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The future for Ford workers: literacy will be key



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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Stewart Riddle does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

Yesterday's announcement that Ford will close its manufacturing operations in Geelong and Broadmeadows by 2016 at the cost of 1,200 jobs raises questions of what the workers' future employment options are.

But as these workers consider their futures, we need to understand that nearly half of Australian adults are considered functionally illiterate. And manufacturing workers in Victoria, which includes those in the firing line at Ford, were found to have even lower literacy skills, with 54% scoring at the lowest levels.

Nearly half of Australian adults are functionally illiterate, with manufacturing workers having some of the country's lowest literacy levels, a significant issue for workers as the industry continues to shed jobs. AAP Image/Julian Smith

The data are alarming and there are now serious concerns about these levels of literacy and the impact they have on the employment, health and education opportunities for workers.

Given the strong links between increasing literacy and better employment opportunities, economic independence and social conditions including health and education, this is a serious issue not only for manufacturing workers, but for the rest of the Australian community.

What is functional illiteracy?

Functional literacy is broadly defined as having the literacy skills for everyday living. This includes reading and writing lists, interpreting medicine labels, understanding road signs,

using maps, navigating the internet, using instruction manuals and other procedural texts that people encounter in their daily lives.

While complete illiteracy refers to a total inability to read or write, **functional illiteracy** is much more difficult to see, as functionally illiterate adults can generally read and write to a limited degree.

UNESCO defines functional illiteracy as being unable to productively engage with society due to poor reading and writing skills.

Data from a recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) study, as part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), assessing adult literacy and numeracy skills shows that about 44% of Australians aged 15 – 74 had literacy skills at levels that are considered to be functionally illiterate. Older Australians have **lower literacy** rates than younger Australians, with 65% scoring at the lowest literacy levels.

The impact on people's lives

The impacts of functional illiteracy are generally well-hidden as people often do their best to “get by” and **disguise** issues they might have with literacy in order to not be noticed for fear of discrimination or other repercussions. In some cases, people are excluded from the workforce altogether due to their low levels of literacy.

The 40% of employed Australians who lack the basic literacy skills to participate effectively in the workforce, advance their careers or engage in further skill development acts as a significant **economic dampener**.

Just as there is a clear need for investment in schools in order to **increase economic and social benefits** across some of the country's poorest neighbourhoods, the same is true for adult literacy levels. As little as a **1% improvement** in adult literacy levels can lead to a 2.5% improvement in productivity.

As well as the socioeconomic factors, low literacy levels have been shown to **link to poor** health outcomes, cyclic poverty and welfare dependency, alongside higher crime rates. There are implications for participating in the democratic process, understanding policies, voting, as well as being able to interact with government agencies.

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire claimed:

to acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques... it is to understand what one reads and to write what one understands.

This includes being able to read the world through the daily activities of banking, using computers, doing the shopping and driving a car. It also means having the skills to engage in higher education and vocational training, help children with homework and understand the ways that advertising and media work to sell particular versions of the truth to people.

It is alarming that such functional illiteracy issues are not only prevalent in society, but that we are spending so little time looking at how to improve it.

While we obsess over NAPLAN testing of students' literacy and numeracy and call for increased teacher quality and accountability, there are whole swathes of the population who are being completely left out of the discussion simply because they are unable to read and write to a level to participate.

What can be done about it?

There are several things that can be done to help improving adults' functional literacy levels – like those adults soon to be laid off from the Victorian Ford plants.

Libraries are already doing excellent work in running tailored programs for adults. And there are other initiatives like the Reading Writing Hotline, as well as Vocational Employment and Training (VET) courses at TAFEs and other community colleges across the country.

Perhaps a relatively untapped resource however, is our schools and teachers. Our classrooms might be full of the noise and liveliness of children during the day, but come the last bell at 3 o'clock there are thousands of empty classrooms around the county. These spaces could be utilised for community-based programs that tap into the expertise of teachers and schools to provide meaningful, contextualised literacy and numeracy programs for adults.

Given the enormous social and economic benefits, it's clearly time to invest in these kinds of initiatives – particularly when there's soon to be a new batch of unemployed workers that need extra literacy support and training.

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