



Can we prove that ACE transforms communities?

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We will soon have a clearer idea where ACE research is going, with NCVET about to publish a consolidation study of work done over the last 10 years. This comprehensive and imaginative review will set new directions for the field.

The study has given me pause for thought about the strengths and weaknesses of Australian research. In particular, I worry about the lack of real social analysis of ACE in its community context. Leaving aside the larger question of 'adult learning' as a social and economic force, the really difficult question for research is still: how do ACE organisations contribute to communities?

The sector continually asserts its contribution to the community. In its most sophisticated expression, we have 'Transforming lives, transforming communities' in Victoria. Now we also have 'Building communities', the report of the Victorian ACE Portraits research.

My point is that we have difficulty documenting the contribution of ACE to the community.

Without re-igniting the debate about 'community' and social capital, there are many difficulties in conceptualising the 'community context' of ACE. There is a good degree of resistance to rigorous work in this area, due in part to the strength of the 'individual learning story' as a genre in ACE. As Alan Tuckett once said, "there is nothing quite like warm and compelling stories when it comes to persuading politicians".

Yet regional development is back on the agenda, and the 'community contribution' of ACE is easier to sell. But do we claim too much in claiming that ACE has the power to 'transform communities'? How much of this is sustaining sector mythology and how much demonstrable reality based on rigorous analysis (a phrase from the *Cinderella* report).

One difficulty is that ACE providers do not work in isolation, they operate in an ecology of provision – they are part of local networks, they have links to other organisations (as the Tasmanian social capital work suggests). The supposed 'transformative' effects of ACE are not just produced by ACE. Then there is the difficulty of proving transformation in social and economic terms in ways that do not fall back on individualistic stories. The question is one of the clients of ACE – what groups use ACE, under what conditions, and for what social and economic purposes? The sector has its stock answers to this question, but we are short on good in-depth case studies.

A greater difficulty for the transformation thesis is the fact that ACE is as much shaped by its social context as it shapes that context. So how do local factors condition what an ACE organisation does and affect the clientele it serves and with what outcomes and benefits? This is not answerable in terms of individual results. It is much more about giving attention to organisations in context, and a historical perspective that examines questions of how ACE came to be in a given place.

The question of the contribution of ACE to the community, particularly the strong claim that it 'transforms' not only lives but also communities, remains to be tested. At some stage there must be a more rigorous analysis of the complex ecology in which ACE operates at a local level. It is not enough to continue to proffer the 'warm and compelling stories' as evidence of ACE's capacity for social transformation. ACE is itself a 'transformed' creature, a policy creature and a product of historical development that needs to be better understood. The challenge of a real social analysis of ACE remains.