



Learning communities

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Adult Learning Commentary, Number 14, 14 June 2000

One of the crucial questions in education policy is: how can we extend the reach of learning beyond the classroom and into every life, in every part of society? The answer lies in learning communities.

Learning is a complex process that cannot be understood simply in terms of formal education and training. Most people go about their daily lives committed to self-improvement and informal ways of learning. They develop new insights and skills from practical experiences and the challenge of changed circumstances.

Indeed, one of society's trends is towards informal modes of learning. Under the time pressures of modern work and home life, people are looking for more flexible and casual ways of improving their skills. They want education to fit into their lifestyle and schedule, not the other way round. This reflects the new politics of personal sovereignty. A growing number of self-reliant citizens are looking beyond the formal institutions of government to satisfy their interests.

This trend can be seen in the findings of ANTA's lifelong learning project, based on a nation-wide survey of attitudes to adult education. It has identified an enormous gap between public preferences and public policy. While governments talk up the importance of qualifications and the formal institutions of education, the public is reluctant to go down this path. In the words of the project:

“People have told us how much they like on-the-job and informal learning experiences, learning from mentors and learning through practical experience, but they feel they've had enough of classrooms and exams to last a lifetime. The problem comes when you try and translate their passion for learning into a similar enthusiasm for the products and experiences of formal education and training”.¹

Time has become the chief enemy of lifelong learning. For most Australians, educational opportunities fade away as they move further into the adult years. Learning loses out to the demands of work, family and social life. Education starts to

look less relevant and more threatening. This is a structural problem for the effectiveness of the education system. It is not meeting the public's demand for flexibility and easy access.

Australians are in search of educational opportunities of a more casual kind. They want the potential for education and self-improvement to be realised in everyday situations: in the home, in the workplace, in pubs and clubs, in the places where people gather for a common purpose. They want civil society to be the natural habitat for lifelong learning. This reflects a key part of the virtuous circle: the close connection between human capital and social capital.

Self-improvement comes not just from mastering new concepts and information; it arises from the social experience of education. Adult learning centres, public libraries and Third Age universities are places where people can learn and practice the habits of social capital. They can learn from each other, as well as from the curriculum.

Governments should seek to foster lifelong learning by activating the potential of learning partnerships in civil society. Fortunately, policy makers do not need to reinvent the wheel. Civil society is based on networking principles. It functions as a diffuse web of inter-connected associations and informal relationships.

Governments need to support these relationships through partnership funding. The aim should be to establish a dense network of learning opportunities throughout civil society. To give one example of this policy in practice: governments should offer funding to licensed clubs for the on-site provision of short courses and other forms of flexible learning. The clubs would need to provide matching funds, with further contributions drawn from participating students. This approach reflects a genuine partnership, with shared interests and funding among the stakeholders.

The public sector needs to be more pro-active in collaborative learning. There is a high level of interest and enthusiasm for this approach among community groups. This is one of the characteristics of a learning society: it changes the traditional role of organisations, introducing them

to the benefits of education. The NSW Clubs Association, for instance, recently recognised the potential use of club facilities for lifelong learning. It hopes to establish a number of internet cafes and learning programs for people in active retirement. Government support would realise this potential throughout the clubs system.

Such a policy has the potential to create opportunities in non-traditional places of learning, such as shopping centres, sporting clubs and other community associations. Each of the learning partners would benefit. Host organisations would be able to offer new and attractive services for their members and customers. For the general public, many of the institutional barriers to lifelong learning would be broken down.

People have a stronger motivation to learn in places where they feel at ease. In such environments, they can turn positive attitudes to learning into practical results. In many cases, it helps them to build the confidence to pursue further studies in vocational and higher education.

Partnership funding aims to turn everyday situations into everyday opportunities for learning. However, a number of related reforms are also necessary. I have space enough to outline just two:

1. Many learning opportunities can be delivered online through interactive education packages. The Federal Government has a role to play in sponsoring the development of sophisticated software, plus a network of electronic learning facilities. The resources of municipal libraries, post offices, schools and other public buildings should be used to create a national grid of computer and Internet access points. The growth of digital television also needs to be fostered as a way of carrying these learning opportunities into Australian homes.²
2. The Federal Government should draw on the Scandinavian experience to commission the adult education sector to establish a national program of Learning Circles.³ These involve meetings of small groups of people, often in homes and community centres, to discuss a range of civic issues such as local governance, crime prevention and environmental management. They are self-managed groups, where people can join and participate on their own terms and at their own level. They reflect a distinctive style of learning: through shared inquiry and dialogue, without regular teachers or fixed subjects.

Such programs should be a prominent part of lifelong learning in Australia. As a nation, our commitment to civic education has been weak. A number of public issues – such as Aboriginal reconciliation, multiculturalism and the Republic – will not be resolved without a more intense level of public dialogue and information sharing.

Governments must increase their emphasis on the development of learning communities, rather than simply focusing on individuals and formal qualifications. This means using civil society as the primary agent of reform, embedding the habits of learning in the everyday habits of life. This is not just a matter of good policy; it makes for good politics.

The ANTA research helps to unravel one of the great paradoxes of Australian electoral behaviour. Even though education is a major issue for most Australians, no political party has been able to turn it into a major vote-switcher. In an act of folly, state educationalists have promoted the wrong kind of learning institutions. They have backed formal structures and qualifications, even though the public has a preference for flexibility and informality. It is only a matter of time before the major parties and their pollsters twig to this reality. Ultimately, the education revolution will not only transform the nature of learning policies; it will change the nature of Australian politics.

1 Martin Stewart-Weeks and Mary Dickie, 'National Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning', ANTA Paper, Training Update Seminar, November 1999, page 5.

2 The Howard Government has proposed restrictive guidelines for the development of digital TV and datacasting services. See Mark Latham, 'Leading the country down a drain hole', *Australian Financial Review*, 10 January 2000, p. 19.

3 Alastair Crombie, *The ABC to Learning Circles*, Australian Association of Adult and Community Education, Canberra, 1998.