

On a Road to Nowhere: The Intersection between Adult Learning Policies and Programs and Rural Community Capability.

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14th National VET Research Conference, Wodonga, July 2005

Abstract

Despite reform agendas occurring within adult learning policies and practices in most countries, inequities in the provision, access and outcomes of adult education and training still persist. Concepts such as lifelong learning are not reflected in outcomes such as mass participation in education and training, changing patterns of inequality or people feeling they have greater control over their lives. Current research is revealing that community engagement and strengthening are government policies that have yet to significantly intersect with adult education and training policy and program development. A recent action research project in one rural community in Australia focussed on the key question of how successful Australian adult education and training reform has been in empowering rural communities to plan for, manage and deliver new adult learning programs. This research led to the conclusion that the potential medium to long term gains of adult education and training programs in Australia will continue to be compromised by the failure of governments to identify and resource community life and community processes leading to increased community capability.

Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines 'adult learning' as all encompassing and including general, vocational, enterprise and higher education and training across all types of learning sites (OECD: 2003). In 2003, the OECD published comparative research on adult learning policies and practices in nine countries in Europe and Scandinavia which contends that despite reform agendas occurring within adult learning policies and practices in most countries, there are persistent inequities in the provision, access and outcomes of adult education and training (OECD: 2003). Empirical research of education and training in most western democratic countries reveals differing levels and outcomes in education participation based on social class, gender, (dis)ability, cultural background and age (Evans: 2003).

Research in Australia and internationally aims to evaluate adult education and training reforms against established policies and practices targeted at specific groups of individuals within a society, including; the unemployed, 'discouraged workers', early (forced) retirees, women returning to work, youth, Indigenous communities and people with disabilities (Noonan, Burke & White: 2004, Evans: 2003, Stevenson: 2003, James: 2001). Noonan et al (2004) provide insight in their comparative study of adult education and training in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom. They state that the development of learning environments where the acquisition of knowledge, experience and skills is valued must occur within a framework of major social change that challenges inequalities based on gender, ability, age and cultural backgrounds.

Adult education has instead, in recent decades, been defined by 'knowledge work', work being the new consumption, "*the more we learn, the more we earn*" and "*New forms of learning are superimposed on old structures that retain most of their original power*" (Evans: 2003: 9, 10). Concepts such as 'lifelong learning' are not reflected in various outcomes such as, mass participation in education and training covering all social groups, the redistribution of power including changing patterns of inequality and the majority of people feeling they have greater control over their lives.

Inequalities can be challenged and mass participation in learning can be optimised within localised community structures meaning that centralised government policy around adult learning needs to be adapted to include regional and community capability as a fundamental aim of adult learning program planning and delivery. Regional, community and organisational capability can be reflected in local adult learning networks, forums and providers being able to facilitate learner-centred learning, be open to change and manage problem-solving by engaging localised community resources. These are key tenets of change management within communities and organisations that to some extent have been missing within education and training policy and reform in Australia (Malloch & Cairns: 1999).

Current research is revealing that community engagement and community strengthening are government policies that have yet to significantly intersect with adult education and training policy and program development (Noonan, Burke & White: 2004, Finger & Asun: 2001). Community capability and development depends on the maintenance of a range of complex factors such as, economic opportunities, access to resources and services plus maintaining and creating community based social and physical infrastructure (Macgregor: 2000, Cairns: 1999).

Capability can be applied equally to individuals, communities, regions and organisations and has been described as, *“an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively – not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstances”* (Stephenson & Cairns: 1999:2)

Community engagement can be described as a process of policy planning and design followed by program implementation and evaluation at a regional and community level leading to effective outcomes for all stakeholders (NSW iplan: 2003). Community strengthening has been defined as, *“Any sustained effort to increase connectedness, active engagement and partnership among members of the community, community groups and organisations in order to enhance social, economic and environmental objectives”* (West: 2004)

In the 1990's the Australian Federal Government allocated funds for the development of a number of rural access community training centres. This program derived from the strategic plan, 'A Bridge to the Future: Australia's National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 1998 – 2003' and specifically the objective of 'achieving equitable outcomes in Australian Vocational Education and Training' (ANTA: 1998). The development of community based rural access community training centres was linked to this strategic approach and aimed to overcome structural inequities such as geographical and social isolation as well as economic deprivation. This policy was aimed at specific communities and target groups including women, Indigenous communities, the disabled, early school leavers and adults with low levels of literacy and numeracy.

A regional and community focus on adult learning provides a framework for the examination and evaluation of the implementation of Australian adult learning programs as they relate to policies of access and equity. The development of concepts such as “*linkages to communities*” and “*improved opportunities and outcomes*” (ANTA: 2004) can then be explored through re-establishing the relationship between education and community life and by examining the effectiveness of educational content and processes to engage with ideas and practices of democracy and promote learning processes as interdependent between the individual and their social, political and economic participation (Evans: 2003).

A recent research project focussed on the key question of how successful Australian adult education and training reform has been in empowering one rural community to plan for, manage and deliver new adult learning programs. During the period 2001-2002 the researcher was employed by Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation, a rural community organisation, to manage a project aimed at facilitating strategic planning and operational policy and procedure development for a new community access education and training facility in the small rural town of Glassy Waters in southern Australia.

A framework of participatory action research was used by the researcher to immerse himself within the organisation and community as an integral part of the project (Kemmis & McTaggart: 1988). Rapport was established through the planning stage and the researcher was able to remove himself from the community everyday to then intellectualise, analyse and write up observations. This process was effective because the researcher did not reside and/or socialise within this specific community. Participant observations were supplemented by semi-structured interviews of key players in the project including, members of the advisory and management committees of the community organisation and members of the relevant State Government education and training authority. Data specifically collected for this research included, transcripts of information collected during interviews with community members and government representatives, the researcher’s own journal and notes of information collected during the project, notes derived from minutes of meetings held throughout the project and notes from researching government reports and policy documents.

A framework of themes and issues was developed from researching government policy documents and other literature then a thematic analysis contributed to this case-study (Merriam: 1998, Yin: 1994) of the Glassy Waters action research process and its links to Australian policies and programs of adult education and training. The community agreed to have this research publicised as long as their identity was altered to protect their privacy and any ongoing negotiations with governments.

Australian Vocational Education and Training Reform

The main plank of adult education and training policy and program reform in Australia during the 1990's was the introduction of a national competency based framework informed by industry advisory bodies. The Australian Federal Labor Government in partnership with the union movement saw national competency based training as not only necessary to reform vocational training and work in Australia but as an integral part of their social justice strategy. The labour movement in this country believed was of the opinion that a national training scheme underpinned by acknowledging worker skills and knowledge in a more flexible and user friendly training environment would have the ability to attract a wider range of participants (ANTA: 1994).

It was suggested that women, disadvantaged young people, Indigenous people and rural and isolated communities could be encouraged to participate in this new vocational training system (ANTA: 1994). Successive Australian governments have attempted a 'two pronged' approach by replacing State and Territory curriculum systems with national competency frameworks and Training Packages as well as reforming traditional adult learning providers (e.g. Institutes of Technical And Further Education and Adult & Community Education providers) to be more flexible and responsive and resourcing new providers within industry and local communities (e.g. Private Registered Training Organisations) to allow education and training sites to be developed closer in philosophy and proximity to industries and communities.

Both of these approaches have resulted in problems with existing providers such as Institutes of Technical and Further Education struggling to cope with change management processes (Schofield: 2001) and new adult learning providers struggling to meet required standards of education and training operation and service delivery (ANTA: 2002). The problems in reforming adult education and training systems in Australia persist to such an extent that the Federal Government's Department of Education, Science and Training (D.E.S.T.) has in recent years commissioned two reviews of adult learning in Australia. 'Adult Learning in Australia: a consultation paper', states that; *"A more coordinated approach to adult learning could ... ensure better opportunities for people to engage in learning in the workplace, encourage higher levels of community participation and social engagement...."* (DEST: 2003).

More recently, the report, 'Skilling Australia: New Directions for Vocational Education and Training', outlines *"a range of views on the future operation of the national training system"* and *"Following the consultation process, a model for the new national training system will be finalised"*(DEST: 2005). These recent reports provide some evidence that governments, industries and communities in Australia have yet to experience the outcomes from education and training policy and program reform that were originally intended.

The Intersection of Adult Learning Policies and Programs and Community Capability

During the period 2001-2002 the researcher was employed by Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation, a rural community organisation, to facilitate a project aimed at developing and implementing a strategic plan and operational policies and procedures for a new community access education and training facility in the rural town of Glassy Waters in southern Australia.

Glassy Waters is a small rural community with a population of some 650 residents situated on a system of rivers and lakes in rural Australia. Glassy Waters is a town like many others in rural Australia with the following demographic profile; 48% of the population is male and 52% is female, 42% of the population is under 30 years of age, 58% is over 30 (with 38% over 60 years of age). Unemployment levels have been around 23% since the early 1990's with 38% of the population classified as

itinerant or casual workers in the main industries of agriculture, tourism, fire-wood, retail services and forest and parks management. The cultural mix of the population is Anglo-Celtic (45%), Italian (15%), other European (18%), Asian (10%) and Indigenous (12%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics: 2002).

Historically, Glassy Waters has been a supply town for Indigenous and colonial travellers who have used the rivers as a highway for travel and as a source of water and food. During recent times it has remained a supply town for Australian and international tourists who flock to the region to use the waterways for recreation during the summer months.

In the mid 1990's some residents of Glassy Waters commenced an informal dialogue about the environmental and economic importance of the rivers, lakes, swamps and forests that dominated the geographical space in their region. In 1996 representatives from relevant Federal and State government authorities and Glassy Waters residents organised a local forum to discuss government education, training and employment incentives with a view to 'kick starting' some new employment programs.

It was revealed that the Australian Federal Government had allocated funding for the development of a number of rural access community training centres to assist rural and regional communities to provide increased access to education and training services. The community of Glassy Waters decided to submit to the Australian Federal Government a rationale that one of these new centres should be built at Glassy Waters.

Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation was informed in 1999 that their submission had been successful and the project commenced in late 2000 with the establishment of a Training Centre Management Group and a firm of architects employed to design the facility and manage the construction of the new centre. In early 2001, the researcher was employed as a consultant to the project to manage the transition to a community owned and managed adult education and training centre.

Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation was a community owned and managed organisation and was funded by several government and non-government agencies for the provision of land management, environmental and tourism services within the region. The organisation had restricted membership based on specific rules of

incorporation and association regulated by Federal and State government agencies and the organisational structure was 'flat' with a hierarchy of voluntary management positions (i.e. Chairperson, Ordinary Members, and Volunteers etc) overseeing several programs.

Conflict occurred at every phase of the planning and implementation process of the new centre because issues of race, gender, age and Indigenous cultural processes influenced processes such as specific design features of the new facility, ascertaining the training needs of different groups in the community and lobbying tactics when meeting with government authorities. This conflict had a history in the community dating back over 100 years where generations of Indigenous families, farmers, entrepreneurs and environmentalists have fought over the management and use of land, waterways and community resources. These conflicts had engendered a community culture of mistrust, competing advocacy of community needs and the formation of a plethora of small interest groups around specific community issues.

The process of communication between Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation and the broader community about this project was the responsibility of the Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation management committee and the Training Centre management group because of the self-governing clause in the project contract and because Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation wanted this role. However, in their enthusiasm to develop the new centre, people on these community committees failed to inform and educate their own community about medium and long term education and training policy and program development. This relates to the concept of ownership of the project by the whole community rather than just 'the organisation'. It was perceived within the broader community that the new centre belonged to the Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation and that only a few people had influence over the centre rather than the community as a whole having a voice regarding the centre and its policies and programs.

Before construction of the centre was completed several education and training programs in literacy and numeracy education, train the trainer and horticulture had commenced. The rapid growth in staff numbers within Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation, due to the planning and delivery of these programs, revealed several

deficiencies in the organisation's structural and operational processes. The management of the new education and training centre was effectively the responsibility of one management committee member which led to an impression in the community that the development and operation of the centre was not integrated into the wider community via consultation and participation, this led to many people 'drifting' away from the project during the eighteen months of its initial development.

The impact of expanding financial and administrative tasks and processes on a staff team with limited skills meant that the organisation had to research and decide on options for future organisational and financial management. The lack of participation by the local community in the advisory and management processes meant that there was a level of dissent and dissatisfaction within the community. Community politics was interfering with strategic development and priority setting, the reality being that different groups within the community had very different views about the education and training priorities to be addressed by the new facility. Most of these groups did not participate in the project because of a misconception that the centre 'belonged' to only a couple of the community interest groups.

Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation soon realised that it needed to conduct an organisational review to enable it to incorporate government sanctioned adult education and training regulations and practices into its management and service delivery framework. This organisational review was conducted to enhance operational processes encompassing growth in income, service delivery and human resources management and against a backdrop of two main issues. Firstly, staff had to participate in a plethora of negotiation processes involving setting up new partnerships with government agencies and industry about land management, tourism and other opportunities without having the experiences and skills necessary for these new tasks. Secondly, there was ongoing conflict between the State Labor Government and the Coalition Federal Government over funding for regional education and training programs as well as the management of environmental and land programs (desalinisation of land, managing forests, water conservation etc).

Faced with an overwhelming workload on a day-to-day basis, it was decided by the Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation management committee to use external experts and consultants to provide input to the process and manage organisational review projects as required. It was found that the engagement of external consultants to conduct reviews had several advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantages being that consultants were able to quickly collect information and distil new knowledge and information relevant to the organisation's needs and they were able to meet with all stakeholders and seek views about a range of issues and make recommendations for change without being hampered by involvement in community politics. The main disadvantage was that the consultants could not, ultimately, be responsible for incorporating ongoing or continuous improvement into community and organisational processes.

Effective decision-making was being hampered by a lack of community participation in organisational management processes resulting in a lack of a broad based understanding of the need for organisational and community change. Only a few individuals would turn up regularly to management committee meetings and the organisation was struggling to keep its internal governance up to the standards required by government legislation and regulation.

The aim of the Glassy Waters community education and training project was to implement a new service in one rural community within an existing community based organisation. During 2002, the project achieved its objectives by coordinating and delivering a number of education and training programs to the local community including one general adult education program, one workplace trainer program, two horticulture programs and one business administration program. However, by late 2002 the management of the centre was in crisis due to a lack of participation by the local community, there was no on-site manager for the new centre, all the consultants had completed their contracts, two new vocational training courses had to be cancelled due to a lack of enrolments and two staff members had resigned their positions at the new centre because of frustration with the (lack of) community management.

Over the period 2001–2002 the new facility had been successful in creating access to adult education and training programs for approximately forty people from the regional community including, women returning to work, people with disabilities and Indigenous people. To this end, the project had begun creating the success stories it had wanted to achieve. However, the internal governance and management of Glassy Waters Advisory Corporation and the complexities of managing community engagement and participation in this new program was undermining the whole project. This can be evidenced by the ultimate collapse of the community based management of the centre and the fact that during the period 2003-2004 there have been no new courses or enrolments at the centre and it has only be utilised as a general community centre and for external education and training providers to deliver short courses to specific groups in the community.

The potential medium to long-term gains of adult education and training programs like those at Glassy Waters will continue to be compromised by the failure of governments and community based organisations to identify and resource the complexities of community life, community processes and community capability. West (2004: 8) in a recent discussion paper for one State government in Australia states that, *“there has been an increasing interest in community strengthening ...and the initial focus has been a number of statewide initiatives trialling approaches to working with communities.”*

From the evidence provided in this case-study, specific Australian Federal Government programs aimed at increasing access and equity outcomes in adult education and training within rural communities are in danger of failing to a large extent. Even though there had been increased access to some adult education and training programs within this rural context, the project was unable to implement effective processes of community engagement or community strengthening to support the long-term development of new education and training programs.

The development of new individual and community learning processes can promote notions such as flexible learning and lifelong learning which (in theory) ensures that individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, are able to negotiate life and work for the whole of their lives (DET: 2002, Bunning: 1992, Kolb: 1984). This

can then be linked to change management processes that facilitate learning within an organisation and a community via the creation of cultures and processes that allow people to transform the way they arrange themselves within organisations and communities (Bawden & Zuber-Skerrit: 1991, Billet: 1992, Bunning: 1992). This particular case-study of Glassy Waters takes as a premise that communities and workplaces are increasingly being recognised as primary sites for the coordination of education and training programs and that community based organisations and small to medium sized industry enterprises are increasingly becoming the managers of adult education and training processes (ANTA: 2002, DET: 2002).

This general movement toward the development of learning communities (regions, cities and towns) is based on frameworks of community development stemming from 1960's and 1970's social theory and is being utilised to inform the knowledge, information and skills development within communities. However, concepts of innovative and capable communities were not upper most in the minds of the participants in this research project, the community was primarily concerned with economic growth in the community and not the community culture, networking and cooperation required for social infrastructure projects. The case-study of Glassy Waters reflects research conducted throughout Australia (ANTA: 2002, Collits: 1999, Falk & Kilpatrick: 1999) which identifies the barriers to developing learning objectives in a community context.

The issues to consider when implementing and evaluating regional education and training projects include the development of local planning processes that meet local needs and outcomes, securing a considerable commitment by key people including community leaders and ensuring that various community based organisations are included in the planning, implementation and evaluation of adult education and training programs. (Falk & Kilpatrick: 1999)

One of the problems encountered by the Glassy Waters community included government policy and rhetoric about regional and community development being received with cynicism because the community did not receive any resources for community based processes that strengthen capability. Relationships and partnerships within this community had been fractured by many decades of tension

and conflict over issues such as land and environmental management, a national issue that plays out at its worst at a local level between stakeholders such as agriculturalists, Indigenous communities and environmental activists. This tension and conflict needed to be acknowledged and managed in parallel to the implementation of new adult learning programs. The development of adult learning programs about managing community diversity, cultural reconciliation, community participation, community governance and management processes would have provided the support required by this community to discuss, manage and mediate the issues arising in the community.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that this Australian Federal Government policy initiative of increasing access to adult education and training programs via rural access community training centres, aimed to implement specific adult learning outcomes before ensuring that the community was capable of coping with the responsibilities of managing new learning frameworks. The contexts of learning development, whether they be a community, business enterprise or an educational institution, must be nurtured before specific adult education and training programs are funded and delivered.

The location of adult education and training in a community context rather than the traditional institutional context (a large, multi-campus Institute of Technical and Further Education or University) is an important development in Australian adult learning policy and practice. Adult education and training can be delivered by many types of providers utilising flexible and innovative program delivery and recent data has revealed that this diversity is being strengthened by the demand for such adult education and training services by the 'users' (Dumbrell: 2000).

Morris (2001) points out that there exists a plethora of "community" based education philosophies and structures relevant to adult education and training in a community context. These, include, extra mural education which provides outreach education services by institutions as a way of reaching local communities; adult education in the community as an all age, multifunctional education service becoming the focal point of community life and education for community action where the purpose of

education is to empower individuals and groups to participate in community and society more effectively. This means that government, community or industry organisations that manage adult learning need to acknowledge and strengthen relationships within communities before embarking on major projects that aim to create new services and resources. Most change management processes in the Australian context have focused on outcomes (products and services) rather than processes and relationships (Malloch & Cairns: 1999).

The paradigm shift away from bureaucratic models of organisation toward the construction of learning organisations and learning communities requires systematic research and analysis of the structures and relationships that currently exist within communities and organisations, where these are heading and the processes in between (Morris: 2001, McIntyre & Solomon: 1999). The intersection between government adult learning policies and programs and policies and practices aimed at community capability needs to incorporate models of community engagement and strengthening that provide real learning within communities about how to implement and manage successful programs not just achieving the particular outcomes of a specific government funded project. Glassy Waters wanted a new community education and training centre and to improve access and equity outcomes for its disadvantaged citizens but it did not have the structures, resources and relationships required to manage the necessary community and organisational processes. The intersection between adult learning programs and community capability is a complex one that is producing more accidents than a clear pathway to an equitable society.

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