Three questions for VET foundation skills support services

Justin Hayes

Three questions for VET foundation skills support services.

Justin Hayes

December 2020

This three-part piece looks at three questions related to foundation skills support services in Australian VET. The aim is to assist practitioners in their understanding of their roles, the complexity of issues at hand and the historical background of the field. This piece uses past literature to investigate the three questions, although this should not be considered to be a literature review or encompass the entirety of literature on the subjects. Whilst these questions are posed, practitioners will realise that answers are not easily forthcoming (or even provided).

Question 1
How do you define foundation skills when terminology is 'in constant flux'?

In 2012, the Australian federal government released its latest policy document on adult foundation skills, titled the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults* (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment [SCOTESE], 2012). Its first policy document on 'foundation skills' and its first on literacy and numeracy since the *Australian Language and Literacy Policy* in 1991 (Newton, 2016), it defined foundation skills as being the combination of:

- English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) – listening, speaking, reading, writing, digital literacy and use of mathematical ideas; and
- employability skills, such as collaboration, problem solving, self-management, learning and information and communication technology (ICT) skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life.

Here, foundation skills has two components: an LLN component and an employment component. Pinning down a universally agreed upon definition that exists over the course of a number of years has, however, proven to be elusive. In 2001, this point was raised by Falk and Millar when commenting: "literature associated with literacy and numeracy in VET comes from a variety of multi-disciplinary sources ... [and] as a result, there are often difficult and overlapping concepts associated with the field" (p.8), and include such terms as LLN, basic skills, functional literacy, integrated literacy and numeracy, workplace literacy and numeracy, whole language and critical literacy and numeracy.

Falk and Millar also provide what they term the "most widely accepted Australian definition of adult literacy" (p.10) (at the time), established by the Australian Council for Adult Literacy (ACAL) as

Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge, which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy, which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society.

This same definition was also discussed by Suda (2001), who emphasised that literacy here goes beyond reading and writing texts and incorporates a range of information processing skills for meaning-making in a range of formats and for a range of social, employment and cultural practices. This expanded view from the traditional viewpoint of an acquired skill to the modern take of contextualised practice received much attention around the turn of the millennium.

Perhaps Wignall (2017) condenses this elusiveness of terminology best when stating the definitions of what constitutes foundation skills are "in constant flux" (p.3) and "a flexible approach to defining and redefining foundation skills is needed to accommodate the broad and shifting range of individuals' skill development needs" (p.4). This 'constant flux' is apparent in literature by looking at how the terminology has changed over the years before and since Falk, Millar and Suda wrote in 2001.

Newton (2016) reviews literature on terminology in the first decade of the 21st century and notes the seemingly interchangeability of such terms as 'basic skills', 'core skills', 'life skills', 'generic skills' and 'employability skills' at the time, and provides an overview of the definition and development of the term 'foundation skills' in Australia. This development includes a suggestion by Perkins (2009) in her report *Adult literacy and numeracy: Research and future strategy* of "a move from talking about literacy and numeracy to a discussion of core skills or foundation skills" to raise awareness and help "ensure literacy and numeracy is seen as a mainstream concern" (p.37). Newton reports that the results of the

2006 *Adult Literacy and Life Skills* survey, the intentions of the incoming Labour government to promote an inter-relationship between education, skills and productivity and the work by Roberts and Wignall (2010) to integrate foundation skills into Training Packages can be seen as a significant stimulus for the definition provided in the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*, which includes both an LLN component and an employability component.

The context of this integration is in part the subject of work by Black (2004) and Black and Yasukawa (2010), who provide background to the development of terminology and literacy and numeracy in policy prior to the 21st century. With references to the 1987 *National Policy on Languages*, the 1990 *International Literacy Year* and the 1991 *Australian Language and Literacy Policy*, Black and Yasukawa give a historical setting for a concerted effort to inter-relate adult literacy and numeracy with economic development and productivity, stating "The current rise of foundation skills represents the confluence of several national political and socioeconomic agendas which are based in large part on the human capital rationale, whereby improved literacy and numeracy skills will lead in turn to improved productivity and greater national prosperity" and where "private industry is playing a key promotional role" (2010, p. 35).

With and since the release of the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults* in 2012, however, the use of the term 'foundation skills' has been obscure, both within the Strategy itself and in subsequent documents. The Strategy states, "Australian governments agree that the [Australian Core Skills Framework] ACSF will be used as the standard framework for measuring foundation skills and will support the use of tools based on the ACSF" (p.15). The ACSF, however, describes the five skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy, and therefore, it is impossible to measure the remaining skills within the definition by using it, those of 'digital literacy' and employability skills'. Perhaps for this reason, the Strategy also mentions, "The Australian Government funded the development of a new Core Skills for Work Framework [CSfW], which assists with the identification, description and measurement of employability skills" (p.17), however, the CSfW, released in 2013, does not incorporate the

employability skills of the Strategy's definition and, instead, documents three skill clusters of ten entirely new skill areas. It is worth noting that Roberts and Wignall (2010) define foundation skills two years before the Strategy's release as those that "encompass both the Core Skills (or reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy and learning) described by the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and Employability Skills" (p.3), yet, the Strategy chose to provide an alternative definition, whilst at the same time stating that the ACSF will measure them.

Complicating matters from the national perspective, when mentioning foundation skills in *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia's Vocational Education and Training System* (Joyce, 2019) (also known as 'The Joyce Review'), only LLN and digital skills (LLND) were listed, apparently dropping the employment-related skills and the learning skill of the ACSF from relevance. Understanding that digital skills was now considered of major importance, the federal government recently released the *Digital Literacy Skills Framework* (DLSF), which now sits alongside (and perhaps in the future within) the ACSF. It is unclear, however, what relevance the *Core Skills for Work* framework still holds at a national level, with the only comment in relatively recent literature from Wignall (2015), who stated that it "has had little impact to date on practice around employability skills, but there is considerable potential for it to underpin the development of education and training products and practices that will strengthen foundation skills provision in future" (p.9). Nevertheless, training packages and units of competency currently embed and list both the learning skill of the ACSF and employment skills as key aspects whilst not yet explicitly embedding or listing digital literacy skills.

From a state perspective, terminology is no less clear, at least in Victoria. The *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to participation and jobs – Discussion paper,* produced by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (2018), has numerous references to "literacy, numeracy and foundation skills" on pages 4, 7, 8, 14 and 36, with the word 'and' curiously being included, as if either foundation skills were somehow separate and distinct from literacy

and numeracy or if an error was made in production where the word 'other' was meant to be included to make 'and other'. Furthermore, *The Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020-25: Ministerial Statement* (Department of Education and Training, 2019) uses the term 'core foundation skills' without explanation of what the term means or why the word 'core' was added.

As can be seen, a standard and widely accepted definition of the term 'foundation skills' in Australian VET does not exist. And this leads back to the original question: *How do you define foundation skills when terminology is 'in constant flux'?* It is proposed here that this involves a national discussion between governments, industry and the education sector to agree on a definition, to update and amend Standards and regulation, to incorporate this definition in future announcements and to propose future dates for regular discussions on the subject, acknowledging that the definition will likely change as society changes. In a country that is steadily recognising the importance and complexity of foundation skills, this task is certainly achievable.

References

Black, S. (2004). Whose economic wellbeing? A challenge to dominant discourses on the relationship between literacy and numeracy and (un)employment. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies, 13*(1), 7-17 Retrieved from https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/index.php/lnj

Black, S. & Yasukawa, K. (2010). Time for national renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills'. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies, 18*(2), 43-57. https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v18i2.1897

Department of Education and Training. (2018). *Future opportunities for adult learners in Victoria: Pathways to participation and jobs – Discussion paper.* Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/adult-learners-paper.PDF

Department of Education and Training. (2019). *The future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020-25: Ministerial Statement.* https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/training/learners/learnlocal/Future-ACE-2020-25-Ministerial-Statement.pdf

Falk, I. & Millar, P. (2001). *Literacy and numeracy in Vocational Education and Training.* Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0019/9145/literacy-and-numeracy-in-vet-573.pdf

Joyce, S. (2019). *Strengthening skills: Expert of Australia's Vocational Education and Training system.* Retrieved from https://pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/domestic-policy/vet-review/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system

Newton, J. (2016). *Foundation skills policy contexts and measures of impact.* Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/83151/Foundation-skills-policy-contexts-and-measures-of-impact.pdf

Perkins, K. (2009). *Adult literacy and numeracy: Research and future strategy.* Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0018/9162/adult-literacy-

and-numeracy-2162.pdf

Roberts, A. & Wignall, L. (2010). *Foundation skills in VET products for the 21st century*. Retrieved from https://www.acal.edu.au/publications/documents/Foundation_Skills_in_VET_Products_for_the_21st_Century.pdf

Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment. (2012). *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*. Retrieved from https://docs.employment.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/national-foundation-skills-strategy-for-adults_0.pdf

Suda, L. (2001). *Policies and pedagogies for lifelong literacy: International perspectives for the 21st Century*. VIC: Language Australia

Wignall, L. (2015). *Research to identify and qualify professional practice in foundation skills*. Retrieved from https://rit.statedevelopment.sa.gov.au/upload/NFSS/report/pp-final-report.pdf

Wignall Consulting Services. (2017). *Foundation Skills Professional Standards Framework - Final draft for trialling*. Retrieved from https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A80736

Question 2
Are they actually 'skills' or are they 'practices' ... or are they both, at the same time?

This is the second of a three-part series that looks at three questions related to foundation skills support services in Australian VET. The aim of this series is to assist practitioners in their understanding of their roles, the complexity of issues at hand and the historical background of the field. This series uses past literature to investigate the three questions, although this should not be considered to be a literature review or encompass the entirety of literature on the subjects. Whilst these questions are posed, practitioners will realise that answers are not easily forthcoming (or even provided).

Newton (2016) explained that the 2006 *Adult Literacy and Life Skills* survey, with its standardised survey questions, was one impetus for the definition of foundation skills in the *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*. This, along with the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF), the Core Skills for Work (CSfW) and Digital Literacy Skills Framework (DLSF) that describe, measure and help assess the abilities of VET students, imply that foundation skills are a distinct set of skills that are measureable and consistent from context to context. On the other hand, the 'most widely accepted Australian definition of adult literacy' prior to the 2012 Strategy was provided by Falk and Millar (2001, p.10) to be

> Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking; it incorporates numeracy. It includes the cultural knowledge, which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognise and use language appropriate to different situations. For an advanced technological society such as Australia, the goal is an active literacy, which allows people to use language to enhance their capacity to think, create and question, in order to participate effectively in society.

This was interpreted by Suda (2001) as meaning literacy was not a skill (or set of skills) to be acquired "in a neatly prescribed fashion" (p.11) from which one only needs to learn and is then able to participate in society, but rather a social and cultural practice that develops in diverse settings, requiring negotiation by participants in specific contexts.

Lonsdale and McCurry (2004) present these two perspectives as the 'Autonomous model of literacy' versus the "Ideological model of literacy', and attribute this distinction to Street's 1984 work *Literacy in theory and practice.* Lonsdale and McCurry (p.7) summarise these two models as:

Autonomous model of literacy

- Literacy is viewed primarily as the expression of a person's intellectual abilities and various psychological tests are used to determine individual literacy levels.
- Illiteracy is viewed as a deficit, with the individual held largely responsible for this lack.
- Literacy is considered separate from its context and is mainly print-based.
- The underlying purpose of literacy is to imbue into individuals an acceptance of the dominant ideologies and its explicit purpose is to enhance the economic productivity of the nation.
- This model is aligned with the concept of human capital, in which intellectually trained workers form the backbone of the workforce and knowledge becomes a commodity to be exported to other countries.

Ideological model of literacy
.
- Literacy is viewed as a social practice and as a social responsibility.
- There are multiple learner-centred literacies involving a diverse range of skills and understandings, including technological and computer literacies.

- Critical thinking skills play an important role as enabling tools in this conception. Ethnographic approaches are adopted as assessment tools.
- There is a strong focus on the social context in which literacy practices take place and a consequent shift from narrow vocational outcomes for individual learners to more holistic outcomes related to empowerment and capacity-building for both individuals and communities.

Lonsdale and McCurry continue to explain that if literacy is context and social specific, then a universal literacy is not pragmatic or achievable and a multitude of literacies exist across space and time, a concept that has been termed 'New Literacy Studies' or 'New Literacies'. This has given rise to new terminology, such as computer literacy, digital literacy, scientific literacy, information literacy, social literacy, financial literacy, environmental literacy and health literacy, all of which relate to a broad classification of foundation skills.

Falk and Millar (2001) provide a range of research on the social context of New Literacies appropriate for the VET field, and highlight three points in particular: 1) its 'integrated' and 'embedded' nature, whereby literacy and numeracy skills are not "assumed to be teachable separate from the actual task" (p.13), and where teaching, in a vocational setting, is done in the context of the job, 2) where "the emphasis is not so much on the text or the product, but on the nature of language as being a part of any social context" (p.16) and 3) "in which basic skills for decoding, encoding and fluency connect to all aspects of an individual's and a community's sense of social identity and capacity to command social resources" (p.16). Measuring a VET student's foundation skills using a standardised tool against a pre-defined standardised outcome automatically defaults a foundation skills support service to remedial, deficit-bridging approaches, but literature on social practices reveals another option, one of a broader set of context-specific needs.

Black (2004), seemingly unconvinced by the distinct and measurable set of skills narrative (the autonomous theory), claims Australian government policies, initiatives and programs for literacy provision are aimed at improving

employment and economic statistics, yet questions the casual relationship between literacy and (un)employment. To quote Black (p.4),

> This 'model' of literacy [as a set of technical skills] has been termed 'autonomous' by Street (1984, 1993) because literacy is considered a cognitive skill relatively autonomous of social context. In many studies based on this model, the literacy levels of particular groups of people are measured using a range of indicators, and usually higher literacy levels are found to correlate with higher income/status jobs, and the reverse is the case for lower literacy levels (for recent Australian studies, see Lee and Miller 2000; Miller and Chiswick 1997). The measures or the indicators of literacy vary considerably across different studies, ranging from the estimations and beliefs of employers and their organisations (see House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 191:9-12), to sophisticated statistical surveys conducted across a range of standardised literacy related tasks (e.g. OECD 1995, 1997, OECD/Statistics Canada 2000, Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997). On the basis of both these beliefs and the statistical findings, powerful institutions invariably assume the authority to identify individuals and groups of people as lacking or deficient in literacy skills and to 'prescribe' some form of literacy provision for the economic wellbeing of all concerned; individuals, enterprises and the nation.

Speaking about the large-scale international surveys of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) specifically, Black writes (p.4),

> These surveys with their seemingly 'objective' findings lead to commonsensical assertions about the state of literacy in different countries, and they enable the OECD and others (government agencies in particular, which draw on the OECD finding) to present themselves as arbiters of what counts as literacy and to 'prescribe' solutions involving the need for increased literacy provision.

Further (p.5),

Critics of the IALS [one OECD survey] point out that standardised literacy measures are unlikely to accurately describe the literacy activities/practices of the groups of people surveyed largely because they fail to adequately account for different cultural contexts.

Following from there, Black details the alternative (ideological) view in which evidence from a large range of research suggests that literacy and numeracy are used within social networks and 'communities of practice', to negotiate and contextualise communication, and what that communication means to them is of far more value than a widely-standardised and neutral set of autonomous skills.

By revealing, however, that "usually higher literacy levels [as measured by standardised testing] are found to correlate with higher income/status jobs, and the reverse is the case for lower literacy levels" (p.4), arguments against the 'autonomous model' seem weakened. If there is a correlation between higher literacy levels and higher incomes, then the autonomous model must have some validity, depending on a particular purpose.

Lonsdale and McCurry (2004), Mayer (2016) and Cameron (2016) attempt to portray a co-existence of these two seemingly distinct viewpoints of literacy, whereby a separation of the two is at times confusing and that a clear distinction between the two perspectives is not always apparent. Lonsdale and McCurry (2004) explain that some skills can appear to be situation-specific but are also, simultaneously, common to all contexts, providing the example of 'computer literacy', which can be both a generic skill and a social-specific literacy. Mayer (2016) provides a detailed literature review on the human capital versus social practices debate and concludes, "While human capital and autonomous models may suggest that distinct skills can be taught and that they will contribute to the economic inclusion of previously marginalised individuals, this review has shown that this is not the only perspective in the research literature." (p.22). Cameron (2016) adds recent research, documented as a 'pluralistic approach', is a way to incorporate these two perspectives, citing three pieces of research that

explore performance measurements across contexts, proficiency measures against literacy/numeracy practices over time and cognitive processes across life domains. Cameron states clearly that none of the perspectives presented are considered to be superior, as each have their own use, and it is promising to learn that after the late 20th century and early 21st century debate over two perspectives seemingly as odds with each other, there is the possibility through more recent research to show how they can both be integrated into VET support.

With much literature discussing government focus on skills for employment and economic development, for example Black (2004), Black and Yasukawa (2010) and Falk (2001), it is interesting that the federal government has acknowledged both skills and practices in its *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*. On page 2, it is stated, "Foundation skills development includes both skills acquisition and the critical application of these skills in multiple environments for multiple purposes". This suggests that the Strategy fuses the autonomous model of independent 'skills acquisition' with the importance of social practices via 'critical application' of those skills. If, therefore, foundation skills are a set of isolated, individual and measurable skills, then deficit approaches to develop them are valid, along with the set of frameworks to measure them (ACSF, CSfW and DLSF), but if foundation skills are interconnected, social and negotiable practices, then altogether new approaches to informing, teaching, measuring and reporting must be created, approaches that research and literature have yet to clearly define.

References

Black, S. (2004). Whose economic wellbeing? A challenge to dominant discourses on the relationship between literacy and numeracy and (un)employment. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies, 13*(1), 7-17 Retrieved from https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/index.php/lnj

Black, S. & Yasukawa, K. (2010). Time for national renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills'. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies, 18*(2), 43-57. https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v18i2.1897

Cameron, L. (2016. The salience of diversity in foundation skills contexts, pedagogies and research. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/83572/Salience-of-diversity-in-foundation-skills.pdf

Falk, I. (2001). *Sleight of hand: Job myths, literacy and social capital*. (CRLRA Working Paper No. RA-D14/2001) Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED463427.pdf

Falk, I. & Millar, P. (2001). *Literacy and numeracy in Vocational Education and Training*. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0019/9145/literacy-and-numeracy-in-vet-573.pdf

Lonsdale, M. & McCurry, D. (2004). *Literacy in the new millennium*. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0012/2424/nr2l02.pdf

Mayer, D. (2016). *Exploring perspectives on adult language, literacy and numeracy*. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/83121/Exploring-perspectives-on-ALLN.pdf

Newton, J. (2016). *Foundation skills policy contexts and measures of impact*. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/83151/Foundation-skills-policy-contexts-and-measures-of-impact.pdf

Suda, L. (2001). *Policies and pedagogies for lifelong literacy: International perspectives for the 21st Century*. VIC: Language Australia

Question 3

What roles do foundation skills support services have in VET?

With questions over terminology of foundation skills and whether they should be considered as skills or practices (or both) unresolved, the environment for VET foundation skills support services is more complex than simply assisting students with literacy and numeracy. Here, the roles of these services are introduced with literature from three phases: 1994-1996, 2001-2009 and 2010-2018.

1994-1996

Unlike present-day Victoria, which has a contestable training model without a single, unifying organisation to administer public Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, New South Wales has continued to have NSW TAFE as its statutory body since it was established in 1990. 'Tutorial Support' became a part of this NSW TAFE development in 1990, along with the Foundation Studies Training Division (FSTD), which oversaw the operations of foundation skills training in TAFE institutes across New South Wales. (Although Black (1996) explains that 'Tutorial Support' had been in existence long before that, known as remedial and refresher classes.) Between 1994 and 1996, a series of research literature was funded by FSTD that sheds light on aspects of foundation skills training within New South Wales VET during this period. It is noteworthy that not only was such research created, given the lack of other specific research related to foundation skills in VET up to and during this time, but that the word 'foundation' was used, two decades because it was included in the federal government's 2012 *National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults*.

Between 1994 and 1996, a series of papers was produced for the FTSD that provide a snapshot of the foundation skills support practices within NSW TAFE at the time, which consisted of four models: team-teaching, small group work, one-to-one and the availability of Independent Learning Centres. This was the

first concerted effort to document foundation skills support with Black (1996) noting, "To date, Tutorial Support is relatively unresearched, but with the current emphasis on 'vocational' education and training (VET), and the 'integration' of English language, literacy and numeracy with VET, Tutorial Support assume special significance" (p.1) and "there have been relatively few studies conducted into language, literacy or numeracy difficulties encountered by students in undertaking TAFE vocational courses" (p.6). Three of these FSTD papers largely focus on the implementation strategies and issues of integrating foundation skills teaching within the VET programs and team-teaching with VET teachers (Courtenay, 1994; Courtenay and Mawer, 1995; Black, 1996), two took a more generalised overview to look at wider practices, such as strategies for communication, one-to-one forms of support, learner needs, enrolment and administration (Janelle Moy and Associates, 1994; Salter & Allan, 1996), while Quirk (1994) investigated literacy and numeracy issues in competency-based assessment. It is clear from these FSTD papers that the focus on supporting VET students with foundation skills at NSW TAFE at those times largely centred around three aspects: 1) assessment of student foundation skills abilities (primarily before or soon after commencement), 2) identifying and implementing appropriate support models and 3) teaching whole cohorts within their VET programs (that is, identifying foundation skills aspects embedded within course content and integrating teaching to team teach with VET teachers). Even though each of these papers was produced more than twenty years ago, they offer valuable insights for current management and practitioners as they discuss issues that are still relevant for foundation skills support in Australian VET today.

With respect to assessing a prospective learner's foundation skills ability prior to or soon after commencement, Quirk notes that work from Nunan and Brindley indicate concerns for the use of a single standardised testing instrument to determine abilities and suitability for a program, as they provide little information on a particular learning objective and assume proficiency is a single, independent entity, instead of the general consensus that it is a multidimensional construct. Although, Quirt does acknowledge Mawer's (1992, 1994) belief that

global proficiency measures can provide an indication of the extent a prospective student will be able to cope with the language demands of a program, and, if used, should be supplemented with specific work-related tasks to assess communication abilities.

With respect to teaching cohorts within VET, Quirk offers what seems to be an explanation of the development of the integrated approach from the 1991 *Workplace Language Literacy and Maths Policy* of the government of New South Wales, which informs that the provision of 'basic skills' should be integrated and contextualised with other workplace training, based on evidence that skills improvement is more rapid than when addressed separately and outside of context due to a person's 'cognitive system'. Further, Quirk states that this theoretical perspective does not "support the traditional practice of providing instruction in basic skills before commencing occupational skills instruction" (p.9) and the FSTD supported "an integrated approach to curriculum development [that] would directly address language, literacy and numeracy skills" (p.9).

Courtenay and Mawer (1995) focused their work on integrating LLN into VET and, whilst not mentioning any theoretical approaches specifically, demonstrated their belief that integration must incorporate social contexts and social processes, clearly referring to the social practices of the ideological approach presented in the second question of this three-part series. They write that 1) people learn most effectively when they can relate what they learn to wider work and social contexts, 2) LLN are social processes influenced by context, so programs should provide opportunities for LLN application in an immediate occupation context as well as wider work and social contexts and 3) evaluation should also document LLN application for these settings.

2001-2009

In the early part of the 21st century, a new initiative to research and document foundation skills within Australian VET was made possible by the National

Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER), which produced a series of papers between 2001 and 2009 (most notably via the Adult Literacy Research Program 2002-2006). Four papers in particular are presented here: Falk and Millar (2001), McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2005) and Balatti, Black and Falk (2006, 2009).

By bringing together major insights from research since 1990, Falk and Millar (2001) made a number of important points and conclusions in relation to foundation skills in VET. Three of these are:

1. Basic skills (being separate and individualised) "are necessary but not sufficient for participation and mobility in VET" (p.53) with a "convincing set of research that show basic skills do not transfer easily to other tasks and contexts" (p.54). That is, once acquired, there is the assumption that basic skills can be easily transferred to various contexts unaided, however, contexts themselves have their own competencies, meaning literacy and numeracy must be integrated within.

2. Literacy and numeracy learning occurred in two forms: "the integrated or 'built in' approach as found in training packages, and in separate provision such as classes or one-to-one tutoring as a stand-alone or 'bolted on' literacy or numeracy learning activity" (p.53), citing reasons for the need of intensive provision for the existence of this second form.

3. Government policy in Australia has largely focused on human capital benefits of literacy and numerous provision, with little attention given to social capital benefits, such as social cohesion and lifelong learning.

McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2005) continue with the topic of 'integrated' teaching, via a case study in community services programs. Their work reiterates strategies documented by Salter and Allan (1996) and identify the following seven features for successful integration:

- acknowledge learning is affected by the context in which it is taught, as well as by students' beliefs and attitudes
- develop an explicit model of language appropriate to the context of the industry
- use a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching
- provide a framework for describing language, literacy and numeracy
- conduct an analysis of the specific training package and workplace context
- ensure there is capacity to identify critical points of intervention
- consider the needs of learners.

One study that can have a potentially large impact for foundation skills support services was that of Balatti, Black and Falk (2006), who took the social capital benefits aspect of Falk's previous 2001 work and conducted research seeking to determine the social capital outcomes on 57 students enrolled in VET accredited adult literacy and numeracy courses. This study looked at the changes in both student connections with people and their socioeconomic wellbeing, as well as implications for educational practice and reporting outcomes. The findings, as presented by Balatti, Black and Falk, are (p.5):

- Participation in accredited adult literacy and numeracy courses produced social capital outcomes for 80% of the students interviewed, even though improved literacy and numeracy skills were not necessarily present.
  - Students reported changes in the number and nature of attachments they had to existing and new social networks and spoke of changes in the way they interacted with people in their networks.
  - Students valued social capital outcomes highly because they contributed to their socioeconomic wellbeing.
  - There was evidence that social capital outcomes had a positive impact on students' social environments, education and learning, employment and quality of working life.
- Literacy and numeracy improvement often required the social capital

outcomes noted above as a prerequisite or co-requisite. For example, students' literacy skills improved when their membership of networks provided them with opportunities to learn, or to implement what they had learnt.

- Social capital outcomes were realised as a result of specific teaching strategies, such as promoting interaction with peers, and through the new networks and relationships experienced in the course. Reframing adult literacy and numeracy teaching/learning to include the idea of the student as a member of networks would make the social capital-building function of the courses more explicit.

- Current reporting frameworks, including the National Reporting System for language, literacy and numeracy, do not specifically account for social capital outcomes. Recognising the importance of those outcomes, and perhaps reporting them, is likely to result in a more accurate picture of the contribution that adult literacy and numeracy courses make to individuals and communities.

These results potentially force a re-evaluation of the practices and purposes of foundation skills support and on notions of effectiveness, since a direct one-to-one relationship between foundation skills provision and benefits is no longer one of simple cause and effect. Now, relationships in foundation skills provision intersect and interact in dynamic and possibly unpredictable fashions to produce benefits for individuals and groups of individuals, even in circumstances where no foundation skills improvements are observed.

Further NCVER research by Balatti, Black and Falk (2009) give insights into how RTOs can incorporate social capital development and outcomes into a broader purpose, beyond Training Packages for employment. Of particular value here is the finding that RTOs can have an integral partnership with local organisations to build foundation skills across social and community areas of importance, such as financial and health literacy. Here, characteristics for effectiveness are also presented, which not only provide an avenue for delivery, but also enable RTOs to broaden their perspectives on why and how they operate within communities.

Furthermore, Balatti, Black and Falk (2009) offer detailed information on how foundation skills support practitioners can integrate within VET teaching programs in order to produce social capital outcomes, details of which are largely missing from previous research.

2010-2018

Literature related to foundation skills support in Australian VET in this third time period focuses on two aspects primarily. The first is the continuation of the discussions on integration and social capital outcomes, however now, these aspects begin to merge into more holistic approaches that see the needs of learners as practices increase the value of professional partnerships, whereby foundation skills support service are not just integrated into VET programs, but are also integrated into student services in general as well as community organisations. The other aspect is a series of literature reviews under NCVER's Foundation Skills Literature Review Project that bring together much of what has been presented in this paper, as well as other topics, such as policy and the international context.

Roberts and Wignall (2010) note that even though it has been a requirement since the establishment of Training Packages to embed LLN within them (and now employability skills to form foundation skills), delivery has not been effective because RTOs have found it difficult to implement approaches in integrating them and VET practitioners have often found it difficult to unpack or interpret them within a Training Package. Roberts and Wignall offer a number of recommendations for the development of Training Packages to be improved, and also, importantly here, comment on the challenges and options RTOs have in training their students. They explain that some students will only need to develop the foundation skills specifically identified in competency standards, achievable if they already posses certain underlying foundation skills, but for students enrolling in a program who do not have adequate foundation skills to begin with, they cannot be expected to achieve competency in that unit with a standard delivery of nominal hours and a vocational trainer who is not

experienced in delivering specific foundation skill concepts. Here Roberts and Wignall identify three components within these scenarios: 1) a foundation skills trainer to teach the foundation skills within units, 2) a foundation skills trainer to provide additional support, such as specialist assistance in class, out of class or enrolment in specific foundation skill units beforehand, alongside or packaged within their VET program and 3) a mechanism to identify which students may need additional support. Note that enrolling students in specific units beforehand is at odds with Quirk (1994) above, who believed that a pre-VET training foundation skills program was against the integration approach, however, Quirk was possibly considering students that already possessed adequate skills to begin a VET program, whereas Roberts and Wignall suggest it may be an appropriate option for those students who do not.

Robertson (2010) begins to move the discussion beyond the practice of support integrated into VET products and approaches support from the perspective of students being encouraged to become self-directed and autonomous learners, capable of utilising various resources. Rather than isolated literacy and numeracy support, Robertson views 'learning support' and resources as expanding beyond a traditional foundation skills specialist and encompassing mentoring, IT support, networking and counseling, amongst others. Here, the approach of support in isolated areas in no longer adequate in a modern environment where information technology and the metacognitive skills of learning are more necessary in today's highly technical world, and require support alongside traditional literacy and numeracy. Robertson takes aspects of constructivist learning theories where learners construct what information means to them for their own realities, which ties in with the concepts of New Literacies and social practices discussed in the second question of this three-part series, whereby students use modes of learning appropriate to them, interact with peers in ways suitable for them and apply learning in contexts that make meaning for them. Taking this perspective, foundation skills support services become one of an integrated approach to support within a broader RTO support framework. Along with this, support is not solely for students deemed initially to have a deficit of literacy and numeracy skills for their chosen program, but for all

students that require assistance with any foundation skill at any particular point in time.

Although this 'integration of support services' is not a new concept, with Roe, Foster, Moses, Sanker and Storey (1984) and Haigh and Brunner (1990) detailing how literacy and numeracy support has been but one student service in a wider set of services well before recent times (alongside counseling, financial, accommodation, disability, etc.), Robertson, as well as a report by Ithaca Group (2012) for The Queensland VET Development Centre, highlight the conscious need to more closely integrate various support services to match student needs. The Ithaca report, in particular, provides a detailed vision for how such services can provide a 'more seemless experience' by various support services having a shared intent, a range of approaches to meet the diverse student needs and a set of outcomes that demonstrate and recognise the benefits of services. Unfortunately, the Ithaca report does not provide assistance or guidance on how outcomes can be developed or reported, saying that it is an area "in which there is considerable room for action and improvement" (p.26).

This topic of outcomes advanced somewhat in this post-2009 period, primarily with the research of Black and Yasukawa (Black and Yasukawa, 2010; Black and Yasukawa, 2011; Yasukawa, 2011 and Black and Bee, 2018). In these works, any question of whether human capital *or* social capital outcomes should prevail in VET foundation skills provision settled into an acknowledgement of the importance of both human capital *and* social capital outcomes, with Black and Yasukawa (2010) stating "The purpose of this paper is not to undermine the primacy of the human capital underpinnings of the new National Foundation Skills Strategy" (p.43) (which was yet to be released), but that "in the development of a new national strategy, there is more than one perspective on the rationale for investing in adult literacy and numeracy" (p.44) and "we draw on recent work on social capital which has direct implications for social inclusion, but also for complementing the human capital rationale for adult literacy and numeracy" (p.44).

Like Balatti, Back and Falk (2009) above, the line of research during this period features opportunities for partnerships with community organisations outside the RTO (called 'cross-sectional partnerships'). Here, a useful discussion is presented on not just human capital outcomes via theory components of units of competency, but also social capital outcomes via communities of practice and networking, with all of the aspects of communication integral for them to succeed. Like previous 'integrated' discussions, theory related to social practices, context and individual meaning-making justify the role of an integrated approach that works closely with relationships, however here, this concept of integration exists not just within a VET program, but also in conjunction with external organisations, such as community health organisations that run health education programs for the general public.

Moving to the NCVER Foundation Skills Literature Review Project, this series published in 2016 provides a valuable summary of issues related to foundation skills in Australia over the past few decades, and has been useful in the writing of this paper to assist in understanding the variety and complexity of topics. Cameron (2016), Mayer (2016) and Newton (2016) also discuss broader issues in this series, such as policy and the international context, but these have not been presented here because they pertain to foundation skills more broadly and not specifically to foundation skills support services. This point highlights a matter for managers and practitioners of such services: there is a distinct lack of research and literature on the specific details for operating these services and engaging with students. Broad theory, issues and benefits are presented, but not specifics, and how a manager or practitioner is to function in their workplace is largely absent.

<div align="center">***</div>

As can be seen, the topic of foundation skills support services in a VET environment is a complex one. It is clear that these support services are to serve both human capital and social outcomes, requiring the ability to pinpoint specific areas of need for individual students as well as to generate and facilitate

relationships. Literature has provided justification for VET foundation skills support services to integrate with VET teaching departments and other student services and work beyond the training package by developing relationships and programs with external organisations (community or even corporate organisations), which is likely to be an exciting area to explore.

As to the roles these support services have in VET, generalised answers are provided in past literature, but details on what specific roles they can have as well as how to function in the roles are limited. They do not provide managers with how to operate the services on a day-to-day or even semester-to-semester basis, such as how to inform students of the services, specific roles in identifying or assisting departments to identify students, when, where and how to support a student inside and outside of a VET class and how to gauge and report effectiveness. Whilst these may be issues for RTOs at an individual level, a framework, a series of options for best practice or even a reporting of current practices would be beneficial for all RTOs and their services. Research into the specific ways VET foundation skills support services can consistently and effectively benefit student, community and industry needs will provide important instruction for managers and practitioners that work in the field.

References

Balatti, J., Black, S. & Falk, I. (2006). Reframing adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes: A social capital perspective. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0020/4934/nr4l05.pdf

Balatti, J. Black, S. and Falk, I. (2009). *A new social capital paradigm for adult literacy: Partnerships, policy and pedagogy*. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0024/10896/a-new-social-capital-paradigm-for-adult-literacy-2170.pdf

Black, S. (1996). *Literacy/numeracy support and team teaching in VET. TAFE teachers reflect on their practice*. NSW: Foundation Studies Training Division

Black, S., & Bee, B. (2018). Adult literacy and liberal-progressive pedagogy: Australian contexts. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *23*(2), 181-201. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpce20/current

Black, S. & Yasukawa, K. (2010). Time for national renewal: Australian adult literacy and numeracy as 'foundation skills'. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies, 18*(2), 43-57. https://doi.org/10.5130/lns.v18i2.1897

Black, S. & Yasukawa, K. (2011). Working together: Integrated language, literacy and numeracy support in Vocational Education and Training. NSW: The Centre for Research in Learning and Change. University of Technology Sydney

Cameron, L. (2016). The salience of diversity in foundation skills contexts, pedagogies and research. Retrieved from https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0025/83572/Salience-of-diversity-in-foundation-skills.pdf

Courtenay, M. (1994). *Integrating language, literacy and numeracy provision into Vocational Education and Training*. NSW: Western Sydney Institute of TAFE. Foundation Studies Training Division

Courtenay, M. & Mawer, G. (1995). *Integrating language, literacy and numeracy provision into Vocational Education and Training: A framework.* NSW: NSW Technical and Further Education Division

Falk, I. & Millar, P. (2001). *Literacy and numeracy in Vocational Education and*

Training. Retrieved from

https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0019/9145/literacy-and-

numeracy-in-vet-573.pdf

Haigh, J. & Brunner, S. (1990). A national review of student services in TAFE.

South Australia: TAFE National Centre for Research and Development

Ithaca Group. (2012). *Integrated support services for learners: An investigation

into current thinking and practice*. Retrieved from

https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A55645

Janelle Moy and Associates. (1994). *Research on the effectiveness of Tutorial

Support*. NSW: Foundation Studies Training Division

Mayer, D. (2016). *Exploring perspectives on adult language, literacy and

numeracy*. Retrieved from

https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/83121/Explorin

g-perspectives-on-ALLN.pdf

McKenna, R & Fitzpatrick, L. (2005). Integrated approaches to teaching adult

literacy in Australia: A snapshot of practices in community services.

Retrieved from

https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0024/4749/nr3l04.pdf

Newton, J. (2016). *Foundation skills policy contexts and measures of impact*.

Retrieved from

https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/83151/Foundati

on-skills-policy-contexts-and-measures-of-impact.pdf

Quirk, R. (1994). *Language and literacy issues in competency based assessment*.

NSW: Assessment Centre for Vocational Education

Roberts, A. & Wignall, L. (2010). *Foundation skills in VET products for the 21st

century*. Retrieved from

https://www.acal.edu.au/publications/documents/Foundation_Skills_in_

VET_Products_for_the_21st_Century.pdf

Robertson, L. (2010). The changing face of VET learner support. In Berthelsen, D.

& Vogel, L. of *Transforming Queensland VET: Challenges and Opportunities

(Volume 3)* (pp. 42-51). Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Roe, E., Foster, G., Moses, I., Sanker, M. & Storey, P. (1984). A report on Student Services in Tertiary Education in Australia. Queensland: Tertiary Education Institute. University of Queensland

Salter, K. & Allan, L. (1996). Strategies for success: developing English language, literacy and numeracy in vocational courses. NSW: Foundation Studies Training Division

Yasukawa, K. (2010). Breaking out of the Package: Educating literacy and numeracy teachers with agency. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, *18*(2), 75-87. Retrieved from https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/lnj