

# On being a Consultant Member of LDA

**Jan Roberts, recipient of the 2019 Rosemary Carter Award, reflects on life as a Consultant member of LDA.**

It was a great honour to receive this award in memory of Rosemary Carter, my friend and a much loved consultant. I thank my nominators and others who supported me in this nomination. I often wish I were younger but age has given me extra opportunities to fulfil the criteria for the award. I will take you down the path that led me to my current work and share a few of the things I do as a typical LDA consultant.

After three years of teacher training and with memories of structured phonics, Cuisenaire and implied explicit teaching, I spent two energetic years at Kinglake West Primary School in a country infant room, with 28 Preps to Grade 2 children plus two extra Preps mid-year. My class included Maureen, who was severely brain damaged and Tony, who strangled my budgie and was probably home damaged. Back to the city with straight Preps was a breeze with a blissful year in a suburban 'country infant room'. I then retired and produced four sons, and often took my two youngest to work as an emergency teacher. How things change! Returning to study psychology and remedial education led to a change.

I moved to Templestowe High School for the next fifteen years, classroom teaching to Year 12 and managing the special needs programs for students with learning difficulties as well as ESL and gifted students and the integration of students with disabilities. While there, I completed a BA in English and then a Graduate Diploma in Special Education, specialising in learning difficulties. Two

years or so as a Victorian Education Department curriculum consultant gave me the opportunity to deliver teacher training. A Kafkaesque promotion as a consultant in maths (my weakest subject) saved me from having to train teachers in Whole Language and stick to primary maths. What a lucky background for my future career, having taught from Prep to Year 12, including special needs and also delivering PD.

In 1995, I retired (again) to take up tutoring and also, for many years, Certificate 3 training of integration aides. I became a consultant member of LDA, then the Australian Resource Educators Association (AREA), and was persuaded by Rosemary Carter to be the Convenor of the two day millennial conference in Melbourne in 2000. After that I became a member of LDA Council and later also served as Convenor of the Consultants Committee. This whole connection has been an amazing journey until this year when I retired from council.

In the early days of tutoring there was not the easy access to good resources that we have today, so I developed a structured phonics program. Being at the height of the Whole Language era, it had little hope of acceptance as a reading program so I focused on spelling. Later, with the help of Dr Saskia Kohnen, I updated this program to include synthetic phonics. I have continued to develop other resources for teachers. In 2001, ACER published *Spelling Recovery* and also sold rights to the UK publisher David Fulton. This led to plenty of PD work, particularly with ACER, which was very helpful while building up my tutoring business. At that time LDA support for consultants was particularly strong, as it is now.

Selecting programs to tutor students with learning difficulties is still a challenge as most students have very particular needs, and one program is rarely perfect in its entirety, if at all. Consultants are often reshaping programs, like orthodontists, or filling holes, like dentists. For example, while many students have learned some

digraphs they frequently do not know the single vowel sounds, maybe from insufficient exposure or perhaps because, for some students, these letter

sounds are phonologically difficult to distinguish from each other. Invariably, they think that short /ă/ says /ū/, possibly from slowly reading 'This is ū [sic] dog'. It is very rewarding to be able to find ways to improve students' knowledge of the structure of words, such as VCV and VCCV, and extend their vocabulary and comprehension in reading.

One spelling strategy is teaching learners to sound out (not spell out) most words while writing. For example, Johnnie, aged 10, wanted to write 'interesting' but spelled out '-I-N-T-S-I-N-G'. When he was asked to sound it out, he wrote 'intresting', which was close enough for spell-check to fix, and indicated some progress on the way to learning the correct version through exploring syllables, base words and suffixes.

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Students with learning difficulties are generally not good metacognitioners and need to be taught how to be analytic and use mnemonics. An effective strategy for a difficult word to spell is to identify the tricky bit and then think of a way to remember it, for example by creating a story from initial letters, as in the case of: 'because' (Big elephants crush ants under small elephants); or 'does' (Does [an] octopus eat seaweed/sausages/sandwiches?). But there are limits to the number of such stories so other strategies must



be employed, such as sounding out a tricky word as it is spelled, not spoken, eg. *frī-end, prĕtṭy, fāst, w-rite, disting-ū-ish*. Some teachers find using the analytic, multisensory CHIMP (the **C**hunk, **I**nvestigate, **M**emory screen, and **P**ractise) strategy effective to memorise a very difficult word.

Tutors need to be adaptable. Most senior students need comprehensive strategies, and to achieve success (a learning aphrodisiac), we might need to guide them step by step through their set school work, modelling essay structure, text analysis, and editing and vocabulary, and reinforcing basic skills in the context of reading, so that they start to hand work in, do better in assessment tasks and gain confidence. In the process of reshaping and fine-tuning we employ much gentle pushing wrapped in TLC.

The job of tutoring can become complex, with the needs of the student, parents, teachers, and other professionals to consider. Also, students might come for one thing, but we find that something else, often maths, requires urgent attention. And in the environment of one-on-one, consultants sometimes unearth the basic problem. Take Max, now in Grade 6. He did well in Grade 5 NAPLAN maths but in Grade 6 he wasn't finishing tests and was making errors. Because Max has learning difficulties, which camouflages his intelligence, teachers might have assumed that he is just a bit slow in general. But it transpired that Max worked out everything mathematical in his head - a very handy skill - but was inaccurate due to overload. He had no idea how to do written calculations and must have tuned out when these were being taught in class, relying on his knowledge of the basics. But once he understood the convenience of the four written processes he put his mind to learning them and now says that he is utilising them when appropriate. Max is quite an inspiration.

The role of the Consultant as a tutor is satisfying in many ways - satisfaction from helping hard working students, many lovely parents and teachers and the connection with LDA. There are financial challenges, especially in the beginning: no assured pay, no employer superannuation contributions, the cost of attending PD and having to cancel sessions, insurance, equipment and resources. It is a bizarre anomaly that parents can't claim medical rebates on our services as they can with speech and occupational therapists, who also

teach, although there is some access to NDIS funding.

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There is irony in being tutor. You lose clients if you don't succeed but you also lose them when you do, which is of course our aim. I try for rapid success-related redundancy but my wand is rarely magic and occasionally, almost loses its mojo. I don't have all the answers and achievement is mostly due to focused effort from everyone involved.

Effective support for students with learning difficulties, as well as their families and teachers, depends on the continuing learning and collaborative commitment of all of us in our different spheres of influence. As long as I have my passion, compassion and competence, I will do my best to live up to Rosemary Carter's example and the criteria of this award.

*Jan Roberts is a long standing Consultant member of LDA, who has served as President of LDA and as Convenor of the Consultants Committee. She has been an active member of the Consultants Committee and the Consultant network support groups, and has contributed to the ongoing support of Consultant members through professional development and other support activities.*

The Rosemary Carter Award was established in 2018 in recognition of Rosemary Carter's enormous contribution to the education of young, struggling students, and to the wise and valuable support she provided to parents and to colleagues over many decades. Rosemary Carter was a longstanding member of LDA and served as LDA's Referral Officer from 1991 to 2002 and as Convenor of the LDA Consultants Committee from 2002 to 2008.