

COMMUNICATING: THE HEART OF LITERACY SYMPOSIUM

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

Government House, Hobart
26 November 2018



“It was truly inspiring. At the end of the day we were at one: unlocking every child’s potential to learn the magic of reading is an achievable goal and here, in our island State, we have people with the passion, skill, drive and insights to realise this dream.”

Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, Governor of Tasmania

REPORT AUTHORS: RIKKI MAWAD AND LEIGH ARNOLD



Foreword

**ROSALIE MARTIN, TASMANIAN AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR 2017
AND FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, CHATTER MATTERS.**

When I was awarded 2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year, it felt as if the sky had opened up and something amazing happened to fall on me. It was a great honour. I was already of the mindset that to whom much is given, much is expected; so I wanted to seize the opportunities that came along to share conversations about communication, connection, kindness and literacy. And I wanted these conversations to be surrounded with thinking about flourishing, enablement, restoration, acceptance, forgiveness, dignity and human rights.

This desire came from the intersecting of my three professional interests. As a speech pathologist I am interested in how ruptures in communication can be repaired. As a criminologist, I am focussed on non-judgment, hope, and building functional skills. And as the facilitator of reflective dialogues, I am interested in how we sustain ourselves in our strengths and weaknesses, and our emotional responses.

When Rikki Mawad from the Board of Chatter Matters Tasmania Inc suggested a high-level symposium about the literacy work I had been doing in the prison, I immediately felt that we needed to do this as a reflective dialogue. Our wonderful Governor, Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, said 'yes' to hosting this dialogue. So we did it – and the Symposium went ahead with the help of Her Excellency's team and others.

Symposium participants embraced the chance to talk openly and honestly about this shared work on communication and literacy in Tasmania; connecting it deeply to values. Many said they had never before experienced shared discussion quite like it. I was struck by how eagerly we connected our small stories to the bigger stories of purpose, work and life; and also by the power of listening to those stories.

We were invited into experiencing this enormous richness of connection by the moving Welcome to Country by Janice Ross and the important Aboriginal story shared by Ruth Langford. The growth of clarity in the final session was thrilling. I was reminded of the story in David Bohm's On Dialogue of the First Nations of north America coming together and talking and talking without an apparent agenda, and then getting up and knowing what to do. Many got up from our day knowing something shared and new about what to do.

Our symposium agreed on a new goal of 100% literacy for all Tasmanians. And we agreed we will work together to pursue this goal by communicating positively, authentically and with deep respect, because communication sits at the heart of what it is to be human.

Thank you to everyone who supported, co-created and participated in the symposium. I look forward to working with you all on the campaign that lies ahead: #100PercentLiteracy.



Symposium Overview

ON 26 NOVEMBER 2018, 55 TASMANIANS GATHERED AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE IN HOBART, TASMANIA, FOR A FULL-DAY SYMPOSIUM TO TALK ABOUT IMPROVING LITERACY IN TASMANIA.

The event was hosted by Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, Governor of Tasmania, organised by the Tasmanian communication and literacy charity, Chatter Matters Tasmania, and jointly facilitated by Courage & Renewal facilitators, Rosalie Martin of Chatter Matters and Associate Professor of Education Dr Janet Smith. The diverse range of participants included representatives from across the government, academic, community and private sectors as well as from the arts, the Tasmanian Aboriginal community and the media.

The broad aim of the day was to make a positive impact on Tasmania's literacy problem by opening reflective dialogue within new, and established, relationships – and within each individual participant. The challenge is already well known: almost half of the state's population aged 15 and over do not have adequate reading and writing skills to manage the demands of daily life.¹ This extraordinary symposium approached this entrenched challenge in an innovative way: through a high-level conversation about collaboration, communication and relational trust as the foundations for learning, drawing upon existing knowledge and wisdom, opening space for creativity, and for making change.

This report summarises the events of the day and is divided into several sections. Following this Introduction is a brief summary of the opening remarks. The report then restates the purpose of the event before looking at the people who attended. It captures discussion about Tasmania's literacy problem and the process used by participants to examine that problem. The report concludes by highlighting new possibilities for addressing the problem and any other intended actions that might follow. The appendix lists all of the attendees.

The *Communicating: The Heart of Literacy* Symposium was originally due to take place in May 2018, but was cancelled on the morning of the gathering following a major storm the previous evening that caused widespread damage across southern Tasmania. The successful reconvening of this event in November 2018 is testimony to the determination of all involved to make a positive difference around this complex challenge.

¹ Based on 2006 ABS Data, figures indicate that almost half of the population in Tasmania lack the literacy skills needed for everyday life with at least 49% of Tasmanians lacking the literacy skills to read newspapers, books, magazines or brochures, see further, www.26ten.tas.gov.au/PublishingImages/Publications/Tasmanian-Adult-Literacy-Action-Plan.pdf; and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Summary Results, Australia, 2006 (Reissue) [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20\(Reissue\)?opendocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20(Reissue)?opendocument)

Opening remarks

Participants were privileged to be welcomed to country by Tasmanian Aboriginal woman, Janice Ross. Janice spoke eloquently in language, palawa kani, and translated the words into English. Janice told the participants that this event was an opportunity to build empathy and to create connection between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Tasmanians.

Ruth Langford then used song story to ground participants in what she described as the practice of the wisdom traditions. Her song story was about reweaving the web of humanity, about connection, intention and equality.

“We know that our ground is sacred and our people have been here for a long time. This ground holds our past, present and future. Their stories are still here, in the Earth, the trees and the wind, and they will always be here.”

JANICE ROSS

Her Excellency Professor the Honourable Kate Warner AC, Governor of Tasmania, officially opened the Symposium by declaring it an opportunity to start a dialogue and to share assumptions about the challenges of education and literacy in Tasmania. Her Excellency also encouraged everyone to take responsibility for lifting literacy and education standards around the State.

Former Tasmanian Australian of the Year, co-facilitator and symposium architect, Rosalie (Rosie) Martin, spoke in her opening remarks about how language forms the basis of human agency. Rosie, who is a qualified speech pathologist and the founder of Chatter Matters, encouraged us to reflect on the importance of kindness in addressing the literacy challenge, saying that kindness is inherently social. Kindness, she said, makes it possible to work together, understand one another and build trust. Rosie went on to say that building relational trust, which in turn improves communication, learning and literacy, requires four elements:

1. Respect: seeing other people and their worth as fellow humans.
2. Personal regard: kindly responding to and caring for each other.
3. Competence: understanding that the greatest impact comes from combining skills.
4. Integrity: aligning our actions with our values.

Rosie encouraged participants to see the Symposium as an opportunity to think deeply about the integration of actions with values. She called for a recognition that some people have ‘communication privilege’ because of their upbringing or access to education. ‘Self-awareness and other-mindedness enable honest dialogue to improve language, literacy and inclusion’, she said.

Through dialogue, Rosie hoped the Symposium would allow participants to develop a shared understanding about language as the basis for learning and the means by which we put together understanding and create meaning. ‘It is also through shared language’, she said, ‘that we build inclusion and equality’: two core values that drive her commitment to transforming communication, which is the ‘heart’ of literacy.



Purpose

THE COMMUNICATING: THE HEART OF LITERACY SYMPOSIUM HAD A NUMBER OF STATED OBJECTIVES AS PART OF THE OVERALL GOAL OF MAKING A POSITIVE IMPACT ON TASMANIA'S LITERACY PROBLEM:

1. To gather a diverse cohort of participants — people with literacy difficulties, leaders, service providers, influencers, commentators—to increase understanding of the value of cross-agency and cross-sector integration and collaboration in building the skills of communication, language and literacy that increase the agency of all people.
2. To understand, through shared stories, the value of communication skills from multiple points of view and diversity of experiences.
3. To enhance participants' experiences of and skills in collaborating with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives.
4. To provide participants with opportunities for safe, guided reflection on their individual experiences of collaboration.
5. To provide participants with opportunities for safe, guided reflection on their experience of barriers to collaboration.
6. To provide participants with tools to develop relational trust and leadership within their organisations, communities, groups and families.
7. To form a cross-agency, cross-sector, multi-disciplinary and cross-community collaboration to build on the work of the Symposium.

At the start of the Symposium, Rosie stated her vision for the event: to create a space for intentional reflection on the literacy issue. This would be achieved, she said, by participating in a dialogue about communication and literacy, creating shared understanding, developing shared language, fostering commitment to continue the conversation and encouraging action.

People

All the participants in the Symposium were invited to attend by Chatter Matters based on their experience and skills in communication, leadership and literacy. The group was deliberately broad in its make up in order to promote deep dialogue and reflection across multiple forms of diversity.

The Symposium included a cross-section of representatives from education, justice, the arts, thinkers, social influencers, policy-makers, lawyers, adult learners, Aboriginal Tasmanians, activists and business people. The participants included people with language and literacy difficulties, both in person and through videos. They spoke about their experiences of literacy, language and learning.

Problem

As highlighted in the introduction, Tasmania has an apparently intransigent literacy problem with 48% of people living in the State not having written language skills at a high enough level to manage the comprehension and self-expression demands of daily life when those demands are in written form.²

Written language is usually acquired through the connection of two underlying skills: 1) spoken language; and 2) knowledge of the 'code' that represents the sounds of spoken language. This acquisition is a 'both/and' process: both sets of skills are necessary: spoken language and code knowledge. When either skill is compromised, that will have a negative impact on written language ability.³

Without a shared understanding of the 'problem' of literacy in Tasmania, we cannot have meaningful dialogue about how to solve the problem. Symposium participants agreed there were key considerations to framing up and discussing the problem, including the following:

- Tasmania's 48% illiteracy rate is at heart a communication problem. Without words, you don't have language; and without language, you can't process meaning.
- This is a problem that is urgent and important. It is, in fact, a social emergency, but how do we use that realisation to compel real action?
- There is competition and a challenge to driving collaboration: can we get the 'village' of collaborators to truly work together to tackle the problem.

While many Tasmanians are dismayed by the State's low literacy levels, the Symposium reflected a strong and positive collective desire for change with a good amount of individual and collective action already being directed toward various solutions to this inequity.

² Above, n1

³ Rosalie Martin www.chattermatters.com.au/communicating-the-heart-of-literacy-rosie-martin

Process

To consider the complex challenge of literacy in Tasmania in a new way, the Symposium adopted a non-traditional approach of drawing on the teachings of Courage & Renewal⁴ facilitation and of Parker J Palmer. This approach uses a set of communication guidelines that welcome diversity and aim to minimise power gradients between participants. These guidelines for communication create space in which participants can feel settled and safe to give and share their views, enabling full participation.

Guided by this approach, the Symposium incorporated deep reflection, open and honest questions, poetry reading, storytelling, drawing, silence, and journaling as well as more traditional small-group and full-group discussions and activities.

Grounding principles

During the morning, participants were introduced to the ‘Touchstones’ approach by facilitator Janet Smith. This was designed to create a ‘safe space’ in which dialogue could flourish. The approach incorporates six elements:

1. Choose for yourself when and how to participate.
2. Make space for silence and reflection.
3. Embrace differences.
4. No fixing: instead use listening and presence to support others to seek their clarity.
5. When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.
6. Observe confidentiality.

Working with our questions

The Symposium drew participants into a day-long consideration of the role of open, honest questions and deep listening for building communication, respect, inclusion and literacy.

The group heard a reading of the poem *Sometimes* by the modern poet, David Whyte. Participants were invited to reflect on the poem’s closing lines:

questions

that have no right

to go away

⁴ Centre for Courage & Renewal www.couragere renewal.org

by writing on an index card what their own pressing questions were about communication and literacy. The cards were then collected and redistributed with each participant standing to read out a question written by someone else. The questions were as diverse as they were insightful, a small sample include:

—

Why do we refer to language and literacy as a 'gift' but everyday in every act value those with its skills and actively devalue those without its skills.

—

Who are we and who do we become as a community if we collectively tackle/solve this issue?... and who are we and who do we become as a community if we don't?

—

Why do we have a 'fix it' approach rather than a prevention approach to language development in young children?

—

Why don't we care enough to make a system that works for everyone?

—

Knowing the importance and impact of literacy and communication for society, why are the resources for development so difficult – including finances?

—

What could literacy and communication do to help my peers continue on to year 11 and 12?

"It takes a certain courage to hold the tension of questions that are not easily answered."

DR JANET SMITH

Rosie then led a discussion based on Bohm's, *On Dialogue*, noting the importance of suspending judgments and questioning our own assumptions.

Rosie asked participants:

- to consider 'What can we learn in the opinion of another?';
- to recognise that, in Bohm's words from *On Dialogue*, 'we tend to think it is the other one who is not listening properly'; and
- to understand that good communicators take 100% responsibility for the success of their communication; that communication is to be approached with intentionality.



Suspending judgment and questioning assumptions are skills. When these skills are practised intentionally, they can become ways of being. To support participants' awareness of the structure of these skills, Janet shared Parker Palmer's "Five Habits of the Heart".⁵ The Five Habits of the Heart added to the framework for creating and sustaining equity of participation in the day's discussions. The Five Habits are:

1. Understanding that we are all in this together.
2. Appreciating the value of otherness.
3. Holding tension in life-giving ways.
4. A sense of personal voice and agency.
5. A capacity to create community.

The participants were then invited to explore the idea of open and honest questions, as well as the notion that silence can serve as an invitation for other people to both think and speak more deeply.

"A truly open and honest question is one that you couldn't possibly know the answer to – that's the honest part; and one that invites the speaker to elaborate their thoughts – that's the open part."

ROSIE MARTIN

Participants were then invited into the garden to find an object that resonated for them as a symbol of one of the Five Habits of the Heart. They were invited to deepen this engagement with that 'habit' through journaling about their chosen symbol before sharing their insights with another participant; and soon after, without compulsion, with the entire group. Participants were invited to keep their symbol if it was readily-pocketable, and to photograph it if not.

The exercise was about facilitating the achievement of a shared understanding that we 'are all in this together' and that the challenges and opportunities around literacy and communication are interdependent. The session was also about developing an appreciation of otherness; and of holding, rather than discharging, the tension around the issues and with each other in conversations. Importantly, it was also about developing a community that supports and encourages these ways of being. The ultimate aim was to create a new community of practice, commitment and the essential interaction skills to address these complex issues facing Tasmania and Tasmanians.

⁵ See further, Parker J. Palmer's Five Habits of the Heart Centre for Courage & Renewal www.couragerenewal.org/habitsoftheheart/.

Stepping stones of communication

In the afternoon, the Symposium was introduced to the notion of ‘stepping stones’ as a disruptive exercise to understand something new about how experiences inform each other and create new insights and stories. Janet invited participants to write or draw briefly about five important moments or insights—‘stepping stones’—about communication and literacy from their own lives. They were then invited, in groups of three, to each tell a story that linked these five stepping stones. After each person spoke, the other two members of each group drew an image symbolising what they had heard the speaker say. This resulted in all 55 participants having their stories reflected back to them in the form of two pictures with short explanations from other people.

“It was different to normal conversation where people jump in. Instead it drew everybody into being good listeners.”

AMANDA DUCKER

On Dialogue

The day ended with participants spending time reflecting and writing down their thoughts on what had emerged for them during the Symposium. Many participants shared their thoughts with the whole group.

“Today reinforced the importance of togetherness. Creating community is an important part of a just and fair society where everyone is seen to have value and is able to learn and share kindness.”

PETER EDWARDS

One theme that emerged strongly was how much participants valued deep listening and being heard. Others spoke with passion about the need to maintain momentum in addressing the problem. The need for healing was identified: to help people, through improved communication skills, overcome traumatic experiences. The observation was also made that any investment in improving the State’s literacy would soon pay for itself through improved productivity.

“Tasmania isn’t peculiar in that the literacy problem is shared by other communities like ours. But we are special because we are small enough to organise... We should not tolerate illiteracy in Tasmania.”

MICHAEL ROWAN

Participants were then asked to write down their ‘take away’ thoughts, ‘a ha’ moments and/ or intentions on an index card (shown in the report’s cover image). All participants then rose to their feet one by one to share their words. Some of these are captured in the next section about possible next steps.



Possibilities – 100% Literacy in Tasmania

THROUGH COLLECTIVE DIALOGUE THE *COMMUNICATING: THE HEART OF LITERACY* SYMPOSIUM REVEALED MANY POSSIBILITIES FOR PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR NETWORKS TO WORK COLLECTIVELY TO ADDRESS THE LITERACY CHALLENGE IN TASMANIA.

A new goal of 100% literacy for Tasmania emerged, with #100PercentLiteracy and the #HeartOfLiteracy established as a platform for continuing the discussion. Some of the 'a ha' moments included:

Tasmania needs a goal of 100% literacy (for all Tasmanians).



We should strive for a goal of 100% literacy in Tasmania's prisons.

A desire to remember the goodwill and enthusiasm at the symposium and not give up trying to make a difference.

A pledge to help young people share their stories and be heard and understood.



Intention: to raise the bar of literacy in my workplace.



Active listening is a skill that needs to be honed.



An intention to bring Western and Indigenous knowledge together to support future generations and build trust among peoples.

Harnessing technology to increase language, connection and learning.



It is possible to read in front of other people.



A commitment to contribute to the building of community in daily life.



An intention to get louder.



Total transformation. A paradigm shift. Life-giving dialogue about language and literacy enrichment in Tasmania and beyond.

Commitment to working with people differently in schools, in prison, in community.



Use this collective wisdom and power [from the Symposium] to allow social change around literacy.

Take this new understanding (and way of being) back into our workplaces and into our lives.



How 'we' get there

MICHAEL LEUNIG'S CARTOON, "HOW TO GET THERE", WAS USED AS A WAY TO DRAW THE SESSION TO A CLOSE. WITH CONSENSUS AMONG PARTICIPANTS OF WORKING TOWARD THE GOAL OF 100% LITERACY FOR ALL TASMANIANS, THE EVENT HAD DEFINED ITS 'THERE', THE NEXT STEPS ARE TO DEFINE 'HOW' WE GET THERE.

Chatter Matters is committed to working with everyone who was part of the Symposium, all relevant Stakeholders and interested Tasmanians to co-design the next steps in the 100% literacy campaign. Plans are underway:

- to gather groups to participate in Bohm-style dialogues on the themes that emerged;
- to maintain momentum in public thought through:
 - publication of opinion pieces written by Symposium participants; and
 - convening events, discussions and pilot projects to demonstrate innovative, evidence-based practice for literacy advancement;
- to arrange further focused events to build on the Symposium;

To facilitate further action and planning, Chatter Matters will be contacting participants to arrange focused discussion events and build towards further larger events.

In its role with this campaign, Chatter Matters seeks to maintain an engaged, respectful and collaborative connection with all those involved in the Symposium and with others who share the goal of achieving 100% literacy in Tasmania. Those relationships are central to the campaign succeeding, and maintaining and strengthening them will be at the core of the work.

How To GET THERE

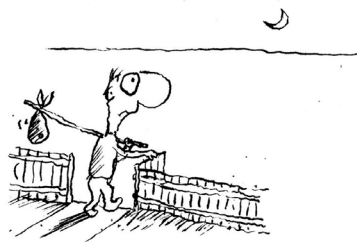
Go to the end of the path until you get to the gate.



Sit down and have a rest every now and again.



Go through the gate and head straight out towards the horizon.



But keep on going. Just keep on with it.



Keep going towards the horizon.



Keep on going as far as you can. That's how you get there.



Leunig



Closing remarks

Rosie's vision for the Symposium was to create a space for intentional reflection on the literacy issue facing Tasmania through a dialogue about communication and literacy aimed at creating shared understanding, developing shared language, fostering commitment to continue the conversation, and encouraging action. Arguably this vision is being realised through the shared goal of 100% literacy for all Tasmanians and through the passion, commitment, changed perspectives, and sense of community created by the event.

Thank you to all who participated in the event and for those who helped to make it happen, particularly to Her Excellency and the staff at Government House, and to the team of 'helpers' who supported the event in lots of practical and necessary ways.

Image - Facilitation Support - (Left to Right) Back row (standing): Leigh Arnold, Richard Martin, Nick Cernigoi, Chris Rees, Rikki Mawad; Front row (seated): Tracy Zhou, Emma Sells, Allison Raymond, Sona Lewincamp.

Appendix

Full list of attendees


Name	Position		
Amanda Ducker	Mercury, Associate Editor	Liz Daly	Former Children's Commissioner/B4
Alison Raymond	Chatter Matters advisor	Madeline Wells	Project O
Amanda Neil	Health Economist, Menzies	Maree Thompson	Teacher DoE
Amelia Jones	Square Pegs/ Treasury	Margie Nolan	Child & Family Centre
Angela Conway	State Growth - GM, Workforce Dev & Training	Mary Dwyer	Impact Solutions
Belinda Hopwood	Education academic Utas	Matt Lamb	Editor/Author/Biographer/Literacy champion
Bev Schiller	Psychologist - private practice	Michael Rowan	Education Ambassador
Bill Jarvis	Secondary Principal, DoE	Michelle Williams	Paediatrician
Brad Daly	Adult learner	Natalie Brown	Director, Peter Underwood Centre
Cathrine Montgomery	Special education coordinator - Catholic Education	Nick Ross	Chatter Matters advisor
Chris Rees	Impact Solutions	Patrick Ryan	Manager, Ashley Youth Detention Centre
Danielle Campbell	Law Enforcement Public Health project, Utas	Paul Liggins	Economist, Deloitte
Di Hooley	Principal Northern Christian School	Peter Edwards	Tasmania Police
Di Stow	Counselor	Rachel Small	Project O coordinator
Don Macrae	JusTas	Rich Martin	Chatter Matters Board
Donna Mason	Aboriginal community	Rikki Mawad	Chatter Matters Board
Emma Sells	Chatter Matters Board	Robin Banks	Chatter Matters Chair
Gail Eaton - Briggs	Deputy Secretary Communities	Rosie Martin	Chatter Matters Board
Ginger Rankin	Big hART	Ruth Langford	Nayri Niara - Peacemaker, Aboriginal activist
Ginna Webster	Secretary Communities	Sarah Bolt	Anti-Discrimination Commissioner
Her Excellency	Governor of Tasmania	Scott Rankin	Big hART
Ian Thomas	Director of Prisons	Sona Lewincamp	Impact Solutions
Isabelle Bartkowiak-Theron	Tas Institute Law Enforcement Studies - Utas	Steve Bentley	Teacher, DoE & independent schools
Janet Smith	Assoc Prof Education, UCanberra	Stuart Kelly	Principal, Catholic Education
Janice Ross	Riawunna Utas	Sue Costello	26Ten manager
Jeff Thomas	Education Utas	Todd Sculthorpe	Aboriginal Education DoE
Jillian Hoogenhout	Teacher - Southern Christian College	Tracy Zhou	Chatter Matters Board
Jim McCormack	Mojo Works	Apologies	
Jo Archer	Linking Tasmania	Jenny Burgess	Dep Sec DoE
Kate Gross	Story Island Project	Tim Bullard	Secretary DoE
Kate Slater	Principal, DoE	David Clements	Former Children's Commissioner
Kathrine Morgan - Wicks	Secretary Justice	Jocelyn Nettlefold	UTas ABC collaboration
Kim Backhouse	CEO Possability	Robyn Moore	Professional Speaker
Leanne Minshull	Tasmania Australia Institute	Clive Tilsley	Fullers/Business
Leigh Arnold	Chatter Matters Board	Jessica Munday	Secretary Unions Tasmania
Lily Stojevski	Independent writer	Robert Morris - Nunn	Architect
Linda Williams	Senior speech pathologist, DoE	Izzi Ward	Big hART - Project O
Lisa Denny	Director, Institute for the Study of Social Change, Utas	Kristen Desmond	Disability in Education Advocacy
		Matt - adult learner	Adult learner
		Rowena Wilkinson	Early Childhood Intervention Service

ChatterMatters TASMANIA

Enriching language. Enriching life.

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“Reading is an everyday skill. You gotta read every day. Cooking. Like when you cook. On the back of recipes and that... you’ve gotta read. Even driving... you’ve got to read.”

Brad Daly, Symposium Participant & Adult Literacy Learner

#100PercentLiteracy