



Community in education; education in community

by Kate Lawrence

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What do we mean when we speak of community education and community-based education? Are community and public education in opposition? Rick Flowers' commentary suggested that a discourse of community education is feeding into anti-public sector sentiment, and that advocates of a deregulated adult education market use it to undermine TAFE.

To some extent I agree. The discourse of community is used within public policy (and not simply in the arena of adult and vocational education) as a justification for reducing direct state provision, and for contracting out of public goods and services. Dr Kemp, Minister for the commodification of education, speaks of regional communities as clients disadvantaged by their former reliance on TAFE and empowered through the choice, diversity and flexibility of the competitive training market.

As adult and community educators we are involved with the way in which people learn together, and learn about themselves in relation to their social, economic and political contexts. And to varying degrees, we are all part of the way in which community is constructed through public policy systems such as ACE and VET, and policy discourses such as lifelong learning and social capital. Within market management of vocational education, policy texts increasingly identify and construct community in economic terms, as client (local or niche market), as resource (providing information and facilitating provider access to clients), and as enterprise (eg as ACE providers).

However community advocacy and community based provision is more complex than the problematic dichotomy of 'community' versus 'public' education. Communities are more than interest groups, concerned with their economic and positional advantage. Community identity and interests are constructed and represented differently according to individual, local, organisational, institutional or governmental perspectives. Community is a dynamic process, with social relationships and forms of organisation continually being constructed (and re- and de-constructed).

Community need not be oppositional to equity, inclusivity nor public provision; indeed, community-based approaches are integral to the achievement of equitable and inclusive provision, and to the effectiveness of public provision. My interest is in the possibilities and problems for local and regional communities in negotiating to get their vocational

education needs met, and in how community is constructed and represented in relation to VET policy.

I note with some alarm an underlying chord of disappointment in TAFE among regional communities I have worked with, a perception that TAFE regional institutes are increasingly governed by economic imperatives and that the adult learning needs within small towns and areas outside the major regional centres are neglected or marginalised. This disappointment has two strands. One is the perception that accredited VET programs (to which public funding applies) are not necessarily relevant to learners' needs but are all that is available through TAFE. The other is that as TAFE colleges have been rationalised and merged into giant institutes across several regions their planning and decision-making processes are increasingly remote from local communities.

Flowers questions whether, and to what extent, community-based education providers can fill the gaps left by the reduction in public provision of education. In 'thin markets' (lacking sufficient learner/client numbers and education infrastructure to enable providers to establish themselves) outside major regional centres, the answer seems to depend not upon the type of provider but on the presence of local or locally accessible mediators between community, provider and regulatory and funding contexts. Where local or regional networks, organisations (or determined individuals) are able to effectively identify community learning needs, negotiate with providers, promote the courses and thus gather a critical mass of participants, providers can profitably offer adult and vocational education courses. In some regions TAFE still funds local part-time staff to fulfil this function. In many others it depends upon the voluntary effort and passion of 'locals'.

It is unproductive to interpret an increase in community-based engagement (as mediator or provider) as an attack on TAFE, or on the value of the public sector, when in my observation a major impetus for this has been the commercialisation of TAFE and the consequent neglect of the mediation role of public provider. Increased community mediation of adult and vocational education is in many ways a positive development, enabling increased relevance of provision to community contexts, and providing an emerging site for policy activism. If such community engagement is to be sustainable, community mediation needs to be recognised and supported as part of the public good of vocational education provision.