Literacy needs

Department of Communication & Journalism
Wellington and Palmerston North

What are the learning needs of people with low functional literacy in English, who are seeking to upgrade their abilities? In one-to-one interviews we asked 90 people undertaking literacy training courses to tell us what needs they perceived were linked with improving their literacy.

This research programme was initiated by the Wanganui District Library in collaboration with the Department of Communication and Journalism, later joined by the Whanganui Community Foundation, Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), and Te Puna Matauranga O Whanganui.

This poster displays actual quotations from interviews with people of low functional literacy in English. All were taking part in adult literacy training courses and were volunteer participants in this research. Each quotation occurs within an illustration showing people featured against photographic backgrounds of Wanganui. The illustrator, Kerry Ann Lee, developed these depicted persons following the demographics of our interviewees: ages, gender, ethnicity, etc., though, for reasons of privacy, without knowing the specifics of the individuals originally making the comments.

Objectives
1. to document interviewees’ experiences in a vivid manner
2. to seek ways to keep interviewees’ words in a prominent place in the forefront of the research
3. to find ways in which interviewees’ own words might have an appropriate influence in debate about national literacy and employment policy
4. to later provide feedback to interviewees on what they and others had said in a supportive and accessible manner.

1. Formal Workplace Qualifications

Increasing workplace demands for qualifications serve a useful dual purpose. First, they focus people on building demonstrable aptitudes, necessary in light of the complex work tasks inherent in the 21st century environment. Second, they create a heightened awareness among people that their future prospects of work are increasingly tied up with improved literacy abilities.

2. Confidence

Many people with literacy needs are not yet in training. Culligan et al. (2004) used national censuses plus the 1996 IALS to predict the numbers of people at IALS levels one and two. Around 1.2 million adults may have low levels of literacy and possibly 730,000 are not participating in training (for a summary see Learning for Living Issue 2). People’s self-confidence grows in proportion to their literacy learning.

3. Communication Skills

Many people interviewed identified better communication as resulting from their literacy studies, and linked such abilities to feelings of success or actual promotion at work. Improvements in literacy at work correlate positively with a person’s growing ability to suggest improvements, their openness to say when they do not understand something, and their ability to interact successfully with others.

4. Computer Skills

Digital literacy is an important cluster of competencies for the 21st century. However, those concerned to put right the “digital divide” often seem to assume that access alone will ensure that individuals and communities will become and remain digitally connected. The national digital strategy needs to be as focused on facilitating users’ enduring use of computing as on facilitating access alone.

5. Cultural Literacy or Whakapapa

Most people want to feel grounded in their culture, which reinforces their sense of being a capable learner. Te Kāwai Ora (2001), a key report on Māori and literacy, defined literacy broadly: “critical themes about literacy (are) the social and historical contexts in which literacy is understood; the skill bases that literacy, when broadly defined, encompasses, and the competencies that the literate person is able to demonstrate” (p. 5).

References

