



An adult educator in the grains industry

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Just six months after the colony's establishment, Governor Philip wrote: "...very little of the English wheat had vegetated and a very considerable quantity of the barley and many seeds had rotted in the ground... All the barley and wheat likewise which had been put on board the 'Supply' at the Cape were destroyed by the weevil". A pitiful crop of about a bushel was produced from the first plot at Farm Cove. The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics has just released its winter crop estimate of 34.4 million tonnes of grain. The Australian grains industry accounts for 25 per cent of the value of farm production, and around 34 000 farmers make a significant part of their income from grain production. While grain growers still have to battle the poor soils, insect attacks, and adverse climate that made life hard for the settlers, there has clearly been some learning!

Farmers have achieved annual productivity growth of around 3 per cent a year for the past two decades, despite seriously lacking 'educational attainment'. They lack formal qualifications, and are in general averse or indifferent to the institutions and practices of formal education and training. Farmers adapt to enormous complexity and uncertainty to make a living. Like other small business people, they have to constantly learn by doing. Their learning projects are highly pragmatic, and are most likely to involve trusted colleagues or peers in 'real life' settings that fit the rhythm of the farm day and the cropping seasons.

'How farmers learn' needs no further study in my view. What does bear further examination is why education and training providers find it so hard to become genuinely 'learner focused', in the case of farmers in particular. Among farmers faced with a growing array of commercial providers – company representatives, farm consultants, electronic information suppliers, and so forth – a common complaint is the difficulty of choosing from such a bewildering array of options.

To overcome this problem I strongly advocate development of the role of *learning brokers*. A good broker helps create, and then maintains a strong position in two networks – of supply and of demand. The Grains Industry Training Network based in Horsham, Victoria, has some of these characteristics for grain growers in that region.

There is both satisfaction and revenue to be gained from helping members of farm management teams identify the right learning choice for their business development needs. Good adult educators have sound brokering instincts, and could make this a valuable service.

The yield and productivity of the grains industry have increased dramatically over two centuries, mainly as a result of technological innovations. While there will always be more to learn about plant breeding, crop growing and harvesting, the key drivers of future productivity improvement will be consumers, and those who process grains into food and beverages for them.

The Dutch are world leaders in this emerging discipline of *supply chain management*. Their government invests around \$5 million a year in the Netherlands Agri Chain Competence Foundation – funding that is matched by industry and the research community. Australian farming history, of bulk commodity exports and marketing monopolies, is completely different to the Netherlands, and we are relative beginners in the global supply chain management business. 'Supply chain thinking' requires a perspective transformation for much of Australian agribusiness, before the hard grind of building globally competitive supply chains can get underway. This represents a major, industry-scale learning challenge.

My experience in the grains industry has affirmed an important general observation about learning and education. Constant multi-dimensional change has made learning a core survival activity – for people, communities, organisations, and industries. Learning – conceived as the way people solve problems, and close the gap between where they are and where they want to be – is all pervasive. Educational institutions have been slow to understand and respond to this socio-cultural shift, as though they have a trained incapacity when it comes to catalysing learning, and helping people learn for themselves. In general they are still too introverted, too rule-bound, and too smug about what can be classed as worthwhile knowledge. Whatever the merit of this judgement, it is incontestable that a raft of new players is moving into the learning business – including in the grains industry.