

# **Aligning partnerships, policy and pedagogy with participants: A social capital perspective**

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The primary purpose of the recently completed National Centre for Vocational Education Research study reported here was to produce a set of guidelines on how to deliver adult literacy and numeracy education and training using a social capital approach. No such guidelines currently exist. At a time when improving the social inclusion of Australians who are socially, culturally or economically marginalised is very much on the political agenda, approaches that can increase availability, access, take-up and/or outcomes of adult literacy and numeracy education and training are needed. Previous research has shown that a social capital approach has the capacity to achieve these aims. This study focussed on three key elements. These were the partnerships involved in the design and delivery of adult literacy and numeracy programs; the policies that influence the kind of partnerships possible; and the pedagogical practices that teachers use. The methodology used to produce these guidelines was to synthesise understandings of social capital from existing theory and previous research with the findings from researching current practices in the adult literacy and numeracy field. The study confined itself to looking at delivery involving partnerships in the areas of health literacy, personal financial literacy and in the justice sector. As well as a literature review, scans of health literacy in NSW, financial literacy in Queensland and literacy and numeracy provision in the justice sector in the Northern territory were conducted. Pedagogical practices were further investigated through three action research projects, each one with a teacher who trialled teaching strategies that could enhance social capital outcomes for learners. This paper summarises the guidelines produced.

## **Introduction**

This paper presents research-based guidelines for delivering adult literacy and numeracy training from a social capital perspective. It is a model that can produce

alignment amongst the key elements of delivery. It aligns policy, partnerships and pedagogy with the needs of the participants i.e., the learners, who engage in the training. By alignment, we mean that there is a match between the planning and delivery of the adult literacy and numeracy training with the targeted participant group that leads to outcomes that improve the learners' quality of life. The guidelines are designed for those policy makers, funding bodies, community groups, industry and training organisations, including teachers, who wish to attend to social capital in their efforts to produce positive socio- and economic- outcomes for participants.

By social capital, we mean 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, p.5). Fundamental to social capital theory is the proposition that networks of relationships are a resource that can facilitate access to other resources of value to individuals or groups for a specific purpose. The usefulness of social capital theory lies in highlighting those aspects of social structure that lead to economic or social gain for either groups or individuals. In the research field of adult learning, the concept of social capital has been operationalised, for the most part, as a private or individual good rather than that of a group. This study, too, investigates social capital outcomes for individuals, in this case, the learners.

The two-way connections between social capital and learning, both formal and informal have been the focus of much research (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Falk, 2007). Field and Schuller (1997, p.17) state:

Social capital ... treats learning not as a matter of individual acquisition of skills and knowledge, but as a function of identifiable social relationships. It also draws attention to the role of norms and values in the motivation to learn as well as in the acquisition of skills, and the deployment of new know-how.

A social capital perspective to adult literacy and numeracy provision leads to reconceptualising not only the kinds of outcomes that adult literacy and numeracy training can produce (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2006) but also how the training is designed, planned, funded, and marketed, and how participants are recruited. A social capital perspective considers the role of networks at every stage of the delivery.

In the study that produced the guidelines described in this paper (Balatti, Black & Falk, in press), three elements of training delivery were the primary areas for research. The first was the kinds of networks involved at any stage of delivery. The particular networks that we were most interested in were those whose members described as partnerships i.e., collaborative arrangements. Partnerships are a key element in community capacity building and have featured strongly in VET research in recent years, reflecting their newfound priority role (e.g., Billett, Clemens & Seddon, 2005).

The second was the pedagogy that teachers/trainers used in adult literacy and numeracy training that seemed to enhance the social capital outcomes experienced at the individual level by participants. Our previous research (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2006) had suggested that pedagogy was one (but not the only one) factor that influenced social capital outcomes. Social capital outcomes here refer to the changes that participants experience in the way they interact with members of their existing networks and also to the changes in the types and number of networks that they access or of which they become members. Networks refer to any formal or informal groupings of people with which the learners engage including family, friendship groups, special interest groups, government systems such as health and education, employing bodies, and goods and services providers.

The third element was policy. Policy is the often invisible but defining underpinning of the partnerships that produce the networks that in turn draw on and build social capital. It provides the rules by which the practical strategies are played out.

The learner group that was the focus for the study comprised people that government agencies describe as marginalised or socially excluded from society. The current Australian government defines social inclusion as having the opportunity to “secure a job; access services; connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community; deal with personal crisis; and have their voices heard” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, online).

Socially excluded groups are often notoriously difficult to recruit to education and training courses. Within this learner group, our research aimed to look at adult literacy and numeracy delivery in the three areas of health, personal financial literacy and

justice. Previous research had suggested that these were some of the key areas that required models of delivery of training different from the traditional classroom-based stand-alone training delivered by providers in institutional settings (Figgis, 2004; Hartley & Horne, 2006; Wickert & McGuirk, 2005). We began the project with the assumption that innovative models of delivery had developed in these areas.

## **Research method**

The study consisted of three sequential phases. Phase one was a literature review; phase two was three environmental scans; and phase three comprised three action research projects. Each phase informed the decision-making in the subsequent phases. This section describes the purpose of each phase and data collected. How the data were analysed and the guidelines synthesised are described in the next section.

Phase One was a literature review of recent developments in the field of adult literacy and numeracy education in Australia. Its purpose was to determine the nature of the literacy training in the areas of health, personal financial literacy and in the justice sector. The focus was on the partnerships operating, the policies influencing the field and the pedagogies used in the training. The review revealed a dearth of provision in legal literacy and some work in health literacy. In contrast, personal financial literacy training provided the most fertile ground for a range of collaborative initiatives.

Phase Two comprised three environmental scans, one each in New South Wales (with health as the focus), Queensland (personal financial literacy), and the Northern Territory (justice). Legal literacy was not pursued and the scan investigated literacy and numeracy programs for prisoner populations, including post release programs. The purpose of the scans was to explore in more detail than what the literature review afforded the partnerships between literacy and numeracy providers and agencies in the areas of health, finance and justice and the nature of the program delivery. The first source of data was responses to an email enquiry sent to all providers in the two states and territory listed on the database of the Commonwealth funded national telephone referral service, the *Reading Writing Hotline*. As well as following up these responses, websites and other leads gained by word-of-mouth were also investigated. The scans also identified possible participants for the action research projects in the third phase.

Phase Three adapted the Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) action research model to explore how three experienced teachers trialled social capital building strategies identified in the previous two phases. The purpose of the trials was to develop a better understanding of the strategies and to identify the factors that facilitated or impeded social capital building. The three volunteer teachers participated in an initial workshop on social capital and the action research process. They committed to an action research plan and engaged in regular reflection sessions with the researchers over the duration of the course. Details of the three action research sites are summarised in table 1. Data collected in this phase comprised the action research plans, the regular critical reflections that were taped and transcribed and a set of semi-structured interviews with the teachers and the learners at the end of the course which were also taped and transcribed.

**Table 1: Action research sites**

Site	Training	Teachers	Length	No of enrolments	Learner description
NSW	New program funded with annual Commonwealth (DEST/DEEWR) literacy funds for innovative programs	2 (LLN teacher & health educator)	26 hrs over 13 weeks	12	NESB Muslim women from different ethnic backgrounds
Qld	Work from Certificate II in Business for Workplace Re-entry PLUS financial literacy component	1	80 hrs over 8 weeks	12	Mainly (10) mature aged, long term unemployed women
NT	Work from the Certificates in General Education for Adults (CGEA)	1	160 hrs over 10 weeks	6	Aboriginal women from severely disadvantaged backgrounds

An important limitation to the study concerned its scope. The study focussed on just three elements of the adult literacy and numeracy training endeavour, namely, partnerships, pedagogy and policy. This limitation prevented any detailed analysis from a social capital perspective of the specific stages in the process of designing and delivering training such as recruitment, evaluation and costing.

## **Discussion and guidelines for a social capital perspective to adult literacy and numeracy provision**

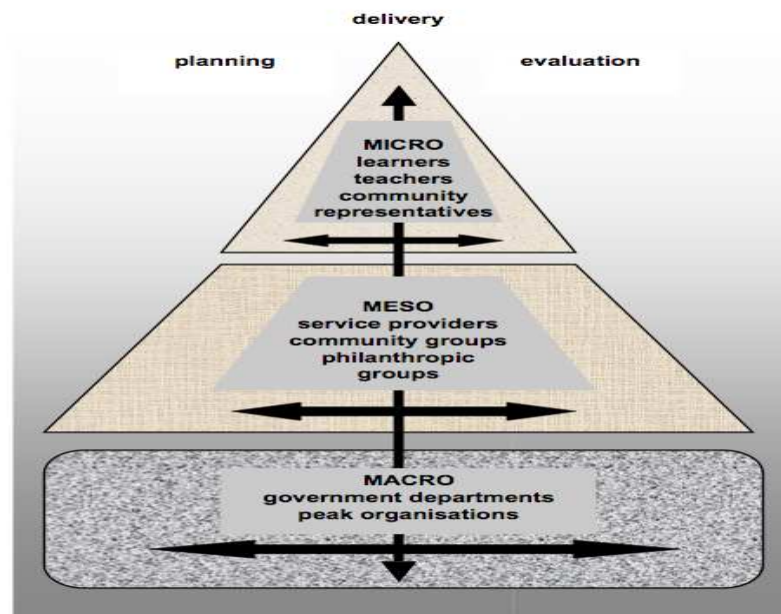
The guidelines presented below are to be understood within two overarching principles. The first is that a social capital perspective necessitates conceptualising adult literacy and numeracy training as a social intervention embedded in wider spheres of social and economic activity. These include the social, cultural and economic context of the town, city and/or region in which the learners operate. The second principle is that a social capital perspective also necessitates conceptualising the learner as a member of networks or as a community member who accesses networks. A summary of how partnerships, pedagogy and policy work in the delivery of adult literacy and numeracy training from a social capital perspective now follows.

### *Partnerships in adult literacy and numeracy development*

Partnerships were categorised in terms of their membership and purpose. Figure 1 is a heuristic that helps describe the kinds of partnership configurations that can lead to better outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy programs at the individual and community levels. The diagram organises partnerships in terms of the three organisational levels, macro, meso and micro and provides examples of possible stakeholders at each level. The diagram disrupts the commonly held hierarchical construct of locating the ‘macro’ at the top of the pyramid. Having the micro level i.e. the learners and their teachers, at the top, is a reminder that education and training interventions only achieve their purpose at the micro level of interaction. It is at the micro level that the learning happens.

Locating the macro level as the foundation of the pyramid serves as a reminder of its importance in sustaining interventions for as long as they are needed. The partnerships at the macro level between government departments and peak organisations produce the policy that supports the efforts at the meso and micro level. Without the support of the macro level, the best efforts of individuals at the meso and micro levels are at risk of being unsustainable.

**Figure: 1 Partnerships in the planning, delivery and evaluation phases of adult literacy training**



The horizontal arrows signify the importance of building partnerships within each level. The vertical arrow signifies that good partnerships also have links across the levels as well e.g., policy makers at the macro level have ongoing consultation with implementers of policy and the intended beneficiaries of policy.

The final element of the diagram is the overlay of the partnership configurations over every phase of the adult literacy and numeracy intervention. To simplify, these are identified as the planning, delivery and evaluation of the intervention. The overlay denotes the potential importance of partnerships to all aspects of the intervention.

Appropriate partnering across government, industry, community groups and philanthropic organisations has proven to be a means of getting the right sort of provision to the people for whom it is intended. Such partnership arrangements have been termed ‘whole-of-government’ or ‘linked-up’ approaches.

The usefulness of the figure is in providing a visual representation of the structural aspects of partnerships. However, it says nothing about the qualitative nature of partnerships that work well. Much research has been done on identifying the qualities of good partnerships (Allison, Gorringer & Lacey, 2006; Gelade, Stehlik & Willis, 2006; Seddon et al, 2008). This study confirmed that elements or characteristics of those partnerships that work well require partners to:

- have common understandings of their joint purpose;
- have common understandings of how to ascertain progress made toward achieving the common purpose;
- bring with them the appropriate resources in terms of financial, social, cultural and physical capital to achieve the common purpose;
- hold compatible philosophical positions with respect to their common purpose; and
- have good communication.

*Pedagogy*

Teaching strategies that were identified as drawing on or building social capital were those that interviewees (teachers and learners) described as leading to social capital outcomes. Social capital outcomes were defined as changes in the elements of social capital listed in table 2.

**Table 2: Indicators of changes in social capital**

<b>Social capital outcomes as indicated by learner changes in:</b>	
<b>1 Network qualities</b>	<b>2 Network structures</b>
1a trust levels	2a the number or nature of attachments to existing and new networks
1b in beliefs about personal influence on his/her own life and that of others	2b the number or nature of the ways that the learner keeps in touch with others in his/her networks
1c action to solve problems in one’s life or in that of others	2c the nature of memberships in networks for example, changing the power differential
1d beliefs and interaction with people who are different from oneself	
<b>3 Network transactions</b>	<b>4 Network types</b>



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3a the support sought, received or given in the networks to which the learner is attached	4a the activities undertaken with the main groups with which the learner interacts
3b the ways the learner negotiates and shares information and skills	4b the activities with groups that are different from the learner's
	4c the links that the learner has to institutions

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Note: Based on the ABS (2004) Social Capital Framework

Pedagogy developed from a social capital perspective views the learner as a member of networks. The networks that are of relevance to the trainer or teacher are the learner group itself, the networks that the learner already accesses or of which he/she is a member; and the new networks that the learner interacts with as the result of the learning experienced.

#### Learner group as the site for social capital outcomes

Conceptualising the learner as a member of networks begins with teachers recognising that the group or class in which they are teaching is a new network for all participants including themselves. It is arguably the most important network from the teachers' perspective because it is the one that they can most directly influence. It is the network in which learners can acquire new knowledge (e.g., literacy skills) and identity resources (e.g., self-confidence) that they can draw on in their interactions inside and outside the class. It is the network that has learning as its common purpose.

Teaching strategies that can lead to social capital outcomes within the learner group include the following:

- Foster relationship building between learners, and learners and teachers (bonding ties).
- Negotiate content and approach with learners.
- Devise with the students a set of protocols that encourage an open and respectful environment.
- Foster a safe and supportive environment where learners feel safe to make errors or to try different ways of being.
- Provide opportunities for learners to be challenged.

#### Existing networks for social capital outcomes

Changes in the ways which learners interact in the networks of which they are already members is the second kind of social capital outcomes that may result from the

learning experience. A cautionary note is required here. Social capital outcomes that may be positive for the learner need not be perceived as such by other people in their existing networks of family, friends or acquaintances. Attached to changes in the way learners interact in their networks come certain risks. In some cases these risks may include learners being impeded in their efforts to attend training or even experiencing domestic violence.

Some teaching strategies that increase the likelihood of social capital outcomes occurring through the learners' existing networks are the following:

- Content is relevant to everyday living (e.g., improving eating practices at home, working with computers at home).
- Draw on learners' life experiences.
- Set up the teaching so that other family members can participate e.g., course for adults and a concurrent companion course for children.
- Allow opportunities for family members or friends to be part of the course e.g., at celebratory events.

#### *Potential new networks as sites for social capital outcomes*

Social capital outcomes include learners accessing or becoming members of new networks that offer contacts, services, knowledge, and other social, economic and cultural resources that the learners had not previously enjoyed. Becoming members of new networks leads learners to experiencing new sets of norms, values and beliefs which in turn may result in changes to how they perceive themselves (identity resources) and others. Below are some teaching strategies by which this can occur:

- Arrange for learning experiences to occur in out-of-class contexts that will be useful to the learners.
- Set tasks that require learners to interact with networks (organisations, community groups, service providers) they have not yet accessed.
- Invite people from potentially useful networks to co-teach or co-participate.
- Foster the building of bridging and linking ties.

#### *Policy in social capital approaches to adult literacy and numeracy development*

To explore how policy facilitates partnerships, examples of collaboration were analysed using the Wallace and Falk (2008, pp.200-201) framework that applies social capital principles to informing policy development and implementation. According to this framework, the five Principles of Policy Effectiveness are.

**Principle one:** Effective policy depends on understanding the dynamics of change at ‘the local’ level.

**Principle two:** Gaining benefits from policy depends on engaging the intended recipients. Inclusive and consultative processes are slow, but they pay off.

**Principle three:** Continuity of resources, including structure and personnel provides short and long- term sustainable success.

**Principle four:** Ensure ‘market forces’ are supplemented by resourced capacity building.

**Principle five:** Policy cycle effectiveness requires availability and responsiveness of an evidentiary base. This includes continuous and iterative evaluation of individual projects.

Those examples investigated in this study that demonstrated these principles appeared to reach more of their target group and produce more outcomes. The analysis also led to the following findings to do with policy design and implementation:

- Policy that influences the effectiveness of an initiative can come from government and/or from private enterprise. Initiatives in personal financial literacy provided examples of this.
- Policy that ‘listens’ to the grassroots and has the capacity to adapt to local needs is more effective. There is a balance between the top down and bottom up groups involved.
- A great deal of excellent and productive pedagogy at the micro level occurs and produces social capital benefits. From the scans and evidence in this study, this usually happens in spite of, not because of, policy measures.

It is important to note that the field of adult literacy and numeracy training is operating in Australia with no uniform national adult literacy and numeracy policy. There has not been one for nearly two decades since the Australian Language and Literacy Policy in 1991 (see Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991). Furthermore, there are no recent state or territory adult literacy or numeracy policies, although there are some isolated strategies in place that respond to Federal funding requirements; This lack is reflected in the diversity of isolated initiatives e.g., ‘financial literacy’, health literacy’, ‘mental health literacy’, each of which tends to

occur in isolation from the other and independently of the established adult literacy and numeracy field.

We conclude our guidelines for social capital approaches to adult literacy and numeracy development by presenting a list of proposals that lead to the effective integration of the three elements of partnerships, pedagogy and policy:

- An ‘effective approach’ depends on an integration of the macro, meso and micro aspects of the intervention. There are indications that the stronger the partnership base across policy bodies and sectors, the stronger will be the social capital that is built, and this will impact on the effectiveness of the policy outcomes. This supports a view that a whole-of-government approach to adult literacy and numeracy would be productive.
- The set of five principles for effective policy development and implementation using a social capital perspective (Wallace & Falk 2008, pp.200-201) have application in the context of adult literacy and numeracy development.
- The policy-building process needs to embrace and build on existing successful models from **inside and outside government** and to draw all stakeholders into the national dialogue on the role of adult literacy and numeracy in enabling social inclusive policies.

## **Conclusions**

The main task for this study was to investigate what constitutes a social capital perspective to designing and delivering adult literacy training. This was done by exploring the partnerships, policies and pedagogies operating in face-to-face adult literacy training delivery that seem to draw on and build social capital at several levels. These include within and between government, industry and education providers; within communities; and for the learners themselves.

The value in exploring the ways that adult literacy and numeracy is being made available in the areas of health, finance and justice has been to show that there are very different configurations of partnerships involved. The environmental scans revealed that the activity in financial literacy training at this point has outstripped

activity in the other two areas with work in legal literacy being negligible. Arguably under-represented in the partnerships engaged in literacy provision in these areas of interest are public VET training providers.

This research leads to a number of further questions that have not yet been satisfactorily answered. Cost effectiveness is one. Whether social capital approaches are cost effective has not been ascertained. Part of the problem here is that evaluations of the impact of education and training exist only in some isolated cases.

Also worthy of exploration is the capacity of various sectors to embrace social capital approaches to adult literacy and numeracy provision. Initiatives that engage partnerships in substantial ways appear to be most evident in financial literacy. In the case of health literacy, there are currently only ad hoc local partnerships undertaken without any overall direction or policy and without significant funding or other resources. Could the equivalent of the national financial literacy foundation and the partnerships between government and industry in the delivery of financial literacy occur in say, health literacy?

A third area of research needed is to better understand the professional development needs of teachers who do not have a specialisation in adult literacy and numeracy but who are working in areas such as personal financial or health literacy. Adult literacy and numeracy skill development happens on a very large stage, much of it informal, much of it provided by teachers who would not describe themselves as specialist adult literacy and numeracy teachers.

Social capital models for adult literacy and numeracy provision have merit only if they are likely to produce additional or superior outcomes for the learners. Attending to social capital at the various stages in the design and delivery of adult literacy and numeracy training can increase the availability of the training, its accessibility, its suitability, its relevance, and the outcomes experienced. Ultimately, it is the benefits experienced by the targeted participant group that is the measure of alignment amongst the various elements of delivery.

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