortunate circumstances of Indigenous children who do not complete formal education, and of Indigenous adults who have not reached the literacy 'ability,' is shameful in contemporary Australia. To 'master' an English-language dominated world framed by western laws, in my view, is to have agency. In turn that agency enables Indigenous people to mitigate the tense negotiations of non-Indigenous epistemologies. Literacy can facilitate a continuum of learning that offers choice and creates a sense of hope that personal aspirations will be achieved. Literacy in Australian Indigenous communities is further problematized by the divergences of educational access between urban and remote settings, as well as by the disparities in power relations between Indigenous peoples, members of the dominant Anglophone society, established migrant groups and recently arrived migrants and refugees.

To unfold a mass literacy campaign anywhere in the world is a complex process and depends on the work of dedicated scholars and community leaders who have identified the long-term benefits of such an investment. Conversing with José about the practical implementation of the program, he commented:

Sometimes mobilizing is the biggest problem, but it is a process with its ups and downs due to historical issues affecting target students. They struggle with shame factor, and sometimes it is difficult to take them out of their daily routine as they incorporate

into a new life style. They are invited to share with us for 3 or 4 days a week, from 10 to 1. The results are amazing; they not only improve their literacy skills, but also acquire a greater self-esteem, a widened cultural perception, an improved performing in their own context and better life quality. Beyond the acquisition of abilities and skills in the handling of letters and numbers, the “Yes, I Can!” [program] focuses on enhancing social functions carried out by individuals and communities in their daily life. (Personal communication, June 2016)

As José points out mobilizing can be affected by underlying social factors that influence the day to day functioning of a community and the complexities of particular cultural practices. For example, over the course of my visit to Brewarrina, there were two funerals; and some weeks before my arrival there were other deaths and incidents affecting the attendance of students and members of the community. Death and grief are a constant presence in these communities. High levels of unemployment and lack of culturally appropriate services and support are added to the community’s profile. Research conducted by the Australian National University’s Centre for Aboriginal Economical Policy Research (Ross & Taylor 2000) to determine the social and economic conditions of Aboriginal population of Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett, highlighted the following:

the overwhelming feature that distinguished Indigenous school attendance from that of the rest of the school-age population was a steady fall-off in participation from as early as age 14, culminating in very low levels of attendance among 16, 17 and 18 year olds—only 30 per cent of Indigenous youth aged 16 and 17 years attended an educational institution compared to 65 per cent of their non-Indigenous counterparts. (Ross & Taylor 2000: 6-8)

One of the findings of this research demonstrated that Indigenous people in the three towns were nearly five times less likely to have a post-school qualification than non-Indigenous people:

The largest disparity was for the youngest age group, aged 15–24 years, with only 4 percent of Indigenous people holding a post-school qualification compared to 32 percent of their non-Indigenous counterparts ... In the prime working ages when formal education could be expected to have been completed only 10 percent of Indigenous adults had a qualification compared to 42 percent of non-Indigenous adults. (Ross & Taylor 2000: 17).

While research outcomes are analyzed, quantified and coded in far remove from the realities of these communities, and in the comfort of academic enquiry, those involved in the literacy campaign have to deal with tensions arising from high local expectations of success: all involved want the program to be as successful as it has been in other countries. To ensure the continuity of the campaign in other remote Aboriginal communities, the program must demonstrate its effectiveness through tangible outcomes. Such outcomes include the graduation of students who acquired first levels of literacy and of students who continue with a post literacy course linked to skills and training. It is fundamental that continuity is maintained; this will, in turn, ensure the goals of the campaign.

But these outcomes will be attained only with the uninterrupted participation of students. The recruiting and retention of students, in particular younger age groups, has proved to be a challenge. Educators also negotiate daily tensions between the implementation of trusted processes, with a long-term vision, and measurable indicators that must be achieved as the

campaign unfolds. An added consideration has to be the time available to the overseas experts in which they need to become familiar with new social and cultural contexts, and to adapt to local models of operation and accountabilities. And at a personal level the absence of family and close friends while staying away from home can also create emotional stress. It is inevitable that cultural frictions and misunderstandings occur when negotiating between, on the one hand, local Indigenous cultures affected by historical colonial legacies, and, on the other hand, an expert educator who is coming from another country to implement a foreign system of learning and who, in turn, has to negotiate his/her own cultural and social needs while working on the campaign.

Brewarrina: A brief historical background



A fish trapped, Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

Brewarrina is an outback town situated at the point where the Barwon River becomes the Darling, at 119 meters above sea level. The town is some 810 kilometres from Sydney and 98 kilometres from Bourke. Brewarrina has a population of about 1,500 people, with a further 1,500 living on properties around the town. The first European settlers arrived in the district around 1839 and 1840, with the first landowners being the Lawson brothers ('Brewarrina, New South Wales' 2017). Riverboats reached the town in the late 1850s, leading quickly to the town becoming an important port on the Darling River. Brewarrina was the first town in NSW to have two state heritage listings of Aboriginal significance ('Brewarrina, New South Wales' 2017). The first, known as the Ngunnuh (noon-oo) to the local Ngemba people, are the Brewarrina Aboriginal Fish Traps, which are estimated to be more than 40,000 years old. They lie on the bed of the Darling River just downstream from the weir. The traps consist of a series of stone weirs and ponds arranged to form a 'net' that is in effect, a complex piece of engineering: 'The fisheries are pieces of masterful ingenuity designed to trap the fish and to be sealed off so that the fishermen can catch and kill the fish at their leisure' These fish traps are pieces of masterful ingenuity designed to trap fish and be sealed off so that the fishers could catch and kill the fish at their leisure' ('Brewarrina, NSW' 2017).



Fridge, Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

Bre (warrina) Is Bree

Brewarrina with an accent on the a²
 Tall trees it means, he told me.
 Pointing to the fish traps
 He exhorts, a dam
 An intervention
 To our way of catching fish.
 Eight other different language groups
 Each one with its 'fridge' where families
 Store their weekly ration of fish.
 The ochres are for women
 Repeat this or that word
 He commanded:
 I listened.
 How many times
 I heard his people's story?
 Of massacres and losses
 The guide's script is worth \$10 a tourist
 Nothing holds truth.
 They are the keepers of the dreaming.
 What price does this hold?
 An ARCH's grant?
 A corner of Barangaroo?
 Across the museum he points,
 My eyes follow,

2 The name Brewarrina is derived from 'burru waranha.'

A condemned building stands
Through its cracked walls
New sounds filter while
The morning sun warms up
The alphabet
To learn in the language of the Other.

Interjección poética

Aiding to mend: Other ways of learning incorporating new conceptual frameworks

The Yo, Sí Puedo adult literacy methodology has been successfully implemented in various countries around the globe, and has had to adapt to local cultural realities and expectations in the process. In New Zealand, for example, '[c]ollaboration between Cuban and Maori educators produced an adult literacy program known as "Greenlight" which employs Maori words and cultural symbols' (Gutierrez cited in Everett 2014: 260). In Australia, as Everett points out, 'the [Yo, Sí Puedo] model has to be adapted, in collaboration with indigenous educators in remote communities, to cater for linguistic needs' (Everett 2014). However, this is not a simple task. Indigenous Australians are not homogenous; they speak multiple languages and consequently levels of functional literacy are particular to each group, adding to their complex and often disadvantaged relationships with the dominant national language English. That said, educator Diana Eades highlights the important role that Aboriginal English plays in maintaining and asserting Aboriginal identity: '[A]s the linguistic situation before the British invasion shows, Aboriginal people have long used language and speech as markers of group identity' (Eades 1993: 5). Eades concludes, 'Respecting, valuing and understanding Aboriginal ways of using English is a significant step in respecting, valuing and understanding the identity and self-esteem of [Aboriginal] children' (Eades 1993: 8).

Aboriginal English is a symbol of cultural maintenance (Malcolm 2001; Sharifian 2006). Sharifian offers a framework for understanding Aboriginal uses of English and how the language embodies and communicates Indigenous culture. English words are linked to schemas, metaphors and categories that have direct connections to Aboriginal belief systems (Sharifian 2006). In particular, Aboriginal English is informed by different schemas in which words may relate to the recognition of kinship that, in turn, has implications for interpersonal responsibilities, set behaviors and territorial boundaries. Reflecting on the urgent need to nurture the languages that still exist, the issue of literacy is loaded with further complexity and challenges. Pennycook states: 'We need alternative representations, alternative stories, alternative possibilities, and these needs to be in our classes, our English classes, our linguistics and applied linguistics classes, our ESL classes, our teaching materials. We need to work in and against English to find cultural alternatives to the cultural constructs of colonialism; we desperately need something different' (1998: 217–218). Pennycook argues that English as the language of colonialism constructs particular cultural discourses, and it is through working in and against these constructions that alternative and opposing paradigms may emerge. The unfolding of the Yo, Sí Puedo program can be a tool to rebuild discourses of dialogue instead of opposition, facilitating the *re-righting* of Aboriginal Peoples' position in history. We need to make use of the masters' tools to rebuild. Pondering on these linguistic challenges, I asked José for comment: 'How do you reconcile the fact that Aboriginal Australians have lost so many

of their languages with the current move towards implementing a program that focuses on mastering English?' He responded:

It is a sad fact that in losing a language, an important part of the culture is being lost and not much is being done in order to reverse the process. Though the language used in the lesson is English, we are trying to incorporate elements of the First Nation's language in the lesson as well, as they do original language lesson workshops after they finish the "Yes, I Can!" so they have more options to go from when they finish and recover the language which is being lost. Students are reminded of the importance of the culture and how to expand through most of the lessons. (Personal communication, June 2016)

Anzaldúa's words resonate in my mind here: 'So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language ... I am my language' (Anzaldúa 1987: 81). Having lost my father's language, Guaraní, and as a migrant having to acquire a second language, I feel enormous empathy for those who have to negotiate between two or more linguistic and cultural worlds in order to be seen, heard and acknowledged.

The Literacy for Life Foundation identified that from urban to remote areas in the country, up to 65 percent of Aboriginal people are functionally illiterate in English. The UNESCO standard settings instruments offer the following definition: '(d) A person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his [her] group and community and also for enabling him [her] to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his [her] own and the community's development' (1982: 4). This would be a shameful statistic in any country, more so in a country such as Australia with a first world economy. This recalls the concept of language as cultural capital and language as one of the most effective instruments that help us create what Bourdieu named 'habitus.' We embody this as a set of durable dispositions that shape our attitudes and behaviors. Habitus relates to the ability to understand and operate successfully within the cultural norms and expectations of a dominant society (Bourdieu 1984). Symbolic capital is a resource available to an individual based on recognition within a culture. For Aboriginal people, speaking Aboriginal English, Standard English and for many one or more Indigenous languages means they inhabit multiple linguistic and cultural registers. Those registers can be drawn upon to construct habitus in order to relate to and speak about their distinctive social worlds and to continue to build capital that can be passed on to their children.

Aboriginal English and other Englishes have to be taken into account when designing and implementing the Yo, Sí Puedo methodology, hence what appears to be a straight forward pedagogical exercise is in fact highly complex, and therefore requires ongoing evaluation and adaptation. José explains:

The YIC [Yes, I Can!] can be adjusted to Portuguese, French, English, Creole and other languages. It can also be adapted to different social and cultural contexts covering all levels of society including Indigenous peoples and their languages, those in rural and urban areas, those serving prison sentences, people with special educational needs, migrants, ethnic minorities, and paying special attention to women's education. The humanistic approach, alphanumeric method, analysis and synthesis, traditionally the methods used for teaching reading and writing as methodological and pedagogical principles of the Yo, Sí Puedo [campaign] have been proven to be effective wherever they have been applied. (Personal communication June 2016)

It is interesting to note the potential for the diverse applicability of this program, including Braille. My experiences working with culturally and linguistic diverse communities have showed me that programs that are flexible, contextual and dynamic, validating local knowledges and languages, are effective and affect change. Similarly at the core of the Yo, Sí Puedo methodology is the belief in learning as dialogical, contextual and dynamic. This is what makes the program successful. Boughton and Durnan assert that the Yo, Sí Puedo Campaign is not a simple method of teaching literacy; rather 'It's a low-cost mass adult literacy campaign involving extensive coordination and mobilization of government, non-government agencies and actors and the population as a whole' (2014b: 327).

Expanding on some of the points raised above, José explains:

Addressing low levels of literacy in English in the Aboriginal adult population would inevitable impact at many levels, in particular health but specially by acquiring basic literacy skills mean to take control over decisions affecting the community as a whole. (An Aboriginal Adult literacy campaign 2013) Language is interpreted as an individual way to look for information and self-development. (Personal communication, June 2016)

Taking into account Indigenous histories and sociopolitical relations with colonialist society, the success of the Yes, I Can! project cannot rest on the shoulders of the community and its leaders and teachers; it also requires communities and community leaders to trust experts' advice and the support of government agencies.

The Classroom

'The language belongs to the land' Arrente Elder



2 Classrooms, Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

The fire is going and the click clack of typing in the background mixes with the roar of trucks passing through the town and black cockatoos crossing the morning sky. The lesson begins.

Stepping into the classroom one cannot stop feeling the contradiction emanating from its walls and the cacophony of morning office life. The room is divided into the 'office section' and the 'classroom section' where a traditional setting of lined desks is testimony of formal western education. A television set with video monitor sits to the left, handy to be brought into play as needed. Walls decorated in colourful sticker notes establish boundaries of respect and classroom rules, with affirmations, posters and a white board that could easily have been a smart-board or an old blackboard for chalk. Each desk has a pencil holder decorated with the words Yo, Sí Puedo that I assumed students were asked to make during the warm up period. Each table displays the alphanumeric key as a handy reference. This is the set up that has been reproduced in classrooms all over the world, and now in Brewarrina, to deliver the Yes, I Can! model of adult literacy (Boughton & Durnan: 2014b).

Observing the class unfold I notice that as a Cuban José carries Caribbean traits and a disposition that seems to fit with the students' distinctive embodiment of time perception and construction. This is evident as the class unfolds each morning in what for some, like myself, can be perceived to be painful slow motion. As an outsider I cannot avoid feeling on my skin the contradictions, the juxtaposition of time and space belonging to two or more contrasting histories and synergies. I witness syncopated worlds in dialogue, but ask: is success possible in such a convoluted process? Here the negotiation between bureaucracies and urgent needs have to be dealt with in a skillful manner for the benefit of the community. In hope the educators believe in the power of education and that one person's jump from illiterate to literate status will have a ripple effect and change the lives of that person and others. Sister Mary Jane Waites, a bright and dynamic Ngemba woman, arrives with Johnny cakes, one loaf for afternoon tea and another in a special packet, with Emu eggs for the teacher's breakfast as promised. With efficiency and determination she prepares morning tea, introducing people, setting up equipment, running in and out, bringing or taking participants to classroom, doctors' appointments and Australian social security programs (Centrelink) waiting chairs.

The day begins at 8.30 a.m. for teachers, coordinators and a film crew documenting the process. The crew—Black Fella Films—arrives to set up sound equipment and cameras to capture the first movements of the learning process. The crew is ready to document an image, a sound, a gesture that demonstrates the unexpected shift from a world of nonsensical lines on a classroom board to the sound of comprehension. The crew wants to capture the leap, the jump into sounds and symbols that moves from incomprehensible clatter and noise to definite comprehension, the 'aha' moment when a phrase is formed. The first emerging sounds of literacy are materialized when one of the students stands up and with a smile on his face begins to read the posters around the room. We all stop holding our breath; our smiles acknowledge his success.

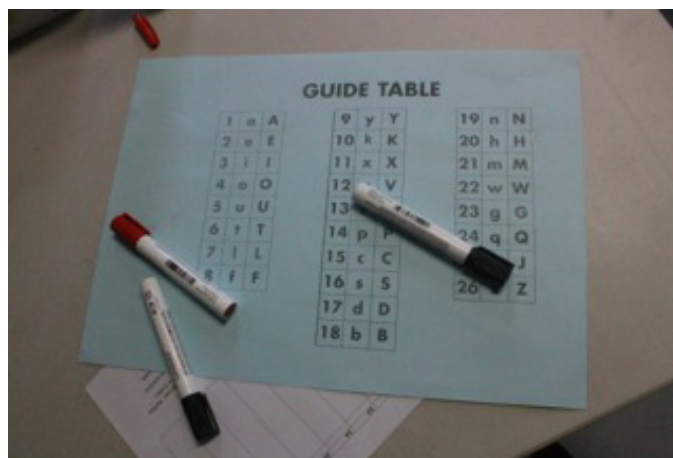
Here two epistemologies contest each other, one wearing the scars of the other, and the fragility of this relationship is represented by the cracks on the wall. The light filters and blinks to us as the morning starts and moves into midday. The liaison officer arrives by car, bringing more students. Other students turn up on bikes or are dropped off by relatives in cars with 'P' plates. The museum across the road comes to life early in the morning and monitors the ins and outs of community centre where the classes are taking place. On my first visit to the classroom I began at the museum, where a group of men sitting at the front gate awaited visitors. A ten dollar fee gave me entry to the fish-traps. I encounter a painful

reminder of progress: a dam has interrupted not only the natural flow of water into the fish traps, but a way of being. The museum tour guide repeated to me several times that eight different languages coexisted here. These were their refrigerators; this was where men came to fish. The dam was built to cater for the cotton farms, without consideration of the already existing economy—including the cultural maintenance and survival—of the distinct groups that fed and practised rituals in the area, in particular within the fish traps and the surrounding land. The dam epitomizes the symbolic and real dynamics between Aboriginal and European peoples established since early white settlement as a relationship between ‘us and them.’

Two contrasting epistemologies confront each other in the classroom space as a reminder of this history. The guide comments that the community centre used to be a back-packers hostel, but the building was condemned and the hostel was closed down. This is where lessons have taken place since May 2016. In this intimate and vulnerable space, the process of coming into learning is exposed alongside bureaucratic functionality, like an open wound slowly and painfully being mended. Teacher and students meet in this space now marked by the historical legacies of the slave trade in the Caribbean and the brutality of first clashes between Aboriginal and European peoples. Between the waters of memory trust is gained. The language is English and the sounds that emerge before the the four walls of the classroom conjoin aspiration and necessity.

I arrived in Brewarrina during phase two of the Yes, I Can! campaign and was able to observe the implementation of the alphanumeric system in the classroom for a week. I noticed on each desk a ‘guide table’ with the ABC correlating to the numbers 1 through 26. Curious about how this guide table was used I asked José to explain how the alphanumeric system works:

Numbers are combined with the letters of the alphabet of the language used to teach adults. It is the basis of the content of the lesson, as numbers are common knowledge of adults as a matter of skills survival: a-1, e-2, i-3, o-4, u-5, t-6, l-7, f-8 and so till 26 are associated to numbers. In the case of Australia, adult students find the number association amazing as they relate to the bingo game and they learn about those associations and use it at the same time as they enjoy it. (Personal communication, June 2016)



Alphanumeric guide. Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

A key to the application of the method is the use of video with playback scenarios that reinforce the lesson and allow the facilitator to observe and assess oral comprehension in real time classroom contexts. The facilitator plays an important role, as José explains:

The facilitator is the mediator between the DVD and the participant; observing and getting information off the students (participants) involved concerning learning or other issues affecting them; working with the coordinator, advisor and supervisors in designing strategies to implement; assisting in the classroom and providing individualized attention; mobilizing and maintaining students' retention; following the students' performance and progress. They gradually gain confidence and are able to work independently with little support. Some of the facilitators from previous intakes are now working either at a small business, at a café or even at school. (Personal communication, June 2016)



On the Wall: En la Pared. Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

In Australia the issue of literacy has been approached by implementing small scale literacy programs run by accredited organizations with a focus on an individual's developing skills, a common approach in most western countries (Boughton: 2012). In contrast, a large mass literacy campaign involves the commitment and engagement of different government agencies, community members and NGOs that can support each stage of the project. The campaign's aim is the transformation of communities and the focus is on the collective not the individual. Boughton summarizes three key elements that constitutes a literacy campaign:

Phase One, which we call "socialisation and mobilisation," mobilises as many people as possible to take part, as learners, teachers, organisers and supporters, and seeks to enhance the understanding of society as a whole of the importance of literacy to wider social and economic development goals. It also builds organisation at national, regional and local levels to lead the campaign, widening the responsibility for raising literacy levels beyond the government education authority, enlisting support and commitment from all government agencies, from non-government and civil society

organisations and from the community as a whole ... Phase Two, consists of a set of basic literacy lessons, run over a short period, usually three months or less, in which non-literate and low literate members of the community are encouraged to enrol and supported to complete. These lessons are usually non-formal, rarely accredited, and taught and organized by non-professional local facilitators and leaders in the community, with the assistance of professional advisers and materials provided by the central campaign authority ... Phase Three of the campaign, is for “post-literacy.” This consists of activities designed to help the newly-literate participants continue to build their literacy beyond what has been achieved in the basic lessons, and to create a more literate culture in the community. (Boughton, Chee, Beetson, Durnan & Leblanch 2013: 9)



Early in the day – teacher and students, Bre 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

José brings to the classroom more than 30 years’ experience as a teacher, translator and interpreter. As a language teacher, he pays particular attention to names and sounds. We comment on our own difficulty as Spanish speakers in pronouncing certain English sounds or the names we encounter of animals, plants and relations that people spontaneously incorporate into their day to day language, observing: ‘Charla with the r is the way many people say my last name (Chala). The reason seems to be that the letter combination ‘al’ does not exist or is rare, as I found out, in Paatkanji, the language of the Wilcannia people. They tend to use arl instead, resulting in Charla or Charly, even in writing’ (Personal communication, July 2016). After his involvement in the last two missions in Australia José reflects on the program’s methodology:

This humanistic approach conceives literacy as a process that allows the overall shaping of the personality of the student, who then is able to understand, analyze and develop cognitive and motor skills. Everything was new for all at the beginning; the “Yes, I Can” Cuban literacy program has not been experienced in Australia before and we were all learning. Indeed, we are still learning after 8 intakes and more than 100 graduates in Wilcannia, Bourke, Enngonia and now Brewarrina. Now we can call it a campaign, not a trial, pilot or program. It has been proven that the YIC is

helping as well as it has done in other countries. Being accepted by the community was crucial due to the fact that our role is to help, train and monitor and we are here by ourselves. It is a very interesting experience. The cultural bath is shocking. (Personal communication, July 2016)

Expanding on this last sentence and José's form of expression, the implementation of the campaign could be said to have been a cultural shock for all parties involved. One does not have to be Cuban to recognize the enormous cultural differences that exist between dominant Australian culture and Indigenous Australians, or to grapple with enormous disparities in social conditions, resources and infrastructures between rural, remote and metropolitan settings. I then asked José if he considered the methodology flexible enough in the future for the purpose of teaching Indigenous languages.

Yes. As a matter of fact, a "Yes, I Can!" version has used original languages as the target language in some countries, such as Tetum in East Timor. Flexibility is a key point in the success of the program. The English version created for Grenada is the one used here and this version has been also used in Namibia to teach English, though it is not its main purpose. The program for Indigenous Australians has not been created yet. This is a pilot. This DVD version is from Grenada, the only one that exists in English. In NZ, it was developed over 3–4 years and [involved] 6 specialised English teachers only. It will be up to the organization that gets funded to continue and produce the local material. (Personal communication, July 2016)

Prior to the implementation of the program it is necessary to have a preparation and adaptation stage whereby the realities and idiosyncrasies of place are taken into consideration and the adapted model is absorbed and supported by the receiving community. Boughton stresses that the 'Cuban literacy project carries the core values of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire and Cuban independence hero, José Martí, that requires a "political will" at all levels of society. Popular support was mobilized at both the state level and local level' (Boughton 2010: 63). Without this political will, and the appropriate coordination and development of culturally and linguistically relevant materials, the model will only reproduce a program, without achieving the desired linguistic and political transformations. As mentioned earlier the Yes, I Can! method encompasses three distinct stages—training, teaching, reading and writing—after which there is a consolidation phase. In order to deliver the material effectively, a teacher must assess the group's literacy and gauge the group's particular social conditions and kinship relationships. Each stage has different durations and aims to be completed in a total of 65 classes:

The first phase of training is delivered in 10 lessons, 42 [lessons] focus on reading and writing and the remaining 13 lessons aim at consolidation. A video recording of a lesson is brought it as introduction, this last 15 minutes and after a 10 minute break to return to class for 30 minutes incorporating discussion and analysis for 15 minutes (My translation, 'Programa cubano de alfabetización Yo Sí Puedo' 2011)

During my visit to Brewarrina I had the opportunity to observe José in the classroom. The lessons followed the tightly structured 65–lesson model explained above. The approach is traditional in that it follows a conventional western pedagogical style, with the teacher in front and the students seating in orderly rows facing the white board and TV set. I arrived when the program was about to enter the final phase. Only a few weeks later José would begin to establish classes in neighboring communities. My observations are subjective;

my reflections about the way the model is delivered challenged my personal views on how radical a program has to be to facilitate change in a community and address many years of educational neglect. Observing José's interactions in class I could see a synchronicity of rhythms between the students' personalities and Jose's Cuban cadences, facilitated by a slow and patient approach interjected with humour and spontaneity. The classroom time was structured and run in a traditional way; but the dynamics and the rhythm within the four walls of learning denoted something different. There are many pieces to the puzzle and they have to fit in order to unveil a larger picture, a landscape with all its ugliness and beauty. The model only works when the project is embedded in a specific cultural setting and the local community owns the process and its success. The expert facilitator must become another member of the community and trainees must belong to the community as well.

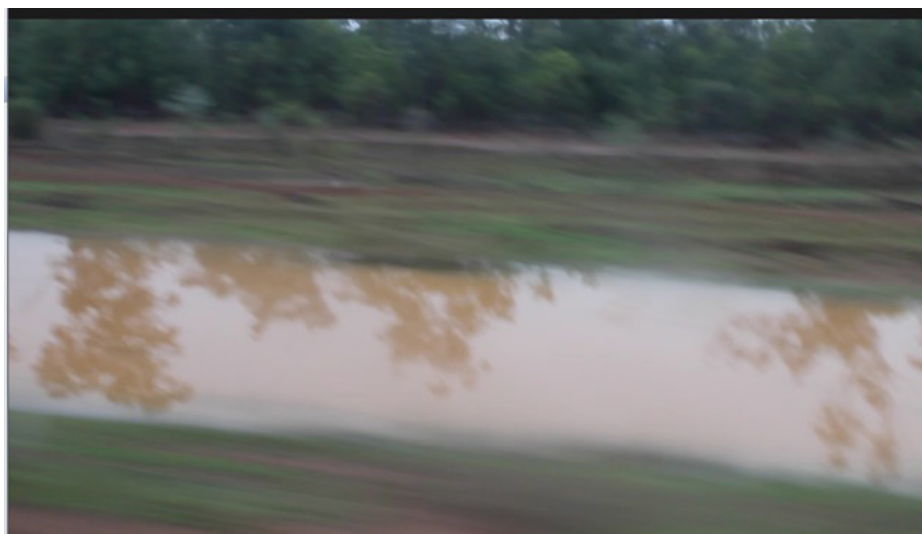
Consultation, ongoing evaluation and flexibility of approach are three of the main characteristic of the Yo, Sí Puedo methodology. José mentioned the importance of respecting the community's dynamics and feedback, stressing:

We acknowledge local Aboriginal leaders, coordinator and facilitators too. The work they do to help the campaign is essential to its success. If we are not accepted by them we don't begin do it. The community should take ownership of the campaign and it is one of the key points of the success. The campaign also builds the capacity of the local staff and benefits the whole community. We listen to students, and to staff as well to community members, and to government and non-government agencies to find out if the campaign is helping people to build their literacy, and about other benefit the participant's experience. They are asked about what additional support is needed to make the campaign more sustainable and how the campaign can be improved. (Personal communication, July 2016)

The Yo, Sí Puedo methodology understands literacy as the responsibility of the community and not of the individual alone. This to me differentiates the concept of knowledge as constructed in the West from knowledges as formulated in the geopolitical South. The pilot undertaken by the University of New England in partnership with Beetson and Associates and local Aboriginal organizations from 2012 to June 2015, in Wilcannia, Enngonia and Bourke, has produced 89 graduates. By July 2015 the campaign started its first phase in Brewarrina. By the end of 2016 a second intake had begun, and preparations for the first stages to take place in Weilmoringle, followed by Walgett, were underway with the aim, eventually, to reach other towns in NSW and the rest of the country. José has worked on the Wilcannia project; on finishing his post in Brewarrina, I asked him what lessons he had learnt from both experiences:

That we need to go on and get more support especially when dealing with communities which have suffered a lot. Still it is difficult sometimes to engage students, due to many external and historical factors related to issues going on for many years which we eventually find and not always are able to manage. They are not beyond the possibilities of the program. Always trust the process, as Jack Beetson always says. Teamwork of community coordinators and facilitators has been the key to success. And we all know we need to keep on trying. (Personal communication, June 2016)

Coming back to land



Along the way from Bre to Sydney, June 2016 © Liliana E. Correa

With eyes half open after almost nine hours driving away from Brewarrina I noticed the colour of the earth changing to red. I cannot avoid thinking of Corrientes, my father's land, which abuts the South Atlantic Ocean. Yet I am here, experiencing other sounds, smells, and textures on my bare feet, my thoughts scattering, co-existing with Australia's First Nations under the same sky. I am learning to observe this country with different eyes, and to listen to the stones, to read the carvings and the signs that mark my way back, to name the way of the stars that disclose where to search and hunt. Here is a culture that survived millennia and is still resilient, creative, innovative, strong, alive: how can we still be so blind before so much knowledge?

It is, I argue, a conundrum to be educated in the language of the oppressor in order for one's own language to be heard. For the Yo, Sí Puedo / Yes, I Can campaign to work deeply, the campaign's approach to literacy should involve the maintenance of languages in danger and the revival of lost languages. This may involve programs that acknowledge other epistemologies and community development educational strategies in which Aboriginal Englishes are included in literacy programs and skills development programs as a way of allowing stories to be told. As the Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith writes: 'Every issue has been approached by Indigenous Peoples with a view to *rewriting* and *rerighting* our position in history. Indigenous Peoples want to tell our stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes' (2007: 332).

As with other First Nations Australian Indigenous peoples face the complex legacies of colonization, which include the loss of language, and intergenerational trauma that lingers despite records of survival. Australia is a first world country that by chance is on the edge of the world's most economically dynamic region. Its population of over 24 million has come from all over the world, adding to the dominant English language some 300 more languages. British colonialists imagined this land as an empty space of possibility; immigrants and refugees continue to regard it as a sanctuary. In contrast, for the traditional custodians of this land, 'Australia' is a nation-state founded on mistaken policies and violent encounters; here,

the levels of poor health, deaths in custody, child mortality, domestic violence, racism and oppressive sociocultural and political conditions should be unthinkable.

My last questions José were: Why is this important for Cuba? As a Cuban how do you feel when you are so far removed from your culture and facilitating literacy on the other side of the world? José answered: 'It is our modest contribution to better the world and especially the most disadvantaged people. Showing solidarity is paying respect to Australia's First Nations and making the world a better place' (Personal communication, July 2016). Education can be the common ground on which our differences can be acknowledged. Experience has taught us that big achievements arise from first steps and in the hope that change is possible. In practice the Australian Literacy for Life Foundation has taken the first steps to effect change with the knowledge that Indigenous communities are fast learners and resilient. Learning one sound at a time; from little words big words grow. It was my interest in this transformative potential and in the possibilities of collaborations between South-South peoples and knowledges that took me originally to Brewarrina to meet the Cuban advisor of Yo, Sí Puedo / Yes, I Can. Spending a week in Brewarrina inspired the annotations and visual-poetic narratives that I have used throughout this text. I hope they can contribute to heightening the visibility of the Yes, I Can campaign and to ensuring that the implementation of literacy programs for Indigenous peoples in Australia remains at the forefront of public debates and consciousness.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Cuban educator José Manuel Chala Leblanch for his contributions to this article. This paper would not have been written without his camaraderie and stimulating conversation, and for facilitating my visit to Brewarrina. In addition, I am grateful to the Australian Literacy for Life Foundation (<http://www.lff.org.au/>) for accepting my visit.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. 1987, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco.
- Boal, A. 1979, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Pluto Press, London.
- Boughton, B. 2010, 'Back to the Future? Timor-Leste, Cuba and the Return of the Mass Literacy Campaign,' *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2: 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v18i2.1898>
- Boughton, B. 2013a, 'Popular Education and the "Party Line,"' *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, vol. 11, no. 2: 239–257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2013.782189>
- Boughton, B. 2013b, 'What Can the Cuban school of Adult Literacy Offer in Aboriginal Australia? A Pilot Study in a Remote Aboriginal Community, in *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education*, (eds) C. Kawalilak & J. Groen. Victoria, B.C. Canada, June 3–5.
- Boughton, B., Chee, D. A., Beetson, J., Durnan, D., & Leblanch, J. C. 2013, 'An Aboriginal Adult Literacy Campaign in Australia Using Yes I Can,' *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1: 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v21i1.3328>
- Boughton, B., & Durnan, D. 2014a. 'Cuba's Yes, I Can Mass Adult Literacy Campaign Model in Timor-Leste and Aboriginal Australia: A Comparative Study,' *International Review of Education*, vol. 60, no. 4: 559–580. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11159-014-9421-5>.

- Boughton, B., & Durnan, D. 2014b, 'Cuba's Yo Sí Puedo. A Global Literacy Movement?' *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, vol. 3, no. 2: 325–359.
- Bourdieu, P. 1979, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Routledge, London.
- 'Brewarrina, New South Wales' 2017, Wikipedia entry, 25 July (update). Online, available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brewarrina,_New_South_Wales [Accessed 29 July 2017].
- 'Brewarrina, NSW' 2017, Aussie Towns. Online, available: <http://www.aussietowns.com.au/town/brewarrina-nsw> [Accessed 29 July 2017].
- De Heer, R. (dir.) 2013, *Charlie's Country*. Feature film, Australia.
- Eades, D. 1993, 'Aboriginal English,' *PEN 93*. Primary English Teachers' Association, Newtown, NSW: 1–6. Online, available: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED388040.pdf> [Accessed 29 July 2017].
- Eades, D. 2013, *Aboriginal Ways of Using English*. Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra.
- Everett, N. 2014, 'Education for Liberation: Cuba's Yo Si Puedo Adult Literacy Program and Education in the Global South.' Unpublished paper. Online, available: https://www.academia.edu/7392105/Education_for_Liberation_Cubas_Yo_Si_Puedo_adult_literacy_program_and_education_in_the_global_south [Accessed 29 July 2016].
- Freire, P. 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [Pedagogia do oprimido]. Herder & Herder: New York.
- Instituto Pedagógico Latinoamericano y Caribeño (IPLAC, Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean) N.d., Online, available: <http://www.iplac.rimed.cu/> [Accessed 29 July 2016].
- Kral, I. & Schwab, R. G. 2003, 'The Realities of Aboriginal Adult Literacy Acquisition and Practice: Implications for Remote Community Capacity Building,' Australian National University (ANU) Discussion Paper No. 257, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU Canberra. Online, available: http://caepr.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Publications/DP/2003_DP257.pdf [Accessed 8 August 2016].
- Literacy for Life Foundation N.d., Official website. Online, available: <http://www.lfff.org.au/> [Accessed 29 July 2016].
- Lorde, A. 1984, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,' *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, Berkeley: 110–114.
- Malcolm, I. 2001, 'Aboriginal English: Adopted Code of Surviving Culture,' in *English in Australia*, (eds) D. Blair & P. Collins. John Benjamins Publishing, Amsterdam: 201–222. <https://doi.org/10.1075/veaw.g26.19mal>
- Malcolm, I. 2013, 'The Ownership of Aboriginal English in Australia,' *World Englishes*, vol. 32, no. 1: 42–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12003>
- Moraga, C. & Anzaldúa, G. (eds) 1983, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Persephone Press, Watertown, MA.
- Pennycook, A. 1998, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*. Routledge, London & New York. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203006344>
- Pennycook, A. 2007, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. Routledge, London & New York.
- 'Programa cubano de alfabetización Yo Sí Puedo' 2011, Enciclopedia colaborativa en la red cubana (EcuRed). Online, available: https://www.ecured.cu/Programa_cubano_de_Alfabetizaci%C3%B3n_Yo_S%C3%AD_Puedo [Accessed 8 August 2016].

Ross, K. & Taylor, J. 2000, 'The Relative Social and Economic Status of Indigenous People in Bourke, Brewarrine and Walgett,' Australian National University (ANU) Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) Working Paper No. 8, ANU Canberra. Online, available: <http://caepr.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/Publications/WP/CAEPRWP08.pdf> [Accessed 8 August 2016].

Sharifian, F. 2006, 'A Cultural-Conceptual Approach and World Englishes: The Case of Aboriginal English,' *World Englishes*, vol. 25 no. 1: 11–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0083-2919.2006.00444.x>

Tuhiwai-Smith, L. 1999, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Book & University of Otago Press, London & Otago.

UNESCO 2004, 'Education Position Paper: The Plurality of Literacy and its Implications for Policies and Programmes.' Online, available: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf> [Accessed 8 August 2016].