

Learning to work: Learning together¹

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Margaret participates in activities organised by Gawith Villa Inc, an adult training and support service in Melbourne. Carmine is an instructor with Gawith and offers literacy and numeracy classes to Margaret and her colleagues at the Institute of Disability Studies at Deakin University. They also participate in some work experience activities on campus. Margaret is now employed for two days per week in the University Faculty Student Centre that is managed by Gunta. Margaret will speak about her learning experiences and those of her colleagues. Carmine explains how the program operates and Gunta describes how Margaret has joined the work team in the Faculty Student Centre. Barrie discusses the value of the Gawith program as a community learning experience within the Institute of Disability Studies and the University.

1. Introduction (Margaret Quinn)

This talk is about the literacy and numeracy studies I do with my friends from Gawith Villa. Carmine Laghi gives more information about that. I will also tell you about my new office job at Deakin University. Gunta says something about that too. Barrie will finish by speaking about our links with Deakin.

2. My Story (Margaret Quinn)

2.1 Work I do at the Faculty Student Centre

I got my new job in July this year. They needed someone to help with office work at the Faculty Student Centre.

When I come in this office I check the assignment cover sheets. I have a class list and I do the ticking off of the students' assignments. If people muck them up I put assignments in alphabetical order and I deliver assignments to different areas too. I put them in the cabinets outside the door. Then I put "received" on the computer. I also hand out corrected assignments. I ask them their last name and the code number on the little tags.

I also serve at the counter and I do the envelopes too. I have a Faculty Student Centre stamp and I stamp the envelopes up the top in the left-hand corner.

I'd like to answer the phone one day.

I work with Gunta and Jenny and Kleo, Julie and Lyn. They are nice people to work with. And I get on with them well. They are fun, kind and nice too.

I like meeting new people in the community. I like being out in a different environment. I get paid for it now. I'm a working woman now and I like that.

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2.2 Gawith Villa

I like doing numeracy and reading with Carmine at Deakin. I like the volunteers helping us on a Tuesday. I also like the Deakin library.

Jane and Carmine got me this job because they thought I could do the job. They thought I could do it so well. The reading and writing I do at literacy helps me with my job.

I learn numeracy and reading at Deakin. I also help other people if they need it.

2.3 VALID Advocacy Support Service

VALID is a group helping adults with intellectual disability. I used to be a member of the VALID sub-committee. They did self-advocacy things. I did self-advocacy and they showed some videos. I used to like being on the sub-committee but they don't have it any more.

2.4 Home

I live in my own flat in Armadale. I do my own cooking and my own washing. I do my own shopping with a little bit of support from Simone. She works for the Tipping Foundation.

I'm a busy lady now. I do gym at Hawthorn Swinburne on Mondays and after that I am the Chairperson at the meeting. You know I do literacy on Tuesdays. After work at Deakin on Wednesdays I do Work Ed with Beck. On Thursday I go to Red Cross. I do volunteer work there. I do computers with Marina at Richmond.

3. **Gawith Villa** (Carmine Laghi)

3.1 The Gawith service

At 50 years of age Gawith Villa is the oldest Adult Training Support Service in Victoria. Started originally by a group of parents as a means of providing meaningful activity for their children, Gawith Villa now seeks to provide meaningful service to adults who range in age from their late teens to early sixties.

Services offered by Gawith Villa take place on a group or individual basis, both at the Centre and in the community. These services range from recreational and vocational to academic and personal, and are always based directly on the individual needs, wants, dreams and visions of each person.

3.2 Literacy and numeracy program

The development of the literacy and numeracy studies program at Gawith Villa (which currently takes the form of the Certificate 1 in Initial Adult Literacy and Numeracy) arose as a result of the common needs and wants of service users as expressed during their individual planning meetings. Related to this, the Futures for Young Adults initiative (a State Government funded post-school options program) also had an impact on this program. Service users and their families had expressed the desire for some form of continuing adult literacy education as a means of retaining and building upon skills previously learned while at school. In short, this is what service users and their families were asking for - continuing appropriate adult

literacy and basic education options which could lead to further educational or vocational opportunities.

Another factor that led to Gawith offering this particular program was that there seemed to be a significant lack of appropriate literacy courses which catered to the particular needs of many people who have a disability. This lack was demonstrated by some service users being excluded from some programs because they were not considered appropriate candidates. Many literacy service providers also aimed to have people complete their studies within a limiting time frame, rushing them through with little regard for individual needs. In addition, many literacy programs were aimed at people who already had some reading and writing skills, thus once again excluding a significant number of people.

3.3 Why Deakin University?

Gawith Villa is committed to supporting people to develop skills in valued and normative environments. For a group of adult learners who were seeking to study in an accredited certificate program, Deakin University became a natural choice. The strong values-based commitment of Deakin, coupled with the enthusiastic support of staff from the Institute of Disability Studies and other departments, has made the program a success.

One of the most valuable aspects of locating the program at Deakin is demonstrated by what may be called associated learning. This encompasses all of the learning which comes from locating any program in a valued, normative and natural setting and includes things like modeling behaviors and interactions from other students and staff as well as incredible improvements in motivation and self esteem as people begin to feel more valued. This associated learning may have come about as a result of being treated as valued and as equals, which is demonstrated by the very fact that they are considered worthy of being at university.

3.4 Certificate 1 in Initial Adult Literacy and Numeracy (CIALN)

The literacy program being offered by Gawith currently takes the form of the Certificate 1 in Initial Adult Literacy and Numeracy. This is a 500-page document consisting of two quality assured, nationally recognised and accredited courses and six “best practice” sections. The two courses contained within the CIALN are:

- CIALN (Foundation))
- CIALN

These courses have been designed to support teenage and adult participants with little or no current literacy or numeracy skills. They incorporate areas of study including communication, numeracy, reading and writing. The course is designed to be flexible in its delivery and can be implemented within a workplace or community setting.

The CIALN consists of 31 core modules with each module containing an associated, personal, functional, informative and cooperative learning task.

3.5 Current program and its benefits

The current program at Deakin runs for one day per week 9.30 am - 3.30 pm. It is coordinated by a Gawith Villa staff member who also teaches in it. There are seven students enrolled in the course, each studying different modules. The program is fortunate to have a number of dedicated and enthusiastic volunteer tutors, who give

their time to help each student have as much individual attention as possible. The program also has the support of various Deakin staff who lend their skills and time.

The benefits of a program of this type go beyond literacy. Here are a few:

- ◆ People who previously spoke very little, now initiate and maintain conversations with a variety of people.
- ◆ Opportunities to handle money in the same way as other students, thus putting numeracy skills to immediate and relevant use. This mainly occurs through people buying their own lunch at the cafeteria, which involves counting money and checking change.
- ◆ Modeling behaviors from other students, such as waiting in line.
- ◆ Reading signs and recognising words around the campus.
- ◆ Making choices where once anything would have been acceptable.
- ◆ Following directions around campus.
- ◆ Becoming involved in work experience activities within the university.
- ◆ Improvements in social skills - initiating greetings, asking questions.
- ◆ Friendships with tutors.
- ◆ Travelling independently to the program on public transport.
- ◆ Improvements in self concept and self esteem, perhaps best demonstrated by the way students refer to themselves as “university students”.

3.6 Some advantages of the literacy program

- ◆ Literacy assists people to participate meaningfully with others, and gives people with an intellectual disability greater control over their environment.
- ◆ The attainment of literacy skills may lead to an individual being more readily accepted by peers as well as leading to increased expectations of people, which could lead to greater opportunities for independence.
- ◆ It is one way to better prepare people for open or supported employment.
- ◆ Increased competence in reading and writing can foster a positive self concept within the person.
- ◆ Literacy provision of this type can enhance inclusion by improving access to recreation and leisure opportunities and other resources.
- ◆ Other benefits include the expertise and stimulus of other staff and help or support from other students who may be studying in related fields such as special education.
- ◆ Learning to read printed language may aid in thinking skills, as it is possible to reflect longer on printed ideas because the visual messages do not fade, and therefore print may serve as a memory prompt.

3.7 Challenges

There are many challenges still facing this program. The most significant seem to lie in the distinct lack of information and research available on adult literacy and intellectual disability. Much of the existing literature outlines common key areas which require addressing and which all pose issues for our program at Deakin. Some of these include:

- the need for appropriate assessment methods on which to base instructional strategies
- the lack of age-appropriate teaching materials

- research suggests that instruction is more likely to be effective if skills are the reinforced for shorter periods of time daily rather than in a single long session weekly
- adults with severe disabilities have had a history of receiving no literacy instruction at all.

It is often overlooked that people who have an intellectual disability may be slower to attain certain developmental milestones, but in many cases do attain them. This has often meant that the continuation of literacy instruction, taken for granted with non-disabled students, may be deemed inappropriate for some students with an intellectual disability. This may mean that people may only begin to acquire concepts about literacy at the time that their curriculum deletes literacy in favor of vocational or daily living skills, effectively denying them the opportunity to learn to read and write.

3.8 Work experience and employment

CIALN is designed to be flexible in delivery, which means that people can develop their literacy and numeracy skills while in the work place and in association with work-related activities. People can develop skills that are directly and immediately relevant to their job. This can lead to the person having an increased motivation for learning and a greater likelihood that skills that are learnt will be retained because they have been developed in natural environments and not in isolation. The opportunities for students to be involved in work experiences with the University has proven to be a highly effective and relevant method of working on the Certificate.

Factors such as these led to Margaret's eventual employment with the University. Margaret expressed an interest in administrative work, and this led to a work trial and the transition to a permanent position. Margaret continues to work on her certificate skills within her work place, but they are now incorporated into her everyday duties. Some other factors which contributed to Margaret's employment include:

- the tremendous support Margaret has received from the other staff in the work place, providing an environment where success was the "only option"
- her enthusiasm, hard work and belief in herself and the things she can do.

This experience demonstrates quite clearly, not only in Margaret's case but in the case of all those attending the Gawith literacy program, that if people are provided with the opportunities and environments for them to succeed, they often will.

3.9 What the tutors and students say

Tutors were invited to say how they saw the students developing. Typical responses were:

- "It is tremendously satisfying to see the students make progress with talking more, and listening especially in the mornings. The effort they all put in is very encouraging to me as a tutor." (Christine)
- "The benefits of students learning in a normal university environment has increased their self-esteem and abilities beyond my expectations. Their willingness to participate, withdraw from their shyness is giving them untold confidence -- the change from when I started in July until now is dramatic." (Jean)
- "Opportunity of assisting others in developing skills that will enable them to develop their full potential by working towards the Certificate of Numeracy and Literacy. I had no previous experience of working with students with difficulties and my appreciation of their situation has increased enormously." (Bryan)

Students had this to say:

- Becky says she enjoys working on her recipe book , which she plans to give as Christmas gifts.
- Gary:
How did you feel when you came to Deakin?
“nervous, good, happy”
What do you like best about being here?
“The food - pies, coke, talking to people.”
- Lisa :
“I like Deakin:
 - Library
 - Carmine - teacher
 - Mala, Nicki - volunteer tutors
 - Margaret and the rest of the class - studentsI feel more grown up being a university student.”
- “I like coming hear to learn read and write to improve your reading cause it’s fun, and you feel good coming here.” (Garry)
- “I feel happy. I like the books in the library. I like being in a certificate course.” (Sheryl)
- “Deakin university buildings are very big. The library was good. The reason I like being at Deakin is because it makes me feel excited am happy like lunch time and and doing numeracy. The library has many books. I travel to Deakin by taxi tram train plane bus car.” (Justin)

4. Working in the Faculty Student Centre (Gunta Bisinieks)

The Faculty Student Centre is a busy, thriving hub of activity. It acts as a central point for the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences in the receipt and return of student assignments, course inquiries, administrative processes and various other tasks relevant to the Faculty. As staff workloads were increasing and the more time-consuming tasks were not being completed, it became necessary to employ someone to do these.

Through Deakin's association with Gawith Villa, Margaret was recommended to us. She was computer literate and had some administrative experience through her work with the Red Cross and also as Chair of Gawith Villa Inc self-advocates' group. Were we prepared to take on someone with a disability?

Initially, there were some reservations about this. Questions arose as to how much time and effort Margaret's would training require. How might this impact on staff time and workloads? How much and what allowances do we or do we not make for her? Perhaps we should undertake training skills to be better equipped ourselves? It became evident to me that we were more concerned about our own inability (or should I say (dis)ability) in not having "experience" or "expertise" to address Margaret's needs than Margaret herself. And then Margaret arrived -- and showed up our own shortcomings.

What we discovered was that we did not require any particular "experience" or "expertise" to work with Margaret, only to accept her as herself and as a member of our team. Margaret's needs were much the same as ours - to be accepted as herself, on her own merits and to be able to do satisfying work.

Margaret's training period took no more effort or patience than the required time for any other new trainee. Because she becomes more confident and adept with tasks as time goes by, we extend and challenge her skills with new ones. We have the full support of the Institute of Disability Studies, Carmine and Gawith Villa staff if required, however, there has rarely been an occasion where we have had to refer to them for assistance. We have made allowance for Margaret but no more or less than that afforded to a fellow colleague when times call for a little encouragement and understanding. In the process, we are also learning about what Margaret has to offer, about the expectations we hold and about the interaction of people in general. It has become a natural, reciprocal arrangement in which we have learnt to see the person and the strengths that are added to our workplace.

We have also tried to incorporate the lessons Margaret learns from her numeracy and literacy classes. She fills in her own forms (with assistance when requested), marks off assignments, attends to student counter inquiries, does data entry, uses the fax and does mail-outs of letters and brochures and deliveries. Batches of "50" are Margaret's specialty and she is always "spot on".

Margaret is also learning how to use email and we expect to receive a message from her shortly sharing her views about the Conference. When students come to deliver or collect their assignments, they see Margaret as a familiar face at the counter and part of the staff at the Faculty Student Centre. We now rely on Margaret taking the excess burden of those important "bits and pieces" in the office, and assign her tasks in advance knowing that she will be able to complete them.

Margaret has become an integral part of the office and a valued member of our team. She performs her tasks diligently and reliably and all with good humour -- and she tells some great jokes!!

We have all found it a rewarding and enriching experience watching Margaret go from strength to strength, gaining confidence and more skills. We have taken an active interest in her life, her family and friends, and support her in her endeavours. We share her ups and downs and take pride in her achievements, especially her contribution to this Conference.

5. Being at the Institute of Disability Studies (Barrie O'Connor)

We were approached early in the year to make available some meeting room space at the Institute to accommodate the Gawith Villa Literacy and Numeracy course. There appeared to be some useful synergies in this arrangement and we agreed to trial the process. As a recent graduate of the Institute, Carmine knew that this project would be of practical interest to us. He was also keen to find a space to offer an educational program to his students in a socially-valued setting.

The arrangement has proved mutually beneficial. The Institute is pleased to be involved in supporting activities that enhance the lives of people with disabilities. There are also opportunities to offer research assistance to the group's activities next year through the work of an honours or masters student. We have found that the Gawith students are learning increased responsibility for appropriate social interactions and really enjoying the assistance of their tutors. As part of their work experience, they sometime undertake meaningful tasks that assist our efforts and enhance the value of their contributions.

The program is not as formalised as that offered at the University of Alberta, where people with intellectual disabilities are part of a cohort that enrolls to audit certain first

year units and that is involved in relevant work in campus groups such as the basketball team. Neither is it similar to a pilot program that was recently offered at Flinders University in South Australia (Gibson, 1998), in which three people with intellectual disabilities audited a disability studies-related unit along with non-disabled peers. We are providing space, a valued learning environment and the potential for growing academic links.

At Deakin University, Margaret's contributions as an employee are valued by her colleagues. Tasks that can be time-consuming for them are completed reliably and accurately by Margaret.

Margaret's value as an employee also relates to her training as a self-advocate. She took part in the Gawith Villa trial of a self-advocacy training program developed by Valid Inc. in Melbourne, along with people from six other adult training and support services. *The becoming a self advocate training program* manual (Valid Inc, 1996) outlines 18 training sessions with a further two that help self advocates make the change to running their own meetings. A new, broader training manual for advocates titled, *To stand beside: The advocacy for inclusion training manual* (Stone, 1999) has also been published to extend this earlier work.

6. Conclusion

The Gawith Villa literacy and numeracy program in a university setting has provoked unexpected and encouraging outcomes for all participants. The volunteer tutors are learning new insights as they work with students, providing an important dimension of community care and support. The staff in the Faculty Student Centre and students who do business there now take for granted that they have a valued new worker who contributes greatly to the workplace. The Gawith students are learning new skills as they take responsibility for being guests in a public centre. We are involved in valuable activities that have mutual benefits for all participants. As appropriate, there may be opportunities to evaluate the project and also lend research support to the literacy and numeracy program.

References

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Presenters:

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