

## **Report on the discussion on Literacy and Health**

The fourth BALID Informal Literacy Discussion was held on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2012 courtesy of Professor Brian Street's lovely flat on Brighton seafront. The fact that the sun setting over the sea was totally hidden from view by the rain did not mar the event.

Dr. Kirsten McCaffery, Associate Professor at the School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney led the discussion with an interesting outline of a possible project combining literacy and health, aiming to improve participants' knowledge and understanding of health issues in order to improve their own health and that of their families. Health literacy projects adopt two approaches: the first is to assist patients understand doctors' verbal and written instructions, the second is to train doctors and nurses to use language that patients can understand.

This was a new area for most of those present and it gave us the opportunity to look at literacy from a different perspective and generate new thoughts and ideas. There were interesting analogies between what Kirsten described as 'health literacy' and what the BALID members were familiar with in 'literacy work' in educational contexts e.g. involving recognition of the importance of 'sharing'; that you can build on what people know rather than just impose; that in both cases it is the cultural practices that participants engage in which give meaning to the interaction. In the health field as in the literacy field there are those who see their job as transmitting generic knowledge and skills, whereas in both of our fields we recognise that the required 'skills' are contingent on the context. A strong point of overlap is where patients have to read the labels on medicine bottles and packages – here the 'literacy' required to unpack statements about numbers of doses, frequency of taking, times etc may be more complex than those writing the labels may realise, just as in other literacy contexts where documents, labels, public statements are open to interpretation. 'Literacy' classes in both contexts may involve helping people to interpret such documents-a subtler view of literacy than just imparting decoding and phonics skills!

Kirsten commented that statistical evidence is very important in the medical field and she provided statistical information from the literature review on the positive health outcomes resulting from improved literacy.

Kirsten also explained the different understandings and therefore different definitions of health literacy and shared her paper reviewing the literature on health literacy. We are putting both these papers on our website.

[attended by: Sally Pritchard; Jane Hughes; Ian Cheffy; Juliet McCaffery; Brian Street; Maria Castanheira]