

# Literacy needs

Department of Communication & Journalism  
Wellington and Palmerston North

Niki Culligan  
Frank Sligo  
Franco Vaccarino

Margie Comrie  
Elspeth Tilley  
John Franklin

Illustrated by Kerry Ann Lee,  
Art-Design-Illustration,  
Phone 021 0333 166, hmsb@bigfoot.com  
Wellington

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. later to 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 number 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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).



## 6. Number Skills

The Workplace Productivity Working Group report (2004) comments that "To fully realise workplace productivity improvements in NZ firms will require much more widespread adoption of effective measurement and reporting practices" (p. 11). What is needed is an orientation to measurement at all levels, plus a shared understanding that through measuring and monitoring you really get to understand your business and obtain valid evidence for creating ongoing improvements.



## 7. Reading and/or Writing

The focus on literacy at work often falls upon shop floor workers or other front-line staff. Yet in an increasingly sophisticated, technology-dependent world, everyone, including managers, needs good literacy. The 1996 NZ International Adult Literacy Survey indicates that almost 30% of managers were of low document literacy. This compares with around 44% of the NZ workforce generally being at document literacy levels one and two.



## 8. Learning One-to-One

Our interviewees had varying perspectives on whether learning should occur one-to-one, or whether taking part in a class with others was sufficient. The most vulnerable individuals with very low confidence need significant support in becoming competent adult learners. Before much progress can be made with literacy, people must build their communication competencies, self-esteem and self-confidence.

## References

Culligan, N., Arnold, G., Noble, A., & Sligo, F.X. (2004). *Analysis of New Zealand data from the International Adult Literacy Survey; Demographic predictors of low literacy proficiency*. Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University. Report commissioned by the N.Z. Ministry of Education, Wellington. Accessed on July 19, 2006, from <http://literacy.massey.ac.nz/fileadmin/files/Files/Analysis%20of%20New%20Zealand%20Data.pdf>

*Learning for Living, Te Ako Mo Te Ora; An Update on Foundation Learning for Tertiary Educators, Industry Training Organisations and Employers*, issue 2, February 2005. Wellington: Ministry of Education. Accessed on July 19, 2006, from [http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl10446\\_v1/issue-2.pdf](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl10446_v1/issue-2.pdf)

*Te kāwai ora; Reading the world, reading the word, being the world*. Report of the Māori Adult Literacy Working Party. (2001). Wellington: Hon Tariana Turia. Accessed on July 18, 2006, from <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/turia/te-kawai-ora-report/home.cfm>

Workplace Productivity Working Group (2004). *Workplace productivity challenge. Report of the Workplace Productivity Working Group*. Wellington: Department of Labour (August).

<http://literacy.massey.ac.nz/>  
0800 MASSEY (627 739)



Massey University