REVIEWS

DEVELOPING ADULT LITERACY

A Review by JOANNA BUNT

DEVELOPING ADULT LITERACY: APPROACHES TO PLANNING, IMPLEMENTING, AND DELIVERING LITERACY INITIATIVES
By JULIET MCCAFFERY, JULIET MERRIEFIELD AND JULIET MILLICAN

The authors of this book have set out to create a compilation of the theories behind different models of adult literacy to assist planners internationally in their development of new adult literacy programs. The book offers no 'quick-fix' solution or adult literacy program template, but is rich with examples and ideas emerging directly from literacy teachers 'at the chalk face' from diverse areas of the globe. Case studies demonstrate how ideas have been put into practice, with a focus on the learning experience being a collaborative process between a facilitator/teacher or between learners and their peers in the classroom. There is also a focus on learning in outdoor learning environments.

The book considers concepts of literacy in its different guises: as skills, tasks, social practice and critical reflection. The authors analyse the practical side too — approaches to the curriculum, resources, training and assessment.

Chapter 4 considers what we mean by literacy. Literacy has expanded to have meanings far beyond just reading and writing. I enjoyed reading about the pros and cons of the competency-based or functional approaches to adult literacy programs. The chapter provides an organised framework for tutors to teach with a competency-based approach; however, the book recognises that the approach can lead to students being able to perform certain tasks in isolation yet remaining unable to translate these competencies across diverse life tasks (p.61).

In the discussion on literacy as critical reflection (p.91), there is an interesting section on the difficulties faced by some women in attending literacy classes. Attendance can be seen as a challenge to spousal power. This is an issue not often obvious in contemporary Australian literacy classes, but interesting to keep in mind — the unseen or unexpected restrictions experienced by some students.

A very realistic and pragmatic chapter (Chapter 11) is devoted to monitoring and evaluating literacy programs. The authors here stress that evaluation should take into account the purpose of the program, capacity of staff and resources available. A very detailed and useful exposition of the evaluation process follows with many examples – and an ultimate conclusion that evaluations 'enable organisations to build on their strengths and address their weaknesses' (p.149).

There is a very comprehensive chapter (Chapter 12) on how people learn to read and write, which I feel is of great interest not only to planners and teachers, but also to the volunteer tutors in any literacy class. Lastly, the section on resources and materials gave me several helpful new ideas for my own literacy class.

In all, the book has been well-written by authors highly experienced in the literacy field. I feel that the book is primarily aimed at planners, rather than literacy teachers facilitating programs at the local level; however, it is very easy to read and crammed with useful practical examples, such as the nine-stage framework (p.78) for drawing up a learning program based on the literacy and numeracy that participants require to be able to operate more effectively in their community.

This book is an engaging assessment of adult literacy in a global context, with detailed statistics concerning literacy worldwide, and its effects on poverty and economic development. Also covered are international policies for universal literacy and trends in both policy management and teaching in a local context, such as the popular and effective trend in the past decade towards learning literacy and numeracy skills through information and communication technologies. I would highly recommend this book to those working in the literacy field who are interested in thinking 'outside the local box'.