



Asia Education Foundation

**Asia Literacy  
Ambassadors**  
Partnering Businesses & Schools

## It's not just learning the language

St Columba's College, VIC and Amanda Ralph, NAB

*St Columba's College is a Catholic secondary girls school, in Essendon. It was founded by the Sisters of Charity in 1897 and now accommodates some 1,000 students, just over 100 of whom study Japanese.*

Amanda Ralph says, "When I exit this project, if, as a result of my involvement, only two girls look at their options with a wider lens, that, to me, will be the measure of success. It's not about how many continue learning the Japanese language, it's about the students knowing how valuable an understanding of Asian culture will be in their lives in the future."

Amanda, the Ambassador at St Columba's College, has been involved in a major project for NAB in India, travelling there regularly. She has also lived for some time in Japan and on a Pacific island, so she came to this project with a broad range of experiences to share with the students.

Her own Asia literacy education, however, was very much 'in at the deep end'. "At school I learned French, German and Russian but when I had the opportunity of becoming an exchange student, I chose Japan. I went to a Japanese high school and lived with a family who spoke no English. It was really hard for the first three months but it made me get my language up to speed quickly and it was an overwhelmingly positive experience."

Amanda did a double major in Economics and Japanese at Monash University and, after completing her Masters in Asian Studies, went to live in Fiji for eight years, with her Fijian husband.

"Interestingly, there were commonalities between the Fijian and Japanese cultures – respect and hierarchy. Knowing about Japan helped me integrate into life there and my language led to my doing some fairly random things. I became the emergency

**Asia Literacy:** knowledge, skills and understandings about the diverse countries of Asia  
[ambassador.asiaeducation.edu.au](http://ambassador.asiaeducation.edu.au)



contact for a medical insurance company. If a Japanese visitor went diving and got the bends. I was the person they called.”

### **The core message about Asia literacy**

She has poured all these experiences into the messages she gives to the girls at St Columba’s. “My core message is that speaking Japanese, and my relationship with Japan, have given me a whole lot of opportunities. Being Asia literate can take you on many different paths. I am not wedded to Japanese per se. I am a fan of any language. But the geographic location of Australia means that, whilst a European language is good to have, if you’re looking for direct engagement, an Asian language is going to give you more opportunities.”

“I tried to get the message across that, irrespective of where your ambitions lie, whether that’s having a career or looking after a family, an Asian language is going to be useful. Your children may be in a school with a strong Asian culture and your understanding of that culture is going to be a useful thing; you may work with people from an Asian background and it is good to have a common reference point with colleagues. Having that awareness has certainly enriched my professional life.”

### **A different voice**

Amanda’s words resonate with Japanese teacher Nathan Lane. “I think projects like these are so important because normally it’s me who stands in front of the students and motivates them in their Japanese studies, but to hear from someone else who is not a teacher and has a different life story from mine is exceptionally motivational. After Amanda’s visit, all the girls who had heard her speak were very motivated and engaged. Our Year 10 Japanese class was involved in a special project for the Catholic Education Office and an essential research question was ‘where can I take my Japanese after school?’ Amanda was very much an inspiration for how the girls could answer the question.”

It was also helpful to have a female Ambassador. “Because we are a girl’s school and we always support the idea of being independent, successful women, it was good to have Amanda as a role model.”

### **Keeping the project moving**

Nathan is delighted with the way the project has gone to date and wants to take it forward. “One thing I would like to do is to extend the project to other staff and the wider community of parent groups, but I am always conscious that people are busy and it’s a lot of time for Amanda to invest, so we’re happy to take small steps.”

One of these small steps may well be to use Web 2.0 technology to link the girls with their Ambassador. Amanda again, “I am time poor but I want the opportunity to do more with the school and a blog is something the girls know about and feel comfortable with. Nathan and I have the framework and the mechanics in place, we just have to put a three month plan together for topics for discussion.”