

Searching for the 'C' in ACE

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Abstract

The main focus of the paper is to examine and unravel the discourses emerging from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Adult Community Education (ACE) sectors in the light of policy discourses that serve to construct 'community' in economic terms. The paper seeks to highlight current changes taking place in ACE as Victorian government policy discourses move to place vocational outcomes as a priority for Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) funding. The paper draws from empirical data taken from five participating ACE coordinators from four ACE organisations, two in the Melbourne metropolitan area and three in regional Victoria. The data highlights a cautionary tale of the potential exclusion of some ACE participants who do not fit within current government policy priorities.

Introduction

This paper examines the current political discourses of community being used to frame and align Adult Community Education (ACE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) in light of differences in learning styles, teaching practices, culture and philosophy of the two sectors. It could be argued that the policy discourses of ACE are aligning with VET to construct ‘community’ in economic terms, which may work to differentiate those who fit policy priority criteria from those who do not. The paper draws on empirical data taken from my larger PhD project looking at identity formation in VET frontline management in the wake of policy discourse that serve to impose change on the sector.

Lindeman’s Vision of Adult Education – back then

Eduard C. Lindeman is possibly best known for his pioneering work on community development and adult education. In 1926, he sat down to write *The Meaning of Adult Education*. Essentially, Ednard’s notion of Adult Education was neither constructed in the classroom nor restricted by prescriptive curricula. His vision was concerned with the notion of education contributing to everyday life, and constructed around non-vocational ideas, experiences and situations (Lindeman, 1926).

He called his vision a ‘new kind of education’ that was the confirmation that education was life and that the whole of life is learning. His notion was that adult education was principled on a set of values that began when vocational education finished. Its purpose, according to Lindeman, was to ‘put meaning into the whole of life’ (p.4).

ACE in Australia Today

ACE is differently organised in each state and defined in different ways by practitioners, community members, states, territories and government bodies. Essentially commentators have recognised that ACE in Australia is diverse and broad ranging. For Clemans, Hartley and McCrae (2003), the flexibility and mix of ACE delivery and programs include accredited and non-accredited courses, funded and fee for service delivery, structured and unstructured program delivery. They define ACE as involving ‘tutor run and self directed groups, in-class and work based learning, support groups and working groups’ (p.25). Brookfield (1985) ambitiously defines adult education as fitting into three categories. The first he describes as extra mural adult education, or the establishment of more formal educational providers such as university or TAFE institutes. The second is adult education provision central in the community. Thirdly adult education for community action has, as its principle focus, to empower individuals and the community.

McCrae (2001) claims there are also three categories for ACE. The first of these she defines, as community owned ACE; These include community houses, University of the Third Age (U3A), Indigenous learning organisations and neighbourhood houses. Secondly she defines ACE/TAFE organisations, in this category as non-accredited programs run by TAFE; these courses include foundation, general education, further and recreational programs. Finally she defines ‘universal adult education’ (p.1), by

which she means all community education occurring in any community. This category can include self-directed learning, local clubs and societies, museums, national parks, social movements and public education campaigns.

The Victorian Scene

According to the 2004 Victorian Government Ministerial Statement on ACE ‘Adult Community Education has a proud history, beginning in 1839 with the foundation of the Melbourne Mechanics’ Institutes. Other milestones were the opening of the Council of Adult Education (now CAE) in 1947; the provision of the first Adult Migrant Education Service (now the Adult Multicultural Education Services) in 1951; the opening of neighbourhood houses in the 70’s; and the proclamation of the Adult, Community and Further Education Act in 1991. Today there are 450 community-owned and managed organisations eligible to deliver adult community education programs across the community of Victoria’ (Kosky 2004, p.5).

The notion of ACE in the 70’s was to meet the needs of community members by offering an informal, non-threatening and nurturing environment for people to gather and participate in community based education and hobby courses. The strength of ACE at that time was through the fostering of a sense of ‘grass roots’ community and the subsequent opportunities for people to gather in a social setting and participate in community life. From this notion of grass roots community education came the establishment of the Australian Assistance Plan (AAP), an initiative of the Whitlam Government. The Whitlam government of the 70’s were a reformist government and promoted change. AAP was consistent with policies that focused on local community consultation. In the mid 70’s the main themes coming from community houses and learning centres was empowerment of the individual, caring and sharing. (Buckingham, Aldred, & Clark, 2004).

Whilst fragments of the original model of community learning still remain in ACE today there have been significant shifts through government policy requirements that focus on pathways involving courses that lead to educational outcomes. This change is vocationally focused and requires ACE to step inline with the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), conform to rigid accountability structures and establish stronger linkages with VET.

The ‘Business’ of Community

Today both VET and ACE are involved with the delivery of education and training outcomes to the community. This contributes to the way in which community capacity is being constructed through public policy discourses such as lifelong learning, social capital, community building and community development. It could be argued that community education today is now based on the 1994 government training reform framework that expounded the need to create a skilled flexible workforce. Learning through ACE is no longer constructed through the 70’s discourses of ‘individual empowerment’ but rather is now in line with the notion of education being an investment in ‘human capital’ which leads to greater economic returns (Buckingham, Aldred, & Clark, 2004). Under the 2004 Ministerial Statement entitled, *Future Directions for Adult Community Education in Victoria*. The minister for education Lynne Kosky, outlined a four strategy approach to grow and develop

ACE in Victoria to 2007, to meet the changing economic needs of community. Essentially the strategies outline the development of community learning partnerships that are said to be a new way of government 'doing business' (p.10) with communities. The recognition and prioritising of specific learner groups and individuals is also outlined in the statement, these learner groups are identified as; Koories, men over forty five years, people with a disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people aged fifteen years and over and people aged over fifty five years. A further strategy outlined in the statement is the development of strategies to enhance adult community education provision through improved business, management, governance, workforce and volunteer practices (p.15). According to the statement this will be achieved through the simplification of reporting and accountability requirements and the enhancement of roles and responsibilities of regional councils and ACE providers.

Community is being increasingly used by politicians, policy makers and service providers through its policies on community development and community capacity building and social capital. (Kilpatrick 2000; Keating, Badenhorst & Szlachetko 2002; Kilpatrick 2003; Roberts 2004). The current ACE policy discourses being expounded by government on community are said to develop social capital through VET and ACE provision. These types of discourses have been filtering into the policy language of VET for some time. ACE providers/practitioners working on the ground are feeling and hearing the policy discourse of community, however are experiencing some difficulty fitting their understandings of community into its current political context.

According to Brookfield, (1985) community is a word that evokes great emotional intensity. Historically for ACE, the notion of 'community' came from the principle that community learning came in many forms and took place through shared interests and informal discussions. This learning took place in informal, nurturing and non institutionalised settings. The current re modelling of ACE delivery is now geared around the development of human capital, and is defined as an investment, which will have greater economic returns. Now governments are 'doing business' with community education providers/practitioners/community members. This business is founded on the notion of regional sustainability through vocational outcomes and is funded against government community development priorities (Settle 2004; West 2004; Productivity Commission 2003).

I am most interested in the way ACE provision today is being discursively constructed to frame and advance policy priorities that do not necessarily promote ACE provision for all members of community and that the increasing social and economic priorities that expound 'vocational outcomes' through ACE may 'exclude' a growing number of the same people who traditionally accessed ACE.

According to Carson (2004) in his address to the Victorian Council of Social Services Annual Congress, the policy agenda of community can have inescapable negative connotations. The concept that he argues carries a strong element of differentiation and even exclusion within it. He argues that ones' identity through a community necessarily carries a sense of differentiation from other groups and, more importantly, 'of others outside the community being different and *other*' (p.4). In the context of current Victorian government community priorities those outside government specified learner groups are discounted/differentiated.

ACE organisations that are funded by Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) are now more than ever being funded against vocational learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are focused around government priority areas which are being promoted as areas that will strengthen community capacity through foundation and general education programs designed as pathways to further education or develop employability skills. This, it could be argued, discounts/differentiates those people over seventy years of age, for example, who may wish to learn computing for interest, or those with a disability who will never have the capacity to be employed or those who simply want to access a learning centre to take up a hobby course. Under the current ministerial guidelines these people do not fit current policy priorities.

Method

Essentially the interest in ACE came from looking at data taken from five participating coordinators from four ACE organisations, two in the Melbourne metropolitan area and three in regional Victoria. These organisations were involved in a larger sample of VET organisations used to look at the role and identity of the front line manager/coordinator in VET for my PhD project.

Qualitative data was collected using multi methods, These included observations; individual semi structured interviews containing open-ended questions and document analysis. The questions used were categorised under two sub headings, the first looking at the changing nature of VET. These questions focused on the impact of change on roles and responsibilities of coordinators. The second category concentrated on working identities being formed in VET/ACE today and the future for VET professionals in the wake of policy changes.

Summary of Findings

A grounded theory approach Merriam (1998) was employed using a coding system to analyse and dissect the data meaningfully. Categories of analysis that were identified in the data as consistently occurring fell into themes under the headings of identity, change and inclusive practices.

In summary when asked about identity, the common theme resonating from the responses were relating to identity of the ACE sector itself rather than individual roles and identity. In all cases participants expressed concern about the emphasis on vocational outcomes. Many also expressed concern that the identity of ACE would be replaced from a caring one to a more institutionalised and less flexible environment. Practitioners felt their professional identity was enmeshed within and to a flexible, inclusive learning environment. A coordinator situated in a country Victorian ACE organisation explained that:

We are proud of what we achieve here. We work hard to maintain a responsive and flexible learning space for the people who want to come and learn. We aren't and don't want to be a TAFE and it wouldn't work here any way. What makes us so successful is the informal and welcoming house and the one-on-one approach that happens on a daily basis. Our people need extra care; I guess when you ask me about identity I see it as this house and our hands on approach, you can't split the two because the

learning space and our flexibility is what brings people through the door. You put us into the TAFE setting and our identity is basically lost, does that make sense? I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm frightened for the sake of the people that come here. I'm frightened that we'll become so bogged down with accountability and vocational outcomes that we may as well b.... shift into the TAFE up the road and close our doors. If we did that, all the people we see would have no place to learn at all. I don't know maybe that's what the government want, these people out of sight?

Concern was expressed by most coordinators at the loss of what they considered to be effective learning and empowerment strategies for all participants and resentment at the belief that ACE was being 'forced' to focus on ACFE priorities that were seen as disenfranchising many of the people that historically benefited from their programs. A further concern was expressed by the majority of coordinators that ACE had undergone a change that impacted negatively on its capacity to assist all members "without fear or favour" to participate and learn in a creative and non-structured environment. The change in government language and emphasis was also identified by some of the coordinators as having the affect of reducing ACE capacity to function effectively across *all* of community. One member explained that:

I'm not worried at all about me. I can read and write; I was lucky and got a chance to learn through a supportive family. There are people here who never got that chance. I suppose in a way we're their family we really want them to succeed and work hard to make them feel welcomed. See Helen over there, she has an intellectual disability and has been coming here for two years. What is going to happen to her if these current ACFE priorities are how we get funded. Helen and others like her can't work, so vocational outcomes are b..... stupid. I'm really worried about the students that come here. We work really hard to make them feel valued and respected. That for us is a much more important outcome!

Approaches to pedagogy and teaching practices in ACE were seen as being extremely important to retain the flexibility of where and how people could access learning. Respondents consistently highlighted teaching practices in ACE as being flexible and responsive, or as one person put it "artful and a creatively engaging way of teaching". The importance of maintaining ACE as people centred learning organisations were also seen to be compromised by a funding model that only funded against vocational outcomes that assist people to employment and further training as its principle. A senior coordinator from a larger ACE organisation explained that:

I have worked here as the coordinator for fifteen years and have seen policies come and go. Working here is a challenge because we get a big catchment of lots of types of people. I spose we are considered a large ACE provider and are reasonably well funded. We have teachers here that have left secondary teaching to come and work with our students because they see it as important work. Other tutors are not trained but come here out of a sense of community. They have artful and engaging ways of teaching our students and that is what I think may be compromised if the government gets its way. Lots of our work is the preparatory stuff that works on health, well being, literacy and numeracy and self esteem. In many cases we don't concentrate on vocational outcomes at all because it's too soon for many of our students. We provide step one, and with out our step one for many of these people they would beI don't know ...lost.

Discussion

A Cautionary Note

According to Kilpatrick, Field and Falk (2003) there is broad agreement that social capital is a resource based on relationships among people. In particular, most definitions focus on membership in networks and the norms that guide their interactions. Essentially there are two theoretical approaches defined by commentators and described by Falk and Kilpatrick (2000), the first 'collective benefit' (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000; Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000) and the second that of 'individual benefit' (Bourdier, 1986; Coleman 1988). For the purposes of this paper I follow the individual benefit approach to community development where it is connected with social capital in the context of current ACE provision. For this purpose it highlights the cautionary potential for the differentiation of the individual in their communities through policy priorities that can discriminate. Dasgupta (1999) cautions the use of social capital as a peg on which to hang those informal engagements we like, care for or approve of. Advancing this approach when looking at ACE vocational outcomes, it could be argued that government policy discourse on social capital is the peg on which ACE value will now be approved of. According to McIntyre (2001), the politics of inclusion in national VET policy demand that ACE demonstrate its vocational worth. This politics of inclusion is also demonstrated in the Victorian ministerial statement on ACE. Strengthening community through pathways to education and employment is according to the 'collective benefit' approach developing community capacity generally. A cautionary note should be included here when the individual is ignored in policy priority and the notion of vocational inclusion works to exclude the capacity of ACE to work with individuals. Various authors have argued that social capital can create problems for community well being by restricting individuals capacity to engage in their own communities through a lack of individual freedoms or because of an incapacity to input into economic growth (Ostrom 2000; Portes 1998; Waldinger 1995).

The strength of ACE outlined by Volkoff, Golding and Jenkin (1999, p.59) is that 'Vocational intentions reside within individuals rather than within particular programs' they point out that for ACE learners non vocationally based/focused programs contribute to personal development and may lead to 'unforeseen vocational outcomes.' For some ACE learners the value of personal development skills that lead to community participation and social contribution is as valuable as vocational outcomes in many instances.

Golding and Rogers (2002) described the positive attributes of ACE programs through its flexible and holistic approach to teaching and learning. ACE practitioners work with learners to develop personal and social skills whilst teaching practical skills across a broad range of program areas. Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) have identified ACE-teaching practices as having significant overlap between personal and social skills. They attribute ACE teaching practitioner success as being achieved through 'drawing on a wide range of strategies, approaches and pedagogies to foster and nurture generic skills development' (p.5). These skills and approaches are intrinsic to and connect with the cultures that characterise ACE centres, ACE environments and ACE places. Sanguinetti, et al (2004) have called this the

‘pedagogies of place’ (p.5); they suggest that the unique education and social contribution of ACE can be found in the intersection and the interaction between pedagogies of personal engagement, and pedagogies of the ‘plACE’.

There is concern coming from the Victorian ACE sector that the current policy priorities that frame the ACFE funding model are too prescriptive and have a heavy emphasis on vocational outcomes and not enough emphasis on the social value that adult education organisations provide. The current round of submissions to ACFE for 2005 are not as previously applied for which was by using qualitative reporting against program areas. This new application system is based purely on statistics and allows no room for adding the personal and nurturing elements of an ACE program essential to its success. No more will ACFE be funding introduction classes or any programs that do not have an accreditation or certification attached. ACE organisations are being encouraged to fund these types of ‘self development’ programs using fee for service dollars, unfortunately dollars that in most cases ACE participants historically do not possess.

Synopsis

The Important Role of ACE

There is broad agreement from commentators and government that there is benefit in closer pathways and links between ACE and VET (Wyn, Stokes & Tyler; Saunders 2000; Kosky 2004). This link strengthens pathways and opportunities for people to learn and built on employability skills. However, many of the learning needs of the socially disadvantaged that access ACE are not met through the more prescriptive institutional learning system of TAFE/ RTO class/training room set-ups. There is a need to concentrate on the individual in the area of preparatory work – the early stages of the learning pathway – the important *stuff* that needs to occur before any accreditation/qualification can be obtained. The learning needs of many ACE participants are not met by large well- funded institutions, but can be met through community-based adult learning providers – neighbourhood houses, learning centres, community groups, informal venues the places and spaces that provide an environment where individuals can develop a strong sense of self worth. Without these learning environments maintaining they’re unique nurturing capacity, there will be individuals in communities that are differentiated from policy norms.

ACE organisations play a vital role in introducing to the socially disadvantaged the opportunity to develop options, make choices, overcome barriers and participate in community life. Current VET policy discourses will need to facilitate and promote a range of learning venues, individual needs and teaching practices to benefit whole of community (Cross, 2004). The danger in linking VET and ACE too closely through rigid policy priorities is that it can disenfranchise those who do not have the capacity to engage in formalised education.

Clemens Hartley and Macrae (2003) in their report on ACE outcomes, acknowledge the vocational contribution of ACE through many of its programs. They also acknowledge the community development role of ACE through what they term the ‘cement of social capital through society’s good will’ (p.33). These outcomes are developed though connecting people with each other, making contributions through

the development of citizenship programs, cultural contributions, the enhancement of community identity and more. The diversity and good will of ACE is fundamental to its success and contribution to community generally. This contribution must be acknowledged by government through policies that nurture and recognise value in individual and community enhancement. This acknowledgement can be achieved by a funding regime that sets aside a proportion of its program dollars dedicated to assist people in participating as full *members of community*. Funding pegged exclusively to vocational outcomes or rigid priorities will work to diminish the rich contribution of ACE through its good will programs and social value.

I would like to acknowledge the limitations of this paper relating to the small sample set and its Victorian only focus. I do however see the importance of maintaining the integrity and inclusiveness of ACE through critical analysis. As the ACE/VET relationship continues to develop under government community priority programs so too should the essential social responsiveness and specialist learning environments of ACE not be diminish under these priorities. Further and more extensive inquiry is needed to highlight the value of ACE/VET partnering along with critical questioning of government policy priorities that can work to include/exclude community members across Australia.

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