

Response to 'An experiment in method' (J.L.J. Wilson)

Tom Stehlik
School of Education
University of South Australia

In celebration of the first edition of the Association's journal, published in July 1961, the current editor has asked me to respond to one of the original three articles which appeared in that issue. J.L.J. Wilson was Director of Tutorial Classes for the University of Sydney, and NSW Chairman of the Australian Association of Adult Education, as ALA was known then. Reading Wilson's article from a distance of 50 years highlights a number of ways in which we as a nation, adult education as a field, and the journal itself have moved on and progressed significantly—not only in terms of the way we understand learning for marginalised groups in society, but in the very language we use to discuss it.

In 1960–61 Wilson was invited to give lectures on 'modern techniques in adult education' as part of a training school for those involved in the work of developing 'Co-operatives for Aborigines' which were

sponsored by the Australian Board of Missions—the national mission agency of the Anglican Church in Australia, and an organisation that is still active (<http://www.abmission.org/>). In Wilson's own words, the school 'consisted of two courses for two groups—one for aborigines, the other for European teachers, administrators and missionaries working in aboriginal settlements' (p. 20).

To his credit, Wilson decided that lecturing either of the groups on modern techniques in adult education was inappropriate, and instead conducted what he considered at the time to be 'an experiment in method'—a problem-solving approach based on group discussion using the knowledge and experience brought by the participants to an issue that was meaningful and relevant to them. The article therefore consists of a report of these sessions, with Wilson's reflections and questions on the relevance of this method more generally to adult education, compared with that of the 'ordinary lecture-discussion session' (p. 20).

What is of great interest to this reviewer is the fact that the article: (1) presents a historical snapshot of a moment in adult education in Australia when an argument was being presented for the importance of introducing group methods in teaching adults—'Americans have been doing it for years' (p. 20)—and (2) gives a fascinating account of a non-Indigenous Australian grappling with ways to describe his experiences of working with a group of Indigenous Australians from different urban and rural areas and language groups, for whom English was not their first language, and who had varying levels of education and experience in 'European' formal instruction.

In terms of the first point, Wilson acknowledges the assumptions still being made in adult education in 1961 around the application of teacher-centred learning, based on particular subjects and exposition of set content, at the risk of ignoring the 'motives, interests and "objectives" of the students' (p. 21). Accordingly, his method in working with the group of Indigenous people was to

attempt to extract from them the important issues around forming a co-operative in their community, from their own perspective and experience 'by dint of questioning and as little suggestion as possible' (p. 21). Wilson seems almost amazed that in experimenting with his method, the 'subject' for the session, with headings and sub-sections, appeared on the blackboard from the input of the group rather than from a pre-determined lesson plan or lecture notes.

However, Wilson goes on to wonder in his article about how to evaluate or measure such learning that is not based on transmission and assessment of information, but on solving problems that require longer term transfer of learning in real contexts. He refers to a Professor Gibb, who 'fears that this method results only in students airing, and having aired being confirmed in, their own prejudices and ignorance' (p. 22). It is a stark message from the past about how far we have—hopefully—come in adult education in recognising self-reflection and personal narrative as a positive rather than a negative process for learner development. The only way Wilson appears able to determine the success or otherwise of his approach was that he found it 'much harder work' (p. 21) than simply giving a lecture—something I'm sure all adult educators could relate to.

Wilson shows how pre-occupied adult educators were at the time in determining *individual* learning, rather than the powerful learning that can take place due to the synergies and interaction of the group as a whole. He worries that, out of a group of around 25, only about half actually spoke during the entire first of two sessions; while one or two were consistently vocal and 'had to be checked early because they were making too many suggestions' (p. 23). Sounds like a typical group of adult learners! He thinks that this may have been due to shyness on the part of some participants, and also acknowledges varying levels of English literacy; but eventually the light bulb comes on and he reflects on his own limitations—'my *vocabulary* was an obstacle to effective communication of my ideas and concepts to them' (p. 24, original emphasis).

What is also interesting is that Wilson does not yet have the vocabulary with which we are now familiar to describe and discuss the processes he is reflecting on in this article. By the second session, Wilson appears to have developed as a *reflective practitioner* in his approach to the group and completely hands over his power and control, becoming a *facilitator* rather than an instructor. The result is a process of *student-centred learning* in which the issues for discussion and their importance are determined entirely by the group. The topics reported are as salient to Indigenous people now as they were then: 'economic insecurity, social inequality... finding capital and thrift, adult education... and children's education' (p. 25). The group then listed *action items* to address these issues in their own communities. They concluded with a *process check* and decided that, in terms of their own adult education processes, they needed *skill development* in English expression, arithmetic and bookkeeping, chairing and conducting meetings and so on.

As a facilitator, Wilson used nothing more in this session than the situation and the group itself as resources, as well as the judicious use of questioning to help achieve a useful and practical outcome from what could have been a patronising, one-way transmission of recipe-type information that may have reached some participants but certainly not energised the whole group. It is quite remarkable then to read the following statement from Wilson about the extent to which the group seemed empowered through:

... the importance of understanding themselves the task of convincing their own people of their need for adult education... [and] the inter-relation of adult education with that of children's education, to secure parental support of education for the child, and the place of education in their future as a people... (p. 25).

The second point raised for this reviewer relates to Wilson's reflections on working with a group of Indigenous adults, which, despite his apparent sensitivities, are somewhat confronting to a

reader in 2010. To put the article in historical context, 1961 was a period in Australia's history when the politicisation of Indigenous issues was yet to occur, but was just over the horizon. The 1960s saw the Freedom Rides in 1965 organised by Charles Perkins, resulting in the 1967 referendum when Indigenous people were finally recognised as Australian citizens. The Aboriginal tent embassy of the early 1970s in Canberra was still a decade away when Wilson wrote about these Indigenous learners, labelling them in such terms as 'half or quarter caste', 'some from Native reserves... some free citizens and were urbanized'; and wondered how his method would work with 'more sophisticated groups' (p. 22).

The very context in which the article is set also reflects the policy of the times in taking a missionary approach to Indigenous affairs and issues, which has always been fraught with arguments about the benefits in terms of education and health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people versus the limitations of a condescending, patronising and assimilationist approach to their welfare based on European attitudes and Christian morality. Only two years before the article was published, Albert Namatjira had passed away—a man whose life was symbolic in terms of the missionary influence on his artwork which became celebrated and recognised, even though his own life and his own people were not.

It is interesting to note in Barrie Brennan's response to one of the other articles in that first journal edition of 1961 that, at the time, W.G.K. Duncan used the metaphor of the missionary to question the degree of commitment and enthusiasm of the adult education professionals in seeking to extend the scope of, and participation rate in, adult education. Whether participation in adult education still remains a mission for the ALA and its members in its 'Golden Jubilee' year is an interesting question, and perhaps something that the association may continue to debate at the 50th annual conference this year and beyond.