



Learning social literacy

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Reading the society that we are part of is not generally seen as a skill. We separate out many of the activities of daily life and do not see these as on a par with formal or accredited learning. Years ago I was running a workshop in Adelaide and tried to get the group to unbundle the concept of communication skills. 'What were its components?' I asked so someone put their hand up and said 'Listening'. I wrote it on the whiteboard and asked 'do we have to learn to listen?' 'Yes we had a workshop last week,' he replied. 'Could you listen before?' I asked and he looked indignant and said 'No'. Ah, the magic of formal training!

I use this anecdote sometimes to illustrate the way we compartmentalise those skills we see as academic or trade-based, that is, those we are taught formally, versus those we absorb from life, our family and other informal processes. We neither examine nor train for levels of social competence, such as making and retaining relationships, developing networks for use and pleasure, or a capacity to read social mores so as to feel integrated into one's social milieu.

Some of this may be defined as cultural capital, Bourdieu style, which is the know-how we have that allows us to operate effectively. This is at the individual level, but obviously affects the ways in which groupings of people operate in workplaces, communities and so on. I tell my research methods students that formal research is an extension of what we do on a daily basis. We collate impressions, evidence, feelings and experiences that inform us of what to expect of the day, the week, the meeting, the trip, the workplace or whatever social process we undertake or avoid. However, unlike my students, there is little formal or even organised informal or experiential learning for those whose social literacy may be a major barrier to developing their capacities.

So maybe we need to consider how people develop social literacy. Do they have the social skills to enable them to work out how to do what they want to do? Can they read situations in ways that allow them to solve problems? Can

they make sensible decisions, interpret their options and retain and develop friendships or relationships that work? These are serious questions and ones we tend not to address within formal educational systems. Some assume we are born with social attributes, others expect family and society to raise children with these skills and if you miss out, tough.

On a wider scale, we learn from those we associate with, as social beings, we draw from others' views of us, learn from the groups we are part of or excluded from. We learn collectively to join with others, or to keep to ourselves, and draw from the resources of those who are prepared to give. We learn whether we have something to give, and whether others can respect us, or disparage what we try to do. It is the quality of these wider relationships that develops or diminishes social capital.

Such skills tend to be badly distributed, so those with low human and financial capital may also lack cultural and social capital. Using generalised trust as the best current indicator of social capital, we find that inequality seems to negatively affect trust. Unfairness, lack of confidence in the legal system, expectations that governments will not reduce inequalities, civil unrest and poor tolerance of diversity show up as factors that reduce generalised trust. It seems obvious that many of the social problems that have been identified in 'progressive politics' can be shown to be the result of unequal distribution of wealth but also the ways people interpret this. So neo-Marxists can stop assuming that social capital is an apologia for less intervention by government, just because some people misuse the concept.

Marx's view of the potential for revolution has not worked because in most cases change comes not from the most oppressed, but from those who feel that change is possible and desirable. The 'solidarity' that is seen as a necessary, if not sufficient, prerequisite for change comes from the ability to build trust in a movement. Many of the populist revolts come from loss of trust in anyone who is 'not like us'. So maybe we need

to look at whether we need to spread social literacy, that is, the capacity to read the state of one's own part of the world and work out how we can collectively change what worries us.

One way of understanding social capital is to think of it as part of the stories people tell about their communities. If you listen to people describing their street/suburb, their workplace, local organisation or networks of friends and acquaintances, you can hear their perceptions of trust and relationships, which permeate their stories. One story might be of the pleasures of goals achieved, the sense of work well done, and the pleasures of friendship and cooperation. Another story is of fractions and factions, victories scored against the 'enemy', other people's failings, and unresolved problems. Still another story tells of constant senses of exclusion, impotence, invisibility, unfairness, anxiety and misery.

The term social capital is valuable for exploring human society. Possibly, it describes the way group processes can work to benefit the society as a whole. It can also identify the effects of distrust and bad relationships in groupings, which may limit the life chances and quality of life of the people involved.

Understanding what is needed to make the changes we want, or just to maintain some of what we value, requires a learned set of skills. For too many communities, the learning has tended to be negative as they react to powerlessness with distrust of political process. While recognising that learning to trust others contingently will not make a revolution, it may foster forms of collective action. We cannot move on if we expect everyone else to be untrustworthy. However, if we want to ensure that we can achieve progressive change, we need to work for popular support, and diminish the need to deal populist solutions, or the cynicism of those who don't trust in democratic process.

We know there are communities with low social capital, with little capacity to learn and move on. We know there are subgroups in some areas who are excluded from the local networks, we know there are some groups whose networking is driven by a desire to advantage themselves at the expense of others. My question is whether adult learning can explicitly offer people experiential learning that can build social skills so people become more able to assess who is trustworthy, and recognise opportunities for change.