

Reframing adult literacy and numeracy: a social capital perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the capacity of stand-alone adult literacy and numeracy courses to produce social capital outcomes and assesses the value of such outcomes. The study also identifies the pedagogical practices that seem to be the most relevant to social capital production and concludes with implications for both pedagogy and the framing of outcomes reporting. The study found that almost 80% of the students interviewed experienced social capital outcomes from participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses. These outcomes mainly came about from changes in network structures and from changes in network transactions. Student characteristics such as English speaking background, Indigeneity and age impact on the type of social capital outcomes experienced. Further, technical skill outcomes (human capital) often require social capital outcomes as a pre-requisite or co-requisite in order to be acquired and/or to be applied. Finally but importantly, social capital outcomes are found to have a role in the impact that participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses has on the socio-economic well-being of the participant and/or the community.

Research purpose

This paper summarises the main findings of recent research commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (Balatti, Black & Falk forthcoming). The broad purpose of the exploratory study was to see if adult literacy and numeracy courses produce social capital outcomes and if so, to determine their significance. By social capital we mean the ‘networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2004, p.5). By social capital outcomes therefore, we mean changes in the nature of the connections that students have in existing or new social networks that lead to more involvement in society.

Literature review

The concept of social capital has gained increasing popularity for more than a decade. The links between social capital and human capital and their role in the contribution that education and learning makes to society are the concern of major international organisations (e.g. OECD 2001). In recent years there have been many studies that have sought to unravel these links and relationships, especially in terms of the wider benefits of adult learning, both formal and informal (e.g. Field 2003, Kilpatrick, Field & Falk 2003, Schuller et al 2004). But these relationships are complex. Balatti and Falk (2002), for example, explain how the learning process, seen in terms of change in knowledge and identity resources, both draws on and builds social capital in making socio-economic contributions to communities.

To date very few studies have focused on the role of social capital in adult literacy and numeracy courses. An exception is the work of Falk (2001a, 2001b, 2001c) who argues,

for example, that courses which focus on work-related skills, that is, human capital, may be insufficient for gaining employment unless participants also have the requisite social capital including social networks involving bridging ties.

For more than a decade in Australia the primary focus for adult literacy and numeracy policy and programs has been promotion of human capital (Castleton & McDonald 2002). Specifically, from the time of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Department of Employment, Education & Training 1991), the overriding aim from the Australian government's perspective has been to develop literacy and numeracy skills for jobs and to improve the economic competitiveness of the nation in a globalised economy. As a result, jobseeker and workplace language, literacy and numeracy programs have received priority government funding. From the mid 1990s in particular, the adult literacy and numeracy field has embraced the mainstream VET agenda in the promotion of human capital skills, a policy which has been reflected in overseas trends led by the OECD (McKenna & Fitzpatrick 2004). In Australia, this policy has seen the development of a National Reporting System (Coates et al. 1996) which is mandatory for federally-funded jobseeker and workplace programs; a competency-based and accredited adult literacy and numeracy curriculum (Hazell 1998, Sanguinetti 2001); and an increasing trend to integrate literacy and numeracy in VET (Courtenay & Mawer 1995; McKenna & Fitzpatrick 2005).

It is this human capital model that currently 'frames' adult literacy and numeracy course provision in VET. Course outcomes are seen largely in terms of units of competency, module or course completion (e.g. TAFE NSW Access Division 2004) and subject to extensive validation and moderation processes (e.g. TAFE NSW Access Division 2003). Or in the case of federally-funded programs, they are seen largely in terms of job outcomes or gains made in one or more of the NRS macro skills (Rahmani & Crozier 2002).

While human capital development has been the driving principle behind adult literacy and numeracy provision in VET, researchers in the field have increasingly focused on 'social' aspects. Gee (2000) refers to this as the 'social turn' whereby literacy is constructed as a social practice. In contrast to the traditional view, which sees literacy as a single set of *decontextualised* skills (i.e. 'basic' skills) that people possess to varying degrees, this more recent perspective asks how literacy and numeracy skills are put to effective use in the contexts of people's everyday lives, and how the dynamics of the interaction between the context of use and literacy and numeracy play out. Thus, literacy, or more accurately literacies in this view, are seen as social practices (for numeracy as social practice, see Baker 1998; Johnston et al. 1997) that are necessarily always 'situated' (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic 2000) in contexts of various kinds. That is, people read and write or calculate for a specific social purpose: primarily to communicate with others in a whole range of life situations or contexts. They may take the form of writing birthday cards or leaving brief written messages in the home domain (i.e. local or vernacular literacies according to Barton & Hamilton 1998), or they may involve the so-called dominant literacies of the schooling system and other formal institutions. Within this perspective social networks are recognised and valued as part of social practices. For example, people in some social networks may be given assistance with literacy related tasks by 'mediators' (e.g. Baynham & Lobanga Masing 2000) or there may be a reciprocal exchange of assistance in different ways between people (e.g. Fingeret 1983).

Recent literature in the field of adult literacy and numeracy indicates that ‘social’ understandings now predominate among literacy researchers (Lonsdale & McCurry 2004, p.36). A central issue for this study is whether the social capital perspective should be added to the human capital perspective, especially in terms of identifying course outcomes, as recent research literature has foreshadowed. For example, Castleton, Sanguinetti and Falk (2001) call for a new national policy on adult literacy taking account not simply of a single economic bottom line, but a ‘triple bottom line’ involving economics, social capital and community development.

Thus social capital is on the agenda but it has not yet become an official part of the practice of adult literacy and numeracy courses nor of the policy context. At this stage adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes are viewed primarily in terms of technical literacy and numeracy skills as we have indicated. Our current study of adult literacy and numeracy courses and social capital outcomes questions the adequacy of existing reporting measures to capture course complexity. A social capital perspective may have the potential to move the debates and pedagogical practices on to provide a more comprehensive picture of literacy and numeracy course outcomes. It is important to stress that by so doing we do not envisage a dilution of human capital skills as outcomes of adult literacy and numeracy courses, but rather, we make explicit (and therefore enhance) an important social capital element. As seen earlier, the available evidence suggests that technical skills (human capital) are necessary but usually insufficient for effective socio-economic course outcomes.

Methodology

Five research questions guided this study:

1. What are the social capital outcomes of participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses?
2. What are the socio-economic impacts (as gauged against OECD bands) for self and/or community of participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses?
3. What is the role of social capital outcomes in producing socio-economic impacts?
4. What are the implications of social capital outcomes for adult literacy and numeracy pedagogy?
5. What are the implications of social capital outcomes for reframing adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes?

The research design that suited the expressed purpose of exploring then building new knowledge and theory (as opposed to testing existing knowledge and theories) is qualitative (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln 2000). Seventy-five participants, 57 students and 18 teachers, were interviewed in the study. Most students were selected from four demographic groups, namely, Indigenous students, mature aged, youth and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. The participants were students and teachers of adult literacy and numeracy courses in Sydney, Townsville and Darwin. The courses in which the students were enrolled were the Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA), the Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) (Statement of Completion), the Certificate in Foundation Adult Vocational Education (FAVE) and the Certificate One of Vocational Access.

The semi-structured interviews sought information on what students got out of being in adult literacy and numeracy courses (i.e., the outcomes) and on the nature of the teaching/learning experience. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed in full.

The student transcripts provided 196 discrete items of data, some as short as one word and some several sentences long that referred to outcomes. These items were first analysed for social capital outcomes and then analysed for evidence of the course having had an impact on the socio-economic well-being of the student.

The ABS (2004) framework of indicators of social capital (Figure 1) was used to identify social capital outcomes. A social capital outcome is, in this study, a piece of transcript data describing a social activity that clearly includes one or more of the social capital indicators based on the ABS social capital framework.

Figure 1: Application of ABS Social Capital Framework (ABS 2004, p.14)

Groupings	Elements	Indicators for the Study
		Does participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses result in
1. Network qualities (Including Norms & Common Purpose)	Trust & trustworthiness; Sense of efficacy; Acceptance of diversity and inclusiveness;	1a. Changes in trust levels? 1b. Changes in beliefs about personal influence on his/her own life and that of others? 1c. Action to solve problems in one's own life or that of others? 1d. Changed beliefs and interaction with people who are different from the student?
2. Network structure (Including Norms & Common Purpose)	Size; Communication mode; Power relationships	2a. Change in the number and nature of attachments to existing and new networks? 2b. Change in the number or nature of the ways that student keeps in touch with others in their networks? 2c. Change in the nature of memberships?
3. Network transactions (Including Norms & Common Purpose)	Sharing support; Sharing knowledge, information and introductions	3a. Change in the support sought, received or given in the networks to which the student is attached? 3b. Change in the ways the student shares information and skills, and can negotiate?
4. Network types (Including Norms & Common Purpose)	Bonding Bridging Linking	4a. Changes in the activities undertaken with the main groups with which they interact? 4b. Changes in the activities with groups that are different from the learner? 4c. Changes in the links that the student has to institutions?

To identify any socio-economic impacts in the 196 items of data, the OECD (1982) framework was used. It identifies the eight aspects of socio-economic well-being and Figure 2 shows how each was interpreted for this study. Coding was conducted individually by the three researchers and then repeated collectively to ensure consistency of interpretation.

Figure 2: OECD indicator bands and their meanings as used in this project

OECD Indicator Band	Meaning
Health	Changes in physical, emotional and spiritual of self or that of others as a result of participation in these courses
Education & learning	Change in human capital (e.g. specific literacy skills, enrolling in another course) of

	self or that of others
Employment & quality of working life	Change in employment of self or that of others (e.g. getting a job or a better job, doing current job better, being happier in current job)
Time & leisure	Change in use of time for leisure of self or that of others (e.g. picking up a hobby, joining clubs, changing the nature of what they do in their existing clubs, change in what they do with their spare time such as going to the library)
Command over goods & services	Change in the way students (or others) can access the common (e.g. health services, the law, public knowledge) goods and also commercial goods (buying vegies) available in society
Physical environment	Change in students' own practice (or that of others) in working/living with the physical environment (built and natural)
Social environment	Change in the way that students (or others) interact with individuals or groups (family, friends, clubs, organisations, institutions)
Personal safety	Change in students' own practice (not knowledge) or that of others when it comes to personal safety (e.g. not getting caught up in physical fights anymore)

Aspects of the teaching/learning experience in both student and teacher interviews were also analysed for commonalities that were deemed to relate to the reported outcomes, especially social capital outcomes. Patterns across teaching practices that seemed instrumental in producing social capital outcomes were thus identified.

The most significant limitations of the study concerned its timeframe, its size and the frameworks used for the analysis. Only students who were currently enrolled in a course were interviewed. This meant that any outcomes experienced post completion were not identified. The study was a relatively small study comprising only 75 participants from four different sites. The final limitation was the use of frameworks (ABS and OECD) that were primarily designed for large scale quantitative and survey-style research work, with very little detail provided as to the kinds of social activities at the micro social level that might count for each category or indicator. For this study we had to make sense of the kinds of practical, micro and applied social activity that might realistically and validly be argued to have a warrant for inclusion in these bands of indicator activity.

Findings and discussion

The study found that almost 80% of the students interviewed experienced social capital outcomes from participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses. Of the 196 items, 116 (59%) included evidence of social capital outcomes. Figure 3 lists examples from the student provided items that were categorised as social capital outcomes because of the particular social capital indicator being evident. While more than one social capital indicator may be evident in some of the examples, for the purposes of illustration only one is identified.

Figure 3: Examples of social capital indicators

Indicators	Examples
1 Network qualities	
1a change in trust levels	A 17-year-old boy now has his mother's trust because she knows he spends his days at TAFE unlike previously when he was truanting from school.
1b change in beliefs about personal influence on his/own life and that of others	A 45-year-old man originally from Iran now feels confident to participate in formal discussions and informal conversations in any context he finds himself including answering the phone at work.
1c change in action to solve problems in one's life or that of others	A 50-year-old woman originally from China can now make phone calls to institutions such as banks and the local council to lodge complaints or make enquiries.

1d change in beliefs and interaction with people who are different from the student	A 39-year-old man now allows other people to express their points of view even when they are different from his own.
2 Network structures	
2a change in the number or nature of attachments to existing and new networks	A 47-year-old Indigenous man has made new friends with people in the course and with whom he socialises out of class time.
2b change in the number or nature of the ways that the student keeps in touch with others in his/her networks	A 58-year-old woman originally from Hong Kong now has computer skills and enough English to use email to communicate with friends.
2c change in the nature of memberships in networks e.g. power differential	A 15-year-old boy is now prepared to help out at home in a reciprocal relationship with his parents whereas in the past, he resisted being told what to do and was hardly at home.
3 Network transactions	
3a change in the support sought, received or given in the networks to which the learner is attached	A 50-year-old Indigenous man no longer relies on others to read his mail for him.
3b change in the ways the learner negotiates and shares information and skills	After six months in the course, the English of a 24-year-old Indigenous man who recently moved from an Indigenous community to the city has improved sufficiently for him to better deal with Centrelink.
4 Network types	
4a change in the activities undertaken with the main groups with which student interacts (bonding ties)	A 54-year-old woman originally from Columbia is now able to be more effective at work because she can communicate and work in teams better.
4b change in the activities undertaken with groups that are different from the student (bridging ties)	A 50-year-old woman originally from China and who has been attending classes for two and a half years recently went on a cruise knowing that fellow passengers would not be Chinese. She would have refused to do so earlier.
4c change in the links that the learner has to institutions (linking ties)	An 18-year-old Indigenous man can now complete the forms necessary to deal with institutions.

Social outcomes resulted mainly from changes in network structures and in network transactions. This study revealed differences in the kinds of social capital outcomes experienced by different student groups. Changes in network qualities, for example, were more significant for the youth category than for any other student group while changes in network types were less significant for this group than for any other. In contrast to other student groups, the Indigenous students in this study derived social capital outcomes principally from changes in network transactions while changes in network structures were relatively less important. This is in contrast to the non-English speaking background (NESB), youth and mature aged students whose source of social capital outcomes are related primarily to changes in network structures.

As well as showing that participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses produces social capital outcomes, the study showed that these outcomes contribute to the socio-economic well-being of students. The data showed that participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses can produce socio-economic impacts across all eight categories of socio-economic well-being. Figure 4 shows examples from the student data of how course participation influenced the student's everyday life. In more than 50% of student examples in which at least one of the eight areas had been influenced by course participation, there were social capital outcomes evident as well.

Figure 4: Examples illustrating OECD impacts

Area of socio-economic well-being	Student reported examples
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1 Health	A 49-year-old woman from Hong Kong who is socially isolated now attends the gym regularly with a friend she made in the adult literacy and numeracy course.
2 Education and learning	A 33-year-old man is now able to read more of the newspaper and he can use the computer to write.
3 Employment and quality of working life	An 18-year-old waitress is now able to apportion costs when two customers want to split the bill. Previously she had to ask the customers to do the calculation.
4 Time and leisure	A 15-year-old girl now mixes with a new group of people and does not engage in trouble causing behaviour in her spare time. Previously she and her then friends would "just get up to trouble".
5 Command over goods and services	A 41-year-old Cantonese woman successfully installed the Internet on her computer by following the telephone directions from the provider. Her poor English a year earlier had made that attempt unsuccessful.
6 Physical environment	A 60-year-old Indigenous woman commenced literacy classes three years ago and since then, she has also completed a horticulture course in which she learnt to graft and pot plants.
7 Social environment	A 17-year-old boy's relationship with his parents has improved significantly as a direct result of participating in the course. He no longer fights with them and they think he has matured.
8 Personal safety	An 18-year-old Indigenous man tells of how the younger learners accept him as a mediator when there are anger fuelled issues to resolve.

While the study was not able to comprehensively identify the various roles—and they are various—that social capital outcomes have in producing socio-economic impacts, the following list is a start:

- Social capital outcomes unaccompanied by any improvements in literacy and/or numeracy skills can lead to positive socio-economic impacts for some students;
- More commonly, social capital outcomes together with improvements in literacy/numeracy skills and increased self confidence and self esteem result in socio-economic impacts for students;
- The relationship between social capital outcomes and human capital outcomes is complex. For some students, the first appears to be a prerequisite for the second; for others it is vice versa.
- Social capital outcomes can be experienced within the context of the course or they can be experienced in contexts external to the course. For example, a socially isolated student developed a network of friends amongst the members of her class (internal) while another student became more active in existing networks outside of the course because of her improved literacy skills.

The social capital outcomes experienced by students in their adult literacy and numeracy courses do not appear to occur by accident. One key aspect of the learning experience that seemed to contribute significantly to producing these outcomes was the new networks to which students gained membership by participating in the course. Students met other students and staff members and the interaction that occurred in these networks produced the resources i.e., knowledges, skills, attitudes and beliefs that lead to social capital outcomes and/or human capital outcomes such as literacy and numeracy skills and the more elusive intrapersonal skills and attributes to do with confidence and self esteem.

Within these networks the relationship between students and teachers in particular is considered crucial in producing social capital outcomes. Also very significant were the norms and pedagogical practices operating in the course that ensured a safe and potentially productive practice-ground in which students could redefine themselves and

their relationships with others. At the same time, the course design encouraged bridges between the course experience and students' lives in the 'real world' by welcoming knowledge exchange and network building.

Conclusions and implications

This study found that students do experience social capital outcomes from participating in adult literacy and numeracy courses. If we concur that the value of adult literacy and numeracy courses can be measured in terms of their socio-economic impacts, then this study further suggests that these social capital outcomes cannot be ignored. Social capital outcomes as well as human capital outcomes can – and in this study, do – have an impact on the socio-economic well-being of students.

The findings suggest the need for a reframing of adult literacy and numeracy pedagogy to make the role of social capital building in teacher practice more explicit. While keeping the core pedagogical practice of having the student at the centre, the reframing might consider having the student at the centre of networks. In constructing the student as a member of networks it throws a different light on how social capital outcomes and arguably other outcomes, including literacy and numeracy skills and intrapersonal skills and attributes such as self confidence may be produced.

In addition, the findings suggest that the reporting of outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses may need review. Students valued highly the social outcomes they experienced from participating in their courses, yet these are not officially recognised by institutions. Current official reporting measures such as module completions or the National Reporting System (NRS) do not specifically account for social capital outcomes. Recognising the importance of social capital outcomes and reporting them would result in a more accurate picture of the contribution that adult literacy and numeracy courses make to individuals and communities.

The findings of this project suggest that further research is required in the role of social capital in adult literacy and numeracy courses and more generally, in adult education and training. More investigation is required into social capital outcomes involving larger samples of courses and to include students who have completed adult literacy and numeracy courses. In the past 20 years of Australian research in adult literacy and numeracy, there has been only one major longitudinal study that tracks students to determine longer term course outcomes (Griffin & Pollock 1997). In other fields such as health this absence of evidence base would be untenable. It is especially important in adult literacy and numeracy in light of the kinds of multiple benefits that might result from explicit pedagogical attention to social capital and socio-economic outcomes.

This study showed the importance of student teacher relationships in producing social capital outcomes. There would be value in comparative studies that examine the relative extent to which face-to-face pedagogy and various forms of on-line or flexible delivery produce social capital outcomes and socio-economic benefits for students. More work also needs to be done on why different student groups experience different social capital outcomes.

Further work is required to develop a social capital indicator framework that would have general acceptance in education and training. Research would benefit from a social

capital indicator framework that is suitable for identifying the social capital capacity of education and training courses generally. The field would also benefit from frameworks designed for qualitative research and for quantitative research.

The social capital perspective is part of the 'social turn' referred to earlier, and it presents a challenge to the dominant human capital discourse while being complementary to it. While this study has presented a case for the 'reframing' of adult literacy and course outcomes, the study has implications that go beyond this. A social capital perspective potentially involves a 'reframing' of the whole field of adult literacy and numeracy including pedagogy and more fundamentally, even how adult literacy and numeracy could be defined.

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