



# MultiLit

A newsletter for parents and teachers

December 2012

# moments

## With MultiLit's help 'Indigo Solves the Pzulze'

A new book for children, 'Indigo Solves the Pzulze', recounts the true story of Indigo, a little girl who struggled to learn to read.

The book was written by Wendy Fitzgerald and illustrated by Sophie Norsa and tells the story of 10-year-old Indigo Wallace-Knight, her struggles with dyslexia, and her resolve to overcome her disability and to assist other children who have literacy challenges. Part of Indigo's story involves her setting up the Indigo Express Fund that now partners with the National Centre of Indigenous Excellence to deliver literacy assessments and tutoring for Indigenous young people.

Indigo's journey towards reading success involved her attending the MultiLit Literacy Centre for regular tutoring. MultiLit Chairman, Professor Kevin Wheldall AM, wrote a preface for the book and has been invited to speak at the book's launch.

Dr Catriona Wallace, Founder of the Indigo Express Fund, a sub-fund of Sydney Women's Fund, and Rosalind Strong AM, Chair of Sydney Community Foundation, will launch the book on Sunday 9th December 2012. All proceeds from the launch and the sale of the books will go to the Indigo Express Fund.



## MultiLit for migrants

### Jean Hopman

**The River Nile Learning Centre is an education centre catering for African migrant women aged 15 to 25 years. Many of our students are also young mothers. Some of our students are newly arrived in the country with little experience of schooling, and need to start with basic English language tuition. Some come with a solid educational experience in other languages. Others were born in Australia or came to Australia when they were in the primary years and have been through mainstream education. They have reached Year 10 to discover that the language skills required of them are far beyond the foundations they have been given, thus education became extremely frustrating and they disengaged, eventually finding a place at the River Nile Learning Centre.**

Each of our students has a unique story requiring an individualised approach to learning. This is why MultiLit is proving successful for many of our students, especially those who have come with a limited experience of English

in print. One of our students who has been working through MultiLit this year began with a limited knowledge of the named alphabet and less of the phonetic alphabet, and has since achieved a great deal personally. She was able to read a small sample of common two-and three-letter words. Her desire was to be able to read stories to her two small children and hopefully to pass her citizenship test. At first it was slow going but, with much persistence and hard work on her part, her word attack skills began to improve. Her fluency was also proving to be a real challenge and was affecting her ability to read and comprehend in context. We employed some strategies to help and eventually it became easier and each level took less and less time. As I write this, she is now working on level 8.1, just opposite me and reading with a smile on her face. Even more importantly, she can now read stories to her small children and has just passed her citizenship test.

Literacy empowers people: being part of a process and program that can provide it is most rewarding.

*Jean Hopman is a Teacher at the River Nile Learning Centre ([www.rnlc.org.au](http://www.rnlc.org.au)).*

# Tiger by the tail

Robyn Wheldall

**The parlous state of 'Aboriginal education' was highlighted again with the release of the NSW Auditor-General's report on the failure to meet the 'closing the gap' targets. The report also makes the point that there are a good many Indigenous students who can read and write as well as their non-Indigenous peers. This is something to be celebrated. But, as many have said before, the problem is that the 'tail' of underachieving students is very long (and muscular).**

Why is lifting the literacy (and numeracy) level of so many Indigenous students such an intractable problem? It is clear that there are instructional issues, stemming from the fact that education systems are not necessarily committed to mandating that proven approaches to the teaching of reading be used in their classrooms. Even if they were, the teacher training institutions do not necessarily turn out teachers who know how to teach reading effectively. This is a problem for all young Australians and it seems to be a matter of 'luck' whether you will be taught to read effectively or not in one of the nation's classrooms. But that is an argument for another day.

We consistently read that the poorest performing students are Indigenous students who live in remote and very remote areas of our country. Here the likely instructional inadequacies are overlaid by the myriad problems that are inherent in these 'hard to staff' areas. High rates of staff turnover, young and inexperienced staff, weather events (like Cyclone Larry), fresh food shortages, vast distances to be travelled, road closures, lack of replacement staff, lack of housing for school staff (and the list goes on), play havoc with delivering consistent and adequate teaching.

It does not take one long in a remote community to come to grips with the enormous challenges that exist for anyone with a vision and passion for redressing this dreadful social ill; that generations of young Indigenous Australians are being relegated to lives devoid of the opportunities that are afforded by education. We are presently failing to provide even a basic education to a sizeable minority of Indigenous students. At times this apparently intractable problem can seem quite overwhelming.

There is a solution to the provision of effective literacy instruction to these struggling students, however. This comes in the form of the marriage of two forms of instructional technology. When one hears this term, most people think of computer hardware and its applications. But the instructional technology that informs how and what to teach predates the emergence of the information technology that most of us now take for granted. This form of 'instructional technology' forms the bedrock of the skills and expertise that special educators bring to the field of generic

basic skills teaching.

Direct, systematic and explicit instruction that is evidence-based is what these students need to get on the road to learning success. But how do we put those who know how to use such effective instructional technology in touch with the most needy students in remote and very remote areas?

With the advent of fast broadband technology (often excellent in these remote areas), and indeed the coming of the National Broadband Network, we are now able to by-pass all of the staffing and resourcing issues that have hampered the delivery of even the most basic schooling for so long. We now have the means by which a struggling low-progress reader in, say, Aurukun, Coen, or Baniyala in East Arnhem Land, can be taught to read directly, explicitly, systematically and intensively every day by a trained tutor or a teacher at the other end of a broadband connection. An individual program may be delivered in this one-to-one mode, thereby meeting the idiosyncratic needs of each student.

We have been trialing such an approach in MultiLit and are confident that it can deliver the instruction that these students most urgently need. The cost of providing such a service is a grain of sand compared to the desert of costs that are required to attract, retain and maintain staff in these remote areas. All that is required at each end is a computer, a camera and a headset (also reducing some of the problems of 'white noise' in a classroom for students with hearing impairment) and a student ready to learn. Moreover, the integrity and fidelity of the instruction can be assured as monitoring such instruction from the 'hub' is easily done.

When we first started our work in Cape York in 2004, a skeptical local educator of some stature said to me, "So... you're going to catch the tiger by the tail, are you?". I took it as a challenge. Our subsequent years of work in the Cape confirmed that we could in fact get students moving and learning to read using scientific evidence-based methods, such as are employed in our MultiLit programs. The logistics around the human element of the exercise was the really challenging thing – we knew what to teach, and we did it. The students learned. We got the results.

Some seven or so years later, we can now see a way of delivering effective and intensive instruction to the large numbers of students who need it. As a society, we will be judged, quite rightly, by our failures not our successes in the years to come. It is time to grab this tiger firmly by the tail.

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# Neuromyths: 'A little learning is a dangerous thing'

*A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.*

(Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism)

## Kevin Wheldall

When I was in my teens (which in my case lasted until I was at least 30), my father, an otherwise kind and gentle man, used to say to me on occasion, shaking his head in disbelief: "Kevin, you might be clever in some things... but you're bloody thick in others". (I think it was his use of the word 'might' that really got to me; expressing a degree of doubt.) On mature reflection, I suspect that he was often, if not always, right.

Of course, anyone who has spent any time on university committees will know that the most eminent folk, who are certainly 'clever in some things', can be remarkably stupid in others. The almost childlike behaviour of some academics is quite extraordinary. So it should come as no surprise that some otherwise smart and accomplished professionals, such as teachers, are capable of espousing the most curious beliefs. But I get ahead of myself...

Over the past 20 or so years, we have seen extraordinary developments in brain imaging technology such that we now have a much clearer and deeper understanding of how the brain works. At the same time, and notwithstanding this amazing progress, we still have much to learn. Perhaps even more importantly, we still have much to learn about how to put this new knowledge about the brain into practical everyday use. This has not stopped, however, a tidal wave of psychologists, educationists and others from wildly speculating about new 'brain-based learning'. (I leave it to the reader to come up with examples of non-brain-based learning; elbow learning perhaps...?) Seemingly everywhere one looks, there is news of yet another brain-based teaching method. (Sometimes old wine is simply rebottled with a brain-based label.) My Macquarie colleagues Anne Castles and Genevieve McArthur have recently written an excellent opinion piece on this topic (<http://tinyurl.com/9eqrnoa>), featuring the recently much vaunted Arrowsmith Program, as a prime example.

Alongside this craze for all things brain-based, or 'neuro', a smaller movement has arisen, of desperate evidence-based psychologists and educators, seeking to temper enthusiasm with reality and to dispel some of the nonsense spouted by the 'brainiacs', also known as 'neuromyths'. (A less polite term that you might also encounter online is 'neurobollocks'.) Like zombies, however, neuromyths are extremely hardy and merely providing contrary empirical evidence is rarely sufficient to kill them off. They might pause, briefly, but then they keep on coming. And they breed...

The extent of this problem is revealed in a recent article by Dekker, Lee, Howard-Jones and Jolles, published in *Frontiers in Psychology* (<http://tinyurl.com/8wsjczw>) which reports the

results of a survey of 242 teachers conducted in the UK and the Netherlands. Over 90 per cent expressed interest in 'scientific knowledge about the brain' and 90 per cent were of the view that such knowledge would positively inform their teaching practice. The teachers responded to an online survey that mixed a selection of neuromyths with true statements about the brain.

In addition to the collection of background information (about age, sex, level of education etc), they were also asked about their degree of interest in scientific knowledge about the brain and its influence on their teaching, any 'brain-based' methods they had encountered in their school, and whether they read popular science magazines or journals, among other questions.

Over 50 per cent of the teachers indicated that they believed in seven of the 15 neuromyths included in the questionnaire. Over 80 per cent expressed belief in the following, for example: "Individuals learn better when they receive information in their preferred learning style (e.g. auditory, visual, kinesthetic)"; "Differences in hemispheric dominance (left brain, right brain) can help explain individual differences amongst learners"; and "Short bouts of coordination exercises can improve integration of left and right hemispheric brain function". Over 80 per cent of the British teachers had encountered Brain Gym (specifically), and learning styles (generally) (98 per cent) in their schools.

So far, so bad; but it gets worse, much worse. When the researchers examined the results in more detail, they found that teachers who actually knew more about the brain tended to believe in more neuromyths. Yes, that's right; the more they knew about the brain, the more neurobollocks they believed! As the authors put it:

"These findings suggest that teachers who are enthusiastic about the possible application of neuroscience findings in the classroom find it difficult to distinguish pseudoscience from scientific facts. Possessing greater general knowledge about the brain does not appear to protect teachers from believing in neuromyths."

A little learning is, indeed, a dangerous thing, as Pope asserts. Later on, in the same work, he also cautions: "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread". Quite.

*Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, AM is Chairman of MultiLit Pty Ltd and Director of the MultiLit Research Unit. You can follow him on Twitter (@KevinWheldall) where he comments on reading and education (and anything else that takes his fancy). He also has a blog 'Notes from Harefield: Reflections by Kevin Wheldall on reading, books, education, family, and life in general': [www.kevinwheldall.com](http://www.kevinwheldall.com).*





## A Christmas message from the Chairman

One Christmas, a good few years ago now, my son Julian (then aged about seven) surprised me by saying: "You know, I'm really glad that baby Jesus was born in a manger". I was somewhat taken aback and asked: "Why do you think that, mate?" He thought for a moment and then said: "Oh, I don't know; it just makes it more Christmassy somehow."

And with that, he carried on making his Christmas cards.

So, may I take this opportunity of wishing you all, on behalf of everyone here at MultiLit, the most Christmassy Christmas and a peaceful New Year.

**Kevin Wheldall**

## MultiLit success in reading comprehension

### Vanessa Black

The MultiLit Literacy Centre has been running specific Individual Comprehension Programs for over 12 months now, with students achieving some outstanding results. Designed for students who have either completed the Reading Tutor Program or Word Attack Extension Program and who now have adequate decoding skills, or who present at the Centre as accurate readers but experiencing difficulty with comprehension skills, our programs are tailored to meet a student's specific comprehension needs.

Programs involve a Direct Instruction component, where explicit instruction in comprehension skills such as making inferences, deductions, following directions and understanding language structure is provided. Students also work on their vocabulary, fluency and spelling if needed. A large part of each lesson involves using MultiLit's Reinforced Reading strategies (Pause Prompt and Praise), with specific attention paid to comprehension and fluency. Students attend sessions at the MultiLit Literacy Centre twice a week and also have Reinforced Reading four times a week at home.

Nathan, in Year 6, participated in a comprehension program

for two terms. During this time, his comprehension scores on the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability (3rd Edition) increased from a reading comprehension age of 8 years and 5 months to 12 years and 2 months, with his percentile rank increasing from 15 to 55. Nathan's fluency also improved, increasing from 121 words read correctly per minute at initial testing to 142 words read correctly per minute by the end of the two terms.

Reagan, in Year 4, also participated in a comprehension program for two terms. Reagan's reading comprehension age was 8 years and 3 months at initial testing and had reached an incredible 12 years and 7 months by the end of two terms. Reagan's percentile rank increased from 36 to 82 and his fluency increased from 78 words correctly per minute to 107 words read correctly per minute by the end of his program.

Both Nathan and Reagan also showed fabulous improvements on other tests including the Burt Word Reading Test, the South Australian Spelling Test and the Martin and Pratt Non-word Reading Test, which demonstrates the overall benefits of MultiLit's Reinforced Reading strategies.

## 'Tis the season... for school reports!

Here is a little encouragement for parents feeling a little less than impressed with their children's end of year school reports...

My wife, Robyn, regularly listens to one of our grandchildren read over the internet using Skype, which seems to work very well for both of them. They are currently reading *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, the sequel to Roald Dahl's much loved *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Robyn drew my attention to a section at the back of the book about the author, including quotes taken from his school reports, specifically about his ability in 'English composition'. One report says (when Dahl was aged 14):

"I have never met a boy who so persistently writes the exact opposite of what he means. He seems incapable of marshalling his thoughts on paper."

And then at age 15:

"A persistent muddler. Vocabulary negligible, sentences malconstructed. He reminds me of a camel."

Quite breathtaking, but it doesn't get any better at 16 and 17:

"This boy is an indolent and illiterate member of the class."  
"Consistently idle. Ideas limited."

As Dahl himself writes, "Little wonder that it never entered my head to become a writer in those days!" In 2012, Dahl was voted the most popular children's author in a survey of British primary teachers.

**Kevin Wheldall**

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