

Australia's Reading Writing Hotline: An Ongoing Innovation

Vanessa Iles, Lindy Cassidy, and Jill Finch
Reading Writing Hotline at TAFE NSW

Abstract

The Reading Writing Hotline was originally conceived as phone support for viewers of an educational TV series. Celebrating its 30th anniversary next year, it has evolved to become a national referral service for learners, as well as an information and advisory service for industry and community. It recorded a significant increase in call numbers and complexity during the pandemic. Because of its unique connections with learners and program providers, the Hotline's case studies and statistics are a valuable resource for governments and policymakers. The Hotline is trialing several pilot projects to address gaps in adult literacy provision.

Keywords: adult literacy, informal learning, online learning, distance learning

This article outlines the history and evolving purpose of Australia's adult literacy phone referral service. The Reading Writing Hotline, Australia's free referral service for adult literacy and numeracy, has operated for almost 30 years. Other adult literacy services and programs have come and gone. By adapting to the needs of our communities, the Hotline has survived the many changes in the field and now has a unique overview of adult literacy needs across the country.

The Beginnings

The story of the Hotline begins in 1990, UNESCO's International Literacy Year, when the Australian government started to recognize the need for systematic adult literacy services. While some English classes were provided for migrants, there

were few opportunities for the many English-speaking Australians who had had minimal or disrupted education due to remote location or social disadvantage.

A TV series and workbook was developed to support at-home literacy learning. The Hotline was initially funded as a phone support line for this series and workbook and took its first calls in 1994. Media ads were developed to promote the series and the Hotline.

Calls skyrocketed as the previously hidden demand for adult literacy provision was revealed, and learners' fears and embarrassment began to be recognized. The Hotline was a groundbreaking service because phones were answered by experienced teachers, who understood the difficulties of callers and the barriers they faced and could respond sensitively.

Over subsequent years classes and tutor schemes became more widely established, and the Hotline's purpose shifted from supporting the TV series to providing information and referrals to face-to-face services.

The Hotline Today

The service continues to be funded by government, maintains a national database of numeracy/literacy program providers, and receives more than 4000 phone and email enquiries a year. However, the work of the Hotline has evolved as Australian society has become more complex, and much has changed in the adult literacy sector since 1990. The range of provider and program types and sites has increased, as has the role of technology in everyday life. We have greater understanding of multiple literacies, and the important connected roles of numeracy, literacy and digital literacy. Our national demographic profile is more culturally diverse, and there is recognition of systematic disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. Policies on education and economic development have fluctuated or waned.

The Hotline now provides advice not just to individual callers, but to job agencies, employers, libraries, industry, and government agencies. Our website receives around 66,000 visits a year, in addition to our calls and emails. The Hotline is a reliable source of specialist information in a field where policy, funding, eligibility, and program availability are increasingly volatile.

The Hotline's learner-friendly website has resources for students, tutors, employers, and First Nations learners. Importantly, as a service in direct contact with learners, the Hotline can provide a voice for people who are often not heard, and its statistics shed clear light on gaps in program types, geographical coverage, or learning

resources. For this reason, it is often asked for input into policy reviews by governments.

COVID-19 Changes

Some of the changes mentioned have been deeply accentuated by the pandemic. The Hotline's call numbers increased significantly. Calls are much more time consuming as caller issues are more complex. It is often the person's first time reaching out for assistance, and their literacy needs have to be unpacked from other needs.

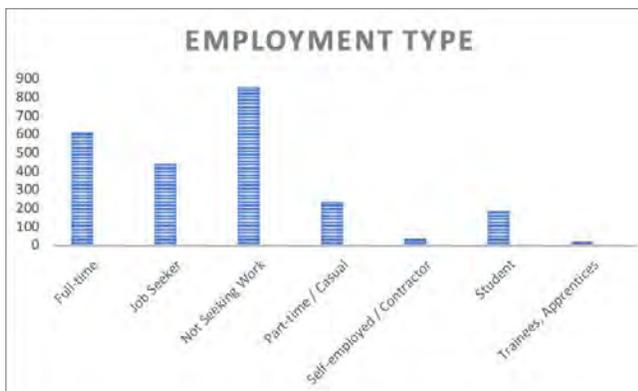
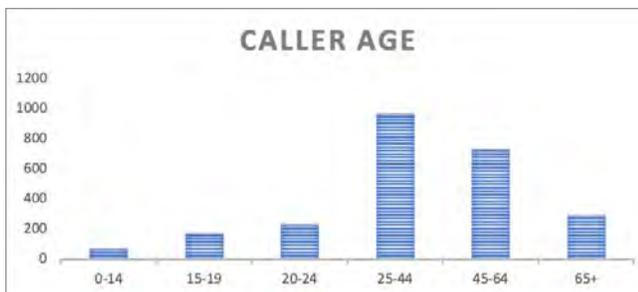
The Hotline has been in a unique position to monitor how COVID-19 affects learners and providers. It is therefore able to report on significant issues for learners, including:

- programs closed or only offering online formats unsuitable for low level learners;
- students dropping out as delivery moved online;
- students who were vulnerable (due to lack of financial, social or learning supports) were first to leave and last to return;
- parents overwhelmed by the demands of supervising at-home online learning when they lacked confidence themselves;
- adults unable to access regular literacy/numeracy supports in the community (such as libraries) due to closures/remote working;
- employees stressed by working from home, as workplace buddies who helped with literacy/digital skills became unavailable;
- fear and shame about complying with health requirements, including changing rules, fake news, QR check-ins and vaccination passports; and,
- complicated health messaging written at a very high level, sometimes translated into community languages but not rewritten to meet the needs of the whole community.

Who Calls and Why

Analysis of internal call data from the Hotline's caller database makes it clear that callers represent the diversity and complexity of adult literacy needs. It reflects and justifies the broader role of the Hotline since 1990. While the needs of callers have changed over time, the overall profile of our caller population is fairly consistent.

Data for Jan 2021 - Jan 2022 shows that more men than women called the Hotline, 72% were from an English-speaking background and around 10% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (who comprise 3% of the overall population). Caller age and employment type are represented in the charts below.



Around half of callers are ringing for themselves, while others ring for a friend or family member, or from community organizations. A smaller percentage of calls are from employers, industry groups, government departments, and health workers. People interested in becoming tutors also call for information on available training.

Here are some of our recent callers:

- **Aboriginal community in negotiations with mining company**

Bruce is a First Nations language speaker and represents his community in negotiations with a mining company. He needed to improve his English literacy to “get a better understanding instead of just blind-signing.” There were no tailored literacy classes available, but the Hotline located a local teacher who agreed to work voluntarily.

- **Worker trying to keep job at remote airport**

An Aboriginal employee called seeking assistance to keep her job. The literacy requirements were increasing and keeping up was becoming an issue. She felt ashamed and was reluctant to ask for help. Barriers for this caller included access to funding, travel to classes, release from work, and cultural appropriateness. The Hotline spent several months following up leads and eventually found a tutor to support her.

- **Worker navigating COVID-19 and unemployment**

Brett rang after seeing a TV series about adult literacy. His fiancée had been helping him with writing but had recently died. Brett needed to complete many forms from the hospital and government, which send him “into a panic attack.” He also struggles with COVID-19 information and requirements. Brett has lost many job opportunities because he was unable to write. He was a concreter and became a foreman but had to give up because the literacy demands were too much. Brett is now unemployed. Physical concreting is hard, and he wants to find other work. He is looking for help to do his resume and forms. “After all these years, I want to do something for myself.”

- **Improving safety for workers**

An agricultural employer rang seeking literacy help for an employee. After a conversation about available programs, the Hotline invited the safety manager to contact us about a larger group who were at significant risk in the workplace due to lower reading skills. A program for this group was subsequently organized.

Calls during the pandemic often amplify existing issues with adult numeracy/literacy:

- A man with a disability had no connection to the internet as he could not afford it. He wanted distance materials to be sent until he was able to access a computer.
- A woman lost her job and now has time to retrain for a new career. She was working as a courier and now wants to study maths to enter the police force. The Hotline helped with practice exams, numeracy class information, and some maths learning resources.
- An essential worker in the health industry needed literacy help. The Hotline provided support, learning resources, and referral information for when face to face classes restarted.
- A woman living alone needed help with computing for social and learning contact, as she had no-one to help her. Crucial forms for financial support were also too difficult, and all online forms were intimidating.

What The Calls Reveal About Australia's Adult Literacy Provision.

It is clear that the Hotline plays a unique role in collating and reporting these issues to stakeholders. Analysis of calls makes clear some important issues for adult literacy in Australia:

- An unhelpful emphasis on literacy for employment. The main funded literacy program is for job seekers, however around 80% of callers are not eligible for this program, because they are already working, or are not seeking work as they are carers or have chronic health issues.
- A need for more informal community-based learning. Accredited literacy classes in colleges are often intimidating and difficult for adults with beginner literacy levels and there are very few pathways in.
- A gap in literacy programs for people in regional and remote locations. While some online programs are offered, many learners do not have devices, access to the internet, or the digital skills to enroll and participate. A national distance mode literacy scheme with postal and phone support options is needed.

How The Hotline Has Responded

The core business of the Hotline continues to be answering calls and finding suitable classes. However, a significant change in recent years has been responding to systemwide needs gathered via the phonedlines. Policy does not always respond rapidly to need; therefore, a key part of the Hotline's innovation has been coordinated action with other non-government literacy councils and organizations.

From the needs identified by its core business, a range of projects have emerged. Most of these are in low-budget "pilot" form, trialing practical ways of responding to needs, and demonstrating how learner-centered adult education approaches can be put into practice. Other stakeholders may then be able to implement projects in a systematic way. Some of these projects have a "back-to-the-future" feel about them, mirroring

successful and well-regarded strategies which have been discontinued.

Helping Adults Fill in Forms

The Hotline receives many calls from adults who struggle to fill in forms to access government services. It also receives calls from community workers called on to give face-to-face help to people trying to fill in forms. Even in paper format, these forms are challenging, but the difficulty is amplified as more forms move online and require digital access and digital literacy. The Hotline responded by initiating research with the community and library sectors to capture the amount of staff time being used to support form-filling and if there was a need for literacy tutor training for these staff. The Hotline is also piloting a small teaching project based in a community center, offering form-filling help as a stepping-stone to engaging in a literacy program.

Distance Literacy

Some of our most vulnerable callers are in remote locations with no literacy classes and no transport. There may or may not be reliable internet or libraries. There are many callers who can't afford data plans or laptops, and many more who don't have the skills and confidence to use them, or anyone to help when things go wrong. To take the first steps in literacy these learners need paper-based learning material, with a teacher available to talk regularly by phone.

These options were widely available in the past but have generally been abandoned, with everyone told to "just hop online," assuming that everyone has access to devices and the digital literacy needed to use them. To address this, the Hotline is piloting postal and phone learning for a small number of vulnerable and isolated learners who

have no other options.

Volunteer Tutor Programs and Training.

Australia used to have a vibrant network of volunteer adult literacy tutor schemes based in libraries and further education colleges. While a few states have maintained this excellent option, many groups have closed due to changes in policy, funding cuts, or lack of qualified staff. This has meant a kind of "corporate memory" loss, with few programs for training new tutors, few learning resources, and limited funding for coordinators to train and support volunteers. To address this, the Hotline has produced an updated tutor training package for free distribution to public libraries and community groups.

Feedback to Government

In recent years, the Hotline has played an increasing role as a trusted reference point for governments at both state and national level. This partly reflects its unique overview of what is happening on the ground for both literacy/numeracy providers and for learners. It also reflects changes in the adult literacy landscape over the last two decades, which have seen large scale privatization and marketizing of adult literacy. This has meant that a limited number of public education providers in literacy (who were easily consulted for advice and statistics) have been replaced by a "churn" of private providers unable to develop a cohesive vision or long-term overview of the field.

Consequently, the Hotline stands as a valuable source of up-to-date information on:

- who is offering what, where, and at what level;
- which cohorts and communities are not getting their needs met;
- what difficulties employers are having in addressing literacy/numeracy in the workplace;

- the kind of research that is needed;
- specialist literacy workforce issues (there is currently a major crisis looming); and,
- policy and program development recommendations.

This means that the Hotline's small team of project officers is often tightly stretched preparing submissions and participating in reference groups across multiple jurisdictions.

This goes beyond its recognized role but has become important in order to make a real difference to the opportunities for future learners. For example, in the above project on form-filling needs, the role started with receiving calls from learners and community workers. When it became clear that few options were available to get callers help, the Hotline initiated research to find out what was happening and what was needed. In addition to the pilot program referred to above, the service reached out to government departments

responsible for the forms, to discuss opportunities for working together on a plain English approach to their materials. The Hotline has put together a plain English kit for a broader audience across government and industry, to develop capability in reader-friendly communications.

Conclusion

For nearly 30 years, the Hotline has significantly expanded its original role and has evolved into a unique resource. It continues to adapt to meet the needs of callers and communities, and to explore solutions to the systemic barriers that adult literacy learners continue to experience. This role has been even more important with the impacts of COVID-19 in Australia. The Hotline provides a voice for people who are often not heard, and its case studies and statistics shed light on gaps in literacy provision. It plays a unique role in ensuring these voices may be heard in policy discussions and program reviews by governments.