

Notes from the Social Justice Forum

The forum began with two focus speakers Keiko Yasakawa and Dave Baker. Keiko Yasakawa's paper was written in response to the central question posed by the organisers:

If we have a commitment to social justice, what is it in adult maths/numeracy education that we think is worth fighting for?

The forum proceeded with Dave Baker responding to the ideas put forward by Keiko and participants being given time for individual reflection and pair discussion after each talk.

The day was also inspired by a panel of speakers, discussing indigenous issues and reports by Gail FitzSimons and Clive Kanen of the Mathematics Education and Society Conference which unfortunately overlapped with the times of this conference. Speakers on the panel on indigenous issues included Caty Morris and Michael Michie whose papers are in this section.

Participants were then asked to talk to others, identify issues or questions they regarded as important in relation to the central question and the speakers' input, and to write these on slip of paper. These were collected and used to find themes for discussion during the afternoon session. Responses included the following:

- How to install a public discussion about adults learning maths in a country where this discussion is unknown – learn from strategies in other countries.
- The emphasis for numeracy and literacy funding is becoming essentially focussed on Vocational and employment outcomes. We need to maintain access for EVERYONE including continuing funding for Life Skills learning
- Overcoming bureaucracy to go forward with courses for Indigenous students (in my case Uni)
- Numeracy needs of prisoners, during and after confinement
- Ensuring numeracy available for everybody irrespective of their reasons for wanting to develop skills.
- The context of program delivery often defines the extent of social justice work. What are the implications for a social justice model for work being done in workplace programmes, when the onus is on delivery outcomes for companies as well as for learners?
- Isn't it obvious to governments that numerate people would be more productive and cost less to maintain? For example less debt, wiser financial decisions, fewer workplace incidents/accidents.
- Changing perceptions/views of mathematics and numeracy - in government – in education – in society – in individuals – in the media.
- Funding - fee paying. Whose responsibility is it to provide access?
- How do we influence policy to promote/ensure social justice?
- Ruth (plenary speaker, Ruth Cossey) overstates the amount of suffering the privileged would face under successful redistribution. Immediately massive contributions to redistribution can be made by the most severe over consumers – US people (though Aussies rate high on this too) without any actual loss of quality of life on their part (indeed its possible their quality of life would improve if they consumed less.)
- I think it is important to think of ourselves, not just as providers, but also as organisers – Keiko talked about this in terms of organising at the grassroots – through unions. Bob Moses, in the parallels he describes between the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and current maths access describes the need to build demand – in the hard work of building a movement for voters rights the and the work to build demand for maths access now.
- What is going to happen to my programme when I retire?
- Who are we reaching with our courses? How are we catering for: indigenous groups; low SES; underrepresented groups in our education system? Who should the client group be? How do we get their voice?

- I have concern about the non-taking up of opportunities to join a numeracy class by potential students from an English Speaking background (in a TAFE college). Any ideas or comments?
- Bridging maths is bridging form the current social and cultural capital (numeracy) to formal maths. (accompanied by graphic)
- Explore ways/strategies to move outside the closed system as described by Keiko [Areas: Research – Teaching and program development – Policy]
- Curriculum – Who is defining what is taught and accredited?
- Putting the learner at the centre might mean that teachers have to work in ways they haven't anticipated (or believe in).
- How to ensure that all students in the classroom are able to participate fully in classroom activities – that no-one is silenced, inhibited, made to feel left out, or excluded – for whatever reason (lack of language skills, feelings of inadequacy, etc)
- How can we overcome issues of low achievement in maths by working class learners?
- It's worth fighting for equity for all people everywhere. Need to create avenues where people can talk about maths at any level. Social side of meths classes are sometimes more important than how to do it. Build confidence, articulation skills, social networks. Ask students and would be students.
- How to encourage /foster classroom /community instructors to look beyond tomorrow's technique or material for immediate use ion the classroom, to the big picture – to methodology, access, social justice etc.?
- Organising at a local level – getting talking/reflecting – shifting at a local level – using each other to bounce ideas, challenge, discuss. – because I think we get 'snowed under' with 'accountability and compliance' and I feel that sucks the life and creativity out of the field.
- To what extent are we (the mathematics education society) open towards other mathematical cultures/traditions -other than those in use in maths/numeracy 'classrooms'?
- How do we change the gate-keeping function of numeracy/maths? Who has the power to change?
- Be of one purpose – Be of one action. We have ACAL for example, but small membership – how do you touch people (practitioners etc)? How do you get to them, inspire them? – Think globally, act locally – does this work?
- From the inspirational talks I felt such a need to get more affective on social justice issues that I almost feel the (individualistic) need to establish my own institute. – Why do I feel so disempowered in the institutions in which I currently reside?
- Rewriting curriculum to be principles based rather than discipline/subject based.
- Lifeskills vs vocational skills – provision for marginalised groups in small communities.
- We need to get together – ie not our own party. We need to keep talking to all of these community people. How?

From these the forum organisers identified four themes and posed questions for consideration after the lunch break. These questions are presented below with the overhead transparency summaries of the responses made by the small groups.

- Can we identify ways in which adult numeracy educators can work with others to raise awareness of social justice issues?
- How can our organisations be advocates for the wide range of numeracy learning contexts and programs?
- Should ALM/ACAL be challenging the gate keeping function of numeracy?
- How can we influence government policy that affects adult numeracy provision?

Responses

1. Can we identify ways in which adult numeracy educators can work with others to raise awareness of social justice issues?

We need allies so we engage our students in our classes as conduits to the community, (seeing ourselves as organisers in communities to get people to demand their educational rights) but we do this in a systematic and organised way by sharing maths ideas about social justice issues to stir up passions (for example calculating the cost of keeping a refugee in detention for a year) and by modelling or utilising democratic methods in our classrooms.

2. How can our organisations be advocates for the wide range of numeracy learning contexts and programs?

- Collaborate
- Research
- Communicate
- LOBBY
- Share
- Advocate across organisations ALM, ACAL BMN
- Raise awareness – social, community, personal, family

One important issue for using these strategies: Numeracy getting lost in vocational training.

3. Should ALM / ACAL / BMN be challenging the gate keeping function of numeracy?

Mentoring of employers and employment agencies to think more openly (and be explicit) about the numeracy needs of employees.

Challenge the formal testing to assess capability to enter courses. We need to acknowledge more formally what people bring with them to learning – skills and knowledge that they may not put into words in test situations.

Our organisations should engage in the rewriting of the NRS (the Australian National Reporting System for literacy and numeracy) or international equivalent.

4. How can we influence government policy that affects adult numeracy provision?

- Lobby
- Bring together common threads from research and practice evidence and focus the message
- (eg papers showing benefits to GDP of lifting level of people at level 1 (ALLS) rather than investing at L3, 4, 5)
- Coordinated cluster bombing to policy makers by individuals and representative groups
- Try to get numeracy into policy as a separate issue (separate from literacy? – in some circumstances maths educators better allies than literacy groups)
- Challenge formal testing (eg national tests such as GED)
- Think locally act globally
- ACAL, ALM, BMN and other organisations initiate 'The most numerate community in ...' Campaign (based on a slogan "the most child friendly town in Germany").

Another suggestion arising from the general discussion was the formation of **local networks** or **clusters** to function on a cooperative basis. These collections of adult numeracy educators could meet in a geographic area (or communicate online in the case of people with particular specialities) to keep alive the conversations and sharing about adult numeracy education. These conversations which, at least in Australia, were kept alive through professional development activities and assessment moderation days, are in danger of dying in the absence, or redirection, of government funding and support.