

# Counselling and Counting, Listening and Literacy: One Counsellor's Account

Yvette Carter

Gaps in numeracy and literacy skills in Indigenous Australians has long been a topic of concern and debate. In Far North Queensland one Counsellor is combining both counselling skills and psychological and emotional support with academic processes to achieve longlasting, positive outcomes. These outcomes are changing lives for individuals, families and the communities in which they live.

## Introduction

In Far North Queensland a numeracy and literacy program, combined with several elements of counselling and the counselling process, has changed lives. On the west coast of Queensland, a dedicated Counsellor has blended the components of counselling with numeracy and literacy sessions to support the program's participants and ultimately their communities. This unique format is making a difference for many residents of two remote Indigenous communities.

To READ is to EMPOWER, to empower is to WRITE, to write is to INFLUENCE, to influence is to CHANGE, to change is to LIVE (Vandergrift, 2008). Sue McGinty (2002) cites research of Garlick (1999) who identified the major elements for building community capacity, particularly in Indigenous communities: Knowledge building, leadership, network building, valuing community and supporting information. These same elements combine to achieve a state of well-being in the community. They incorporate the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge, the skills and knowledge of alphabetic literacy practices and social capital. Community capacity, in this context, also requires the integration of both Western and Indigenous cultural influences, to enable a genuine coming together of 'two ways' or 'both ways' approach to a community's development of its capacity to pursue its goals and aspirations.

The literacy and numeracy program we share here, aimed to improve the numeracy and literacy development of adult learners who were experiencing learning difficulties or delays, hence, not achieving their academic potential. It was designed by the University of New England. Acknowledging that participating adult learners may have varying levels of learning obstacles due to knowledge gaps, lack of practice,

anxiety, low confidence, or associated behaviour problems, the lessons emphasised the development of conceptual understanding by explicitly teaching strategies that highlighted the key concepts underpinning the academic skills being taught. Specifically, this program aimed to provide intensive involvement focused on basic knowledge and understandings that equip students with the skills necessary to engage more successfully while improving their basic mathematics, and/or reading, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (<https://simerr.une.edu.au/quicksmart/program-description/>).

## My work in numeracy and literacy

About five years ago I was successful in obtaining a job providing numeracy and literacy sessions to adults in two Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland. I had worked in both these communities for several years prior to this appointment so was very comfortable moving about community and spending time with many of the residents from both areas. Rooms for the delivery of this service were renovated and furnished while posters promoting this service were strategically positioned in prominent venues throughout these communities. I was ready for business.

Adult learning is facilitated through effective two-way communication between the teacher and the learner which emphasises clarifying, summarising, listening, and reflecting (Byrnes, & Fielding-Barnsley, 1993). In addition, when examining the components of effective counselling several elements must be present. The ability to effectively communicate is a counsellor's fundamental role. The role of the counsellor is to enable the client to explore many aspects of their life and feelings, by talking openly and freely. The counsellor may encourage the client to examine parts of their lives that they may have found difficult or impossible to face before, <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/counselling.html#ixzz4F6HxWep0>

A counsellor's job throughout a counselling session is to provide support to a client (Canning, 2004). Having been employed in the community for several years prior to this

---

Corresponding Authors: Yvette Carter  
Email: [capecounselling@outlook.com](mailto:capecounselling@outlook.com)

Australian Counseling Research Journal ISSN1832-1135

appointment, I was fully aware of many of the challenges the residents faced on a daily basis. Due to this, a casual, safe and comfortable approach was adopted, and every session commenced with a cup of tea and a casual chat. Over time, this became the norm when commencing the numeracy and literacy sessions. It was during this chat that relationships of trust and hope began to grow.

As part of the support offered it was acknowledged that for an individual to be open to the learning process, he/she must first have a clear mind so as to assist the client to see things more clearly, possibly from a different viewpoint. This can enable the client to focus on feelings, experiences or behaviours, with a goal to facilitating positive change. <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/counselling.html#ixzz4F6HxWep0>

With this concept in mind, the opening 'chats' were always accompanied with a cup of tea which then began to move into unscheduled counselling sessions. Regardless of age, gender, religion or social status, each of the numeracy and literacy sessions quickly became a combination of counselling and learning. Many of the issues addressed would overlap into cultural beliefs, community, family and personal expectations, family loyalties and commitments. This was always underpinned with a desire to improve oneself and, in the process, improve the lives of their children and grandchildren.

AIPC Code of Ethics notes that establishing the helping relationship in order to maintain the integrity and empowerment of the client without offering advice is paramount in any therapeutic and/or academic relationship. <http://www.aipc.net.au/articles/ethics-and-counselling/>. Below are two case studies offering testimony to this statement and highlighting the how counselling and numeracy and literacy lessons combined successfully.

## Case Study 1

'Peter' is an Indigenous 29-year-old male who first presented saying he 'wanted to read better'. His mood sometimes fluctuated and over time I began to understand and work with him better. With his initial statement in mind, we set about achieving this goal. During our sessions together he would sometimes talk about his home life and about his alcohol and drug usage and how this affected his relationship with his partner and his children. It was around this time he talked about how his children were afraid of him and about the times he beat his partner. We discussed these issues in depth many times during our sessions. As our 'literacy and numeracy' sessions became more and more frequent, I believe 'Peter' became increasingly at ease. As this occurred, our sessions became longer in duration and included conversations about his dreams, his fears, his hopes and about his passions. At the same time we slowly built on engagement and empowerment to enable change to successfully take place. It is reasonable to affirm that the counsellor's main focus in the communication process is the client's expression, and if needed, encourage that expression (PACFA – Ethical Standards/Ethical Responsibilities, 2017).

When these conversations were 'rounding off', we would then seamlessly move into our numeracy and literacy session. Over time, and together, we addressed many emotional issues such as feelings of worthlessness, inadequacies, and self-actualisation. From this, and an improved and ever-increasing numeracy and literacy level, 'Peter's' self-esteem slowly started to rise. It was at this point he started to 'want' to set goals for himself. Some of these goals included applying for jobs in the

local area. 'Peter' laughingly stated he would be happy if he was 'able to read and fill out the application form by myself', so to actually obtain employment would be a 'dream come true'.

It was around this time 'Peter' and I discussed how he had reduced his alcohol and drug intake and the frequency of domestic violence was also decreasing. "Counsellors promote client autonomy and encourage clients to make responsible decisions on their own behalf" (PACFA – Ethical Standards/Ethical Responsibilities, 2017). Peter was feeling positive about himself and was spending more time with his children. "*Effective counselling reduces confusion, allowing the client to make effective decisions leading to positive changes in their attitude and/or behaviour*" <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/counselling.html#ixzz4F6J7Yrfi>

In due course 'Peter' submitted his job application and together we waited. In the interim he continued to attend the numeracy and literacy sessions and would often share positive stories regarding the connection he was enjoying with his partner, his children, and the community in which he lived. "*Counsellors consider the social context of their clients and their connections to others*" (PACFA – Ethical Standards/Ethical Responsibilities, 2017). <http://www.pacfa.org.au/practitionerresources/ethical-standards/>.

He told these stories with pride in his voice – and in his eyes. After a six week wait, 'Peter' was interviewed and shortly after, was informed he had been successful in obtaining this position. As a result of 'Peter's' commitment to his health, his emotional, social, and psychological wellbeing, his family and his education, he is now drug free, his home is now free of domestic violence, he is employed and reads to his children. I continue to support 'Peter's' journey of empowerment.

## Case Study 2

I would now like to share another account of empowerment and capacity building through the process of counselling and its potential to change and enhance lives. Yet another testimony demonstrating the true value in combining both formal education and counselling.

'Gary' presented stating he wanted to improve his reading and writing skills. After a cup of tea and a casual chat he then went on to tell me he was 'not very good at that reading stuff'. I offered him a smile and told him he was 'safe'. He smiled and said 'God bless you, see you tomorrow'. The next day we commenced our journey.

It was obvious early in the first session 'Gary' was not able to identify letters of the alphabet. Due to this he became teary and asked if we could stop the session. It was here the lesson stopped and the counselling and support began. An hour later 'Gary' left vowing to return the next day. And so he did, and the next day and the next day and the next day and the day after that. And the day after that. The weeks passed and 'Gary's' self-esteem and self-assuredness grew. Then he suddenly, and without warning, stopped attending. In community, I had learned this was not unusual, so I decided to do the only thing I could do, I looked forward to the day I saw him again.

Several months later I was attending a community event where I spoke with 'Gary's' mother. She commented to me about how 'Gary's' literacy skills had improved since having sessions with me. I then enquired about his whereabouts as I had not seen him for some time. His mum informed me he was in jail. She then began to cry. I immediately began to comfort her, and it was at

this point she told me she was not crying because her son was in prison. She told me she was emotional because 'Gary' had written her a letter saying he could now read and write because he 'had done literacy with Yvette'.

This was an amazing story for me. I appreciate whilst hearing a story of someone entering prison one would not normally expect to evoke the response 'that is amazing', but rather, identifying the real beauty here lies in the telling of 'Gary's' story which started many months ago. It tells of the underlying, and again, the life changing qualities of counselling and emotional support. It tells of the strength of learning in an academic capacity and also of the empowering 'worth' of the journey of the self.

I believe Carl Rogers best summed it up when he said 'In my early professional years I was asking the question: How can I treat, or cure, or change this person? Now I would phrase the question in this way: How can I provide a relationship which this person may use for his own personal growth?' (<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/carlrogers202206.html>).

## Bio

Yvette Carter began her counselling career in the early 1980's. During this time she has worked throughout Australia and internationally as a Counsellor. For the past 17 years, Yvette has worked in Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland. In this time she has developed long lasting, authentic relationships with the men, women, and children from these communities. In 2014 Yvette found herself delivering a numeracy and literacy program to adult learners from these same communities. As the program progressed, it was evident the amalgamation of Yvette's counselling skills and support, coupled with academic delivery was the key to programs success.

## References

- Byrne, B., & Fielding-Barnsley, R. (1993). Evaluation of a program to teach phonemic awareness to young children: A 1-year follow-up. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85(1), 104–111. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.85.1.104>
- Canning, J. (2004). *Disability and residence abroad*. Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies Good Practice Guide. Retrieved 7 October 2008, from <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/2241>
- McGinty S. 2002. *Community Capacity Building*. Paper presented to the Australian Association for Research Education Conference 2002. <https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2002/mcg02476.pdf>  
[http://www.aipc.net.au/articles/ethics-and-counselling/Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia: Ethical Standards, Ethical Responsibility. \(2017\). http://www.pacfa.org.au/practitioner-resources/ethical-standards/http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/counselling.html#ixzz4F6J7Yrfi](http://www.aipc.net.au/articles/ethics-and-counselling/Psychotherapy%20and%20Counselling%20Federation%20of%20Australia%3A%20Ethical%20Standards,%20Ethical%20Responsibility.%20(2017).%20http://www.pacfa.org.au/practitioner-resources/ethical-standards/http://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/counselling.html#ixzz4F6J7Yrfi)
- Vandergrift, L. (2008). *Listening: theory and practice in modern foreign language competence* <https://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/67>