Literacy mediation in Neighbourhood Houses

Sally Thompson
Australian Education Union

Interactions between staff in Neighbourhood Houses, and the socially and educationally disadvantaged community members who visit Neighbourhood Houses, have been viewed through many lenses, including community development, social support, caring and compassion. This paper looks at Neighbourhood Houses as sites of pedagogical practice. More specifically, it explores the role of Neighbourhood House administrative staff as literacy mediators — as people who assist others with reading and writing.

Literacy mediation has gained attention as part of a focus amongst New Literacy Studies researchers on the social uses of literacy. In this case study of four staff members working across two neighbourhood houses, I identify that literacy mediation in the neighbourhood houses is common, complex and growing in demand.

A further area of focus of the paper is the invisibility of the literacy mediation in Neighbourhood Houses — to funding bodies, committees of management and even to other staff. It also identifies the role of emotional labour in both facilitating mediation but also as a contributing factor to the lack of recognition of informal literacy work in Neighbourhood Houses.

Keywords: *adult literacy, literacy mediation, neighbourhood houses, informal learning*

Introduction

This paper looks at the nature of informal literacy work in community settings by focusing on a case study of two Victorian Neighbourhood Houses. While Australian houses and centres often provide formal adult literacy classes, which form part of a nationally recognised qualification, or non-formal structured literacy classes, the subject of this paper is the literacy activities and interactions that occur outside these formal classes, in the foyers and kitchens and hallways of two neighbourhood houses.

The paper draws on an analysis of a sample of qualitative interview data conducted in 2014 with four staff from two different Victorian Neighbourhood Houses, one located in the outer suburbs of Melbourne and one located in a small town in regional Victoria. Both houses were chosen because they were situated in communities where high proportions of the population are from low socio-economic backgrounds and have limited education completions. All four staff worked in administrative or management roles. The purpose of the interviews was to identify the social practice of literacy between these staff and attendees at the houses who have low levels of literacy.

Such interactions are of interest to me, because they are spoken of extensively in the public discussion of neighbourhood houses but almost never in relation to adult literacy development. Neighbourhood House public documents, and indeed, the responses of the interview subjects in this study use terms like "friendly", "welcoming", "help" and "support" to describe their work, which downplay the intensity and complexity of the interactions. This study explores these interactions as informal literacy events and more specifically, literacy mediation, that is, interactions where less powerful community members are inducted into texts and discourses of power by intermediaries or brokers (Papen, 2010).

"Literacy mediation" has gained traction as a concept within New Literacy Studies (NLS), which looks at literacy as a set of social practices. A number of ethnographic studies have identified the role of brokers or intermediaries who have developed knowledge across different language and cultural codes and are able to use these skills to assist others (Kalman,1999; Kral & Falk, 2004; Mihut, 2014). While many of these

studies involve immigrant or non-English speaking communities, others have focused on English language communities where code shifting occurs between different genres (Papen, 2009; Theriault 2013) mediated by people who have developed skills in these multiple codes or genres. This study suggests that there are resonances between the work of the neighbourhood house staff interviewed and the mediators observed in some of these other studies.

The second focus of this study is the lack of visibility of Neighbourhood House literacy work and the ways that the work is positioned in the view of the workers, the participants, their committees of management and funding bodies. In the interviews, the subjects identified that informal literacy work takes up large amounts of their daily time and that the workload appears to be growing, particularly as bureaucratic texts and processes become digitised and only accessible online. However, they also identified that others construct this work as less time consuming than it is, and in some instances, as a lack of efficiency or effectiveness.

Some researchers have identified that the feminised workforce and the similarities between the neighbourhood houses and domestic home environments has led to a devaluing of the work done in Neighbourhood Houses (Rooney, 2011, Clemans, 2010). The findings from this case study would suggest that supporting disadvantaged adults with increasingly complex literacy tasks is an example of the 'invisible work' undertaken by the predominantly female staff of Neighbourhood Houses.

Neighbourhood House practice

The community development ethos that underpins Neighbourhood House practice involves local community members taking action on the issues that impact their lives and the lives of others in their immediate community (Rooney, 2011). Neighbourhood houses are open to all members of a local community but have a particular emphasis on encouraging participation by socially isolated and disadvantaged members of their communities. Where adult literacy courses and classes form part of the activities, they are usually targeted at adults who have left school early, some of whom will have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities or will report having had difficult and unpleasant experiences of schooling (Brackertz, 2007).

The two neighbourhood houses in this study are in many ways typical of the sector. The urban house, Beachside House, is situated in a street adjacent to an outer suburban shopping strip. The rural house, Orchard Community House, exists in a purpose built facility, next door to the public library. While it looks less like a domestic house than Beachside House, the décor and furnishings of Orchard Community House are homelike and visitors are immediately ushered into a large kitchen at the centre of the building upon arrival. While Beachside House runs a government funded adult literacy course, Orchard Community House does not. Both communities have high populations of adults with low school completion and low socio-economic status (ABS, 2011).

Methodology

The data analysed in this case study was gathered through semi-formal interviews with staff in their own workplaces, the neighbourhood houses. The interview transcripts were analysed, coded and interpreted by the researcher in the manner suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The analysis consisted of a combination of text segments, verbatim quotes from the cases, and/or summaries of participants' responses. The analyses helped to identify patterns emerging within the data. This was then organised around the two themes i) the nature of informal literacy work and (ii) the perceptions of this work.

All four staff worked in administrative or management roles. None had formal qualifications in adult literacy teaching or in education more broadly, although 'Jan' from Orchard Community Centre and 'Tracey' from Beachside Neighbourhood House both have graduate level qualifications in social work and community development respectively.

There are a number of ways to describe people who interact with others with low levels of literacy. Reikman and Budderberg (2013) use the term "confidantes", and emphasise that these relationships are not necessarily felt as a dependency by the adult with low skills (Reikman & Budderberg, 2013:19). Kral and Falk (2004) use the term "literacy brokers" in the context of a remote Indigenous community to describe "a reader who can play a mediating role as 'textual interpreter' for a less literate group" (Kral & Falk, 2004:52). Papen uses the term 'literacy mediators' (2010) to describe similar processes at work in health environments. Drawing on the work of Papen, Theriault also uses the

term "literacy mediators" to describe staff working in community based youth centres as it "emphasises the interactional nature of this type of literacy event and practice" (Theriault, 2013:2).

Papen has identified that in an increasingly textually laden and complex world, gaining assistance from others with particular genres or texts with which one is not familiar is increasingly common (Papen, 2012:79). According to Papen (2010), literacy mediators can be professional service providers, employers or members of a social network. Further, people will often need the support of a literacy mediator while 'enter[ing] new spheres of social and/or economic activity, which demand of them new roles, understanding of new practices and familiarity with new discourses' (Papen, 2010:79). Literacy mediation is often a means by which socially and economically disadvantaged groups can gain access to discourses of power.

There are a number of features of "literacy mediation" that make it a quite specific category of informal learning. Firstly, the literacy remains 'distributed' across the social relationship and is not simply transferred from one person to another (Papen, 2010). A second feature is that the mediators tend to be people with "bi-institutional knowledge" (Mihut, 2013), that is, they are fluent in the genres or codes of the people for whom they are mediating and the genres or codes that these people are seeking to understand or access for some purpose. Commonly the genres or codes that are being sought out in the mediation process, derive from the dominant culture and its institutions.

Perceptions of informal literacy 'work'

Neighbourhood House work is characterized by high levels of volunteerism and low paid, highly casualised work suggesting a perception of the work as of low value. Clemans (2010), drawing on feminist theory, identifies the centrality of the notion of the 'domestic' or home space in the ways that educational work in community settings is constructed and perceived. She suggests that a consistent emphasis on "care" overlays notions of unpaid, private and domestic work onto those who work in the community learning space, undermining the complex work that occurs supporting disadvantaged learners.

The Neighbourhood House staff interviewed for this research saw informal literacy support for adults with low skills as an important part of the professional work of a Neighbourhood House staff member. Even so one of the interview subjects indicated that she did very little of this work herself and was more likely to refer it to more senior, experienced staff. Supporting disadvantaged adults with bureaucratic documents was identified as the most common informal literacy activity. The main Australian agency responsible for administering welfare and social support payments, Centrelink, was reported to be a significant generator of texts that adults with low literacy skills struggle to interpret and respond to accurately. Respondents also identified a range of other bureaucratic documents such as those related to housing, immigration and seniors' cards that adults brought into the house. The Neighbourhood House staff showed a high level of skill in understanding both the codes of bureaucratic texts and those commonly used by participants.

The staff from Orchard Neighbourhood House also suggested that a trend by Government agencies to move their systems and forms online had created an additional barrier for people with low literacy, many of whom also had poor digital literacy skills. The two Orchard Neighbourhood House staff both felt that the volume of people asking for assistance with reading and writing had grown in recent years and that the texts themselves were becoming less accessible.

> *I think Centrelink are crossing over more to using technology and making people responsible for themselves...So now, here's your password, here's your log-on, now you deal with it. So if it's wrong, that's your problem, not mine. And so here you go. I'm not sure that they're catering for most of their clientele who would have literacy problems. (Jan)*

A related factor, however, is that the computer based systems appeared to provide an avenue for people to seek support with texts. Adults would often ask for support with using the computer, rather than with the text itself. In this way, the stigma attached to low literacy that holds many people back from seeking support was removed because not being able to use a particular computer program or having a general query about technology, provided a less stigmatising way to initiate a request

for literacy support. Struggling with digital literacy did not seem to attract the same self-consciousness as struggling with more traditional literacies and so the former could be used as an easy means of engaging with Neighbourhood House staff to gain support.

> *They will definitely come and ask us. They don't seem too embarrassed about it, or worried about it. Sometimes they'll just say, "I don't understand the computer," or "It's not working." (Jan)*

It was evident from the interviews that visitors to both neighbourhood houses were seeking assistance with texts that have the potential to significantly impact on their lives and livelihoods. Lyn spoke of a visitor living on a disability pension who thought that his elevated electricity bills were the result of an electrical fault. Lyn "got a volunteer down" to methodically work through the bills with him to discover that he "had direct debits going everywhere." Jan spoke of a woman coming to the centre for assistance in filling in a form and then coming back later with a letter saying that her income had been stopped.

> *Because the form has been-- you ticked yes and yes to these little things and I said, "Oh dear God!" and she said, "Am I not getting paid today?" (Jan)*

Tracey spoke of a participant who mows lawns for a living, who made significant demands on her time because "even writing down people's addresses and names and what day he's got to go, he has to be very careful to make sure that that's right."

Tracey, Lyn and Jan indicated that the literacy support they were providing was more than just a narrow decoding of individual words but rather, was an induction into the genre of bureaucratic documents and support to navigate the power dynamics that surround these texts. They reported that while the people seeking support with texts may have been capable of decoding individual words and sentences, that their understanding of the broader purpose of the text, the way the words, phrases and sentences and the layout of the text interacted within the genre of a bureaucratic document was often not understood.

> *You open that Centrelink office screen and its all different*
> *options…– like if that's me I could just sort of glance at that, like*
> *that, I can just glance at that and go, "Okay you've to do that"*
> *Whereas they're there really painstakingly trying to read every*
> *word instead of just looking for the bit that's underlined which is*
> *the web address or whatever. (Lyn)*

A strong theme running through all four interviews was a belief that the neighbourhood house model of operating leant itself to literacy mediation because Neighbourhood Houses, unlike other places where adults with low skills might congregate, are generalist services, with an emphasis on managing diversity and adjusting to the particular needs of community members. The four interview subjects spoke about their approach using different language including "relaxed", "friendly", "safe", "welcoming", and "we don't judge.

> *I just think that it's the history of this place. It's the way that it has*
> *always been… that if someone comes through that door, if we can*
> *help them, we do it. (Lyn)*

> *It's hard to say whether it's the building or just the people who*
> *are employed. We know that there are all people with all different*
> *abilities and try not to judge them. (Leeanne)*

Lyn describes the process as starting with encouraging people to do things for themselves, through to scaffolding texts by putting ticks next to key information, rephrasing texts into more colloquial language, right through to "jumping in" and completing sections of the text for the person, based on a judgment about how much support the person needs. The interactions described by Lyn, Tracey, Jan and Leeanne are less about filling an arbitrary gap based on a predetermined notion of what people should be able to do, than about getting a particular process done. If they can transfer those skills to a participant, then this is ideal, but if they can't due to time or perceived skills of the participant, then they will finish the task with the person, advising or following the process where they can.

Beachside House runs a regular non-formal adult literacy course funded by the state government, while Orchard Community House does not. Interestingly, there appeared to be very little difference in

the demand for informal literacy support between the two Houses, and some evidence that offering the class increased the demand for non-formal individual literacy support as well as for literacy mediation. These demands for support presented the staff of Beachside House with somewhat of a dilemma because, of all the literacy practice occurring in the House, it is only the class that attracts funding. Yet the community development ethos of the staff means that they feel obliged to offer the unfunded informal support if it is asked of them. Staff will tell visitors to the centre who seek support with literacy about the literacy class but they will not pressure them to join. Tracey says: "If they just wanted to come in for their whole life and have support with filling out forms then we would just continue to do that".

Invisible work

The interview subjects felt that their Boards and funding bodies recognised that adults with low skills attended the houses and that staff spent time supporting them with literacy tasks. However, all four felt that the volume of time required to support adults with low skills was not understood.

When asked to estimate how much time is taken up supporting adults with low skills, Leeanne says; "I think only about 20% is really recognised". Tracey suggests that her work with adults with low skills would be "at least a couple of hours a day". Jan says that the work is sporadic, "some weeks you can spend four or five hours on it and then some weeks there's nothing". Lyn also suggests that the time required fluctuates enormously but that "a couple of hours a day, 10 hours a week…. I don't think that would be an exaggeration."

Some also felt that the complexity of the work was not understood. Tracey talked about how supporting adults with low literacy was subtly integrated into a range of activities in the centre, but that often the purposefulness of these activities looked to outsiders more like socialising than work.

> *I think a lot of people here would say that's what I spend most of the day sitting around drinking coffee and talking to people, because it is but there's a lot more going on than that. (Tracey)*

Lyn talks with some frustration of how the funding bodies and the Board say they recognise the amount and complexity of informal work that occurs in the houses but that "it's reflected in our funding that they don't understand the work we do, and it's reflected in the demands placed on us by funding bodies, by committees of management."

All four of the Neighbourhood House workers recognise that the work they do is valuable, but they speak passionately about how stressful it is to have their work go unrecognised.

> *Why isn't this work recognised? I want people to come here for help and I would like to have a designated person ...I'd like to attend to them fully every time. (Jan)*

A recurring theme is that administrative work such as completing reports or filling in forms is recognised as work but that the work with human beings is ignored, or dismissed. Tracey tells of working with an adult learner in the tea room on a particular text and having it described by other staff as her "tea break". Lyn talks about starting the day with the goal of completing a report, working hard all day and then the distress of realising that none of the work that you have completed "count(s) as an achievement for the day – in terms of what's measured".

Tracey, Lyn and Jan in particular were very aware of their own advanced skills in navigating bureaucratic texts and how this knowledge would assist the visitors seeking help. While Leeanne was less likely to recognise these skills in herself, she recognised them in other staff working in the neighbourhood house. Nonetheless she felt that her workload was much higher than an administrative role in another organisation that did not have such a large volume of participants with low literacy.

Networks of support

Reikman and Budderberg (2013) suggest that the deficit view that is commonly held of adults with low literacy is created, in part, by the fact that most research focuses on those who have presented in programs designed to address a perceived deficit. They contend that when research attention is turned to the overwhelming majority of adults with low literacy who don't participate in formal literacy programs,

then a different perspective emerges. Most adults with low skills, they suggest, are supported by networks of "confidantes" who can be found in workplaces but also "in families, circles of friends or within leisure clubs and community associations" (Reikman & Budderberg, 2013:7). Further these relationships are often reciprocal or mutually reinforcing in nature so that it is unnecessary for each member of a network to develop every skill personally.

There is some resonance in Reikman and Budderberg's suggestion that "the clichés of functional illiteracy people do not fit reality. In the working place and in their private life, people affected often have strong networks of support" (Reikman & Budderberg, 2013:1) and Jan's statement that "*They will definitely come and ask us. They don't seem too embarrassed about it, or worried about it.*" In many ways, the neighborhood house staff, through their creation of a homelike environment in a publicly funded service where "no one is judged", have positioned themselves as "confidantes", removing the need for adults who attend the houses to develop particular forms of bureaucratic literacy.

The neighborhood house staff suggest that the demand for support with bureaucratic texts is growing as more government services move online, to be accessed independently. They contend that today's literacy demands are both more prolific and more complex. This aligns with the views of many researchers in the area of literacy mediation who point out that in an increasingly textually dense world, relying on one's networks rather than expecting to be across all text types will become increasingly common (Barton, 2009).

The lack of hesitation or embarrassment that visitors to the neighbourhood house appear to display when seeking literacy mediation can perhaps be explained by the newness of the texts that they are encountering and the growing number of people within their networks who also struggle with them. Papen (2012:79) explains that we are now living in 'highly textually mediated social worlds' and that asking someone else to mediate with particular genres and texts is a widespread practice. Indeed Mace (1998) suggests that literacy mediation is nowadays so common that people do not even notice it.

The literacy mediation in the neighbourhood houses appears to largely occur around codes and genres of power where mistakes carry high risks for already economically and socially vulnerable people. These require a sophisticated handling of different literacies; what Mihut calls "bi-institutional knowledge" and an ability to code shift. Tracey's description of assisting a visitor to the centre with an application for housing shows features of this code shifting and "bi-institutional knowledge". In this instance, the visitor explains that her living arrangements are changing and she is not sure how to represent this in text to a relevant authority. Tracey says: "Sometimes they have to do a little side calculation and that's why they come to us." This "side calculation" consists of determining from prior knowledge of bureaucratic documents what information is essential, what information is private and not disclosable and what information is potentially dangerous to the person. The risks to the visitor in completing the document incorrectly are significant and Tracey shows that she is aware of this significance throughout the interaction.

Both Tracey and Lyn talked about their own extensive past histories of working with people with low literacy, including within their own families, as essential to their literacy mediation work. Stories of literacy journeys were told with warmth and laughter suggesting that affinity and empathy are central to the process. Mihud suggests that this type of mediation involves significant emotional work that replaces the "emotional fabric" so essential to successful language and literacy interaction but which is stripped out of bureaucratic texts.

Mihut uses the term "literacy affinity' to describe the emotional work of literacy mediation defined as "a discursive repertoire comprised of language of empathy, personal experiences, and even social relations embedded in the literate experience" (Mihut, 2012:58). This description is close to the language that the Neighborhood House staff use which also emphasises empathy and personal experiences. However, while Mihut suggests that "literacy affinity" involves a more complex mix of communication and advocacy skills than "brokerage" or "mediation" would suggest, the neighborhood house staff indicate that it is these personal and social skills that lead to their work being minimised and described as socialising or as a lack of efficiency.

Mihut recognises the political challenges of an emphasis on the emotional, personal and social elements of literacy work, "precisely because it has been historically defined as oppositional to rationality" but insists that emotions are "integral components in the fabric of everyday life, entangled in how people think, speak, and act socially and historically" (Mihut, 2012:58).

Clemans (2010) study of the Adult and Community Education Sector in Victoria (which includes neighbourhood houses like Beachside), suggests that there is a gendered element to the language used to describe educational work in the sector, which "renders work conducted in it closer to home and to domestic-related activity than to legitimate educational work" (Clemans, 2010:157). Clemans suggests that the homelike spatial elements of the centres and the domestic related activity leave the centres in a position of "both strength and vulnerability". Strength because of the success of their work in engaging otherwise educationally disadvantaged adults but also vulnerability to having their work dismissed as "not work" because of its caring and domestic associations and broadly held assumptions about the low value of domestic and emotional labour.

Similar to Mihut's rejection of the separation of empathy from literacy mediation, Clemans rejects the assumption that care and compassion can be separated from the success of the literacy activities of the centres.

> *If educational work catering for disadvantaged learners is necessarily overlaid with care and compassion, and evokes symbols and practices of home, does it need to still carry assumptions of work of lesser value than that undertaken elsewhere? (Clemans, 2010:167).*

Clemans suggests that further research into, and articulation of, the creativity, complexity and sophistication of the work of the centres can provide valuable insights into a learning process that has strong benefits to individuals, their communities and the broader economy. Further, that additional investigation could reclaim the value of the work and challenge traditional dichotomies of private and public spaces, work and care.

Distributed literacies

Research into literacy mediation within a social practices view of literacy presents a challenge to the human capital view of adult literacy, which dominates public policy development in Australia. Firstly, mediation suggests that literacy is "distributed" amongst a network, that is, the literacy is not simply "a property or an attribute of an individual, but … shared knowledge and expertise" (Papen, 2009:27). This undermines the individualistic notions of teaching and learning as skills transfer from one person to another that are inherent in Human Capital Theory.

Secondly, a social practice view of literacy research is less interested in an abstract set of skills that learners 'should' have, than in the ways that adults actually use reading and writing in particular contexts for specific aims. It doesn't confine itself to a study of the literacy practices, which have been determined by policy makers as having economic value and are therefore codified in national training package standards. It is interested in multiple literacies "varying according to time and space but also contested in relations of power" (Street, 2003:77). It therefore questions the value of widespread testing in order to determine the populations' position in relation to a very narrow set of literacies that are unlikely to be applied outside their contexts.

By focusing on the wide array of means by which adults develop their literacy, a picture starts to emerge of literacy development in which formal competency based adult literacy and numeracy training forms one very small portion. This opens up policy debates about the best approaches to building literacy across the population and the efficacy of putting so much public resource into one aspect of learning, that is formal, competency based training. As Tusting states: "As soon as one begins to think in these terms, it becomes clear that the vast majority of learning that people engage in occurs outside formal institutions …this raises questions about the current focus of most education research and funding on formally accredited provision" (2003:7).

Powerful texts

Critics of social practices views of literacy suggest that they valorise vernacular forms of literacy and by doing so, leave disadvantaged people marginalised from dominant literacy practices (McCabe, 1998). While

literacy practices may be diverse and rapidly expanding in increasingly globalised, technology enhanced and multicultural countries like Australia. Nonetheless, some literacies hold more power than others, and independent mastery of these literacies by disadvantaged people should be the ultimate aim of any service provider genuinely interested in community development or empowerment. Dominant literacies in Australia are generally assumed to be related to the workforce, determined by industry and encapsulated in accredited curriculum.

Applying this criticism to the Neighborhood House literacy mediation practices identified in this study, a policy maker might be tempted to view the informal literacy mediation occurring in the kitchens and hallways as a short term fix that would be best solved by encouraging participation in the literacy programs on offer at Beachside House or by the referral of visitors who present at Orchard House to nearby courses and classes. Critics of a social practices view of literacy might not view positively Tracey's approach: "If they wanted to come in for their whole life and have support with filling in forms, then we would just continue to do that."

Researchers into social views of literacy refute this argument. Papen (2005) suggests that rather than undermining the case for the formal provision of literacy training, a social practices study of literacy can give insights into the most effective means of supporting learners to develop English language literacy, including within a formal program. Also, there are some approaches to the formal teaching of adult literacy classes that share a social practices view of literacy, notably critical literacy and participatory education models (Papen 2005:134). The Beachside House approach to literacy development involves learners attending formal literacy classes but it also includes individual sessions with a volunteer to go over the material from the class, and to customise and personalise it to their own experiences. In this way, a social practices approach to literacy informs and supports the formal approach. Instead of undermining the formal provision of competency-based literacy programs in the neighbourhood houses, it could be argued that the informal literacy support adds value that would be unlikely to be achieved in more formal institutions of learning.

Also, as Papen points out, in a rapidly changing, globalised and multicultural world, the accepted view of dominant and marginal literacies is, itself, worthy of critique (Papen 2005:130). If a disconnect occurs between the texts that are taught in literacy classes, and the texts for which large groups of the public are seeking literacy support, this brings into question whose needs are being served by the formal adult literacy classes. One of the underpinning principles of critical literacy studies is the study of texts within contexts, including in the political context. The goal of a critical literacy class should be for learners to move beyond being passive recipients of the written word, to an understanding of the role that particular texts play in the broader economy and society and ultimately to an ability to use texts purposefully to achieve their own ends. The Beachside House experience suggests that the classes are not replacing the need for literacy mediation. However, if the classes were able to respond more flexibly to learners' needs, perhaps the need for literacy mediation would reduce.

Conclusion

Literacy mediators work across socio-political systems and structures in order to bridge divides for marginalised people. In many instances, that marginalisation is a result of a lack of proficiency in English language. However, in other instances, the marginalisation occurs within the English language, as the apparatus of the state turns to increasingly complex and textually dense means of managing governance and services. The Neighbourhood House staff in this study, like the youth workers in Theriault's study and Aboriginal store workers in Kral and Falk's study, operate at the literacy interface. Their work has significant impacts on the lives of vulnerable people. Yet this study indicates that their work is barely recognised as work at all, and where it is, it tends to be spoken of with the language of the personal and domestic, thus rendering it of lesser value than the many other administrative, organisational or text based tasks that are part of the work of a neighborhood house administrator.

The consistent role of empathy, understanding and trust in the mediation relationships described in this study suggests that these skills and behaviors are inherent in literacy mediation. Yet it is these skills and behaviors that appear to be leaving the staff vulnerable to

suspicion as to their effectiveness and commitment. This study suggests that literacy mediation in the two neighborhood houses is complex and sophisticated and that it thrives, in part, because the staff have created an environment in which the accepted boundaries of domestic and workplace, private and public are eroded. Further research across the Neighbourhood House sector would be required to determine whether staff commonly holds these skills across the broader Neighbourhood House sector.

An additional area of research attention could be the extent to which literacy mediation occurs in neighbourhood houses that are situated in areas with much lower proportions of residents with limited educational completions and low literacy. The work of Neighbourhood Houses in newly arrived migrant communities and in Indigenous communities is also worthy of further attention.

The literacy mediators' emotional work, outlined in this study, challenges us to rethink the ways that marginalised adults with low skills are supported in our communities. Mihut suggests that literacy mediation shows that "emotions have social and political dimensions" (Mihut, 2012:75). The Beachside House and Orchard House experiences suggest that personal, social and political factors are inherent in the development of adult literacy. The provision of state funded programs that deny the existence of these factors, does not remove them. It merely moves them further out of sight, out of the classrooms and into the hallways and kitchens of the neighbourhood houses.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) *2033.0.55.001 - Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA)*, Canberra.

Barton, D. (1991) 'The social nature of writing' In D. Barton & R. Ivanič (Eds.), *Writing in the Community*. London: Sage Publications, 1-13.

Brackertz, N, 2007, *Who is hard to reach and why? Institute of Social Research Working Paper*, Melbourne: Swinburne University of Technology.

Clemans, A. (2010). 'Stuck at home: A portrayal of educational work in community spaces' in *Studies in the Education of Adults, 42:2*, 156 – 169.

Jacob, S., Fugerson, S., & Paige, S. (2012) 'Writing Interview Protocols and Conducting Interviews: Tips for Students New to the Field of Qualitative Research' in *Qualitative Report, 2012, Vol.17,* 1-10.

Kalman, J. (1999) *Writing on the Plaza: Mediated Literacy Practice Among Scribes and Clients in Mexico City.* Hampton: Creskill.

Kangan, M. (1974) Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education 1974, *TAFE in Australia: report on needs in technical and further education, April 1974 [Kangan report]*, 2nd edn, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Kral, I., and Falk, I. (2004) *What is all that learning for? Indigenous adult English literacy practices, training, community capacity and health,* Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Educational Research.

McCabe, C. (1998). 'A response to Brian Street', in *English in Education*, 32:1, 26-28.

Mihut, L. (2014) 'Literacy brokers and the emotional work of mediation' in *Literacy in Composition Studies*, 2:1, 57-79.

Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994) Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Papen, U. (2005) *Adult Literacy as Social Practice: More Than Skills*, Routledge: London.

Papen, U. (2009) 'Literacy, Learning and Health – A Social Practices View of Health Literacy' in *Literacy & Numeracy Studies* 16: 2, 19-34.

Papen, U. (2010). 'Literacy mediators, scribes or brokers? The central role of others in accomplishing reading and writing' in *Language et société*, *133*, September, 63-82.

Papen, U. (2012) 'Informal, incidental and ad hoc: the information-seeking and learning strategies of health care patients' in *Language and education* 26:2, 105-119.

Riekmann, W., and Buddeberg, K. (2013) *Functional Illiterates and their Confidantes: A new Approach to the Question of Non-Participation in Adult Education*, Paper given to the 7th European Research Conference, Changing configurations of adults education in transitional times, Berlin, German, September 2013.

Rooney, D. (2011) 'Centres 'down under': mapping Australia's neighbourhood centres' in *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 51:2, 203-225.

Street, B. (2003) 'What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice' in *Current issues in comparative education*, *5*:2, 77-91.

Theriault, V. (2013) *Community based organisations as mediation and transitional places for young people's literacy and practices,* Paper presented at 7th European Research Conference, Changing configurations of adults education in transitional times, Berlin, Germany, September 2013.

Tusting, K (2003) *A Review of Theories of Informal Learning,* Working Paper, Lancaster, England: Lancaster Literacy Research Centre.

About the Author

Sally Thompson is the Australian Education Union's (AEU) Federal Women's Officer. She is the former CEO of Adult Learning Australia (ALA), former President of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) and a current member of the Victorian Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board.

Contact details

Sally Thompson
4 Ryan St
Footscray, Vic 3011

Email: sally@sallythompson.com.au