

Workshop 19:
Voicing the goal –
creating resources and building community

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In 1989 when I commenced as a teacher of language and literacy at Long Bay there was a dearth of appropriate materials for teaching adults. Many teachers used and adapted primary school texts. Of course we all knew that these went against all principles for teaching adults and set about creating materials that had relevance for our students in the unique circumstances of a gaol. For those least literate we used the technique of scribing; where the student would dictate his story to the scribe and this transcript would become the learning material for the subsequent lessons. I saw how engaging, motivating and ultimately empowering the use of autobiographical material was to the learner.

In 1991 Belinda Holland, a colleague at the Metropolitan Remand Centre, produced a series of 10 low-level readers for use in New South Wales gaols. The stories were collected from students in her classroom on themes of both personal history and gaol routine. I began to use the readers with my students. Their attraction was that they were simple stories told by fellow prisoners and their subjects were commonly shared experience. One of my students W., an Aboriginal man in his early 40's had been attending classes for several months and was making only a little progress. W. had murdered his wife in a drunken fit. They had 4 children who now lived in another state with W's brother. The children were writing to their father. I was reading W. their letters and through the scribing technique we were responding to them. W. loved his children very much and this was a great motivating factor for him to learn to read and write. W. was further handicapped by brain damage after years of alcohol abuse and he had a severe stutter. Many months passed and W. continued to attend the class taking learning steps forward and backwards. In a class we read together 'The Day the Welfare Came', one of the new readers. W. took it to his cell and returned to class a week later. He read the story unfalteringly and with few errors. In the intervening week he had read and copied the story many times. He told me it was 'his' story. He too had been taken from his family by the state in similar circumstances. The reader became the turning point in W. learning to read and write. His progress became rapid and within months he was corresponding with his children with minimal assistance.

Some years later I was employed to co-ordinate an oral history of Long Bay Gaol. The project commenced in 1996 as a New Work Opportunities Scheme; a partnership between the Department of Corrective Services and the Department of Education and Training. Over the year 19 long-term unemployed people from the local area were trained in oral history techniques, word processing, editing, and general administration duties. The project set out to record a sample of the lives led by those who had experienced one of New South Wales most infamous gaols. The stories of the everyday, of a prison culture that had roots stretching back to the colonisation of Australia and beyond. This culture had developed in exclusion, locked away from society. These were stories that were

worthwhile recording; to become an important social document of little known lives, to capture the voices of those who had been without voice for all this time.

Oral histories are the words of people, often ordinary people, who by living their lives become part of history's fabric. They differ from other histories in that the stories collected do not come from a single perspective, but rather express multiple viewpoints. The Long Bay Oral History Project (LBOHP) has captured a range of voices; women officers, Aboriginal inmates, inmates who entered the system as boys, those who were in Katingal, officers under the Royal Commission spotlight, teachers, psychologists, Legal Aid lawyers and visitors. The interviewees were asked a series of questions to trigger their memories on a range of themes that tried to encompass day-to-day life for the Long Bay inmates and workers. The scope of the project was large, perhaps too large. As the recording progressed, a focus period from the mid 1960's to after the Royal Commission into NSW prisons in the late 1970's emerged. People's recollections often traversed many decades. One interviewee's experience stretched back to the 1940's when he describes the last person executed in New South Wales. That major event is, of course, recorded in historical annals.

The Long Bay Oral History Project exists as 80 hours of taped and transcribed interviews as well as a collection of photographs of the Long Bay buildings. The archive will be lodged publicly once the department has completed using the material. There is a documentary on Katingal in current production using extracts from the recordings.

In 2002 I decided to build on the success of the Long Bay Readers and create the Long Bay History Readers. I had been sitting on these stories for five years. Here was a wealth of material that would be of great interest to inmates; stories from several perspectives of lives in the gaol over many years. Here was an opportunity to take this social history into another form and in the process validate the lives of our inmate students. The process of adapting the transcripts into the readers was more difficult than I thought. The way we speak and the way we write are very different. When we speak there are opportunities to rephrase and clarify. We think as we speak and sometimes we get it wrong, so we try from another angle. Writing is mostly structured while speech can be random and rambling. The way a person speaks; their vocabulary, their accent, their rhythm, their hesitations "ums" and "ahs" give the listener a lot of information about that person. We wanted to stay as true as possible to the original transcript in order to achieve this. This material was not always easy to read and the writing was not always conventional. The finished texts are a compromise. To be used effectively as a tool for our students we had to make some modifications; take out some repetitions and rephrasing, reorganise the syntax and add some punctuation.

The late Kevin Finnerty, a former Principal of AEVTI (Adult Education and Vocational Training Institute delivers education throughout NSW correctional centres) started as a teacher in the Central Industrial Prison, Long Bay in the 1970's. He tells the following story which is the version we have adapted for the reader.

"The guys used to go swimming on a Summer's night, in the ranges, which were the outside cells that had the doors opening on to verandahs. This was 2 and 3 Wings in the Central Industrial Prison - the CIP. You'd often have four guys to a cell in there and it would get stinking hot because the walls would prevent any sea breeze coming through. What they used to do was block the toilet with either paper or towelling. They'd get newspaper and put it all around the cell door, they'd block the sink, if they had one. They'd

then put all of their mattresses and bedding and whatever gear they had, which was precious little, up on the top bunks and turn the toilet and the sink on and actually fill up the cell so it was about 5 or 6 feet deep in water.

And then they'd swim and have a great time jumping off the top bunk and splashing around. At that stage there'd only be a night senior on who would be walking around the gaol and chances are he wouldn't even go into the yards where the ranges were.

I only found out about this when a bloke called Clarrie - the Can-o-mat King as he was known (but that's another story) didn't turn up for work one morning and I said, ' where's Clarrie?' ' He's locked up for three days', someone said.' What the hell for,' I asked. 'He was swimming', they said, 'What?' I said.

The night senior had noticed a bit of noise coming from this cell, went to the door, and there was water seeping out onto the verandah; opened the door, took the lock out and couldn't get the bar back because of the pressure board. Eventually he kicked it back and the door sort of slammed open and a huge wave of water and three crims came swooping out onto the range.

But the trick was that after they'd had their swim they'd unblock the toilet, take the paper out from under the door and the water would run out onto the range and by next morning there'd be no hint of water. That was a very smart thing to do on a Summer's evening" .

Aboriginal inmate Ernie Hinton recorded many hours of colourful, detailed stories. He had been an inmate for over 23 years when the interview was recorded. In the following text from the reader Ernie talks about growing up as an Aboriginal in the 1960's. This short text encapsulates the politics of being Aboriginal for his generation and remains relevant for the many young Koori inmates incarcerated in NSW gaols.

How would you describe yourself as a person back then Ernie?

I was wild and pretty mad I think. I mean I was rip and tear. I think that's the part with a lot of kids when you think about it. I was pretty good at education but I also know being Aboriginal, and I'm not saying this for a break, it doesn't give you much hope for your future. It doesn't matter how much education you've got, the colour of your skin is a weight dragging behind you. Things have changed a bit now, not a bit, it's changed a lot but still there's a big weight dragging behind you just being Aboriginal.

Did you have any role models or people you looked up to in those days Ernie?

No, I think there was a few football players but I didn't know that there was black cricketers. I didn't know much about anything. Even at school I thought Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson were the first men over the Blue Mountains, I remember all my History lessons but I later found out that they were only the first white men. You've got to structure things so people have got pride in themselves - the Aboriginal people, that's where it basically gets back to. They've got to know that they did something. When I was a little bloke, I wanted to be an Indian. I didn't want to be a black fellow, I wanted to be an Indian. If a psych would ask me now, I would say because I thought at least those people fought the white men. They fought in New Zealand. I didn't know that there were fights here.

Since I've been going to libraries and reading, educating myself, I've found out that our people did fight, they did resist. There were fights all over the place. My tribe fought and they joined with different other tribes up in the Hunter. There were fights everywhere but you've got to let the people, you've got to let the Aboriginal people know that. There has got to be pride put back into the people so they know that it wasn't all just "Here you are, take this". It isn't a hand-out society. That's how they're treated. You can't demoralise people and then expect to give them equality but don't give them equality in justice. Equality goes all the way around. Do you know what I mean? George Orwell - some of the animals are equal except the pigs. I remember reading that "Animal Farm". I knew what he was talking about then. A lot of people didn't but I knew what he meant. That's how I feel the Aboriginals are. We're all animals it's just that the white people are the pigs.

(George Orwell, the English Novelist, wrote Animal Farm in the 1940's. The major characters in the novel are animals. The pigs are the rulers of the farm. The chief pig, Napoleon is a dictator in disguise. The motto in the book is "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others".)

We selected a range of voices and experiences for the Long Bay History Readers. Bill Morrow started work at Long Bay in 1939. He had a long and distinguished career and achieved a high rank. He was interviewed when he was over 80 and had a vivid memory for detail. In the reader 'First Days' there are 4 stories of first gaol experiences; two are from inmates and two are from officers.

"I started at Long Bay, to be really correct, at 6.30am on the 4th January 1939. Training, well, there was no such word. I had a rifle thrown at me, old outdated Boer War rifle, single shot. I was given a bandolier of bullets which the lead bullets fell out of. We used to pack them in with brown paper or cigarette papers just to keep them there and stop the powder falling out. I was told, or I was asked by the Chief Warder – 'ah do you know what you've gotta do Jim?' - all young officers were termed Jim. So I says, 'well I'll be on the tower to prevent escape and to protect the unarmed officers.' He said, 'hmm ... that's very good Jim' So somebody gave me a huge key and told me how to get to the front tower, unlock it and climb on top. We were told to move on that tower and never be idle but be alert, and never walk in an established pattern. Never walk from one end to the other in a monotonous manner because people sitting down could watch you, and watch your habits and can time you right to the very split second.

On my first morning they all lined up and I got in the line and somebody said to me, 'get out of here, you're number eight post you're further up there'. So I went up there and I got pushed around until finally I took up the position for eight post. Soon as I did the gatekeeper handed me a bunch of keys, which I watched the others to see what they done with them. Some put them in their pockets, some dangled them in their hands and I suppose that was the extent of my training until later on."

Our students are among the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society. They often have a history of drug abuse, education standard below the norm, few employment and life skills, fragmented work history, can be afflicted with a mental illness, low self esteem and the 'negatives' list goes on. Incarceration can compound these problems by increasing anger and frustration levels, separating families and disenfranchising our students from the general community. They are thrown into a new environment that is home and work and school, hospital, sports club, meeting place, site of boredom, abuse and possible

transformation. Within the walls of our institutions an everyday life goes on. Inmates sleep, eat and wash, have routines, form friendships, play games, contribute to their work, study or wing. Communities are formed. These can be communities of exclusion; the oppressed gathering together in their destitution, or communities of inclusion where each person's role is acknowledged. We as educators have some power in shaping communities of inclusion.

Resources such as the Long Bay History Readers contribute to the development of the gaol community. Acknowledging, validating the lives of those in the gaol. The history readers provide a continuum with the past, with all those other men and boys who have passed through the sandstone facades of these buildings. The young Ernie Hinton protecting himself from attack; finding his political voice. The boys filling their cell to swim on the hot summer night Even the stories of officers' first days have a place in the community. Likewise, gaol magazines, collections of poetry and art exhibitions provide an opportunity for inmates to describe their environment, express their anger or awakening. To have a voice in their community.