

The power of 'e': extending the 'E' in ACE

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Over the past decade or so, an educational evolution has been redefining our understanding and practices of adult community education (ACE) in profound and comprehensive ways. The name of this transformation is e-learning. A bountiful interpretation and practice of 'e-learning' in ACE results inevitably in extending our educational work; its presence automatically extends the WHY (our purpose), the WHO (our community), the WHEN (the timing), the WHERE (the learning spaces), the WHAT (the scope), the WHAT FOR (the learning achievements) and the HOW (the modes, methods and media). In other words, the power of 'e' as a multidimensional force in 'e-learning', and the way it extends meanings, values, ideals, purposes, practices and participants in ACE, means it redefines our understanding of education itself. As a consequence, e-learning has given us new possibilities of connectedness, community, democracy, global citizenship, lifelong learning, transformational learning, learning to learn, critical literacy and much else.

Footnote: This is an edited version of a keynote address presented at *E-Learning Showcase 2009: Celebrating good practice in e-learning in ACE* in Melbourne on the 20 March 2009. An audio/slide version of this conference presentation can be found at: <http://eshowcase.acfe.vic.edu.au/Bradshaw>

Introduction

I want to begin by affirming ACE and what it stands for. ACE. Adult. Community. Education. These are the three lighthouse words that guide our lives. Adult. Community. Education. This powerful trio unites all of us in the ACE tribe as we celebrate the contribution of e-learning to the grand tradition of Adult Community Education.

As with all tribes, it is important to celebrate our cultural heritage – to cherish our stories, to admire our grand feats and to sing the praises of our heroes, women and men. Everyone working in ACE has made her or his contribution to our story. Every single ACE story matters.

The gradual development of e-learning in ACE is an unfolding story that has taken place over many years. The collective wisdom of this story is our legacy. In this paper, I provide a few snapshots of this vivacious and audacious story. It is far from the whole story, but it is enough to see it is an inspiring story. In telling this story, I hope to do justice to the individual and collective endeavours of those who paved the way for us, to those who, in the process, showed us how to extend the 'E' in ACE.

Extending the 'E' in ACE

What do I mean by this? Before embarking on the story, I want to draw attention to the title of this paper: *The power of 'e': extending the 'E' in ACE*. As a start, I'd like to muse briefly on the little 'e' before moving on to what extending the big 'E' might mean.

Not everyone is familiar with the term 'e-learning'. If we say the little 'e' is short for 'electronic', and no more, this usually stifles discussion prematurely. In that case, with all the emphasis on the 'electronic' bit, equipment such as computers, digital cameras and (more often these days) mobile phones and mp3 players take prominence as the key factor in e-learning.

It is a rather impoverished view of 'e'. The 'e' in 'e-learning' means so much more to me. It means emerging, emotional and exhilarating learning, exemplary, essential and effective learning; it means sometimes exotic, regularly exhausting, but always exciting learning. For me, as well, 'e-learning' means everyday and everywhere and everyone learning and, possibly most important of all in ACE, it means egalitarian and ethical learning.



So, when I refer to extending the 'E' in ACE, I mean the effect of infusing the little 'e', and all the richness named above, into our ACE ideals and activities. From this point of view, incorporating 'e-learning' is not simply a matter of buying new equipment or adding the odd computer-assisted learning task or attending an obligatory professional development session on blended learning. It means giving extra breadth and depth to all aspects of the 'Education' in ACE – in what we do and how we think about it.

Putting it another way, to incorporate 'e-learning' in the ways just named is to automatically extend the 'E' in ACE. A bountiful interpretation and practice of 'e-learning' in ACE results inevitably in extending our educational work; its presence automatically extends the WHY (our purpose), the WHO (our community), the WHEN (the timing), the WHERE (the learning spaces), the WHAT (the scope), the WHAT FOR (the learning achievements) and the HOW

(the modes, methods and media). In other words, the power of 'e' as a multidimensional force in 'e-learning', and the way it extends meanings, values, ideals, purposes, practices and participants in ACE, means it redefines our understanding of education itself.

That is the gift of 'e-learning' to ACE. When recognising its power to make education richer in so many ways, it is clear that this small 'e' is not so small at all.

Key milestones

To put our current situation in context, it is time for a little history. To do this, I have chosen to highlight some key moments or milestones, ones that have brought us to where we are today. I asked a number of e-learning pioneers and innovators to complete this sentence, 'A memorable moment or milestone in e-learning for me has been ...'. Commemorating these moments means revisiting those who have travelled this path before us, role models who know (and knew) the breadth, depth and significance of their explorations into e-learning.

Here are the responses I received.

Michael Gwyther:

Well, seeing the link between the emerging web and possibilities for learner publication in ALBE and ESL classes. I was very much inspired by the work of Dale Pobega at Duke Street Neighbourhood House which inspired a few of us ... at Ballarat East Neighbourhood House to learn html for the sole purpose of uploading our student writing to the web! I have been involved in a few projects since then, but none were as exciting and 'Frontierlandish' as those few weeks in '96 when we taught ourselves those skills and published our work together.

Clint Smith:

I'd name the two 1996 documents, *Convergent technologies in adult and community education*, both the report and the kit that we did for ACFE.

Josie Rose:

For me, a key experience was management of my first LearnScope project in 1999. It set all who participated at Narre Community Learning Centre on a technology path that they still follow to this day. As well, it catapulted me into a very different, more national sphere. I was working as an ESL teacher at Narre at the time. We were invited to present at the 'Spotlight on the Provider' conference in Sydney that year. We were so nervous, but I remember standing in our presentation room at the conference centre in Darling Harbour thinking: 'I think we have arrived.'

Gillian Ryan:

Using common and popular forms of online communication, for example:

- using 'My connected community' with adult literacy students
- my first time using Elluminate
- using the internet to engage reluctant learners in learning
- my first online meeting using Skype.

Michael Chalk:

[It was] when Libby Barker decided in 2001 that PRACE needed a flexible learning co-ordinator and encouraged the strengths of a sessional adult literacy teacher by appointing me to the role.

Glenda McPherson:

Josie as a Flexible Learning Leader in 2000 and Michael Chalk in 2004 were significant in terms of lifting the e-learning profile within, but more importantly, outside the ACFE sector in Victoria and nationally.

As well, the TAFE Frontiers initial Flexible ACE research and report in 2004 and the opportunity to revisit it with the AccessACE research in 2007 and report in 2008 was a rare opportunity for follow-up research!

Mary Schooneveldt:

Personally, it was the ACMI 2004 digital storytelling course and then the process of creating an ACE friendly (free!) way of introducing the concept to people in the region.

It is important to put these memorable moments in a wider historical perspective. One result of my research into the evolution of e-learning in ACE in Victoria is a timeline of key initiatives, projects, publications and funding sources that can be found on the conference wiki at: <<http://eshowcase.acfe.vic.edu.au/Bradshaw>>. The scope of research and experimentation over nearly twenty years is truly remarkable. As well, a slideshow on Flickr at: <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/biddyb/sets/72157612809077443/>> displays some of the texts that mark key milestones along the way. Some might call them foundation texts.

Pioneers and visionaries

Another outcome of my research is a collection of *Fine Print* journal excerpts spanning the years 1996 to 2001; the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) journal has long documented and promoted e-learning in ACE. The voices of our pioneers and visionaries that we hear in these excerpts allow us to follow in the footsteps of our hardy ACE explorers. Their words evoke so powerfully the new educational horizons they glimpsed, a vision of e-learning that they recognised (long before many others) would refresh ways of conceptualising and enacting adult education. Their words are as fresh today as when first uttered quite some years ago. I have organised their contributions chronologically.

In 1996, Alan Wayman, ALBE co-ordinator at Yarraville Community Centre, wrote:

With a little skill and a lot of patience, you can retrieve information, images, programs and sounds. Make friends, get ripped off, become involved in political activities, study at a college on the other side of the world, find work, play games, listen to poets, watch the weather change in Hawaii – it's endless, and the possibilities are increasing by the minute. ('From out-of-date to "classic": making use of older technology', *Fine Print*, vol. 18, no. 2, June 1996, pp. 24–25)

Here, Alan points to the magnitude or multiplicity of educational purposes.

In 1997, Mexie Butler, Multimedia Project Officer at Flemington Reading and Writing Program, wrote:

One day when I was browsing on the web, I found this thing called 'chat'. It meant that I could talk to people anywhere in the world in real time... Amazing, to think that somewhere on the other side of the world there was someone sitting in front of their computer, doing the same as I was doing. ('Look @ this!', *Fine Print*, vol. 20, no. 3, Spring 1997, p. 20)

In this excerpt, Mexie points to the ease and excitement of global reach.

In 1998, Dale Pobega, language teacher and Online Literacies Worker at Duke Street Community House, Sunshine, wrote:

The 1998 Central Western Metropolitan ACFE student conference is currently being organised by three groups of adult learners as part of their CGEA... The students are increasing general knowledge while improving their screen literacy skills, establishing friendships through Moo and e-mail, and feeling part of a community of learners on the Net without losing their 'real life' sense of connectedness as they work on the student conference project with its practical orientation. ('Language knowledge and e-literacies for ALBE', *Fine Print*, vol. 21, no. 2, Winter 1998, pp. 12–13)

In this case, Dale points to the community development potential of participating in online communities.

In 1999, Josie Rose, educational technology manager at Narre Community Learning Centre and New Learning Technologies project worker for Southern WesternPort ACFE, wrote:

There are two crucial factors to the success of a New Learning Technology in the language and literacy classroom – teacher confidence and a sense of enjoyment and fun. ('Hard fun: using computer in the language classroom', *Fine Print*, vol. 22, no. 1, Autumn 1999, p. 15)

Here, Josie points to the role of 'serious' play in professional development.

In 2001, Michael Chalk, project officer at PRACE, wrote:

Term one, Y2K, and PRACE is entering the trial stage of an exciting ACFE project to examine NLT in ESL provision. Other providers on the project are Olympic, Meadow Heights and Lalor Living and Learning... on day one of the inter-class communication trial, the learners at Olympic are writing their first introductory letters to the learners at Preston... 'I'm finding this very demoralising', said student M, genuinely frustrated, as she wrestled with the e-mail sign-up procedure. I sat with her knowing how important it was to find some success at that point... When she finally got herself an e-mail account, the letter M sent her partner in the other group was very inspiring, urging the other woman to believe in herself and not give up. ('Open forum: email as a second language', *Fine Print*, vol. 23, no. 1, Autumn 2000, p. 30)

Michael here points to a new and vital version of learner empowerment for lifelong learning.

In 2001, Dale Pobega, manager of ACEWEB, wrote:

Twenty seven online workshops were held across the four days of the e-conference with morning, afternoon and evening sessions attended by 300 conference participants and presenters logged in from Israel, the USA and Thailand. Transcripts of all e-conference sessions can be found online. ('Community and connectedness: a review of the inaugural ACEWEB e-conference, 2001', *Fine Print*, vol. 24, no. 4, Summer 2001, p. 19)

In this excerpt, Dale points to the wonder of transcending the boundaries and limitations imposed by time, space and distance.

What comes through these words so strongly are the very same features of e-learning in ACE that we cherish so much today – the diversity of educational purposes, access in all its forms, capacity for lifelong learning, personal and community development, democratic participation both locally and globally, the role of play in professional

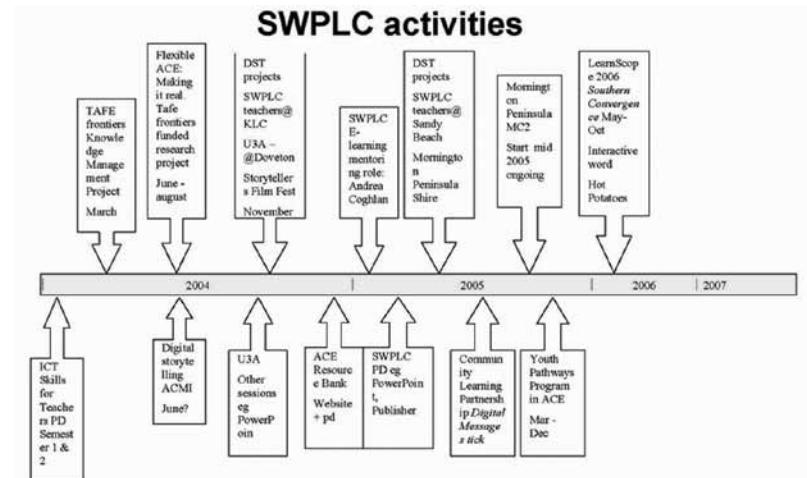
development, freedom from the limitations of time and distance. And these educational virtues were first sighted and trialled by our ACE explorers as early as a decade ago.

The time it takes

But, as we all know, significant and sustainable change does not happen in an instant. As Glenda indicated in her response to me:

E-learning does not happen overnight. It is a slow process before it can be embedded. TAFE Frontiers research showed how long and hard it was for TAFEs – it is much longer and harder for ACFE ... Infrastructure – hardware, software, professional development and personnel – is very sparse... and that means ...it is much more down to individuals within providers.

Two timeline documents, put together by Mary Schooneveldt, trace highlights of the e-learning story of Southern Western Port Learning Communities in the Southern Western Port ACFE region from 1998 to 2007 (Schooneveldt, 2003–7).



Taken together and studied closely, they portray succinctly the time it takes for change to happen and endure. Other ACFE regions now also boast a similar track record in e-learning, displaying maturity in both breadth and depth. Now, over ten years on, what are the 'lessons learnt' from all this commitment and activity?

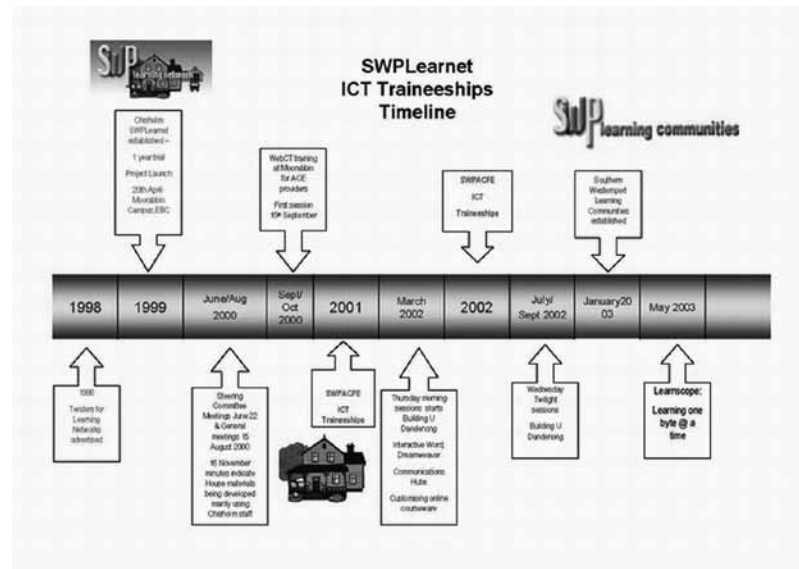
Key themes

Three themes recur when listening to those who have been involved in extending e-learning in ACE. These three themes are:

- Leadership
- Action research projects
- Professional development in all its forms

Leadership

When they take a leading role, government agencies make a huge difference. Consider the vast amount of good generated by the array of projects and activities funded and fostered by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework over many years.



Many ACE managers and teachers have also commented on the key role played, before it was disbanded, by *TAFE Frontiers* – citing it as a powerful source of knowledge, support, professional development and networking that was particularly supportive of ACE.

A number of ACFE regional councils have long affirmed e-learning initiatives and, more recently, the ACFE Board has consolidated past successes by supporting the 2007 *AccessACE* and 2008 *E-Mentor* projects.

Individual leaders are also very influential. Mary Schooneveldt remarked in her response to me: 'A key moment is a very recent one: the realization that we now have tech savvy managers and teachers in ACE willing to enthusiastically travel down the e-learning path.'

Perhaps the most effective local leadership comes from the combination of organisational commitment *and* willing, dedicated individuals. In other words, individual passion *plus* organisational backing are an irresistible, dynamic duo.

In her contribution to the *AccessACE* wiki in the section called 'E-learning around the regions', Lynne Gibb, e-learning mentor at Coonara Community House in Upper Ferntree Gully, reinforces this idea:

Despite quite a deal of interest in the use of technologies in adult learning within the Eastern Metro Region, the uptake was slow until the recent emergence of organisations and individuals keen to take a leadership role. The partnering between Morrison House and Coonara Community House in 2005 for a New Practices Project explored the use of podcasting... This project led to the identification of a couple of key individuals within the local ACE sector who had the necessary passion and drive to set new learning technologies firmly on the agenda.

Action research projects

The second recurrent theme highlighted by those who have been involved in extending e-learning in ACE is action research projects. Never underestimate the power of community-based action research. Michael Chalk singles out the following e-learning examples for particular mention:

- Australian Flexible Learning Framework projects and resources with their strengthening of networks of people and communities.
- The national Community Engagement projects' vital role for gaining a national perspective.
- The Victorian ACFE Board's full support for the 2007 *AccessACE* research and built on with the 2008 regional e-mentor project.

Also, let's not forget the marvellous and popular educational e-resources that have emerged from community-based action research projects. The following examples spring to mind: *World Wide Water*, *Online Banking*, *Snakes Alive!* and *English at the Beach*, (produced by NMRACFE Online Resources, a consortium consisting of TAFE Frontiers, the ANTA Adult Literacy National Project and LearnLinks, an RMIT/NMRACFE partnership), *The Learning House* (produced by SMRACFE) and *Dream Holiday* (produced by the ACENet Learning Network and Flemington Reading and Writing Program).

Professional development in all its forms

The third theme, professional development, is the one, time and time again, named as the *number one* priority in 'lessons learnt'. This theme includes networks and mentoring.

Two recent ACFE-funded reports – *AccessACE: clever uses of ICT in ACE* (2007), subtitled 'Lessons learnt in blended learning – a guide for managing and teaching', and *E-mentor final report* (2008) –

illustrate this well. In the latter of these two reports, Josie Rose, the author of both, sums up the present situation this way:

It often takes a three year period to make deep and broad change. The regions were asked to provide feedback on what the next step should be. Three recommended next steps, all to do with professional development, are:

1. Providing professional development opportunities for organisations to 'try out' different technologies in non-threatening settings.
2. Extending the e-mentor project to assist providers with the implementation of identified projects.
3. Developing a community of practice in the region ... to broaden and deepen their skills and knowled

Year after year, the evidence is the same. A judicious combination of leadership, action research and professional development makes a world of difference, no matter what the size or stage of the organisation. ACE has never been in a better position to say 'Yes, e-learning is for everyone'.

Conclusion

I began with ACE and I want to end with ACE. Above all, I want to return to that all-important big 'E' in ACE. How has the arrival of e-learning extended our understanding of 'education' in Adult Community Education? What difference has it made to our ACE policies and practices?

Over the years, we have seen 'e' moving from the exceptional and exotic to the everywhere and everyday and everybody, from being a novelty to being intrinsic, from 'acting locally and thinking globally' to 'thinking locally and acting globally'. In the process, this educational evolution has been redefining our understanding and practices of ACE in profound and comprehensive ways. E-learning has given us

new possibilities of connectedness, community, democracy, global citizenship, lifelong learning, transformational learning, learning to learn, critical literacy and much else.

Putting it another way, incorporating the little 'e' in 'e-learning' into ACE means extending the big 'E' in far-reaching and significant ways. Consider, for example, as we have heard in today's stories, how it changes:

IDEAS and IDEALS
 MEANINGS and MEANS
 PRINCIPLES, PURPOSES, PRACTICES and PARTICIPATION.

This deepening, broadening and enriching of education is not another 'thing to do'; it's an automatic bonus when 'e' is there. And this will continue to happen wherever and whenever 'e-learning in ACE' is alive and well – as it is today.

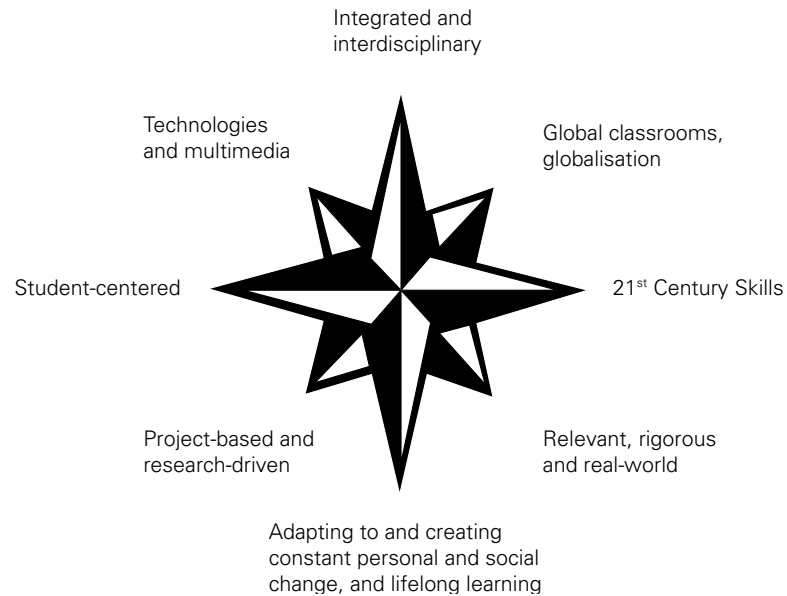
As I draw to a close, I have two final questions:

- What potential 'goods' beckon us in ACE?
- What work – both thinking work and educational work related to 'e-learning in ACE' – is still to be done?

My response to these two questions is determined by reflecting on what constitutes critical attributes and literacies for twenty-first century education. This reflection prompts us to name ACE purposes and priorities precisely and proudly.

To the twenty-first century attributes, first. 'E-learning' is not simply about 'technologies and media'. It is about all the attributes featured on the *Possibilities for 21st century education* website, that is, 'e-learning' is about lifelong learning, global classrooms and globalisation, adapting to and creating constant personal and social change.

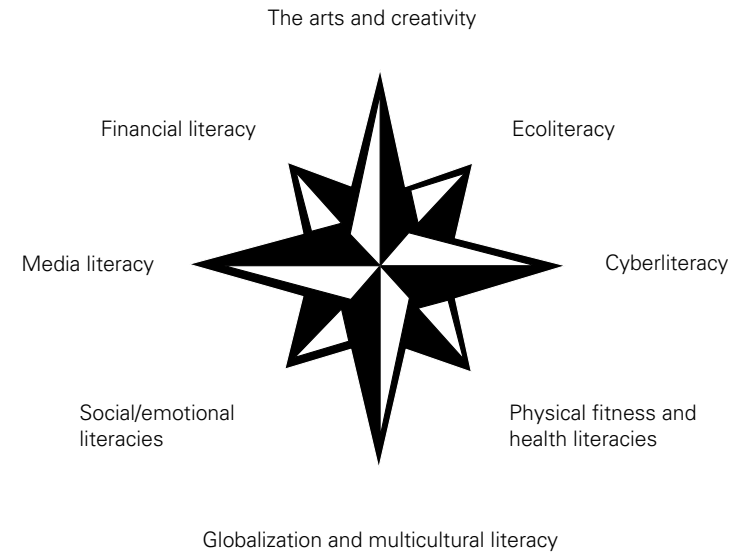
Critical attributes of 21st century education



(Source: http://www.21stcenturyschools.com/What_is_21st_Century_Education.htm)

And to the 21st century literacies. E-learning cannot be reduced to 'cyberliteracy', important as that is. It is also ecoliteracy and multicultural literacy and creativity and all the other literacies foregrounded on the same site.

Multiple Literacies for the 21st Century



So, for me, 'e-learning in ACE' is about aiming for and achieving these attributes and literacies, ones that are necessities and not luxuries in our twenty-first century world. Our ACE history tells us 'Yes, we can'. Our vocation as twenty-first century adult community e-educators declares we must, and will, continue to explore the power of 'e'. In this way, we will continue the long and proud tradition of extending the 'E' in ACE.

Glossary

ACE	Adult Community Education
ACEWEB	Cluster Project – ACE 'collectives' promoting collaborative educational provision and professional development
ACFE	Adult Community and Further Education
ACMI	Australian Centre for the Moving Image
ALBE	Adult Literacy and Basic Education
CGEA	Certificates in General Education for Adults
ESL	English as a Second Language
NLT	New Learning Technologies
NMRACFE	Northern Metropolitan Region Adult Community and Further Education
PRACE	Preston Reservoir Adult Community Education
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
VALBEC	Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council

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About the author

Delia Bradshaw has worked in adult education in Victoria for nearly 30 years. She is a writer, teacher, mentor, researcher, editor, curriculum advisor, panel chair and workshop presenter. She has worked in a wide range of contexts, including ACE neighbourhood learning centres, TAFE institutes, ACFE regional councils, community agencies, government bodies, professional organisations and university education faculties.

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