# AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF

# ADULT LEARNING

**Adult Learning
Australia Inc**

# AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING

# AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF ADULT LEARNING

Volume 51, Number 2, July 2011

*Contents*

## Practice articles

## Book reviews
*Peter Willis*

# FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Our July issue in its refereed articles reflects on the roles and nature of community learning in four articles and on different aspects of corporate/business learning in another two articles. The two practice papers also focus on these two areas in their different ways.

In asking readers what a take-a-way shop, café, lawn mowing service and a winery all have in common, **Donna Rooney** asks what are neighbour centres, and strives to develop a preliminary scoping of the learning that occurs within them. The researcher used three data collection methods: analysis of over 200 public documents; semi-structured interviews with 24 representatives across each Australian State and Territory; and unstructured observations and informal conversations during visits to 15 centres from across the country. She argues that they differ in several ways from other organisations which have adult education as the primary purpose. The centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, though retaining particular values, as well as the broad range of learning possibilities available in these centres, marks them apart. She concludes that they forge significant and valuable contributions to individuals and

communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation. However, the significance of the learning in these centres may not be captured by the mechanisms that report on adult community education in this country.

**Rowena MacKean** and **Joan Abbott-Chapman**, too, pick up on the valuable contribution being made by educational engagement and informal learning to the health and well-being of people in the 'Third Age', those aged 65 and over. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 members of seven community-based organisations in Tasmania, they investigate the benefits older people felt they derived from participation in leisure activities within these community-based organisations, of which learning is an important component. They conclude that the community groups, especially those run by older people for their peers, are an effective means of delivering new opportunities for informal learning. The study found that learning taking place is appropriate to the phase in life which is characterised by loss of paid employment and of relationships, and that this learning plays an important role in helping older people stay positive, and maintain independence and social engagement.

Informal and social learning of a different nature is explored by **Tracey Ollis**, who focuses on the learning of activists as they acquire skills and knowledge through participation in social action. She draws on Lave and Wenger's epistemology of situated learning and Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus', highlighting that activists' learning is cognitive, embodied and situated in practice. Her paper is based on in-depth interviews with 17 activists. She distinguishes between 'lifelong activists', who have generally been involved in student politics and have participated in activism over many years, and 'circumstantial activists', who become involved in protest due to a series of life circumstances. The author claims that both groups' learning is social and informal. However, while lifelong activists tend to develop their skills incrementally through involvement in

student politics, circumstantial activists, not having experienced early immersion, are rapid learners, taken out of their comfort zone and needing to acquire new knowledge and skills urgently in order to practise effectively. The paper contends there is much to be gained from understanding learning in social action, an epistemology of adult learning which deserves greater prominence in current adult education discourse.

How a local newspaper has an educative function in a small community in advising people of specific issues and learning how to deal with changing resources is the subject of the article by **Coral Campbell**, **Erica Smith** and **Emma Siesmaa**. This research was a component of a larger project which examined the nature of 'learning to be drier' in four case study areas within Australia's Murray-Darling basin (published in this journal in November 2009). Over several months in 2009, the *Buloke Times*, a local newspaper in the Wimmera-Mallee region of Victoria, was scanned for articles relating to the issue of water scarcity. In the 24 editions of the paper, 68 articles of various themes were found. Through detailed analysis of these themes, the researchers developed an overview of the role of the newspaper and its capacity to influence and educate its readership. Regarding the significance of their research, the authors argue that their structured approach could be useful to other local newspapers in enabling them to reflect on their educative role, and to community groups and other organisations who seek to educate members of their communities more effectively on issues of concern.

Shifting from community to corporate learning, **Elspeth McKay** and **Cenie Vilela** investigate government online training practices. They searched individual research domains of the human-dimensions of Human Computer Interaction (HCI), information and communications technologies (ICT) and instructional design for evidence of either corporate sector or government training practices.

They found that corporate sector and government employees encounter barriers to their adoption of web-mediated training. One barrier is a lack of enthusiasm, possibly due to ineffective instructional design, which in turn affects motivation towards online learning. A negative attitude towards online training persists in the community, particularly throughout the government sector, even though the Australian Government offers training incentives to the general community. Adoption of effective ICT training tools is a critical issue for the corporate sector and government agencies worldwide. The authors argue for courseware designers to develop sound instructional design principles to enhance web-mediated learning programs.

Graduates need to be prepared for working in global organisations that increasingly rely on virtual, culturally diverse teams. **Joanna Crossman** and **Sarbari Bordia** in their qualitative study investigated the perceptions of university business students who collaborated on a virtual and international project to learn about intercultural communication. A total of 27 students in Australia participated in the project, with data collected from questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaires were administered at three points, the beginning, middle and end of the online, collaborative project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the project in order to provide participants with further opportunity to articulate their thoughts on the project. The authors found that participants capitalised on the opportunity the project presented to find friends and to negotiate and deepen relationships. The paper concludes that the subjectivities of social interaction are powerfully embedded in the learning process and may play a part in engagement. The project was also perceived as a valuable way of preparing students for workplaces where developing intercultural communication skills and online, culturally diverse team relationships are required.

In the first of the two practice papers, **Megan Le Clus** examines the literature on informal learning in the workplace. She makes some critical observations about the importance of informal learning, and explains the various ways that it can occur in that context. While the workplace can provide a rich environment for learning, she states that there is no clear or consistent definition of workplace learning and definitions can be broad and include other types of work-related learning. The nature of informal learning suggests that the social and cultural environment in which learning takes place has the potential to influence how learning occurs. The author concludes that studies have highlighted the importance of the social context in which informal learning occurs, and that this is important because, if informal learning emerges during everyday activities in the workplace, there is the potential for this type of learning to occur more often than formal learning. In the second paper, **Craig Hammond** describes a fathering program that has been operating for a number of years for Aboriginal men in the corrective system. The discussion groups focus on how the men see their role as fathers whilst in jail, and examine ways of changing and developing new skills for them on release. The key theme is that these discussions involve learning from each other, where Aboriginal men sit and listen to each other about stories of being a father with the group and in an environment where no-one is judged for their behaviour, their answers or how they talk. 'Brothers Inside' helps the men to know where they sit within the family and the community.

## 51ˢᵗ Annual Adult Learning Australia Conference

Remember that the 51st Annual Adult Learning Australia Conference, *Celebrating Adult Learning Spaces,* is being hosted by the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne, on Monday 26 and Tuesday 27 September. Guest speakers will include:

- Dr Peter Lavender—the Deputy Chief Executive at NIACE, the UK-based National Institute for Adult Continuing Education
- Kathryn Gilbey—a proud descendant of the Alyawarre people from north east of Alice Springs along the Sandover to Mt. Isa, and a lecturer at Batchelor Institute
- Tony Dreise—an independent Indigenous Learning Consultant based on the North Coast of NSW, and a PhD Scholar at the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research
- Dr Jo Lake—the current CEO of New Zealand's ACE Aotearoa, with over 20 years advisory and management experience.

The Women's Education Panel, entitled 'If we're doing so well in education …' will be lead by Dr Elaine Butler (Convenor of Women in Adult and Vocational Education), and will bring together some of Australia's pre-eminent feminist educators to explore the disconnect between women's participation in education and training and their status in the labour market.

There are also many workshops.

You can find more information on: https://ala.asn.au/conference/

**Roger Harris**
**Editor**

# Centres 'Down Under': Mapping Australia's neighbourhood centres and learning

Donna Rooney
University of Technology, Sydney

*The overarching aim of this paper is to 'talk up' learning in the Australian neighbourhood centre sector, realising this aim is premised on a need to understand neighbourhood centres themselves. Hence, the paper tentatively offers a mapping of the sector by first asking: 'What is a neighbourhood centre?'. Next, the paper provides an introductory scoping of learning in centres in an effort to invite further consideration. Two important conclusions are made. The first is that centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, while retaining some very particular values, marks them in ways that differ from organisations for which adult education is the primary purpose. The second is that the range of learning possibilities in centres is far-reaching, and makes significant and valuable contributions to individuals and communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation.*

## Introduction

What do a take-a-way shop, café, lawn mowing service and a winery all have in common? There are several answers to this, but one is that they all are part of the work of Australian neighbourhood centres[1]. A second is that they all involve adults learning, and a possible third is that this learning may not be captured by the mechanisms that report on adult community education in Australia.

While there is a general agreement that learning occurs beyond educational institutions, traditionally those interested in measuring, accounting for and reporting on adult learning in Australia have looked towards recognised educational institutions when compiling their accounts. While this has been an appropriate starting point that has facilitated the production of many important national accounts of learning, it has failed to account for learning provided in other settings. The starting point here is a collective of organisations across Australia that is not necessarily considered to be part of Australia's educational framework (Rooney 2004, Rule 2005). Unlike schools, colleges or universities that are easily identified by educational researchers as being educational, the organisations central to this paper are not always visible, let alone obvious to those interested in learning. The organisations central to this paper are neighbourhood centres. There are over 1,000 of these located across Australia. While a more detailed description is forthcoming, a helpful first definition is that a neighbourhood centre is a small, community-owned and managed, non-profit organisation that typically subscribes to the ideas of community development.

Community development is a contested term, but generally refers to a 'bottom-up practice' (Ife 2009: 9). What this means is that people and communities are involved in defining and taking action on the issues that affect them (Tett 2005: 126). It is a 'political activity' (Kenny 2010: 2) that values the wisdom and skills of local people, sustainability, diversity and inclusiveness, and the importance of

process (Ife 2009: 9–28). It aims to challenge discrimination and inequality and works toward a socially just society (Tett 2005: 126). Community development workers use 'tools' like advocacy, referral, information sharing, and emotional and material support as part of their community development work. Of importance to this paper, education is also a tool for community development (McArdle 1999, Tett 2005 & 2006).

Despite learning being among the practices within neighbourhood centres, national studies seldom focus on these organisations as being sites of learning (Ducie 1994, Rooney 2004). With the exception of some centres (mostly in Victoria) formally funded to provide adult education, centres by and large are not considered legitimate players in the educational landscape. Along with an estimated 500,000 other non-profit organisations (Productivity Commission 2009: 8) for whom education is not their prime purpose, neighbourhood centres are the focus of research texts typically from disciplinary areas other than education. For example, they can feature in social services literature (e.g. Coleman 1995, Connor 1993, Otto & Onyx 2006, Suhood, Marks, Waterford & Song 2006), in organisational and/or sectoral reports (ANHLC 1997, Bullen & Onyx 1999, Ducie 1994, LCSA 2002 & 2004), or in broader commentary about third sector organisations (Lyons 2001). In general, these texts speak to different audiences and seldom capture the attention of educational researchers or authorities.

A failure to acknowledge the learning potential of centres is a considerable oversight given that a community development focus typically means that those people involved are often highly representative of people under-represented in other educational settings (McIntyre & Kimberley 1996, Rooney 2004 & 2007, Suhood et al. 2006). Learning how to provide more effective educational opportunities for such people is said to be a national priority (Rudd & Smith 2007, MCEETYA 2002). Indeed, research that conceptualises

learning in these types of organisations promises educational institutions new understandings of how learning might be better provided for disadvantaged and marginalised people. Such promise provides the warrant for this research.

This paper represents a first phase of a research project that has an overarching aim of 'talking up' learning in neighbourhood centres into educational discourses, yet realising this aim is premised on an understanding of the sector itself. This understanding can be achieved by the provision of a mapping of the scope and uniqueness of the sector. Therefore, drawing empirical data from documentary sources, interviews and focus groups from across Australia, this paper tentatively presents such a mapping. In other words, the deceptively simple task of this paper is first to address the question of 'what is a neighbourhood centre?'. A secondary aim is to provide an introductory scoping of learning in centres in an effort to invite further consideration. While a more comprehensive conceptualisation of learning is beyond the aim of this paper, the discussion offered here lays the groundwork for such work to begin.

The paper is presented in four sections. It begins by contextualising both the research project and the Australian neighbourhood centre sector. In the second section, it presents a preliminary mapping by addressing the question of what is a neighbourhood centre. With a provisional map established, the paper then adds further detail in the third section where the focus is on learning in centres. In particular, this section draws attention to the broad scope of learning and to the contribution centres are making to the learning landscape in terms of human, social and identity capitals.

Taking the complexities even further, the fourth section problematises earlier attempts to define what a neighbourhood centre is, and concludes that, while centres share many similarities, as a collective of organisations they are far from homogenous. Overall, the paper actually maps and then *un*maps neighbourhood centres. This strategy

is useful so that on the one hand the value of these organisations might be acknowledged, and on the other, the differences are kept in play.

Two important observations are made from this mapping (and *un*mapping) exercise. The first is that centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, while retaining some very particular values, marks them in ways that differ from organisations for which adult education is the primary purpose. The second is that the range of learning possibilities in centres is far-reaching, and makes significant and valuable contributions to individuals and communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation.

## Background

### Research project

The empirical material on which this paper draws comes from fieldwork undertaken over a six-month period in 2009. Three main data collection methods were utilised. First, analysis was undertaken of over 200 public documents where the interest was in how various centres across Australia presented themselves—that is, the public identity they projected in the form of 'identity statements'. By this I mean the statements that organisations write about themselves (e.g. 'X centre is …'). These identity statements serve the purpose of informing others what centres are and what they do. They can be found on the webpages of centres as well as in centres' prospectuses. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 representatives across each Australian State and Territory with the intention of eliciting rich accounts in terms of the scope and breadth of centres' work, funding arrangements and generally what goes on. Over 19 hours of interviews were recorded, transcribed and, along with the identity statements, subjected to thematic analysis. Finally, 15 centres from across Australia were visited, enabling unstructured observations and informal conversations. These visits, and the

conversations occurring because of them, afforded a feel for centres in action.

### Historical context

While this paper is concerned with Australian organisations, neighbourhood centres, or organisations resembling them, are found globally. For instance, Finland's network of *Setlementti,* Vancouver's Neighbourhood Houses, Israel's Community Centers [*sic*], Germany's *Nachbarschaftshäuser*, and Britain's Settlements, are examples of organisations resembling those found in Australia. Some of these international organisations have been in existence for over 200 years (Parker 2009), and have inspired the establishment of similar organisations internationally (International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres 2009).

In contrast to long histories elsewhere, the introduction of neighbourhood centres in Australia is more recent. While a few isolated centres were in operation in the 1960s, there is a general agreement that they amassed alongside the women's movement in the 1970s (Golding, Kimberley, Foley & Brown 2008, Henry 2000, LCSA 1994). This development was fostered by the considerable legislative reforms of the era's socially progressive government. Up until this point, benevolent and charitable institutions (typically faith-based) provided many social services. The Australian Assistance Program, introduced as part of these reforms, served to establish organisations (like neighbourhood centres) that espoused community development approaches.

Community development, then, and organisations like neighbourhood centres that espoused it, presented an alternative to the altruism of faith-based and/or benevolent service provision. What this meant in practice is that these organisations were owned and managed by the very people whom they were said to serve. Self-determination was (and remains) highly prized, and visions of

social justice provided the warrant for the activities the organisations engaged in (or not).

Relationships between the organisations and their funders (that is, the government) have changed since these early days. Like elsewhere, neoliberal policies were embraced in Australia in the early 1980s, and this continues through to the present day. This has seen (among other things) the creation of markets where they had previously not existed (Marginson 1997, New South Wales Council of Social Services 1999). For non-government organisations like neighbourhood centres, the 1980s marked a time where they were re-positioned into purchaser/provider relationships with government, and were expected to participate in market processes. Moreover, for organisations with a history of working collaboratively with each other and with like-minded organisations, this new space presented challenges (New South Wales Council of Social Services 1999: 51). However, this space also presented opportunities to develop new ways of being (e.g. consortia of small organisations producing joint tenders) and of negotiating what was understood as unfavourable conditions in ways that retained their social justice purpose (Lane 1999, Rule 2005).

## What is a neighbourhood centre?

So, what *is* a neighbourhood centre? A first answer to this question is that such a centre is an entity of some sort—a place, building, organisation or association. However, many centres qualify what kind of entity they are. For instance they use terms like safe, warm, friendly and/or fun. Many (like the interviewee below) also point out what a centre is not.

> Technically, using the international classifications of not-for-profit organisations as the Productivity Commission uses, [centres are] a locally-based, multi-activity social service and development organisation.

Terms like not-for-profit, non-government, non-religious and/or non-discriminating are common among the identity statements of centres. The use of these terms flags that centres are purposefully differentiating their organisations from others (for example, those that *are* government, profit-making, religious etc.).

The comment above also draws attention to multi-activities, and most centres' illustrate this via the types of processes they use in their identity statements. There are many processes (material, mental and relational) mentioned and these give an indication of what centres do (or say they do). While some reference is made to mental (e.g. evolve, seek, believe) and relational (e.g. belong to, are, is) processes, the most common type of processes (by far) are material. For example, centres say that they: address, change, connect, create, deliver, develop, improve, initiate, link, lobby, reduce, research, run, serve, stimulate, strengthen, and support etc. The prevalence of material processes in the descriptions of centres suggests that centres are dynamic and active organisations, and this is supported when looking at the programs and activities on offer.

### Funding and focus

Australia's model of federalisation complicates a national picture of neighbourhood centres because centres are generally funded at state level. Centre funding can range from a few million to zero dollars, although the median is a little over 200,000. While core funding may be provided (admittedly in some states better than others), almost all centres rely upon on additional funding for specific purposes as well as from volunteer input and/or from fundraising. In other words, most have multiple sources of funding: an extreme example is a centre with over 40 different funding sources (along with as many acquittal processes).

While the aim of the research was not to compare centres in various states and territories, some inter-state idiosyncrasies are worth

noting. Of particular interest is the way the host states' priorities shape the work of centres and this is seen in the 'tag lines' of funding programs that prioritise: strong, vibrant communities (in Western Australia); community building, community development and preventative health (in Tasmania); and vulnerable groups and those most in need (in Victoria). This means that, while all centres work within federal agendas (e.g. Social Inclusion), differences in state foci influence the work of centres in subtle ways. A poignant example is the situation in New South Wales where a recent shift in funding programs has also seen priorities shift from child protection to building stronger communities.

As earlier noted, another commonality across all states is an espoused investment in the principles of community development. With that said, community development manifests in different ways in centres' identity statements. Some embed community development in their public statements by describing how people 'are encouraged to participate in the running of the centre and to become involved in a variety of projects […] or in the management areas'; others are more explicit, and an example of this is a centre that states how it is 'committed to social justice principles, believing that people have the right to participate in decisions that will affect their lives […] and to advocate for a fairer distribution of resources'.

### Location/place

Centres emphasise the local in their identity statements, and this too is in keeping with the tenets of community development. The emphasis is more than adding an address though. Most centres (regardless of state or territory) explicitly locate themselves using terms like community-based, local organisation, heart of the community and so on. The effect of this signifies a strong identification, or embedding, within a particular geographical area, region and/or community. Centres do not see themselves as

simply existing, or doing. Rather, they exist (and do) somewhere in particular. Location matters! Interviewees concur—as one said, 'it's about place'.

Notwithstanding an emphasis on place, it becomes apparent in interviews and observations that centres exceed place. Centres are not merely 'containers' where action happens, rather much action happens beyond the boundaries of the actual buildings. One example is a take-away-food shop that a centre established to address social, economic, employment and educational issues of concern to local people. Other examples include a winery, a lawn mowing business and a social action campaign around turtles—all of which occur beyond the bricks and mortar of centres.

Finally, centres stress the importance of people. While a few claim to direct their efforts to everyone, most suggest that they work with everyone within the specific location, community or region in which they are situated. Moreover, efforts are often targeted to specific groups of people (e.g. those on low incomes, people returning to work, vulnerable people, people living with a disability, families etc.). It is here that the importance of safe/friendly places resonates (as exemplified by the interviewee below):

> [The value of centres is] in reaching hard-to-reach learners, you know, providing people who would never set foot in anything remotely resembling a school to somewhere that's a safe learning environment for them to go into and try to re-engage in any kind of education process.

## Centres and learning

The comment above leads nicely to the fourth section of this paper, where the focus is on centres and learning. However, this discussion is also complicated by federalisation because there are various definitions of adult community education (ACE) across Australia (Borthwick, Knight, Bender & Laveder 2001, Choy, Haukka & Keyes

2006, McIntyre 2001). In some states there is a visible ACE sector (e.g. NSW, Victoria, SA, Tasmania) comprising entities receiving public funds specifically for the provision of adult community education programs. Some of these entities have succumbed to public policy imperatives to an extent that they resemble vocational education and training (VET) providers rather than the adult community education organisations that most began as (Tennant & Morris 2009). In other states adult community education is a type of non-publically-funded provision, yet recognised as a worthwhile activity and supported via distance (e.g. WA). Finally, in other states (e.g. Queensland) it is difficult to discuss an adult community education sector, which is not to say that adult community education does not occur (Schwencke 1997).

Relationships between neighbourhood centres and ACE are dependent on the host state's definitions. In some states centres and ACE are mutually exclusive (e.g. NSW and Tasmania). However there are examples of complementary relationships between sectors. For instance, state education authorities may fund small projects where centres work in partnership with 'real' providers (LCSA 2001). It is little wonder, then, that the identity statements from these states rarely appear to foreground adult education or learning. With that said, many suggest that they provided opportunities to 'meet new friends, join a group, share a skill or finding out about'. These types of statements imply learning, but do not explicitly foreground it.

In other states the relationship between neighbourhood centres and ACE is integrated (e.g. Victoria, WA and SA). In these states the statutory body responsible for adult learning explicitly supports centres to provide adult education programs (including VET). In Victoria, centres are supported directly through recurrent and increasingly contestable funding. In Western Australia, the peak organisation is funded to support the voluntary ACE delivery of centres but the centres themselves receive little or no funding. In

South Australia, centres receive a quarter of the state's ACE budget, and are able to contest the remainder. In these states, and in particular in Victoria, centres make full use of educational discourses. For instance, centres made clear use of educational discourses and infrastructure in their identity statements, using terms like training, courses, accreditation and registered training organisations.

Finally, in other jurisdictions (e.g. Queensland and Northern Territory) relationships are elusive. This is because one or both sectors are so loosely defined (see Arnott 2003 and Schwencke 1997). For instance, in Queensland there is a broad collective of organisations that works similarly to neighbourhood centres, but a recognisable ACE sector is more difficult to establish. In the Northern Territory both sectors are loosely defined so that any commentary on the relationship between them is problematic.

Overall, less than half of Australia's 1,000 plus centres receive funding specifically for the provision of adult community education. Despite not being funded for this purpose, almost all provide a range of learning opportunities including what might be described as adult community education. This is hardly surprising given that community development and adult community education are closely allied (Tett 2005: 126). However, in a sense (capital) ACE is not a type of learning that is of particular interest here—not because it is unworthy, rather because it has been relatively well documented (McIntyre 2001; McIntyre & Kimberley 1998). With that said, even this funded ACE delivery delivers 'something more'—as an ACE representative explained:

> We are very lucky because what the centres can do value-adds to the piddly little bit of money that we have available for the activities … We're not paying for the real cost, we're paying for a little bit, but all the other services that the centres provide are what makes a success of it. It's not the bit we pay for.

This interviewee draws attention to the additional support mechanisms and services provided by centres and how these add value to funded ACE programs. However, as already suggested, specifically funded learning, while valuable, is only the tip of the iceberg. In other centres, indeed even in the centres that also provide 'real' ACE, there is even more adult learning (Rooney 2007). But this learning comes under the rubric of community development and, at least in some states, there are problems with calling it learning.

To illustrate this last point, an interviewee recounts the response he received from a government agency during a funding program review. The interviewee told of how he included adult education as one of the centre's outputs. The response he received from the funders was that 'we actually can't fund [that]'. What we see here is that while adult education is a legitimate activity in some centres, it is not for all. Moreover, it is not a legitimate (read *fundable*) activity in a state where adult education and community development are siloed.

At this point it is important to reiterate that not being funded to provide adult learning does not also preclude it from being provided. Neighbourhood centres, as generalist organisations, are not limited to providing just one particular type of service (including adult education). Their approach means that there is always a capacity for difference given that geography, demographics and political context in which they are located will also differ. For example, the learning needs of a metropolitan community with large numbers of culturally and linguistically different people will likely differ from those of a regional town with an aging and homogeneous population. With this in mind, the paper turns to introduce the scope and complexity of learning in centres.

### Scope and complexities of learning in centres

Learning in centres takes many forms. Some of these are easily identified as learning and capture attention within the educational

purview. For example there is an array of formal accredited, vocational education programs offered in centres, as well as many non-accredited, pre-vocational courses that aim to support learners to take the next step into accredited, vocational programs. There are formal English language programs as well as informal groups where participants can practise their English. There are also training programs for the sector's many volunteers.

However, there are other forms of learning activity offered in centres that are not so easily captured in public accounts of learning. For instance, there are informal leisure-learning courses (e.g. craft, cooking). These groups may have a teacher, or the role of teacher can be rotated among participants. There are many programs that focus on health (e.g. gentle exercise, managing diabetes). There are workshops and one-off activities that address common concerns (e.g. recycling, parenting teenagers) that may be led by experts. There are leaderless groups that support members who experience a common hardship (e.g. amputee, divorcee). There are social groups for people who share a characteristic (e.g. older men, recent arrivals). And finally, there are social action groups formed because of a need to address a local issue of concern (e.g. the placement of a new freeway, a new bus route). This list is by no means exhaustive, but it begins to demonstrate the diversity and scope of learning in centres. Moreover, a similar diversity and scope is seen in the outcomes of these activities.

### Outcomes of learning in centres

The outcomes for participants of these forms of learning are many and varied. For some, like vocational programs, the outcomes may seem clear (e.g. a job or some progress along the path to obtaining one). However, the outcomes of learning activities may not be as clear as might first be assumed. Take the comments of a participant in a quilting group for example:

> Well, I always wanted to do quilting. I started doing that—so the
> women in the quilters' group, we all swap books and things. Until
> I joined I hadn't read the sort of books that they're into though, so
> it's picked up my—what I read now—and that's part of the quilters
> group.

First of all, the centre's justification for providing this group may be in
order that isolated people make friends rather than merely to increase
women's quilting skills. While the participant may indeed make some
friends, she describes a quilting group that doubles as a reading group
—where she has 'picked up' her reading. It is unlikely that a quilters'
group would be considered as a literacy program, moreover it might
be unlikely that she would join a literacy program. Yet, this brief
example begins to illustrate all these possibilities of learning provided
by organisations for which education is not the prime purpose.

One way to think about the complexities of learning in centres is
provided by Schuller (2004). He illustrates a range of outcomes of
learning using a triangular model of interrelated human, social and
identity capitals. The acquisition or development of knowledge and
skills that enable people to 'function effectively in economic and social
life' are encapsulated in the dimension of human capital (p. 14). The
(above) quilter's capacity to read, or people receiving some sort of
qualification, would constitute an increase in human capital. But it is
the other two capitals that are more interesting in relation to centres
and learning. Identity capital refers to 'the characteristics of the
individual that define his or her outlook and self-image' and 'includes
concepts like self-esteem and sense of self' (p. 22). Reports of learning
in centres are replete with references of increased identity capital
(LCSA 2001), and it is likely that the quilter has a new sense of self
because of her achievements in reading. Finally, social capital refers
to the relationships between people (p. 17) and this constitutes the
third dimension of Schuller's model. This third dimension is another
way of thinking about the community that is central to community

development work. Again, it is likely that the quilter developed relationships between herself and others.

The value of Schuller's model is the acknowledgment of the inter-relationship between its various dimensions (2004: 22), rather than focusing on just one. The model draws attention to how a person's identity capital (sense of self) will impact on their capacity to develop human capital (skills) and/or social capital (relationships with others). This is not necessarily a new idea, but in a milieu dominated by economic concerns and a mistrust of others, it is worth emphasising the relationship.

A final vignette of a centre volunteer serves to illustrate this relationship further. The centre where the volunteer works is located in a region where there is a low-security prison. The users of the centre include prisoners and their families. The volunteer recalls how his work brought him in contact with people he considered different to himself:

> I thought that was just something that happened to other people—it happened in the news, and then all of a sudden you have contact with these people. It's not just the person in jail that suffers—you have the family and it's not their fault either. [It] makes you ask why they did it. There's always two sides to every story [but] you only ever get [the] news—the criminal—the police side.

It seems reasonable to surmise that this volunteer has developed empathy and may now understand himself in relation to others differently (identity capital). Moreover, with a better understanding of the people with whom he lives and works (social capital), he can perform his role as volunteer even better (human capital). The point is not about the truth of this conjecture, but more about how the development of each capital is reliant on the development of another.

### *Un*mapping

Despite having presented a brief mapping of Australian neighbourhood centres to address the question of what is a neighbourhood centre, this part now moves to conclude with a twist. The twist is that most interviewees found the question problematic. As one claimed, 'it's the barbecue stopper, because you can't answer it'. Another suggested, 'people can't define community development, they can't define [a] neighbourhood centre [...] that is a weakness as a sector'.

The task of answering what seems an easy question is more difficult than first realised because the *modus operandi* of centres means that they are continually shaped and re-shaped by socio-political contexts as well as by their community development work. The idea of people 'taking action on issues affecting them' (Tett 2005: 246) leaves the door open for an almost unlimited range of issues. Five examples of issues where people 'came together' include:

- A regional town, with little local infrastructure, whose local take-a-way food store closed down. This meant that not only could locals no longer purchase take-a-way food, but also that tourists no longer stopped over—which further impacted on the local economy.

- A metropolitan suburb where it was noted that there was a high proportion of people with a mental illness and few local services.

- A suburb where a growing number of young people were causing anxiety by hanging around the local shops during school hours. These people were too young for 'official' youth programs, and action by school authorities was seen to be inadequate.

- A noted increase in violence perpetrated by men in a housing department estate where there were marked increases in unemployment of men (most of whom were low-skilled).

- A regional area where increased salinity in the local river resulted in turtles being covered with scales.

Community development approaches to these issues resulted in the local centres morphing into a take-a-way food store, café, lawn-mowing business, winery, and a social action campaign. These local solutions resulted in modest economic gains: for example, increasing the capital of local infrastructure (e.g. through maintaining local tourism, provision of goods and services) and securing additional funding sources for centres (e.g. sustainability). Moreover, potential outcomes across these examples would also include increased human capital. For instance, several provided accredited training resulting in increased qualifications. Several also resulted in people gaining work experience and some local people gained meaningful employment. These are indeed valuable outcomes and likely to be lauded by educational authorities.

However, returning to Schuller's (2004) model, there are even more possible outcomes, some of which increase social capital and identity capital as well. For instance, the people involved in planning develop new understandings of their communities and broader society as they research how to set up and manage what ostensibly are small businesses (e.g. wineries, cafés, lawn-mowing etc.). All involved may develop new understandings of difference, and of issues faced by people with a mental illness, men, and/or youth etc. Such activities have the potential to develop trust between various segments of community and between people and organisations, like the volunteer people involved may learn to know difference differently. These 'spillover' outcomes have potential to contribute to the social fabric (capital) of communities. Furthermore, the people involved can develop new understandings about themselves and in so doing, experience increase in self-worth. Lonely people may make friends. Others may develop strategies for getting along with people whom they consider different. In other words, this activity builds identity capital as well. All these capital gains made possible because five

small organisations were 'nimble and flexible' enough to respond to local needs (LCSA 2002)—not because these five centres *were* but because they were *able to become!*

## Some concluding observations

The mapping, and *un*mapping, work of this paper provides the basis for two concluding observations. The first is that centres' capacity for continual re-shaping, while retaining some very particular values, marks them in ways that differ from organisations for which adult education is the primary purpose. This suggests that the capacity to provide bespoke activities, services and responses to local issues is better achieved when activities and services are not prescribed from the onset. In the examples provided here, local solutions were created to address the idiosyncrasies of issues in ways that universal solutions could not. So that even while an inability to define centres and their work is seen by some as a weakness, the ambiguity can also be understood as a strength. Freedom from the constraints and boundaries associated with robust definitions afford neighbourhood centres substantial fluidity in developing appropriate organisational identities.

A second observation is that the range of learning possibilities in neighbourhood centres is broad-ranging, and makes significant and valuable contributions to individuals and communities, and ultimately to the Australian nation. Underpinning these activities are concerns that extend beyond learning alone. This results in outcomes of learning in centres that are also broad-ranging. While the outcomes may well contribute to important economic priorities, they also make a significant contribution to the individual, social and human capital of participants, and communities, and ultimately the Australian nation. These contributions and learning invite further consideration.

## References

ANHCA (2009). 'About ANHCA', http://www.anhlc.asn.au/ANHCA [viewed November 2009].

ANHLC. (1997). *What is a neighbourhood house*, Melbourne: Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres Inc.

Arnott, A. (2003). 'Learning from the past: Implications for effective VET delivery of adult education services in the Northern Territory', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 43(1): 43–72.

Borthwick, J., Knight, B., Bender, A. & Loveder, P. (2001). *Scope of ACE in Australia: Implications for improved data collection and reporting,* vol. 1, Leabrook, South Australia: Australian National Training Authority.

Bullen, P. & Onyx, J. (1999). *Social capital: Family support and neighbourhood centres in NSW*, Sydney: Local Community Services Association.

Choy, S., Haukka, S. & Keyes, E. (2006). *Adult and community education: A meta-analysis to explore the capacity of ACE for skilling Australia*, Brisbane: Adult Learning Australia, Queensland University of Technology and Learning Network Queensland.

Coleman, J. (1995). 'Learning through collaboration in the creation of a people's park', *The National Bulletin of Good Practice in Adult Community Education, 3* (UTS), 17–21.

Connor, C. (1993). 'House of many peoples', *Community Quarterly,* (27): 25–27.

Ducie, V. (1994). *Opening doors: A report on community neighbourhood houses and learning centres' influence on personal development, skills development, learning outcomes*, Perth: Learning Centre Link.

Golding, B., Kimberley, H., Foley, A. & Brown, M. (2008). 'Houses and sheds in Australia: An exploration of the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community settings', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 48(2): 237–262.

Henry, K. (2000). *Like a circle: A story of LCSA. The first 25 years*, Sydney: Local Community Services Association.

Ife, J. (2009). *Human rights from below: Achieving rights through community developmen*t, Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press.

International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres (2009). 'About ISF', www.ifsnetwork.org/Membership/CurrentMembers/tabid/463/Default.aspx [viewed December 2009].

Kenny, S. (2010). *Developing communities for the future: Community development in Australia* (Fourth ed.), South Melbourne, Victoria: Cengage Learning.

Lane, M. (1999). 'Community development and a postmodern of resistance', in J. Fook (ed.), *Transforming social work practice: Postmodern critical perspectives*, Florence, KY: Routledge: 135–149.

Local Community Services Association (LCSA) (1994). *We just grew like topsy: A resource manual for understanding and managing multi-purpose Neighbourhood Centres*, Sydney: Local Community Services Association.

Local Community Services Association (LCSA) (2001). *Partnerships in ACE: A report to BACE*, Sydney: Local Community Services Association.

Local Community Services Association (LCSA) (2002). *Odd socks: Why the survival of small community organisations is critical*, Sydney: Local Community Services Association.

Local Community Services Association (LCSA) (2004). *Neighbourhood centres in NSW: 2003 facts and figures*, Sydney: Local Community Services Association.

Lyons, M. (2001). *Third sector: The contribution of nonprofit and cooperative enterprises in Australia*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Marginson, S. (1997). *Markets in education*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

McArdle, J. (1999). *Community development in the market economy*, St Kilda: Vista Publications.

MCEETYA (2002). *Ministerial declaration on adult community education*, Melbourne: Department of Education and Training.

McIntyre, J. (2001). 'The discursive construction of ACE in national policy', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 41(1): 56–71.

McIntyre, J. & Kimberley, H. (1996). *Planning pathways: A resource for providers developing pathways for women from ACE to VET*, Sydney: Centre for Vocational Education and Training, University of Technology.

McIntyre, J. & Kimberley, H. (1998). *Planning pathways: A resource for providers developing pathways for women from ACE to VET*. Perth: Western Australian Department of Training.

New South Wales Council of Social Services (1999). *Shifting ground: Competition policy and tendering in the community services*, Surry Hills: J. Bell & Co.

Otto, A. & Onyx, J. (2006). *Developing social capital among older ethnic communities,* Working paper no.73, Sydney: Centre for Australian Community Organisations and Management (CACOM).

Parker, M. (2009). 'The past, the passion and the potential: How the history of the Settlement Movement informs our pursuit of social justice today', in British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (ed.), London: BASSAC.

Productivity Commission (2009). *Contribution of the not for profit sector: Productivity issues paper*, Canberra: Australian Government.

Rooney, D. (2004). 'Cinderella has balls?: Other sites for adult learning', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 44(2): 143–157.

Rooney, D. (2007). 'Writing up' neighbourhood centres and 'writing in' the professional doctorate', Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney.

Rudd, K. & Smith, S. (2007). *The Australian economy needs an educational revolution: New directions paper on the critical link between long-term prosperity, productivity growth and human capital investment*, Canberra: Australian Labor Party.

Rule, J. (2005). 'Tracing discourses of social action: Inner-city Sydney neighbourhood centres', *Studies in Continuing Education,* 27(2): 135–153.

Schwencke, H. (1997). *Adult and community education: A snapshot,* Paddington, Queensland: Adult Learning Australia (Queensland Branch).

Schuller, T. (2004). 'Three capitals: A framework', in *The benefits of learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital*, London: Routledge Falmer: 12–33.

Suhood, T., Marks, C., Waterford, M. & SONG (2006). *Voice of SONG— the way forward: Tackling the issues confronting small community organisations,* issues paper, Voice of SONG.

Tennant, M. & Morris, R. (2009). 'The changing face of adult education in Australia', in P. Jarvis (ed.), *The Routledge international handbook of lifelong learning,* New York: Routledge: 470–478.

Tett, L. (2005). 'Community Development', in L. English (ed.), *International encyclopedia of adult education*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 126–131.

Tett, L. (2006). *Community education, lifelong learning and social inclusion* (Second ed.), Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press Ltd.

## Endnotes

1   These organisations are known by different names in different Australian States and Territories. However, the term 'Neighbourhood Centres' is used here (unless otherwise stated) in the service of clarity.

## About the author

***Dr Donna Rooney*** *is an early career researcher and lecturer in adult education at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). Her doctoral research focused on learning in New South Wales' neighbourhood centres. Her broader research interests focus on adult learning outside of educational institutions. This includes community-based learning as well as learning in workplaces.*

## Contact details

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, 2007, Australia.*
*Tel: +61 2 9514 3044        Fax: +61 2 9514 3737*
*Email: Donna.Rooney@uts.edu.au*

# Leisure activities as a source of informal learning for older people: The role of community-based organisations

Rowena MacKean and Joan Abbott-Chapman
University of Tasmania

*The significance of findings from a qualitative Tasmanian study, which investigated the part played by informal learning in positive ageing, is highlighted by the increasing proportion of the Australian population in the 'Third Age' cohort of active, independent people aged 65 years and over. Semi-structured interviews, conducted by a researcher of a similar age, allowed respondents to speak freely about their perceived needs and expectations for a satisfying lifestyle, in the context of their membership of community-based organisations. Findings revealed the benefits that older people perceive they derive from participation in the 'leisure activities' available through these organisations, and the informal learning which they enjoy. The study found that learning taking place is appropriate to the phase in life which is characterised by loss of paid employment and of relationships, and that this learning plays an important role in helping older people stay positive, and maintain independence and social engagement.*

## Introduction and conceptual issues

There is an increasing literature on the part played by social engagement in the maintenance of good health among older people (Litwin 2006, Luszcz & Giles 2002), but there is very little written about the contribution made by educational engagement and informal learning to the health and well-being of older people. The research discussed in this paper focused on people in the 'Third Age' (Laslett 1991), that is, the cohort aged 65 and over, mostly no longer in the paid workforce but still leading active independent lives, as compared with the 'Fourth Age' (frail, dependent). The study investigated the under-researched topic of the benefits older people felt they derived from participation in leisure activities on offer within a range of community-based organisations, of which learning is an important component (MacKean 2010). We argue that these community groups, especially those run by older people for their peers, are an effective means of delivering new opportunities for informal learning. Significant well-being effects associated with social engagement, coping with loss and hope for the future are also demonstrated (MacKean 2009). It is perhaps not surprising that educational engagement should be beneficial to the well-being of older people, since a number of recent research studies have shown the health benefits of educational engagement and educational mobility for both children and adults (Hammond 2002, Gall, Abbott-Chapman, Patton, Dwyer & Venn 2010).

While the health and well-being of older people, like people of all ages, are influenced by their socio-economic status and education level, older people born during and since the 1940s in general enjoy greater life expectancy, rising standards of living, better health and longer periods of active life after 'retirement' than their forbears. Laslett (1991) has suggested this represents the emergence of a new generational category, named the Third Age, which transcends social class, with shared cultural and life-style characteristics (Gilleard &

Higgs 2005). Third Agers are typically physically and socially active. In 2010 the majority of the 13.3% of Australians aged 65 years and over were living independently in couples or alone, and an increasing number were still in the labour force—24% aged 65–69 and 4.5% aged 70 and over (ABS 2010).

Participation in mental, physical and social activities has been shown in many research studies (Menec 2003, Nimrod 2007) to assist in helping older people maintain their well-being, independence and social engagement, and can act as a significant compensating capability for objective factors such as declining health (Fernandez-Ballesteros, Zamarron & Ruiz 2001). The research to be discussed reveals that leisure activities in community-based groups provide explicit or implicit learning opportunities, not just of specific skills but of attitudes and strategies that are conducive to perceived well-being. These include a sense of belonging and acceptance, the growth of hope and confidence, and the recognition that others share similar problems. Such groups resemble communities of practice more than formal education, since the benefits of belonging include peer recognition and sharing of knowledge and skills, using and expanding skills and expertise, greater confidence in tackling problems, and the enjoyment of being with like-minded people (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). Community and place-making activities and events, as expressions of social capital, have been revealed as sources of informal and incidental learning for actively participating adult learners (de Carteret 2008).

However, official statistics are remarkably silent on the educational participation of those aged 65 and over. Australian Bureau of Statistics on adult learning, for example, recognise community-based organisations as one of the mediums for informal learning (ABS 2006–7: table 10), which is defined as the 'unstructured, non-institutionalised learning activities that are related to work, family, community or leisure' (p. 3). The statistics also show that

informal learning is by far the most popular form of adult learning, with almost three quarters (74%) of Australians between the ages of 25 and 64 taking part in some form. Regrettably, these ABS figures include no statistics for the learning of those aged 65 and over. The reader might be tempted to speculate whether these statistics reflect the sort of negative social construct within a welfare discourse prevalent in the population (Biggs 2001) which views older people as largely dependent and a cost to the social, health and welfare fabric of society.

There are, however, other ABS statistics which do acknowledge older people's learning activities. The General Social Survey gives figures on community participation by age, up to '85 years or over' (ABS 2006: table 29) which appear to contradict the previous classification. The list of *Types of groups* in which individuals participated in the last 12 months makes a distinction between *Education and training* and *Adult education, other recreation or special interest group*. As might be expected, participation in formal education declines in middle adulthood (55–64) when people are reaching or have reached retirement age and do not see the need to increase their educational qualifications for purposes of employment. In the case of *Adult education, other recreation or special interest group*, participation increases in middle adulthood and continues into the later age groups. It is particularly significant that participation in the 75–84 years age cohort is above the average across all age groups (13.2%, compared with 12.9%). Golding, Brown and Foley (2009) argue that, despite the generally lower status accorded to informal learning, it deserves wider recognition and research because of its breadth and importance for adult learners, gained through 'families, workplaces and leisure activities' (p. 41), and the appeal of its informality in organisation and delivery.

Lifespan development theory (Baltes & Baltes 1990) reveals that people have the capacity to learn, adapt, develop, make choices and

remain in control of their lives into old age. This is supported by recent research into neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to change its structure under stimulus (Doidge 2010). In each life phase, people need to learn what is appropriate for successful management of the challenges of that phase, in order to develop coping skills, a sense of self-efficacy and personal continuity (Withnall 2006). Older people need constant stimulus, motivation and opportunity to learn if they are to maintain and develop their cognitive capacity. They prefer to learn what they find meaningful, drawing on the resources they already have, and taking responsibility for their own learning,—if they are allowed to do so (MacKean 2002, Illeris 2006). Jarvis (2004: 71) uses the term 'disjuncture' to describe the motivating force for learning at a time when previous knowledge and life skills are inadequate to cope with new situations. Opportunities for informal learning can help ease the transition from the Second Age of 'learning for a living' to the Third Age of 'learning for living' (Martin 2000: 4).

An inevitable risk in growing older is the narrowing of choices, through personal or societal restrictions such as retirement from paid work, which usually means a reduction in income and consequent restrictions on activities and lifestyle. The range of leisure activities offered by community-based organisations provides and expands choice—not simply about which group or groups to join, but the level of commitment to each group. Moreover, learning in these groups is in the hands of the learners rather than dictated by formal constraints of curriculum, pedagogy and credentials, and as such reflects a more equal power structure than is usually the case in formal learning institutions (Golding et al.: 52). Leisure activities pursued within community-based groups provide opportunities for informal learning which 'may not be recognised even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills' (Longworth 2003: 45). This is 'learning by participation' or 'experiential learning', where new knowledge is acquired through a process of becoming a member of a peer community, so that learning is viewed as a

process of becoming part of a greater whole (Sfard 2008). Within the digital age of borderless global communication younger people, like older people, are finding that 'to anchor identity and seek pleasure through interpersonal interaction with local peers in leisure activities has become of increasing rather than diminishing importance' (Abbott-Chapman & Robertson 2009: 247), and that 'what constitutes "leisure" must also be re-thought' (p. 243). This process of learning exchange characterises new and creative learning which needs to take place among all members of the 'knowledge economy', whatever their age. Creative learning distinguishes between 'performance goals' and 'learning goals', the former focused upon 'winning positive judgment of your competence and avoiding negative ones', the latter upon 'a desire to develop new skills, master new tasks or understand new things' (McWilliam 2008: 119).

## Methodology and research methods

Qualitative research methodology was used to investigate older people's participation in, and reflections upon, community-based organisations of which they were members. One of the main aims was to give older people a voice on their experience of 'social engagement' experienced through their community group membership, and the meaning and benefits to them of the activities offered by these organisations. This shaped the research approach and methods used (Charmaz 2006: 15). A conceptual and theoretical framework derived from grounded theory was adopted, in order to explore participants' own reflections on their community group membership using interpretive inquiry. Respect for the research participants was demonstrated 'by making concerted efforts to learn about their views and actions and to try to understand their lives from their perspectives' (Charmaz 2006: 19).

The research was conducted by means of in-depth, semi-structured interviews of a sample of community group members, researcher observation of group activities and reflection on research notes—to

achieve triangulation (Cresswell 2008: 266). A purposeful sample of seven community-based organisations in Tasmania, Australia, was chosen as the sites from which interview participants were recruited. Maximal variation sampling was used (Cresswell 2008:214) in the selection of the community organisations to take account of different sizes, different activities, different neighbourhoods, socio-economic status of members and a range of management structures. From these seven community organizations, a sample of 25 interview respondents was recruited: 14 women and 11 men aged 65 or over, physically and socially active, independent and living in their own home (that is, Third Agers). The interviews, which were held in the meeting place of the group or in individuals' homes, lasted at least an hour and some went on for two or more hours. The interviewer was of a similar age as themselves and this encouraged the development of trust and shared understandings with interviewees. Participants welcomed the opportunity to share their views with someone of their own age who understood their situation.

Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Data were coded and analysed in four stages: initial open coding, focused coding, axial coding into categories and category clusters, and selective coding of the emerging themes and core categories (Strauss & Corbin 1998, Charmaz 2006).

The privacy and confidentiality of the respondents was respected at all times. Respondents are anonymous, and are not identifiable in either the analysis or reporting of findings. Approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network.

### Limitations of the study

The research sample was small and selection was purposive, the study was confined to the state of Tasmania, and socio-economic status, ethnicity and language of respondents were not investigated. Therefore, findings are suggestive rather than conclusive, with

further research needed to investigate whether the findings are more generally applicable to other populations of older people. In addition, findings reflect the views of current members of community groups rather than non-members or lapsed members. Therefore, it is recognised that further research is needed to compare older people's learning experiences within community organisations with those of older people who are not attracted to community organisation membership. The research towards a doctoral degree arising from this study will investigate these issues among a more broadly based sample of older people, with implications for older people's perceived health and well-being. A comparison will also be made of older people's views with those of policy-makers and practitioners delivering community-based services.

## Summary findings

### Individuals and their activities

The 25 interviewees were asked about the total number of groups of which they were members, and all community leisure activities in which they were involved. Findings show that they were  members of 65 groups (including the ones from which they were recruited) in categories based on ABS (2006) community participation (see Table 1) and that they engaged in a surprising number of 106 leisure activities, not all of them in organised groups. Women generally belonged to more groups than men. Group memberships declined with age for both men and women. Individual membership varied from 9 activities to 1, depending on the state of health of the person or a partner, and family commitments such as caring for a partner or grandchildren. Time spent per week on particular activities varied; one man, who listed only two group memberships, stated that he spent at least 20 hours a week on his hobby of woodcarving at home, in addition to the one morning a week he spent in the woodcarving class. Three volunteers who worked a five-day week at the community shed mentioned only one other activity each.

*Table 1:*   Total group memberships categorised by adapted ABS categories (Community groups from which interviewees were recruited in bold)

| Sport/physical recreation | Handcrafts | Hobbies/ interests | Organised learning | Seniors | Volunteering |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Croquet club | **Time Out** | Photography Association | **OPEN** | Senior Citizens | Tas Tech |
| Bowls club | Hands On | Camera Club | Online Centre | Wellbeing Club | Community Care group |
| Golf club | **N House craft group** | Literary society | U3A | Pensioners Club | Church Care group |
| Living Longer Living Stronger | Bellerive Craft Group | Historical Association | **School for Seniors** | Retired Persons Association | Meals on Wheels |
| YMCA gym | Trefoil Guild | Penguin Club | Probus | **Neighbourhood House group** | Knit for Charity |
| Square dancing | Spinning Group | Friends of Museum | Adult Ed | Veterans Centre | Elder Care group |
| Line dancing | Woodcraft Guild | Rhododendron Club | Computer class | RSL | Red Cross shop |
| Tai Chi | | Bonsai Club | | Legacy | City Library |

| Sport/physical recreation | Handcrafts | Hobbies/ interests | Organised learning | Seniors | Volunteering |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eastern Shore Ramblers | | Mini Locomotive Club | | | Community shed |
| Heart walk | | Bridge Club | | | Children's shed |
| Wellbeing walk | | Guitar group | | | |
| Tennis | | Country music | | | |
| Walk groups | | Singing group | | | |
| Swimming | | Lapidary Club | | | |
| Health Club | | Recorder group | | | |
| | | Book discussion | | | |
| | | Mah Jong | | | |
| | | Cards (friends) | | | |
| **15** | **7** | **18** | **7** | **8** | **10** |
| **23.0%** | **10.7%** | **27.6%** | **10.7%** | **12.3%** | **15.4%** |

The groups were located in a variety of areas, from Hobart's most affluent suburb, to an isolated, low socio-economic area (originally a Housing Commission site), to a semi-rural settlement. The Tasmanian Social Inclusion Unit has estimated there are over 5,000 community organisations serving the half million people of Tasmania (Department of Premier and Cabinet 2007). This probably does not include the many groups meeting under the auspices of the Community Houses or Third Sector organizations—churches, charities and welfare organisations. It would certainly exclude the many informal groups of friends meeting for a common purpose, such as crafts, bushwalking, book discussion and other interests. It is likely that at least half the groups in Table 1 would not feature in the Social Inclusion Unit count.

## Informal learning through leisure activities

Interview questions about expectations and satisfactions of belonging to a community group did not specifically use the word 'learning', so as not to lead interviewees' responses. Nevertheless, spontaneous comments about learning new things emerged throughout. Findings showed that many respondents perceived 'learning' as one of the satisfactions they gained from their participation in activities and their membership of groups, and it became clear that 'learning' was one of the factors common to all the groups. In addition to specific skills learned, other learning experiences emerged, such as how to tackle a new project and gain confidence: *'I do love a challenge'* (F, 65–74); and sampling new activities and a variety of experiences: *'Learning about different things'* (M, 75+) and *'You learn something from every little thing'* (F, 65–74). A particular satisfaction was the chance to learn from others and share one's own knowledge and skills often gained and developed over a life-time. This aspect characterises the 'horizontal' peer group learning which may be described as a community of practice, where participation 'is both a kind of action and a form of belonging' (Wenger 1998: 4). Typical comments on

mentoring and sharing were: *'It's guidance, and seeing what the other people do'* (F, 65–74) and *'Talking with a couple of others, how they do it, what to do, that sort of thing'* (M, 75+).

Another advantage of learning gained through community-based groups is the freedom of choice it offers; this emerged as a strong incentive to participate, and a striking difference from formal education. Freedom of choice and independence can become restricted in older age, with the onset of chronic health conditions and often a reduction in income. Empowerment—the ability to make informed choices, exercise influence and make contributions—can be greatly diminished, as increasingly decisions about one's life are in the hands of others, whether professionals or younger family members. Membership of a community-based group, particularly one run by and for older people, is one area where freedom of choice is still a possibility even in old age, offering opportunities to do things for which there had never before been time, or to enjoy activities that are already a source of pleasure (Erikson 1986): *'It's a lot of fun—if you don't enjoy something, don't do it'* (M, 75+). Since participation in a group is voluntary, as is the extent of one's commitment, there is a choice not just whether to join but whether to continue: *'I don't go just for the sake of it, I choose things I like'* (F, 75+) and *'You do what you want to do, that's it—things I'm doing, it's really enjoyable'* (M, 75+). Unlike the set curriculum of formal education, community-based learning is in the hands of the learners. In the craft group, *'Whatever we wanted to do, we did'* (F, 75+). So the activities on offer must be sufficiently enjoyable and stimulating to overcome the disincentives of poor health, lack of money to spare and transport difficulties.

In community-based groups, particularly those run by older people for their peers, the emphasis is on learning as participation rather than as acquisition (Sfard 2008). The sharing of knowledge and skills among equals is in marked contrast to the hierarchical structure

of formal education and of much informal education. None of the interviewees were enrolled in formal higher education, and vocational training was no longer relevant to their lives. But interviewees who had had experience of adult education classes compared the approach of paid tutors, whose job was to bring all students up to the same standard of a set curriculum, and the volunteer tutors of their own age, in their chosen community-based groups, whose attitude was described as: *'Flexibility', 'Friendly, nothing is too much trouble'* and *'Helping people at their own levels rather than a set class'* (M, 75+). The non-competitive atmosphere of a community group, where there was no compulsion to succeed, 'come top' or earn a certificate, was appreciated by older people who were looking for support and understanding: *'We're a very **caring** group. Because you know a lot of us in turn have something wrong with us, and we **allow** for that'* (F, 75+). Several expressed their appreciation that: *'It wouldn't matter if you didn't do any work, you could go there to have a chat'* (M, 65–74).

### Community groups run by older people for their peers

Groups run by older age peer groups are important because self-help groups understand and cater for the individual needs of their members. They understand the challenges older people face but also their need for independence and self-determination. In this they have an advantage over programs run by outsiders, however well-meaning, in which the potential for stereotyping may lead to a deficit construct of older people as a 'vulnerable' group which results from a 'welfare' discourse rather than one of human rights (Abbott-Chapman & Easthope 1998). By contrast, several groups encouraged self-efficacy and resilience by catering for the varying physical and mental capacities of their members, without making a judgment on these capacities. For example, a croquet club had different types of membership, including an older people's group and a social membership for those unable to play at all. A computer group

had purchased special easy-to-handle 'mice' and large keyboards for learners with physical disabilities such as arthritis. The collaboration and inclusion in the peer group encouraged participants to take up challenges that stimulated and maintained their belief in their own self-efficacy, while the supportive atmosphere encouraged them to experience 'the dignity of risk' (Friedan 1993: 499). There was freedom to make mistakes without feeling foolish: *'I'm not very good at painting but I love it'* (F, 75+). As an eighty year old said of learning to use a computer: *'I thought, well, I got to learn to do things, and the way to learn them is to do 'em-ok, I made **loads** and **loads** of mistakes... you learn the hard way, but I had **fun**'* (M, 75+). Learning provided a positive future-oriented outlook of personal continuity rather than a negative 'end of life' focus: *'If you think you've learned everything, there's not much point in going on'* (M, 75+) and *'You've still got to feel that there's something to look forward to'* (F, 65–74).

The friendly encouraging atmosphere in the peer group helped participants to gain confidence in their capacity to learn, by listening and working alongside others, learning from mistakes, sharing their own skills and learning from others. Learners were also teachers—in a small craft group, it was taken for granted that each member had something to contribute: *'We each teach ... there's one there today. She's showing us how to cover a box, cutting out and covering it'* (F, 75+). The opportunities to take on leadership roles in the group, whether through helping to organise the ongoing activities, overseeing the club accounts or sharing skills with others, emerged as a particularly significant characteristic of the groups run by older people for their peers. In mixed-age organisations, there are fewer opportunities for older people to act as organisers or leaders, and indeed a risk that due to their age they might be relegated to more passive positions. The chance to go on being useful contributed greatly to participants' feelings of self-worth. A participant leading and mentoring others in a seniors' community group said: *'I feel I'm*

*putting a bit back … I do as much as I can. There's lots of things you can't do, lots of things in the garden I can't do—so I enjoy it'* (M, 75+).

Table 2 shows that, of the 65 groups to which interviewees belonged, 54 (83%) were run by the members. of the 27 groups that catered wholly or primarily for older people, a very high proportion (25, 92%) were run by the members; the exceptions were two physical activities run by qualified professionals. As communities of practice, community-based groups represent 'a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment' (Wenger et al. 2002: 34) rather than the hierarchical, teacher-led structure of formal education.

*Table 2:   Who runs the groups of which respondents were members?*

| Category | Number | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Run wholly by members | 12 | 40.0 |
| By members, sponsored or auspiced | 28 | 43.0 |
| By Government Department | 3 | 4.6 |
| Business: paid tutor/organiser | 8 | 12.4 |
| **Totals** | **65** | **100** |

The categories in Table 2 are not totally clear cut, as older people's self-run groups often receive assistance from other bodies such as a church, local council, community house or service organisation in the form of infrastructure support: provision of a meeting place at a non-commercial rent, administrative help, use of equipment such as a phone, computer, photocopier, tea and coffee making facilities. These groups are generally affordable by those on limited incomes because they are run by members volunteering their services rather than by paid staff. A self-run learning organisation such as University of the

Third Age (U3A) offers a choice of up to 900 hours of classes for an annual subscription of around $45, compared with a typical cost of an adult education class of around $90–$100 (concession rate) for 20 hours' tuition.

The opportunity provided by peer-run groups for social engagement and learning to cope with the process of ageing was also very important: *'I've made friends I wouldn't have made otherwise'* (F, 65–74). This was especially important for the 13 of the 25 interviewees who lived alone: *'I suppose I joined to fill a vacuum when my wife died'* (M, 75+). The friendliness and support in the group were seen as *'a tremendous help after* [husband] *died, they're so nice there'* (F, 65–74). Social engagement was seen as a key to improved well-being, at a time of life when personal loss or diminishment and societal attitudes can affect quality of life. It became clear that in particular the peer group offered its members many different opportunities to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose by using their knowledge, skills and energy in a situation of reciprocal support. Analysis revealed that the positive use of learning played a large part in participants' self-assessed well-being, by helping them to use a lifetime's knowledge and skills to cope with transitions, and to learn strategies for successful adaptation to the new life phase.

Vaillant (2002: 224) gives four basic activities that make retirement rewarding, the first being that people should replace their work-mates with another social network—joining a community-based group is a popular alternative. Vaillant's other recommendations are: learn how to play, which 'permits a person to maintain self-esteem while giving up self-importance'; creativity, which 'requires protected time'; and lifelong learning, because 'the challenge in retirement is to combine the fruits of maturity with the recovery of childlike wonder'. Membership of a community-based group should and can provide all four.

## Conclusions and discussion of findings

The research showed that older people's motivations for participation in a community-based group were a blend in varying degrees of three main goals: to take part in their choice of activity, to enjoy the company of others, and to experience the feelings of well-being that come from satisfaction and self-fulfilment. These motivations were found in every individual interviewed, even though the groups from which they were recruited had been chosen deliberately for maximum variation. Participation in a community-based group was found to have a manifest function, pursuit of an activity of one's choice in congenial company, and a latent function of maintaining and improving quality of life by minimising the impact of loss and transition. It became clear that groups run by older people for their peers were particularly effective in providing the satisfactions that older people were seeking.

Part of that latent function is that 'leisure activities' offered by community-based groups have an important informal and often incidental learning component, at a time when life transitions make learning especially empowering (Hammond 2002). Parallels with communities of practice are apparent through the voluntary coming together for a common learning purpose, the opportunity to use and share one's skills and experience, the mutual assistance and support, the building of self-efficacy and resilience, and the horizontal power structures holding groups together. These resemblances are in sharp contrast to the hierarchical structure, imposition of externally set standards and emphasis on competition and attainment that characterise formal education and training.

Reference was made above to Golding's argument (2009) that the breadth and importance of informal learning for adults deserves wider recognition and research. The dismissal of older people's leisure-time education as mere 'hobby-type' has been condemned

by lifelong learning advocate Peter Jarvis (2004: 32). Jarvis sees the provision of this kind of education as 'of great importance, since it provides opportunity for life-enrichment ... helps them use their leisure time in a creative manner'. He concludes that its provision will become more important 'since more people are living longer and hence have more actual time in their lives to learn things ... the elderly have as much right as anyone else to enjoy the fruits of learning'.

The importance of helping older people to maintain their health and well-being and to remain independent has not yet received sufficient recognition and support, even though 'preventive health' is a national priority. The increasing number of older people is a concern to governments and other authorities because of the threat of greater calls on an already over-burdened health system. The literature discussed reveals that participation in mental, physical and social activities has a positive effect on older people's health and well-being, and on their sense of self-efficacy and resilience. The research findings discussed confirm the learning component in older people's 'leisure activities'. These findings suggest that such activities can provide opportunities to learn and practise skills and strategies appropriate to each person's time of life, in a form they enjoy and at a cost they can afford, through the many different community-based, peer-run organisations. Empowering older people to help themselves and to remain engaged can help to combat negative social constructs of ageing at a time when demographic change will make continued participation in the paid and voluntary workforce a social and economic necessity. Authorities' recognition of the value of community-based organisations as informal learning hubs, and increased provision of infrastructure to support their activities, would assist in maintaining a healthy society in which citizens of all ages are engaged.

## References

Abbott-Chapman, J. & Easthope, G. (1998). 'Participation and inclusion: A discourse of welfare or a discourse of rights?', *Australian Journal of Social Issues,* 33(2): 99–118.

Abbott-Chapman, J. & Robertson, M. (2009). 'Leisure, place and identity', in Furlong, A. (ed.), *International handbook on youth and young adults*, Oxford: Routledge International: 243–248.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006). *General social survey: Summary results, Australia,* Cat. No. 4159.0, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006–7). *Adult learning,* Cat. No. 4229.0, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010). *Australian social trends* (September), Cat. No.1370.0, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Baltes, P. & Baltes, M. (1990). 'Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation', in Baltes, P. & Baltes, M. (eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioural sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1–34.

Biggs, S. (2001). 'A Foucauldian analysis of old age and the power of social welfare', *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, 12(2): 93–111.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis,* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Cresswell, J. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.

De Carteret, P. (2008). 'Diverse pleasures: Informal learning in community', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 4 (3), 502–521.

Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPAC) (2007). *The state of our community report,* Hobart: Department of Premier and Cabinet, Social Inclusion Unit.

Doidge, N. (2010). *The brain that changes itself* (Revised edition), Melbourne: Scribe Publications.

Erikson, E., Erikson, J. & Kivnick, H. (1986). *Vital involvement in old age,* New York: Norton.

Fernandez-Ballesteros, R., Zamarron, M. & Ruiz, M. (2001). 'The contribution of socio-demographic and psycho-social factors to life satisfaction', *Ageing & Society,* 21(1): 25–43.

Friedan, B. (1993). *The fountain of age,* London: Jonathan Cape.

Gall, S., Abbott-Chapman, J., Patton, G., Dwyer, T. & Venn, A. (2010). 'Intergenerational educational mobility is associated with cardiovascular disease risk behaviours in a cohort of young Australian adults: The childhood determinants of adult health', CDAH Study, *BMC Public Health* 2010, 10:55.

Gilleard, C. & Higgs, P. (2005). *Contexts of ageing: Class, cohort and community,* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Golding, B., Brown, M. & Foley, A. (2009). 'Informal learning: A discussion around defining and researching its breadth and importance', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 49(1), 34–56.

Hammond, C. (2002). 'What is it about education that makes us healthy? Exploring the education–health connection', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 21(6): 551–571.

Illeris, K. (2006). 'What is special about adult learning?', in Sutherland P. & Crowther J. (eds.), *Lifelong learning, concepts and contexts,* London: Routledge: 15–23.

Jarvis, P. (2004). *Adult education and lifelong learning: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.), London: RoutledgeFarmer.

Laslett, P. (1991). *A fresh map of life: The emergence of the third age,* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Litwin H. (2006). 'Social networks and self-rated health', *Journal of Ageing and Health*, 18(3): 335–358.

Longworth, N. (2003). *Lifelong learning in action: Transforming education in the 21st century,* London: Kogan Page.

Luszcz, M. & Giles, L. (2002). 'Benefits of close social relationships for health and longevity of older adults', *Newsletter of the International Society of Behavioural Development: Special section aging and close relationships*, 41(1): 15–16.

MacKean, R. (2002). 'All you need is a door: Access to third age learning in Tasmania', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 42(3): 352–363.

MacKean, R. (2009). 'An under-rated community resource? How community organisations run by peers help older people maintain their wellbeing and independence', in *Abstracts and Proceedings of the 8th National Conference of Emerging Researchers in Ageing,* Melbourne: Monash University: 129–132.

MacKean, R. (2010). *Ageing well: An inquiry into older people's participation in community-based organisations,* thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of M.Ed. by Research, University of Tasmania.

Martin, I. (2000). 'Reconstituting the agora: Towards an alternative politics of lifelong learning', in Sork, T., Chapman, V-L. & St Clair, R. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 41st annual AERC 2000 international conference,* Vancouver: University of British Columbia.

McWilliam, E. (2008). *Creative workforce: How to launch young people into high flying futures,* Sydney: UNSW Press.

Menec, V. (2003). 'The relation between everyday activities and successful aging: A 6-year longitudinal study', *Journals of Gerontology: Series B: Psychological sciences and social sciences,* 58B, S7-S82.

Nimrod, G. (2007). 'Retirees' leisure: Activities, benefits, and their contribution to life satisfaction', *Leisure Studies,* 26(1): 65–80.

Sfard, A. (2008). 'On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one', in Murphy, P. & McCormick, R. (eds.), *Knowledge and practice: Representations and identities,* Los Angeles: Sage: 30–45.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing Grounded Theory,* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Vaillant, G. (2002). *Ageing well: Surprising guideposts to a happier life from the landmark Harvard study of adult development,* Melbourne: Scribe Publications.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge,* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Withnall, A. (2006). 'Exploring influences on later life learning', *International Journal of Lifelong Education,* 25(1): 29–49.

## About the authors

***Rowena MacKean*** *is a PhD student in the University Department of Rural Health, University of Tasmania, researching the influence of membership and leadership of voluntary community organisations upon older people's perceived health and well-being. She was awarded an MEd in 2010 for her thesis entitled, 'Ageing well: An inquiry into older people's participation in community-based organisations'. Rowena is active in community affairs and an advocate for older people's learning activities. In 2007, she received the Order of Australia Medal for services to adult and community education.*

***Joan Abbott-Chapman*** *is a Research Professor at the Menzies Research Institute, University of Tasmania, following her retirement at the end of 2010 from the Faculty of Education, UTas. She supervised Rowena MacKean's MEd research and is now co-supervising her PhD. She has an international reputation for her research and publications in the field of access and equity in education, student engagement and community development. Insights gained from the study of factors encouraging young people's educational engagement are applicable to the study of older people's learning.*

## Contact details

***Ms Rowena MacKean***
*University Department of Rural Health*
*University of Tasmania*
*Locked Bag 1372, Launceston, Tasmania 7250*
*Email: rmackean@utas.edu.au and rmackean@netspace.net.au*

# Learning in social action:
# The informal and social learning dimensions of
# circumstantial and lifelong activists

Tracey Ollis
RMIT University

---

*This paper explores the informal and social learning dimensions of
activists as they learn skills and knowledge through participating
in social action. In doing this I draw on Lave and Wenger's
epistemology of situated learning and Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus'.
I argue activists learn an array of community development skills
in the social environment of activism. I claim activists' learning is
cognitive, embodied and situated in practice. This paper is based
on empirical research in Australia, where in-depth interviews were
conducted with activists to uncover their important pedagogy. It
explores the learning dimensions of two groups of activists. 'Lifelong
activists' who have generally been involved in student politics and
have participated in activism over many years, and 'circumstantial
activists' who become involved in protest due to a series of life
circumstances. This paper claims that while both groups' learning
is social and informal, lifelong activists tend to develop their skills*

*incrementally by being involved in the fertile site of student politics. On the other hand, circumstantial activists, not having had the benefit of early immersion in a community of practice, are rapid learners. They are frequently taken out of their comfort zone as activists and need to acquire new knowledge and skills urgently in order to practise effectively. Some circumstantial activists remain on the periphery of activism and never fully immerse themselves in the practices of activism. I argue there is much to be gained from understanding learning in social action, an epistemology of adult learning which deserves greater prominence in current adult education discourse.*

*Key terms: Activism and learning, social learning, informal learning, communities of practice, habitus*

## Defining activism

Activism is educationally rich and historically situated in the post-enlightenment tradition of humanism. Community development and activism 'is a part of the project of modernity, [and] draws attention to the state in its creation of disadvantage' (Kenny 2006: 94–95). Kenny (2006: 385) argues that activism is a strand of community development whereby people 'strive continually to understand where the strategic opportunities for action lie'. Resistance towards state apparatus in Australian society is not new as Australia is a western democracy with a long history of trade unionism (Burgmann 2003). Social movements and social change in Australia have long been an important part of the political and social landscape (Maddison & Scalmer 2006). However, even as Australia was being colonised by Britain in the eighteenth century, there was resistance to invasion by Australian Aborigines, the Indigenous Australians (Burgmann 2003). Since the nineteenth century, activism in Australia has been connected to social movements encompassing

issues such as women's suffrage, women's liberation, Indigenous land rights, civil rights and reconciliation. Activism has also been associated with the peace and anti-nuclear movements, the anti-war protests of Vietnam and Iraq, the environmental movement in its various forms, and the anti-corporate globalisation movements. As Couch (2009) argues:

> From the salt mines to Seattle, throughout history, movements such as these have challenged and deposed dictators, stopped armies, undermined corporations, established basic human rights and halted entire industries, all without the use of violence (2009: 4).

For the purposes of this research, the scope of activism is shaped by the broad theories of community development which take into account practices such as policy development, community campaigning, community building, neighbourhood development, popular education and active involvement in social movements. However, there are different spaces and places of activism which are not always connected to social and political movements (Brown & Pickerill 2009, Jasper 2009). For example, circumstantial activists protest but do not always participate actively in social movements. Theorists such as Kenny (2006: 202–203) have argued that the 'activist model' of community development in Australia has its roots in 'left' movements for social change such as feminism, socialism and environmentalism. Community development includes resistance towards the state and often includes direct action (Kenny 1999, 2006). The broad ontology of community development is always a project of progressive social change. This can occur through small acts of resistance to government policy to large public protests organised by established social movements (Kenny 2006). Kenny argues activists such as Alinsky were informed by the theory of community development. Alinsky's (1971) activism brought people together in order to mobilise for social change, a primary project of

community development theory and practice. Alinsky's activism was always a project of education. Many community workers are involved in social movements and campaign groups for social change; they are activists in nature because their everyday work in communities is focused on resistance of some kind (Ife & Tesoriero 2006). Mayo (2001) argues social movements can learn a great deal from the theory and practice of community development: issues such as how to build a group and how to maintain a network of people. Activists need to have outstanding communication skills. They need to know how to resist change within the system as well as outside the system. It is argued these skills are all informed by community development theory and practice:

> Whatever the difference in their perspectives ... community development workers and activists need to share an increasingly sophisticated common core of knowledge and skills (p. 101).

I take the position in this paper that progressive activism and community development are inextricably connected. Resistance occurs in many ways through the mobilisation of mass social movements and in the work of local and small community campaigns of resistance towards the state. I argue that activism which is informed by even the smallest acts of resistance in the everyday work of community workers is just as significant and important as the mass mobilisation of thousands of people in direct protest.

Less well-understood is the notion of circumstantial activism which is not included in present social movement learning theory. It is recognised that there are many activists who protest, but who do not necessarily relate to or have connections with formal political organisations or social movements (Brown & Pickerill 2009, Jasper 2009). This is a significant gap in the theory and practice of social movements. If we can understand the motivation and learning practices of circumstantial activists, social movements would be better placed to encourage and nurture participation of this distinct

group of activists, building movement members and the capacity for greater social change.

## Methodology

This empirical research was conducted in Australia, the primary methodology being qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln 2000) and case study research (Stake 1995, 2003, 2006). The methods used to obtain the data were in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Eight circumstantial activists and nine lifelong activists, a total of seventeen activists, were interviewed to explore their learning dimensions. A selection of the interviews were developed into case studies (Stake 2003, 2006). Research participants were purposively selected in order to reflect the diversity of current social issues both in Australia and internationally. Activists in the study were involved in issues to do with international human rights and civil liberties, refugee rights, disability rights, Indigenous politics, labour and the environment movements and issues of urban development, some of the most important social issues of our time. The research was given approval by the Ethics Committee of Victoria University. Activists who participated in the research were given the option of confidentiality, when this option was chosen, a pseudonym was used. Through this paper when a name is *italicised*, the participant has chosen to remain anonymous. The primary findings of the research activists' learning practices are embodied—the whole person is central to how they make meaning. Both groups of activists' learning is critically cognitive, driven by the emotions, and is both social and informal. Lifelong activists develop their skill and knowledge through a long immersion in a community of practice with other activists. Circumstantial activists on the other hand are rapid learners. They are frequently taken out of the comfort zones and onto a learning edge, because they need to develop knowledge and skills often very quickly in order to be effective in their activism. The major findings of the research relate to the holistic way activists develop knowledge and skill—including

mind, body and emotions in learning. The primary focus of this paper is the social and informal learning dimensions of activists' pedagogy.

## Social learning: communities of practice

Over the past twenty years, few traditions of learning have dominated adult education discourse in the same way as Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated leaning. Their development of a theory of adult learning which situates learning in social and community sites has contributed to understanding knowledge formation through informal learning. Lave and Wenger's work is a socio-cultural interpretation of learning that positions and locates learning within the social environment of work or communities. Lave (1991: 64) argues that this learning

> ... is neither wholly subjective, nor fully encompassed in social interaction, and it is not constituted separately from the social world (with its own structures and meanings) of which it is part.

Most epistemologies of learning are based on assumptions about people, the world and their relations to it. We internalise knowledge or we receive it in a variety of ways, and we learn to absorb this information and assimilate it (Lave & Wenger 1991). However, many adults bring to their learning a level of existing knowledge through having lived a long life full of complexity, with the result that some learning may not transfer, but rather synthesise with existing knowledge. Lave (1996) analysed the learning that takes place between the newcomer/old-timer in the processes of apprenticeship. Her study of apprentices learning the craft of tailoring in the early 1970s in Liberia is useful for understanding the way circumstantial (newcomer) activists develop their craft and become masterful. In this site of learning, Lave observed the work of 250 masters and apprentices in the space called 'Tailors' Alley' (p. 151). The research examined how the processes of apprenticeship allowed young tailors to become more masterful at their craft. Lave (1996) critiqued rational

learning in formal education and the 'narrow' focus of informal learning, which exemplifies the development of skill, but ignores many of the moral discourses that constitute and impact on our learning. What Lave is chiefly concerned about, however, is whether teaching and the transmission of knowledge is a necessary condition for learning (p. 151). She is critical of dualist approaches to pedagogy central to most traditions of learning because of their relativist focus on cognition, as this approach to pedagogy often alienates people who are the most marginalised. She points out that there needs to be a theory of learning which does not entrench 'social inequality in our society' (p. 149). Lave is referring to our reliance on cognition for understanding ways of knowing, and in a sense, her work is similar to Merleau-Ponty's (1962) existential examination of somatic knowledge developed though perception and being in the world. What Lave and Wenger (1991) argued for is a view of learning that goes beyond a mere transfer of knowledge. They claimed the focus on transition models of education do not account for the nature of the learner in their social world, and are largely 'cerebral' (p. 47). As Lave (1996) observed in the Liberian apprentices' daily work, they were learning about the social and cultural worlds around them. They were learning about class distinctions and the 'divisions in Liberian society' which were being played out in the daily 'business of dressing' (p. 151). They were learning about their craft, learning to live, learning to make an income—in essence, they were learning to become master tailors. They were learning about the status they would receive when they eventually became masters of their trade. In effect, the apprentices were learning about the historical and cultural world around them (Lave 1996).

The epistemology of popular education has revealed, mainly through the writing of humanist educators such as Freire (1972), that in the site of struggle learning will always occur. Neighbourhoods and communities are often sites of education where we learn to acculturate hegemony and resist hegemonic practices in society

(Gramsci 1971, Gramsci & Forgacs 1988). The practices of activism are usually closely connected to communities, community development and social movements. Sites of community and social movements are the spaces and places where activists learn through socialisation with one another, by learning in 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 31). Learning in activism is a naturally social process; through time, and the opportunity to observe and interact with others, activists become more expert at what they do. Recently, in Melbourne, the St Kilda foreshore became the site of struggle triggered by the developers' proposal for a high-density shopping complex. *Eva's* activism exemplifies learning in the site of struggle through her involvement in a local community campaign to resist the developers. Her learning included understanding the processes and machinations of government, 'I've learned more about how the Council actually work in terms of ... the role of the paid officers and the CEO as compared to the elected representatives'. Yet she says her biggest area of learning has been in understanding group dynamics and understanding processes of local government. She was learning about resistance and her own agency to act through resistance, as well as learning about the politics of local and state governments.

Activists' learning occurs through immersing themselves into a practice with other organisers, confirming Lave and Wenger's (1991: 93) supposition 'that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be a condition for effective learning'.

The dynamics of social interaction and conversation in the practices of activism can lead to fruitful learning. Every day activists connect through discussing their desires, needs, wants and aspirations. This is sometimes done unconsciously, but also done most purposefully while looking for a solution to a particular issue or problem. Those passing conversations about political processes, impending legislation or organising campaigns are all potential learning experiences. As they swap stories of practice, they are also revealing their concern

for the future of this knowledge and being able to pass it on to future generations of activists (Maddison & Scalmer 2006).

As Whelan (2005) reminds us, there is a great deal to be learned in social action, even when a campaign fails. Both Cam Walker[1] and *Jonathan* believe they learned most of their skill and knowledge on the job of activism; they learned how to manage large-scale events and to stage thousands of protesters to be able to march through city streets. They learned how to brief police, and stage musical and theatrical events in the midst of protest. *Jonathan* learned how to be a part of a human blockade in Palestine on the border of Israel—he learned about danger in protest, but also about the solidarity that comes from social action and being with other activists who were committed to a long journey of resistance. Cam Walker learned about the long haul from his action in the Franklin River blockade. Felicity Marlowe[2] learned a great deal of her skill through being involved in numerous protests, through her involvement in the student union and the Democratic Socialist Party, but more recently through her lobbying for social change parental rights for lesbians.

Like the tailors in Liberia, activists learn a range of skills through working with one another, although this is not always recognised as learning or knowledge by the activists themselves (Foley 1999, Newman 1994, 2006). They learn about the world around them, they learn about systems of government, key advisors and key politicians, they learn to hone their communication skills, to speak in public and they learn to engage with and use the media (Branagan & Boughton 2003, Jesson & Newman 2004). More experienced activists learn to become event managers; by learning how to plan a large rally, they deal with planners, police, local government, traders and large crowds of protesters, and they effectively navigate and negotiate these events in the same way that any major events planner would do. Like the Liberian apprentice tailors, activists learn through the daily practice of everyday activities, many of which develop their foundational

community development skills (Kenny 1994, 2006, Mayo 2005), including skills for networking, group work, planning and facilitation, social policy and research.

## Lifelong activists′ community of practice in student politics

Most of the lifelong activists had some involvement in student politics and it appears from this research that the situated site of student unions and student politics represented a community of practice for activists. These activists found that the student unions replicated the workings of the Australian political system. They learned about conservative and progressive politics and the role of factions in political parties. They learned to be strategic to caucus and compromise on decisions. They developed knowledge about the constraints and benefits of a two-party system of government and also learned how to resist collectively a policy by taking a strong and firm position on an issue. They learned communication skills such as how to develop an argument, how to persuade others, how to speak in public and how to use the media. They developed a reified[3] (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) practice through observing and interacting with other student activists in the union. Jorge Jorquera says he learned about 'pickets and protests and all of the tenacity that goes with direct action'. Felicity Marlowe believes she learned everything that she needed to know about politics from her experience of student politics at university: 'Student politics teaches you everything you ever needed to know about how state and federal politics work, I reckon, and it's all about factions!' For most of the lifelong activists, this social space of learning marked the commencement of a long journey of political understanding and apprenticeship in activism. This experience differed from that of the circumstantial activists who learnt rapidly and in more diverse communities. The student unions allowed individuals to test and rehearse their values, beliefs and ideology. These activists had the opportunity to incrementally develop their values, beliefs and

ideology, while they were learning about politics and protest in this community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998).

## Apprenticeship learning for both groups of activists

Activists learn from other activists all of the time, particularly though the support and guidance of experienced activists, and the theory of social learning highlights this relationship between the 'old-timers and the newcomers' (Lave 1996, Lave & Wenger 1991). Experienced activists play a role in assisting newcomer activists to develop their initial skills and become masterful or more expert in turn. Almost all of the activists in this study had at least one mentor. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), newcomers start out on the periphery of practice and, as they develop more experience, they become more masterful at their practice, and through socialisation pass on their skills to others (Wenger 1998). *Grace* had a significant mentor in her early days of activism. There was a person whose skilful handling of meetings she would observe in order to learn how to steer the agenda and discussion to get a desirable outcome. She recalls a meeting where she saw her 'experienced colleague stop a community member from de-railing the project':

> Now I went away from that meeting and dissected that. How did she do that in a way that did not demean him? We still got our outcome but he was left in no uncertain terms that he was not going to derail the process. I knew I did not have the skill to do that, and I'm not sure that I still would now. But I remember just sitting back watching the whole conversation unfold at this meeting and thinking, 'Wow, she is so good at this!' So I recognise that she had skills that I definitely did not have, and I guess by osmosis you learn the ways of dealing with complex and delicate situations.

Similarly, *Rose* had a number of skilful mentors who encouraged her to become involved in a lot of community groups and policy processes, thereby developing her skills through socialisation. This

sharing of expertise opened up to her a whole network of activists, community development workers and educators, and through this process *Rose* was becoming immersed in the pedagogy of activism.

This research has found activists use mentors and older, more experienced activists to learn from; they work in and with communities and social movements to develop their skills. The majority of their skills develops through situating themselves with other activists in a learning community of practice. Cam Walker 'went in search of all sorts environmental groups that he could work with'— he needed a social space where other activists congregated for him to learn his trade. He needed to know that there were other people out there who had a commitment to social change and the environment so that he could commune, socialise and take action with them. Jorge Jorquera states that he 'loves learning in collectives', and he loves to 'impart and share other people's knowledge'. For activists, the social space of activism, and the sociality that occurs within this field of practice, creates an agency and urgency to act. Through the use of the social space, activists' practices are mirrored and experience is gained; there is a communality which develops and a commonality of practice that occurs within the social space (Lave & Wenger 1991). Activists are becoming acculturated into a practice by experiencing that practice with others.

## Rapid learning and circumstantial activists

It is important here to explore the rapid learning of circumstantial activists as they go about their everyday practices with an agency to learn that is sometimes urgent. Terry Hicks[4], with no experience whatsoever in public speaking or dealing with the media, walks out into the street at the front of his house in suburban Adelaide and holds a media conference.

> The police shut off the end of the street to come into the house. This of course gave us insight into how they all work. After about

a week and a half, I went out and spoke to the media and of course then them [the Federal police and ASIO]. It was as easy as that.

He said he was lucky that through his experiences of using the media, he learned early on in the campaign to get his message out short and simple and, most importantly, to not claim that he had more knowledge than he did, or that he was an expert in international law or terrorism. This skill, learned in action, contributes to his toolkit of practice. These skills developed on the job are being synthesised with other skills and knowledge and are contributing to a developing epistemology of practice.

*Eva* attends a public meeting about the proposed development at her local government chambers with hundreds of residents, activists, politicians and media attending. The meeting is tense, it is disruptive, some people are angry, and some people wanted a resolution. The meeting erupts with people yelling, it is explosive, and the council members threaten to walk out and start to do so. *Eva*, who describes herself as someone who is uncomfortable putting herself in this type of situation, stands on a chair in the middle of the meeting and calls for the protesters to settle down, to calm down so that the meeting could recommence. She claims in this situation she was anxious, her action was something that she did which was 'completely spontaneous', she is out of her comfort zone as a learner, and she is developing skill through trusting her judgement in this social space.

*Bahar*, frustrated with the subjugation of the women around her, speaks to the Imam about male violence in the Turkish Muslim community. She challenges him to offer teachings about women's freedom and equality. She says it is not good enough to only have a 15-minute lesson once a year about the role of women, and there needed to be more education about women's rights for the men who attended the mosque. This action is empowering for her, a Muslim woman whose identity ascribed to her body by wearing the veil symbolises oppression to the Western world. It is a powerful

action because *Bahar* is challenging the patriarchal systems in her community and, by doing this, is promoting change to the customary gender roles.

Beckett and Hager (2002) claim we need to take more seriously judgements made in the heat of practice; instinctive feelings such as gut reactions and intuition help learners to make judgements and assists them to develop expertise. *Bahar's* social action at her mosque is learning in action by making judgements within a context of conflict. *Eva* is learning about how to engage with the crowd and speak in public; she is learning about the emotional environment of protest, in the hot action of activism, she is learning how to make judgements amidst the environment of protest, and in doing this she develops further skill and expertise (Beckett 2008, Beckett & Hager 2000). Terry's 'hot action' holding a media conference was risky, yet he made judgements in action; these judgements in practice would lead him to develop considerable expertise in his future use of the media.

## Power and the social learning model

Learning in a community of practice cannot be considered without understanding the contested nature of the term 'community'. Community is a nebulous term often meaning social closeness or a close-knit community in a geographic location. Wenger's (1998) view of community is often harmonious, yet human relationships are complex, especially in the workplace where specific roles are constructed, produced and reproduced through hierarchical subjectivities of being a worker, team-leader, coordinator or a manager. Conflict occurs in the communities, people are bullied, and their performance is monitored and managed. The epistemology of communities of practice rarely discusses why particular groups may have access to a community of practice or why they may feel excluded from it. An individual's exclusion from a community may make

them peripheral to the practice. In turn, they may feel marginalised from the practice they are engaging in and therefore learn very little (Hodges 1998). Similarly, workplaces and communities may perpetuate unethical behaviours and values (Hodkinson et al. 2004). Mentors and masters can pass on poor practice to newcomers and thwart their ability to learn, or their learning can be closed off by existing power relations (Foucault 1980). Bourdieu's (1977) 'habitus' is a useful guide here for understanding the enculturation of activists' practices in a social space.

Certain dispositions, certain practices are expected and passed down in communities. That is, certain approaches to a social issue are embedded in the practices of activism that occur through the creation of habitus. Lifelong activists such as *Kerry* are already a part of an existing habitus of Indigenous politics, tied to a history of dispossession and imperialism. The creation of a habitus of connecting 'country' to culture and educating Australian society about this reifies her practices within the habitus. In Indigenous politics there are certain discourses, actions, practices and processes that are expected and adopted through social action and are ready to be passed on. While these dispositions may vary from community to community or from social movement to social movement, there is nevertheless a certain habitus that is unique to this social field of practice (Bourdieu 1998). Habitus can maintain a practice or alternatively can constrain or inhibit it. *Kerry*'s initial awakening about her culture and Indigenous politics was empowering because she was told to learn about her history and this gave her motivation to become actively involved in Indigenous politics. She has learned a great deal from socialising with other Kooris and observing both good and poor practice:

> I think it's through socialising, sitting around and having the conversation with a mob of people, a mob of black fellas, and

going, 'Yeah, well we did that down there and we did this here' and
'Oh, those bastards over there, they never listen...'. Yeah. See and I
don't ... I think it's just being passionate. And if you're passionate
enough to share what you know, then you share it in a way that
people feel it coming from your heart and coming from your soul,
and they get to understand those things.

Felicity's learning, however, was constrained by the gendered
practices of the Democratic Socialist Party which compelled her to
reject specific aspects of the practices she observed. Terry's perceived
concerns about the so-called radical practices of some activists
were sufficient for him to distance himself from organised social
movements and groups.

## Circumstantial activists' identity and peripherality

Circumstantial activists do not always identify themselves as activists
and they do not tend to identify as members of social movements,
although they may have other identificatory expressions of why they
are involved in protest. For example, some identify as a concerned
parent or a concerned resident. As Terry Hicks states, 'I'm just an
ordinary bloke ... I'm not an activist, [I'm] a concerned parent'**.**
*Grace* finds the practices of so called radical activists disconcerting.
She does not identify with the term activist and claims she feels
quite uncomfortable with it, feeling there is 'a radical connotation to
it'. *John* identifies as an environmental activist but not a 'greenie'.
Whilst some circumstantial activists participate in social movements,
it is piecemeal and not always ongoing. For some activists, the
identificatory dispositions of the group are alienating to them and
thwart their full immersion in the movement. They remain on
the periphery of the practice and never fully become engaged in
social movements. If learning is a process of becoming, then social
movements need to be more inclusive to these newcomers to protest,
especially if they want to engage new movement members and
potentially create larger and stronger social movements.

## Conclusion

This paper on the informal and social learning dimensions of activists has revealed the broad range of places and spaces where activists learn from one another through socialisation. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning in 'communities of practice' and Bourdieu's 'habitus', I uncover the knowledge and skill development that occurs as activists learn from one another. I argue activists learn an array of community development skills in the practices of protest. Lifelong activists tend to develop their knowledge and skills incrementally, over a long period of time, by being immersed in student politics and social movements. Differently, circumstantial activists are rapid learners, and they come to activism through a series of life circumstances; at times, a crisis has precipitated their involvement in activism. They need to learn rapidly in order to be effective as activists.

The paper has outlined some of the differences in learning and identity formation between the circumstantial and lifelong activists in this study. The importance of the research cannot be under-estimated, particularly as it gives insight into the skill and knowledge that activists need to practise effectively. This research has implications for campaign groups, community organisations, non-government organisations, social movements and adult education in general. The significance of activists' epistemology should be recognised in a world where social and political action will be needed more than ever before. This is especially so if we take seriously our custodian role for a world and a planet that will need to sustain future generations. It is hoped this paper contributes to recognising and understanding their important pedagogy.

## Endnotes

1   Cam Walker is the Campaign Coordinator for Friends of the Earth, Australia. He has worked with FOE since 1989. He has been involved in all aspects of the organisation and campaigned on dozens of issues, from forests to toxic waste, Indigenous affairs, to sustainability and climate change.

2   Felicity Marlowe was involved in student politics in the 1990s at Melbourne University. She was elected National State Education Officer in 1997. Felicity was previously a member of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP). She has a Bachelor of Education, and worked as a student rights officer at RMIT in Melbourne and as a research officer and youth worker for same sex attracted young people. She has been involved in social movements relating to East Timor, gay and lesbian rights, and the anti-corporate globalisation movement. Her more recent activism has focused on working towards fertility rights for lesbians.

3   'Reification' as used by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) relates to identity formation in a community of practice. They claim participants (in a community of practice) often negotiated a shared repertoire of practice with one another, as they immerse themselves in a social practice. Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it produces a lived experience of participation in specific communities.

4   Terry Hicks is the father of David Hicks who was arrested by the Taliban in 2001 and handed over to the United States military, then detained on suspected terrorism charges at Guantanamo Bay, a United States military prison in Cuba. Terry campaigned for more than five years for David's release.

## References

Adorno, T.W., Tiedemann, R. & ebrary Inc. (2001), *Kant's critique of pure reason* (1959), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Alinsky, S. (1971). *Rules for radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*,Vintage Publishing.

Beckett, D. (2008). 'Holistic competence: Putting judgements first', *Asian Pacific Educational Review*, 9(1): 21–30.

Beckett, D. & Hager, P. (2000). 'Making judgements as the basis for workplace leanring: Towards an epistemology of practice', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(4): 300–311.

—— (2002). *Life, work, and learning: Practice and postmodernity*, Routledge, London.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*, Cambridge studies in social anthropology, 16, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

—— (1998). *Practical reason*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Branagan, M. & Boughton, B. (2003). 'How do you learn to change the world? Learning and teaching in Australian protest movements', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning,* 43(3): 346–360.

Brown, G. & Pickerill, J. (2009). 'Space for emotion in the spaces of activism', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 30: 1–12.

Burgmann, V. (2003). *Power, profit and protest: Australian social movements and globalisation*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Couch, J. (2009). 'From the salt marches to Seattle', Australian Catholic University. lecture notes, unpublished document.

Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2000). 'The discipline and practice of qualitative research', in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd edition), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.

Foley, G. (1999). *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education*, Global Perspectives on Adult Education and Training, New York: Zed Books.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Truth and power, Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings: 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*, New York: International Publishers.

Gramsci, A. & Forgacs, D. (1988). *A Gramsci reader: selected writings 1916–1935*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hodges, D. (1998). 'Participation as dis-identification within a community of practice', *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 5(4): 272–90.

Hodkinson, P., Hodkinson, H., Evans, K., Kersh, N., Fuller, A., Unwin, L. & Senker, P. (2004). 'The significance of individual biography in workplace learning', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 36(1): 6–24.

Ife, J. & Tesoriero, F. (2006). *Community development—Community-based alternatives in an age of globalisation* (3rd edition), Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education.

Jasper, J. (2009). 'The emotions of protest', in *The social movements reader: Cases and concepts* (2nd edition), Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Jesson, J. & Newman, M. (2004). 'Radical adult education and learning', in G. Foley (ed.), *Dimensions of adult learning: Adult education and training in a global era*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Kenny, S. (1994). *Developing communities for the future—Community development in Australia*, Melbourne: Nelson ITP.

—— (1999). *Developing communities for the future—Community development in Australia* (2nd edition), Melbourne: Nelson Publishers.

—— (2006). *Developing communities for the future* (3rd edition), Melbourne: Thompson, Nelson.

Lave, J. (1991). 'Situated learning in communities of practice', in L. Resnick, J. Levene & S. Teasley (eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition*, Washington, USA: American Psychological Association: 63–82.

—— (1996). 'Teaching, as learning, in practice', *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 3(3): 149–164.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Maddison, S. & Scalmer, S. (2006). *Activist wisdom: Practical knowledge and creative tension in social movements*, Sydney: UNSW Press.

Mayo, M. (2005). *Global citizens: Social movements and the challenge of globalization*, London: Zed Books.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*, International library of philosophy and scientific method, London: Routledge.

Newman, M. (1994). *Defining the enemy: Adult education and social action*, Sydney: Stewart Victor Publishing.

—— (2006). *Teaching defiance—Stories and strategies for activist educators. A book written in wartime*, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

—— (2003). 'Case studies', in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2nd edition), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

—— (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*, New York: The Guilford Press.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity. Learning in doing, social cognitive and computational perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whelan, J. (2005). 'A hard road: Learning in failed social action', in
J. Crowther, V. Galloway & I. Martin (eds.), *Popular education: Engaging the academy—international perspectives*, Leicester: National Institute for Adult Continuing Education: 157–168.

Williams, R. & Higgins, J. (2001). *The Raymond Williams reader*, Blackwell readers, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

## About the author

*Dr Tracey Ollis is a lecturer at RMIT University in the School of Global Studies, Social Sciences and Planning. Her PhD was entitled 'Accidental and lifelong activists: embodied knowledge, identity and learning'. Research interests include knowledge and learning formation in informal education settings such as communities, activist groups and social movements.*

## Contact details

*School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, P.O. Box 2476V, Melbourne, Victoria 3001.*
*Tel: +61399252328          Mob: 0438–909616*
*Email: tracey.ollis@rmit.edu.au*

# The educative role of a regional newspaper: Learning to be drier

Coral Campbell
Deakin University

Erica Smith and Emma Siesmaa
University of Ballarat

*Throughout the world, people have to deal with the issues of global warming and other more direct consequences of environmental change. This paper considers how a local newspaper has an educative function in a small community in advising people of specific issues and learning how to deal with changing resources. Across the period of several months in 2009, the Buloke Times, a local newspaper in the Wimmera-Mallee region of Victoria, Australia, was scanned for articles relating to the issue of water scarcity. In the 24 editions of the paper, 68 articles of various themes were found. The articles/themes were analysed along a number of lines: frequency across time, frequency within each issue, prominence of articles and unusual events. This research paper develops an overview of the role of the newspaper and its capacity to influence and educate the people who constitute its readership.*

*Key words: adult education, rural education, water scarcity, community newspapers*

## Introduction

Across the globe, governments, institutions, business enterprises and ordinary people are struggling to comprehend and manage the impact of global warming. How do people in rural areas develop understanding of issues which may affect them, either directly (as in a drought) or indirectly (as a global citizen)? Australia is only one country which is affected by drier conditions in many ways, but the issue of water availability has been impacting strongly in Victoria, particularly in the Wimmera-Mallee region. Traditionally, this area has been reliant on rainfall and the delivery of water from the catchment areas via open channels. However, a 'drought', lasting for 13 years, caused members of the small rural communities in this region to re-think the way they managed their water supplies, both in their farming practices and in their daily life.

This paper reports on an analysis of a regional newspaper's coverage of the drought and ways of coping with it, during the early part of 2009. The research was part of a larger project which examined the nature of 'learning to be drier' in four case study areas within Australia's Murray-Darling basin (Golding et al. 2009). In each case study, a number of participants were interviewed including suppliers of water, farmers, community centre workers, agronomists and education providers. The Wimmera-Mallee area was an area which had always had limited water availability, relying primarily on precipitation rather than irrigation. The case study of the region (Smith & Campbell 2009) showed that a range of 'learning to be drier' strategies were utilised, including individual learning from newspapers.

It was decided to supplement the qualitative fieldwork with an analysis of the local newspaper's coverage findings of the newspaper analysis during the period of the fieldwork. Accordingly, three months' issues of the twice-weekly paper, the *Buloke Times*, were

analysed to investigate how the paper covered the issue of drought and coping with it, and what contribution the newspaper might make to people's learning about the issue.

Thankfully, a prolonged period of rainfall during 2010 ended immediate drought conditions in the Wimmera-Mallee, which has traditionally been a 'wheat and sheep' region. In the nature of Australian climatic extremes, this period created its own difficulties for the farmers and other residents of the region, causing flooding, a locust plague and a downgrading of the quality of the wheat crop. Despite these difficulties, the rain was extremely welcome, prompting front-page headlines in the *Buloke Times* such as 'Jumping for joy in the rain' (13 August 2010) and 'All the rivers run' (20 August 2010). Nevertheless, long-term climate predictions indicate that drier weather is now the norm, leaving this paper still extremely relevant for the region, for other farming regions in Australia and for other countries.

## Background and literature review

There are many ways in which adults access new learning, both formally and informally. Rural communities have their own patterns of learning (Kilpatrick, Falk & Harrison 1998). Most local rural communities have a community centre, an adult learning centre, local gardening groups, agronomists and schools. Each of these particular groups provides opportunities for residents to talk about and share ideas regarding local issues, in this instance—the drought. The fieldwork for the research project (Smith & Campbell 2009) showed that community centres run special interest sessions; adult learning centres provide specific skill-based training; local gardening groups share information and consult 'experts' in the field; agronomists use the internet plus industry research to inform their specialism, and schools provide information to students and indirectly through

to families within the communities. Newspapers also play a role in educating their readerships about current issues at local, regional, national and international levels.

How can adult learning theory inform our understanding of the use of newspapers for learning? It has been argued that adult learners construct their own understanding and knowledge based on their experiences (Merriam & Caffarella 1998: 262). People also learn through their social networks with others (social constructivism) (Carlson & Maxa 1998). The theory of constructivism acknowledges the importance of prior understandings and experiences in the construction of new meanings (Doolittle & Camp 1999: 15). According to Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998), in the learning process adults want to learn about topics relevant to themselves and utilise previous knowledge to create understandings. It might be expected, then, that they would look through newspapers to learn about topics of importance to themselves and focus on articles which are about issues familiar to them but which take their understanding further.

Adult learning in small communities has particular characteristics (Golding et al. 2009: 562), such as community-based, adult learning organisations, local networks and interactions, and individual learning—there is little learning through formal institutions and mechanisms. This could be expected to mean that learning from newspapers is a little different in a rural community from a metropolitan community. Communities are essentially bound by physical locations, particularly in remote or rural areas. Communities of people may be those in one town who have tight physical boundaries and are interested in the people who are their neighbours. Within this local nexus of people, a sense of belonging, as well as the geographical location, also provides the overall definition of community. Community can be seen as a place of human interaction or 'interconnected relationships among people' (Kurpius 2000: 340)

or, as stated by Jeffres, Atkin and Neuendorf (2002: 391), 'overlapping systems that include a communication network and social structure'. In smaller communities, therefore, social networks are likely to play an increasingly important role in the learning process. Community connections are important in terms of what is known, how much is known and the particular influence of some people on others. There might be expected to be a heavy reliance on material generated by or through the community.

The local newspaper provides information on a range of events which may be local, regional, national and international in nature. In its most basic form, then, a newspaper can be said to be a distributor of information. However, research has indicated that a newspaper is more than just a printed description of some event (Holder & Treno 1997). The content of a newspaper reflects the social reality of its context, mirroring what is actually happening in the society within which it is produced. At a social level, it can represent the things which a community holds as most important. Equally important is the fact that a newspaper, written by humans, is a construction of reality as determined by the writer. This implies that human biases, empathies and opinions can deliberately, or inadvertently, enter into the fabric of the article.

Some research indicates that newspapers can act as brokers of power, negotiating who is to be empowered and who is not (Olien, Donohue & Tichenor 1995). A community can be said to be a dynamic interplay of people: some are on the periphery looking in, while others are the power-brokers of the community, forming groups and guiding decisions within the community. Community media can help illustrate these distinctions (Mosco 1998), highlighting the strength of particular groups within the community as well as disenfranchising others. Further research into the effect of media on communities (Demers & Viswanath 1999) showed how social power structures

shape the media's capacity to foster social change and interestingly how local journalists often frame articles in ways that reflect traditional power structures (Cohen 2000, Sakamoto 1999).

Moses (2007: 153) states that 'the media have the function of informing the democratic citizenry on matters that are in the public interest', and maintains that newspapers should show every side of an issue. She gives the example of changing public attitudes to racial inequality in the USA which writers attributed partly to the role of the media (Moses 2007: 161). This view of the media implies that a local newspaper has a duty to inform its readers about important matters and to provide alternative viewpoints about these matters.

However, in any discussion of the role of media in education, it is important to remember that not all people learn in the same way from newspapers. Grabe, Kamhawi and Yegyan (2009) in an experimental study found that people with higher levels of education learned more from newspaper articles, even though those with lower education levels were just as interested in the topics. They ascribed this basically to the extra years of practice, among people with greater education levels, in extracting information from written documents. Fleming, Thorson and Zhang (2006) likewise found that people's individual information processing strategies have an effect on the extent and nature of learning from newspapers, which is also affected by other factors such as gender and ethnicity, and individuals' attention to other media outlets. Marx, Nedelmann, Haertle, Dietrich and Eicke (2008), in a study in the health education area, caution that although educational campaigns through newspapers and other media increase awareness, they do not necessarily lead to a change in behaviour. They found that people with lower education levels learned most from information disseminated through a range of channels that used 'short-tailored slogans' (Marx et al. 2008: 378) such as 'Praise for GMW Water' or 'restriction levels eased'. These studies of the

educative role of newspapers suggest that newspapers form only one route for raising awareness of issues among the public and that they are more useful in educating certain sectors of the population than others.

How important has the issue of drought, and coping with it, been to the Wimmera-Mallee? There is no doubt that the Wimmera-Mallee region has suffered through an extended drought. In the ten years to 2008, average rainfall fell by 13% whilst maximum temperatures increased by 0.7%, with more summer days reaching over 30 degrees centigrade (Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment 2008). Although a short-term improvement was predicted, it has also been predicted (BCG 2008) that in the long term there will continue to be low levels of rainfall. The severity of the drought has meant that, in some years and some parts of the region, there have been no, or severely reduced wheat crops; on average, crop levels are expected to be about 18% lower in the future than they were prior to the beginning of the drought (BCG 2008). The farming community has had to make changes to the way it does things. Adaptations include: changing the crops grown, changes in varieties of crops, changing farming techniques and sowing strategies, and using different high technological machinery for more precise farming (BCG 2008, Schultz 2001). More generally, the CSIRO Technical Report (2007) indicates that there are a number of climatic changes which will occur: annual warming leading to an increased number of warm days and nights; less precipitation including rainfall runoff; increased likelihood of drought; and increased severity of droughts. CSIRO (2007) predicts that life, property and ecosystems will be at increased risk. Clearly this is a serious situation and it is important to consider how local institutions such as newspapers may contribute to changes in human behaviour that could ameliorate the effects of drought.

The case study in the Wimmera-Mallee, previously mentioned, proposed a hierarchy (Smith & Campbell 2009: 537) of 'learning to be drier' methods, from the most informal to the most formal (Marsick & Watkins 1990):

- feedback on actions, e.g. planting a new variety of crop or garden plant
- individual learning through the receipt of provided information (e.g. from the water authority, from one's children's school, the local newspaper or magazines produced by agricultural suppliers) or from seeking information via the internet
- talking informally 'over the fence' (back gardens) or 'through the fence' (farms) to neighbours
- attending a community activity specifically on water issues or via another group, e.g. gardening group or Country Fire Association meeting
- if a farmer, joining a farmers' development group and/or employing an agronomist, both of which sources were able to collect and filter information and pass it on
- enrolling in a course (from a short skill-focused program through to a qualification).

## Methodology

Across the three months of 3 February to 1 May 2009, the *Buloke Times* was scanned for articles relating to the issue of drought and coping with drier conditions. The newspaper is produced twice-weekly and typically is between 16 and 20 pages in length. There were 24 editions of the paper in the study, in which 68 relevant articles were found.

The *Buloke Times* was selected for the study as, among the available local newspapers, it was the only one which reported only on the local area (the Buloke Shire) rather than covering a larger region,

and/or including more general rural 'inserts'. In viewing the *Buloke Times*, we drew on the well-established research methodology of content analysis. Content analysis has been described by many researchers in somewhat different ways, but Kerlinger's (1986) definition (in Wimmer & Dominick 2000: 135) seems to be widely accepted: 'content analysis is a method of studying and analysing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of studying variables'. Content analysis is therefore the method we used to assess media content trends in the local *Buloke Times*. The study provides baseline data to see if the framing of climate change issues shifts and changes across the three-month period of the analysis. While it is a form of content analysis, it is not a sophisticated form. In terms of the 'uses of content analysis' (Wimmer & Dominick 2000: 136–137), we are using the technique in a traditional and descriptive manner. It is, however, partly being used to infer societal values about the issue of a drier climate. If we are to be rigorous with our analysis, we need to address a number of questions suggested by Krippendorff (2004). Figure 1 shows these questions and the responses for this study.

*Which data are analyzed?*

Specific newspaper articles, public notices

*How are they defined?*

They are easily defined by the content which must include some reference to water scarcity.

The article headings may not necessarily refer to water change.

*What is the population from which they are drawn?*

The population which accesses and reads the *Buloke Times* came from a regional area of approximately

50kms around the township of Wycheproof in the Wimmera-Mallee Region of Victoria.

*What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed?*

The data are analysed across a number of contexts. Initially the articles are read and classified into a number of themes. These themed articles are analysed according totheir frequency across the time of the investigation, according to their frequency within each issue, the prominence of articles (e.g. where they sit in the newspaper) and any unusual occurrences (e.g. newspaper issues without any articles).

*What are the boundaries of the analysis?*

The analysis is bounded in time and strictly to the articles extracted from the newspapers within that three month period.

*What is the target of the inferences?*

The target relates back to our original question—how the paper covered the issue and what contribution the newspaper might make to people's learning about the issue.

[After Krippendorf 2004]

**Figure 1: Issues addressed within data analysis**

From 3 February to 1 May 2009, each issue of the *Buloke Times* was scanned for articles on water issues or scarcity. The content of the articles related to the water scarcity issue, but the article heading did not necessary have to contain words illustrative of the issue. Classifieds, sport-related stories, advertisements and television guides were excluded from the collection. We sampled every edition of the newspaper in the specific time period. This is a census (Riffe, Lacy & Fico 1998), taking count of articles in context—except that we have focused only on certain content. A census is the best method (rather than taking, for example, one edition every month) with a relatively small amount of content, and avoids distortion of results. The time period (February to April 2009) was chosen as it covers the period just prior to fieldwork and therefore may have had some bearing on our participants' responses (see Smith & Campbell 2009 for a report on the fieldwork). To align our method more closely with an actual census (i.e. of all content), we counted the number of articles related to water scarcity as a proportion of the total newspaper content. We also located each story within the newspaper to ascertain its 'prominence' (e.g. page number, place on page) (Riffe et al. 1998: 132). We were aware that a simple counting or tallying approach could be regarded as superficial and reveal little about the actual value of water scarcity to the community of readership (Riffe et al. 1998: 36) of the *Buloke Times*, which is why we looked at the prominence and content of articles.

The articles collected were then further grouped into a number of categories or themes. We have done this on a simple 'grouping basis' where the recorded units 'share common attributes' (Riffe et al. 1998: 86). We could have chosen more complex categorisation, for example, 'hierarchical allocation', but as all of our selections come under one major theme of water issues/scarcity, this did not seem relevant.

Our selected themes for articles were:

- reports of educative events—events which intended to 'educate'
- educative—articles which tell people 'how to' do certain activities (i.e. directly instructional or didactic)
- outcome—reporting on the progress of a water-related initiative or program
- political or regulatory—reports on political issues or regulations relating to coping with drier conditions
- miscellaneous—all other articles with relevance to water scarcity/ drier conditions.

The articles were analysed on the basis of type, frequency, prominence and clustering.

## Findings

The data collected are represented within two tables which summarise the trends we found as we counted the number of articles related to water scarcity. Table 1 is a raw tally which reports the number of each category of article related to the date of the newspaper across the three designated months. The shading refers to 'clumping' of some themes across time.

Table 1:   Raw tally of articles, grouped by themes against date of issue

| Date of the *Buloke Times* newspaper release | Reports of educative events | Educative | Outcome | Political/ regulatory | Miscellaneous | Total | Trends |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 February | | | 2 | | | 2 | 32 articles across February (7 issues) |
| 6 February | | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 4 | |
| 10 February | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 | |
| 13 February | 2 | | 2 | | 1 | 5 | |
| 17 February | | 3 | 2 | | 2 | 7 | |
| 24 February | | | 1 | | 1 | 2 | |
| 27 February | 1 | 3 | | | 1 | 5 | |

| Date of the *Buloke Times* newspaper release | Reports of educative events | Educative | Outcome | Political/ regulatory | Miscellaneous | Total | Trends |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 March | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 16 articles across March |
| 6 March | | 1 | | | | 1 | (9 issues) |
| 11 March | | | | | 1 | 1 | |
| 13 March | | | | 1 | 1 | 2 | |
| 17 March | 2 | | | | 1 | 4 | |
| 20 March | 2 | 1 | 1 | | | 4 | |
| 24 March | | | | | | No articles | |
| 27 March | | | 1 | | | 1 | |
| 31 March | | | | | | No articles | |

| Date of the *Buloke Times* newspaper release | Reports of educative events | Educative | Outcome | Political/ regulatory | Miscellaneous | Total | Trends |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 April | | | 2 | | 1 | 3 | 17 articles across April |
| 7 April | | 1 | | | | 1 | (7 issues) |
| 9 April | | | | 1 | | 1 | |
| 17 April | 1 | | 3 | 1 | | 5 | |
| 21 April | 2 | 1 | | | | 3 | |
| 24 April | 2 | | 1 | | | 3 | |
| 28 April | 1 | | | | | 1 | |
| 1 May | | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Total | 14 | 16 | 19 | 6 | 13 | 68 | |
| % (rounded) | 20.5 | 23.5 | 28 | 9 | 19 | 100 | |

Table 2 shows the location of each story within each edition of the newspaper—that is, its 'prominence'. The table also provides information on the total number of articles within the dated edition, both as raw scores and as a percentage of total articles, again providing some evidence of the importance of the issue of water scarcity at that particular instance in time.

**Table 2:   Overview of articles relating to relative importance and prominence**

| Issue 2009 | Number of articles † | Percentage of coverage | Story prominence (location)* | Article theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tuesday 3 February | 2 from 27 | 7.4 | p.9, p.12 | Outcome |
| Friday 6 February | 4 from 19 | 21 | p.6 −p.13 | Varied: Political/ regulatory; Outcome ; Educative; Political/ regulatory |
| Tuesday 10 February | 7 from 12 | 58 | p.2–p.16 | Varied: Miscellaneous; Reports of educative events; Outcome; Educative; Political/ regulatory |
| Friday 13 February | 5 from 19 | 26 | p.2–p.11 | Varied: Reports of educative events; Outcome; Miscellaneous |
| Tuesday 17 February | 7 from 14 | 50 | p.1–p.12 | Varied: Outcome; Educative; Miscellaneous |
| Friday 20 February | 0 from 20 | - | n/a | n/a |
| Tuesday 24 February | 2 from 17 | 11.8 | p.9 | Outcome ; Miscellaneous |

| Issue 2009 | Number of articles † | Percentage of coverage | Story prominence (location)* | Article theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Friday 27 February | 5 from 21 | 23.8 | p.1–p.10 | Varied: Educative; Miscellaneous; Reports of educative events |
| Tuesday 3 March | 3 from 18 | 16.6 | p.7–p.15 | Varied: Educative; Miscellaneous; Outcome |
| Friday 6 March | 1 from 22 | 4.5 | Article 1: p.12 | Article 1: Educative |
| Wednesday 11 March | 1 from 28 | 3.6 | p.9 | Miscellaneous |
| Friday 13 March | 2 from 14 | 14.2 | p.6–p.7 | Political/ regulatory; Miscellaneous |
| Tuesday 17 March | 3 from 14 | 21.4 | p.2–p.11 | Reports of educative events Miscellaneous; Educative |
| Friday 20 March | 4 from 16 | 25 | p.1–p.11 | Reports of educative events; Educative; Outcome |
| Tuesday 24 March | 0 from 22 | - | N/A | n/a |
| Friday 27 March | 1 from 23 | 4.3 | p.2 | Outcome |
| Tuesday 31 March | 0 from 33 | - | N/A | n/a |
| Friday 3 April | 3 from 33 | 9 | p.2–p.19 | Outcome; Miscellaneous |
| Tuesday 7 April | 1 from 25 | 4 | p.13 | Educative |
| Thursday 9 April | 1 from 21 | 4.8 | p.11 | Political/ regulatory |

| Issue 2009 | Number of articles † | Percentage of coverage | Story prominence (location)* | Article theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Friday 17 April | 5 from 34 | 14.7 | p.1–p.12 | Political/regulatory; Reports of educative events; Outcome |
| Tuesday 21 April | 3 from 22 | 13.6 | p.10–p.15 | Educative ; Reports of educative events |
| Friday 24 April | 3 from 16 | 18.8 | p.1–p.9 | Outcome; Reports of educative events |
| Tuesday 28 April | 1 from 28 | 3.6 | p.10 | Reports of educative events |
| Friday 1 May | 3 from 16 | 18.8 | p.1–p.9 | Educative; Outcome; Miscellaneous |

† Articles excluded from count were classifieds, sport-related stories, advertisements and television guides
* Story prominence was based on a model suggested by Riffe et al. (1998)

Table 1 shows that the largest category of relevant articles (28%) was related to reporting on the progress of an initiative or program (outcome theme). The next most prominent type of article (23.5%) was the 'educative theme' which assisted readers to understand 'how to' accomplish some task or other. The themes of 'reports of educative events' or 'miscellaneous" followed closely in terms of commonality and the 'political or regulatory' themed articles represented less than 10% of the total number of relevant articles.

Across the three months, there were 32 articles relating to water scarcity and drier conditions in the seven issues in February (Table 1). This averages out at about four to five articles per edition, or to use percentage proportion, 23% of all newspaper articles across February related to the theme of water issues/scarcity (Table 2) (with peaks of 58% and 50% in the editions of 10 February and 17 February). In March, the number of articles dropped dramatically to 16 articles in

the 9 issues—fewer than 2 articles per edition, or proportionally 8% of total coverage. The other interesting observation is that two issues in March contain no articles of water scarcity at all. In April, there were 17 articles across 7 issues, averaging two to three articles per newspaper issue, proportionally 11% of all newspaper articles related to water issues or scarcity.

If we consider the 'clumping' trends, we notice, not unsurprisingly, that educative, outcome and miscellaneous themes were clumped mostly around February which also was the month when most articles were incorporated in the newspaper. However, there was a similar, but less strong, clumping of 'reports of educative events' articles in the latter part of April.

The other data to study from this table are the 'prominent' articles which feature on page one. Using location as an indication of the importance of the article, eight of the 68 articles on water issues/scarcity were found on the first page. Four of these articles ran across both pages one and two, but the rest were contained within the first page. The articles were fairly evenly spread across the themes: reports of educative events theme (2), educative theme (2), outcome theme (2), political/regulatory theme (1) and miscellaneous theme (1).

Table 3 provides an example of one prominent article in each theme.

*Table 3:*   *Examples of articles from each theme, which had*
*significant prominence (page one)*

| Date & type of article | Article heading and description |
|---|---|
| Reports of educative events | **Capturing rain in bucketsful**<br>This article describes a workshop presented by a CSIRO staff member as part of the ongoing program 'Healthy Soils Workshops' by the farmers' development group. The presenter spoke about water use efficiency and its increasing importance in farming systems. Another CSIRO staff member also discussed aspects of soil cover, tillage and compaction in terms of water use efficiency and crop growth. |
| Educative | **Water use challenge**<br>This article describes a challenge set forth by the local water authority, in which individuals are asked to work out how much water they use per day and try to reduce it. The article describes how to calculate water usage and then provides examples of how water usage could be reduced. The article also provides information on the water rebate. |
| Outcome | **Excitement builds at Birchip**<br>This article relates to a previous one which indicated that Lake Tchum would soon be filled. It provided information about the ongoing work of the Birchip Aquatic Club to improve and prepare the lake for water. Pictures accompanied the article showing various scenes of the working bee in action. |
| Political/regulatory | **Tchum Lake back in business**<br>This article discusses the supply of channel water to two local lakes (Tchum Lake and Green Lake). Both lakes are used for recreational purposes. The water authority indicated that the entitlement would not be required for towns or rural customers. The Tchum Lake Aquatic Club committee president provided comment on the benefits to the community. |
| Miscellaneous | **Water, water everywhere**<br>This article reports on a meeting of the Donald History and Natural History Society where members gave a presentation of historical times when the district had plenty of water. A photograph of floods in a Donald street illustrates the article. |

These articles are varied in nature, with the two articles about Lake Tchum, a small recreational lake just outside Birchip, one of the towns in the region, illustrating the importance of visible bodies of water to the communities.

## Discussion

Table 1 clearly shows that around a quarter of the items are about reporting on outcomes, and about a quarter are directly educative, providing information for readers to act on. These types of article may be considered to 'keep up morale', important in a region heavily affected by drought. The reporting of an outcome for any project or action would be considered a positive thing and could produce an optimistic response from the readership. Similarly, an educative article could also provide a sense of efficacy as it implies the possibility for 'action' or a movement in a positive direction. Reports of educative events articles feature for one-fifth of the time. These may be seen as attempts to alert the community to further learning opportunities in the important area of coping with less water and to spread the effects of these events beyond the audience who attended the event. This is important as a strategy in getting information to the 'hard to reach' people those, we had been told, who were unlikely to attend community events (Smith & Campbell 2009: 539). The relatively small proportion of articles about the political/regulatory environment could suggest that the newspaper assumes readers' familiarity with the regulatory environment, or simply a lack of news on the issue.

While water scarcity is a dominant problem of the communities that make up the readership of the *Buloke Times*, it would appear that the newspaper's authors give it some prominence, but do not make it the overwhelming content. The month of February, in particular, was dominated by water scarcity articles and perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that February is traditionally the driest

month and would constitute a time of major concern for the local communities. The social impact of dryness would also be felt most in February when the heat could not be alleviated through the use of more water. The following months see a significant drop in the number of articles, with, in April, the unusual situation where two newspaper issues contained no articles about water scarcity (none in a total of 55 articles).

When we look at the 'clumping' of themes, it is not significant that three themes were clumped in February, since this month had the highest percentage of content of water issues/scarcity articles. There was, however, a minor clumping of the 'reports of educative events' theme across four issues in April. Nearly half of all of the reports of educative events themed articles across the three months occurred in those four issues. It is possible that these articles, and the events which they report, were timed to coincide with the sowing season, encouraging farmers to think about the crop varieties, fertiliser use and sowing techniques.

Looking at the prominence of the issue, only eight of the 68 articles on water scarcity were on the front page, around 12%. Of the total number of articles published across the three months (N=534), this represents about 1%. It seems at first glance surprising that such a prominent world-wide issue, water scarcity, is not featured more strongly, particularly as it was at the time having such devastating effects on the local community. One possible explanation is that this region of Victoria is considered dry land country—water has always been scarce. Another explanation is the 'fatigue' in the community with the issue; it was perhaps judged that people wished to read about other matters which were more positive, particularly on the front page of the newspaper.

The front-page articles provide, however, another interesting insight. Four of these eight front-page articles were predominantly about

a particular farmers' development group and its activities. This is a strong local subscription-based organisation which provides information and support to local farmers through activities for its members but also for the wider community (Smith & Campbell 2009: 531). Previous research by Olien et al. (1995) stated that analysis of the content of a local newspaper can illustrate who holds power within the community and the degree to which power is concentrated within different groups. When considering the *Buloke Times*, we can see that the paper does in fact favour this local organisation and places its articles to the front of the paper. This not only ensures that readers see the articles as being of greater importance, but also ensures that the local organisation is considered the primary source of credible information. The newspaper appears to be favouring one particular local group and may be influencing the way the community sees that group as well as reflecting the traditional local power structures.

## Conclusion

Through consideration of the data and their analysis, we can attempt to answer our original research question: to investigate how the paper covered the issue of drought and coping with it, and what contribution the newspaper might make to people's learning about the issue.

In general, across the three months of the collection of the articles, while the percentage content did vary, it would be accurate to say that water scarcity and related aspects were significant for the readers of the *Buloke Times*. We can also add that the newspaper was mirroring the concerns and values of the community (Holder & Treno 1997).

In our discussion, we identified several factors relating to the newspaper and its role in the community. In its content, we believe that the newspaper is reflecting the value the community places on

the issue of water scarcity. Its coverage was intense in the month when water scarcity would be expected to be one of the dominant local issues, but fell away again as time progressed. The articles tended to focus on positive stories rather than negative ones, reflecting the community's need for improvements in morale.

The other factor indicated by the research was the issue of power. As discussed earlier, some researchers (e.g. Cohen 2000) maintain that local journalists often frame articles in ways that reflect traditional power structures. Mosco (1998) stated that '[c]ommunity media can … highlight the strength of particular groups within the community as well as disenfranchise others'. The number of articles relating to the farmers' development group and its activities was far greater than any other single group. It is unclear which groups may have been disenfranchised but certainly other groups in the community, such as Landcare groups, did not receive the same publicity. Not only did the newspaper highlight particular groups, but through consistent coverage may in fact have acted 'as brokers of power, negotiating who is to be empowered and who is not' (Olien et al. 1995). By promoting the activities of the group, the newspaper may have been enhancing its status within the community, and assisting in the development of the group, perhaps, but not necessarily, to the detriment of other organisations.

What contribution might the newspaper make to people's learning about the issue, and even to changing behaviour? By looking at the grouping of the articles on water scarcity, we can see that the newspaper has taken on a significant role of 'informer'. A large percentage of the articles were educative, providing information on outcomes of projects of local interest, reporting on the activities of community groups and also providing instances where the newspaper provides the 'mouthpiece' for bodies or individuals to instruct the reader. However, better information does not necessarily lead to behaviour change (Marx et al. 2008). Our broader research in the

community indicated that there was differential access to several types of learning activity among groups and individuals in the community (Smith & Campbell 2009), so clearly any educative outlet is helpful in adding to the mix of available learning activities.

We recognise the limitations of the research undertaken on the newspaper collection. How content is interpreted or whose perspective or 'partyline' is being considered, cannot form part of this paper, apart from recognising through the analysis whether particular groups were being privileged in some way. The content analysis as performed in this study cannot make statements about the effects of the articles on the audience (Wimmer & Dominick: 139). For that information, we would need to survey the readership or undertake interviews with individual and groups within the community that focus specifically upon the ways in which they use the newspaper to learn. Different members of the community would be likely to process the information differently (Fleming et al. 2006). However, a strength of the research is the prior fieldwork undertaken in the community so that in our interpretation we are able to draw upon the understandings of the community and its concerns gained through that research. For example, in the prior fieldwork, we found that most of those interviewed tended to hold the farmers' development group as the single most expert source of information for farmers. This was confirmed through the newspaper analysis, where articles from this group were placed closest to the front of the newspaper.

In terms of our classification of the totality of learning strategies about water scarcity and being drier in the case study (Smith & Campbell 2009: 537), learning from newspapers falls within the category, 'Individual learning through the receipt of provided information'. However, learning from newspapers both feeds into and feeds upon most of the other categories: for example, the *Buloke Times'* articles in the theme 'reports of educative events' report upon learning events from the categories 'community activity' and 'farmers'

development groups'. Hence the learning opportunities could be said to work in an iterative manner. This could be seen generally as productive, although it could also reinforce exclusion as discussed above.

It is possible to identify some contributions of this small research project. To our knowledge this is the first paper which uses newspaper content analysis to explore the issue of how a drought-stricken community copes with the drought. More generally, we believe our categorisation of learning-related content in newspapers is unique, and could be applied to the educative role of a local newspaper about other issues of community concern, not just drought. We believe that the structured approach developed in this paper could be of use to local newspapers in enabling them to reflect on their educative role, and to community groups and other organisations who seek to educate members of their communities more effectively on issues of concern.

*Appendix—Expanded Table 2:   Overview of articles relating to relative importance and prominence*

| Issue 2009 | Number of articles † | Percentage of coverage | Story prominence (location)* | Article theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tuesday 3 February | 2 from 27 | 7.4 | Article 1: p.9 | Article 1: Outcome |
| | | | Article 2: p.13 | Article2: Outcome |
| Friday 6 February | 4 from 19 | 21 | Article 1: p.6 | Article 1: Political/regul'y |
| | | | Article 2: p.6 | Article 2: Outcome |
| | | | Article 3: p.9 | Article 3: Educative |
| | | | Article 4: p.13 | Article 4: Political/regul'y |
| Tuesday 10 February | 7 from 12 | 58 | Article 1: p.2 | Article 1: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 2: p.9 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 3: p.10 | Article 3: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 4: p.10 | |
| | | | Article 5: p.10 | Article 4: Outcome |
| | | | Article 6: p.12 | Article 5: Educative |
| | | | Article 7: p.16 | Article 6: Educative |
| | | | | Article 7: Political/regul'y |
| Friday 13 February | 5 from 19 | 26 | Article 1: p.2 | Article 1: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 2: p.? | |
| | | | Article 3: p.? | Article 2: Outcome |
| | | | Article 4: p.7 | Article 3: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 5: p.11 | Article 4: Reports of educative events |
| | | | | Article 5: Outcome |
| Tuesday 17 February | 7 from 14 | 50 | Article 1: pp.1–2 | Article 1: Outcome |
| | | | Article 2: pp.1–2 | Article 2: Educative |
| | | | Article 3: p.3 | Article 3: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 4: p.3 | Article 4: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 5: p.8 | Article 5: Outcome |
| | | | Article 6: p.9 | Article 6: Educative |
| | | | Article 7: p.12 | Article 7: Educative |
| Friday 20 February | 0 from 20 | - | n/a | n/a |
| Tuesday 24 February | 2 from 17 | 11.8 | Article 1: p.9 | Article 1: Outcome |
| | | | Article 2: p.9 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |

| Issue 2009 | Number of articles † | Percentage of coverage | Story prominence (location)* | Article theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Friday 27 February | 5 from 21 | 23.8 | Article 1: p.1 | Article 1: Educative |
| | | | Article 2: p.4 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 3: p.6 | Article 3: Educative |
| | | | Article 4: p.7 | Article 4: Educative |
| | | | Article 5: p.10 | Article 5: Reports of educative events |
| Tuesday 3 March | 3 from 18 | 16.6 | Article 1: p.7 | Article 1:  Educative |
| | | | Article 2: p.7 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 3: p.15 | Article 3: Outcome |
| Friday 6 March | 1 from 22 | 4.5 | Article 1: p.12 | Article 1: Educative |
| Wednesday 11 March | 1 from 28 | 3.6 | Article 1: p.9 | Article 1: Miscellaneous |
| Friday 13 March | 2 from 14 | 14.2 | Article 1: p.6 | Article 1: Political/regul'y |
| | | | Article 2: p.7 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |
| Tuesday 17 March | 3 from 14 | 21.4 | Article 1: p.2 | Article 1: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 2: p.10 | |
| | | | Article 3: p.11 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 4: p.11 | Article 3: Educative |
| | | | | Article 4: Educative |
| Friday 20 March | 4 from 16 | 25 | Article 1: pp.1–2 | Article 1: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 2: p.3 | |
| | | | Article 3: p.9 | Article 2: Educative |
| | | | Article 4: p.11 | Article 3: Outcome |
| | | | | Article 4: Reports of educative events |
| Tuesday 24 March | 0 from 22 | - | n/a | n/a |
| Friday 27 March | 1 from 23 | 4.3 | Article 1: p.2 | Article 1: Outcome |
| Tuesday 31 March | 0 from 33 | - | n/a | n/a |
| Friday 3 April | 3 from 33 | 9 | Article 1: p.2 | Article 1: Outcome |
| | | | Article 2: p.6 | Article 2: Miscellaneous |
| | | | Article 3: p.19 | Article 3: Outcome |

| Issue 2009 | Number of articles † | Percentage of coverage | Story prominence (location)* | Article theme |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tuesday 7 April | 1 from 25 | 4 | Article 1: p.13 | Article 1: Educative |
| Thursday 9 April | 1 from 21 | 4.8 | Article 1: p.11 | Article 1: Political/regul'y |
| Friday 17 April | 5 from 34 | 14.7 | Article 1: pp.1–2 | Article 1: Political/regul'y |
| | | | Article 2: p.1 | Article 2: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 3: p.2 | |
| | | | Article 4: p.10 | Article 3: Outcome |
| | | | Article 5: p.12 | Article 4: Outcome |
| | | | | Article 5: Outcome |
| Tuesday 21 April | 3 from 22 | 13.6 | Article 1: p.10 | Article 1: Educative |
| | | | Article 2: p.10 | Article 2: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 3: p.15 | |
| | | | | Article 3: Reports of educative events |
| Friday 24 April | 3 from 16 | 18.8 | Article 1: p.1 | Article 1: Outcome |
| | | | Article 2: p.6 | Article 2: Reports of educative events |
| | | | Article 3: p.9 | |
| | | | | Article 3: Reports of ducative events |
| Tuesday 28 April | 1 from 28 | 3.6 | Article 1: p.10 | Article 1: Reports of educative events |
| Friday 1 May | 3 from 16 | 18.8 | Article 1: p.1 | Article 1: Educative |
| | | | Article 2: p.6 | Article 2:  Outcome |
| | | | Article 3: p.9 | Article 3: Miscellaneous |

† Articles excluded from count were classifieds, sport-related stories, advertisements and television guides

* Story prominence was based on a model suggested by Riffe et al. (1998)

## References

Birchip Cropping Group (BCG) (2008). *Farm-level adaptation options: Wimmera-Mallee*, Wimmera-Mallee: Birchip Cropping Group.

Carlson, S. & Maxa, S. (1998). 'Pedagogy applied to non-formal education', *The Center*, retrieved 3 October 2009 from www.fourh.umn.edu/ resources/center/PDF/center-story9.pdf

Cohen, J. (2000). 'Group identity: The case of synagogue pamphlets', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs,* 32: 247–275.

CSIRO Technical Report (2007). http://www.climatechangeinaustralia.gov. au/technical_report.php

Demers, D. & Viswanath, K. (eds.) (1999). *Mass media, social control, and social change: A macrosocial perspective*, Ames: Iowa State University Press.

Doolittle, P.E. & Camp, W.G. (1999). 'Constructivism: The career and technical education perspective', *Journal of Vocational and Technical Education,* 16(1), online version, retrieved 3 October 2009, from http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JVTE/v16n1 /doolittle.html

Fleming, K., Thorson, E. & Zhang, Y. (2006). 'Going beyond exposure to local news media: An information processing examination of public perceptions of food safety', *Journal of Health Communication*, 11(8): 789–806.

Grabe, M., Kamhawi, R. & Yegiyan, N. (2009). 'Informing citizens: How people with different levels of education process television, newspaper and web news', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 53(1): 90–111.

Golding, B., Brown, M., Foley, A., Smith, E., Campbell, C., Schulz, C., Angwin, J. & Grace, L. (2009). 'Wicked learning: Reflecting on Learning to be drier', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 49(3): 544–566.

Holder, H. & Treno, A. (1997). 'Media advocacy in community prevention: News as a means to advance policy change', *Addiction,* 92 (Supplement 2): S189–S199.

Jeffres, L.W., Atkin, D. & Neuendorf, K.A. (2002). 'A model linking community activity and communication with political attitudes and involvement in neighborhoods', *Political Communication,* 19(4): 387–421.

Kilpatrick, S., Falk, I. & Harrison, L. (1998). 'Learning in rural communities: A response to rapid economic change: CRLRA Discussion Paper Series, Paper D13/1998', Launceston: Centre for Research and Learning in Rural Australia, University of Tasmania.

Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F. & Swanson, R.A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (5th ed.), Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kurpius, D. (2000). 'Public journalism and commercial local television news: In search of a model', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly,* 77(2): 340–354.

Marsick, V. & Watkins, K. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*, London: Routledge.

Marx, J., Nedelmann, M., Haertle, B., Dietrich, M. & Eicke, B. (2008). 'An educational multimedia campaign has differential effects on public stroke knowledge and care-seeking behaviour', *Journal of Neurology*, 255(3): 378–384.

Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mosco, V. (1998). 'Myth-ing links: Power and community on the information highway', *The Information Society,* 14(1): 57–62.

Moses, M. (2007). 'The media as educators, educational research, and autonomous deliberation', *Peabody Journal of Education*, 82(1): 150–165.

Olien, C.N., Donohue, G.A. & Tichenor, P.J. (1995). 'Conflict, consensus and public opinion', in Glaser, T.L. & Salmon, C.T. (eds.), *Public opinion and the communication of consent*, New York: Guilford: 301–322.

Riffe, D., Lacy, S. & Fico, F. (1998). *Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research* (2nd ed.), Malwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Sakamoto, K. (1999). 'Reading Japanese women's magazines: The construction of new identities in the 1970s and 1980s', *Media, Culture and Society,* 21: 173–193.

Schulz, C. (2001). 'Lifelong learning for farmers: The changing world of agriculture', Masters research paper, Deakin University.

Smith, E. & Campbell, C. (2009). 'Learning to be drier in dryland country', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 49(3): 520–543.

Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment (2008). *Climate change in the Mallee*, Melbourne: Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Wimmer, R. & Dominick, J. (2000). *Media research: An introduction*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

## About the authors

***Coral Campbell*** *is a senior lecturer in Deakin University, and has worked in the fields of science research, school education and higher education. Her current research relates to how people learn in the rural and regional areas and many of her research projects are related to this focus in country areas of Victoria, Australia. In particular, Coral has strong research interests in science education in individuals from birth to adolescents and the systems which support learning science enthusiastically.*

## Contact details

*Faculty of Arts & Education, Deakin University, Pigdons Road, Waurn Ponds, Victoria 3216*
*Tel: +61 3 5227 1485          Fax: +61 3 5227 2260*
*Email: coral.campbell@deakin.edu.au*

***Professor Erica Smith*** *has been researching vocational education and training (VET) and adult education for fifteen years. Prior to that, her careers included community work and human resource management. She has lived in rural and regional Australia, in two States, for almost 20 years. Her major research interests are VET policy, workplace training, apprentices and traineeships, VET practitioners, and young people's movements between work and education.*

## Contact details

*University of Ballarat, P.O. Box 663, Ballarat, Victoria 3353*
*Tel: 61+ 3 5327 9665          Fax: 61+ 3 5327 9602*
*Email: e.smith@ballarat.edu.au*

**Emma Siesmaa,** *PhD Scholar and Research Assistant, is currently undertaking her doctorate within the School of Human Movement and Sport Sciences. Her thesis is investigating the impact of sport injuries and injury risk perceptions on children's participation in sport, attracting an Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship and funding from Sport and Recreation Victoria. Emma has also extended her research into the field of Education and worked, more specifically, within various projects exploring issues in Vocational Education and Training.*

## Contact details

*University of Ballarat, P.O. Box 663, Ballarat, Victoria, 3353*
*Tel: 61+ 3 5327 6140*
*Email: e.siesmaa@ballarat.edu.au*

# Corporate sector practice informs online workforce training for Australian government agencies: Towards effective educational-learning systems design

Elspeth McKay and Cenie Vilela
School of Business Information Technology and Logistics
RMIT University

*The purpose of this paper is to outline government online training practice. We searched individual research domains of the human-dimensions of Human Computer Interaction (HCI), information and communications technologies (ICT) and instructional design for evidence of either corporate sector or government training practices. We overlapped these domains to investigate primary research outcomes. Corporate sector and government employees encounter barriers to their adoption of web-mediated training. One such barrier is a lack of enthusiasm, possibly due to ineffective instructional design, which in turn affects motivation towards online learning. Although the Australian Government offers training incentives to the general community, a negative attitude towards online training persists in the community, particularly throughout*

*the government sector. Adoption of effective ICT training tools is a critical issue for the corporate sector and government agencies worldwide. This paper presents a compelling case for courseware designers to develop sound instructional design principles to enhance web-mediated learning programmes.*

***Keywords****: corporate sector, government agencies, online training, instructional systems design, human-computer interaction, workforce training.*

## Introduction

The first concepts of online learning were developed in the 1960s at the University of Illinois through the creation of a computer-based education environment called PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations), designed for delivery to university students. Some say PLATO paved the way for much of the online interaction seen today (Woolley 1994), including discussion forums, message boards, interactive testing, e-mail, chat rooms, picture languages, instant messaging, remote screen sharing and multi-player gaming. In many places around the world, the online learning environment is now integral to higher education and training sectors. While online learning is yet to reach some countries, the number of institutions and individuals accessing web-mediated learning resources is increasing exponentially (Anderson 2008). Flowing from this connection, one may expect that online training would occur as a natural consequence in workforce skill development practice.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate online training adoption in Australian government agencies. To initiate our government-funded research, we examined the literature to provide a critical analysis of current e-learning/training practice in the corporate sector—with a view to inform government agency

workforce training. The paper unravels similarities and differences between government agencies and the corporate sector.

First, we analyse government reports and corporate sector research, before outlining the importance of prior domain knowledge and individual preferences in adult learning. To clarify our use of the term 'prior domain knowledge', we simply mean that people may know relevant knowledge within one particular area of the specified learning content. For a full description of the concept of prior domain knowledge and how it may interact with the cognitive performance outcomes of educational-learning systems, see Yu (2007) and Yu, Jan, Simoff and Debenham (2007). We present the crux of our argument through the human-dimensions of human-computer interaction (HCI) (McKay 2008) and instructional systems design. To identify possible barriers to the adoption of e-learning, we examine this concept at an organisation level and an employee level. The paper concludes with a review of models that are used to measure training effectiveness.

## Current research

### Government reports

Established in 1996, the Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) is the key Australian government advisory group on national directions and priorities. This body publishes widely and promotes information communications technology (ICT) tools in vocational education and training (VET) and in adult and community education (ACE). The Australian Flexible Learning Framework (the Framework) is one of the key FLAG initiatives that leads collaborative development and provision of essential national ICT infrastructure. As such, it evaluates and provides advice on emerging technological opportunities. It also facilitates access to e-learning products and practices that enable an innovative, flexible and responsive national training system [http://www.flag.edu.au/]. To compare this

Australian experience, it is useful to look at the training practice in the UK.

In the UK, there is the National School of Government's initiative for e-learning—a partnership with the Ministry of Defence, supported by a growing syndicate of departments. It instigated a massive e-learning program entitled Understanding the Civil Service. This program includes a comprehensive list of training modules for policy and civil service processes (used within the European Union and the wider UK civil service). An example from its long list of workforce skill development includes finance and ethics. Its online training modules are designed to provide a sound and comprehensive resource of knowledge acquisition and foundation skill development.

Foundation skills have been examined in Australia through the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), to assist individuals, educators, employers and other decision-makers. The ALL survey collected individuals' data on their familiarity with ICT tool usage. This survey involved a series of self-assessment questions on perceptions and degree of comfort in using these tools. The final outcomes explored the relationship between the use of ICT tools and associated computer-literacy skills (Statistics Canada & OECD 2005). While this research concentrated on basic knowledge and understanding, another Canadian research team at the Athabasca University continued to review the theory and practice of online learning (Anderson 2008).

While there is a plethora of research for all education levels (Anderson 2008), the (Australian-based) Framework frequently reports that the population is aging in Western countries. Consequently, this phenomenon is creating worldwide interest in lifelong learning strategies to maintain current workforce skill levels (Palmieri 2007). One of the ways this skill retention can be achieved is to acknowledge the special needs of an aging workforce. According to Bowman and Kearns (2007: 1):

- many older workers want to go on learning and earning, but in ways that suit their lifestyle preferences;
- this interest in learning often involves part-time work and part-time community service or volunteering; and
- the desire among many older workers to keep learning, including learning about computers and other technologies.

In facilitating effective and efficient training for an aging/mature workforce—on the one hand, it is more difficult for researchers to establish a common view on government training than it is for the corporate sector. Often, the government agency data may only appear in a report appendix listing as organisations visited or interviewed with no further detail. When this lack of published information occurs, the researcher cannot specify detailed data due to privacy laws (Benninck 2004). However, viable partnerships are developing in Australia between VET organisations, private industry operators and government enterprises (AFLF 2006) that enables a growth of expertise in training practise.

Unfortunately, there are many instances when marketing companies seize the opportunity to link e-learning to knowledge management to attract government agency sponsorship. The understandable attraction for the industry operators to such initiatives appears to be in their opportunity to cash in on the procurement of government web-services and media support (Schofield 2002:88). This is the point, we believe, where the Australian government initiatives to promote e-learning successfully negotiate across the government/corporate sector divide. By seizing these lucrative prospects and securing government contracts—the corporate sector appears to treat workforce training as a stand-alone skills development issue, disconnected from the wider competitive nature of corporate sector business strategies.

Corporate sector

We found that corporate sector research is more likely to identify barriers to online training than government agency research reports. Unlike the tendency for government agencies not to report publicly on their training practice, the corporate sector maintains a more open, transparent attitude to its online training practices. Murray (2001) described a four-staged e-learning planning process she observed in her research into the corporate sector that involved planning, building, integration and improvement. Murray argued that forward-thinking Canadian employers were starting to embrace e-learning to become more productive and innovative, regardless of the size, resources or sector of their organisation. Murray (2001) further stated that at the same time these employers were using e-learning to create self-directed, lifelong learners among their employees—and to save money. This sentiment is shared by the Australian VET community.

In 2001, networking members of the VET community developed a Framework initiative known as The Knowledge Tree. This network encourages the sharing of research and learning innovation in relation to the professional practice of e-learning development. Moreover, the group's e-journal is seen as a useful resource for anyone looking to identify and understand best practice. The common thread between the government reports and the corporate sector's research publications is their focus on skills development and their consideration for adult learning (AFLF 2007, Benninck 2004). Nevertheless, facilitating e-learning for an adult trainee cohort requires specialist facilitation.

To this end, Schofield (2002: 88) was prompted by three factors to conduct research into online learning in the corporate sector. The first relates to the unilateral weaknesses in the VET system today that are disconnected from the broader business survival objectives. The second factor is that corporations play a major role in workforce skills formation, alongside education and training institutions. The third is

the scarcity of independent research on corporate e-learning. Instead, what we know is largely provided by companies that have an interest in selling e-learning solutions. Even when the information they provide is objective, reliable and credible, perceptions of a conflict of interest remain. With this in mind, DeRouin, Barbara, Fritzsche and Salas (2005) caution readers about the use of independent survey results, acknowledging that industry partners may have a conflict of interest with regard to findings. Moreover, they identify a need for a science of e-learning that informs corporations on how to design, deliver and evaluate e-learning systems.

In keeping with the concern for evaluation, in a US-based university report, Mungania (2003) employed a web-based survey to collect data with the aim of demonstrating the viability of web-based surveys as an effective tool. Her research identified the challenges facing all stakeholders which result from the increasing demands placed on employees. Thus, the pressure to improve online training and professional development will likely increase, and consequently there will be increased investments in time, people and financial resources designated for e-learning.

Yet courseware creation is integral with the availability of appropriate ICT tools. Eklund, Kay and Lynch (2003) reviewed the literature to examine a range of issues covering technology, teaching and learning, and organisational issues. They offered general recommendations on priorities that will promote the successful deployment of ICT tools in VET. They argued that organisations must consider factors and developments of a technical, organisational and pedagogical nature that are likely to generate change in the use of technologies in education and training.

More recently, Jasinski (2007) conducted applied research on embedding innovative practice in e-learning. The aims of her research were to:

- identify factors that contribute to embedding innovative practices;
- inform future decision-makers with regard to the considerations and potential impact of embedding innovative practices; and
- develop models for ongoing embedding of innovative practices to be utilised by future VET providers.

According to Jasinski (2007: 57), there are healthy signs of progress towards embedding innovative e-learning. In her survey, 86% of respondents considered they were somewhat more innovative than the average person, and 44.7% believed they were delivering innovative e-learning practices and techniques to a high or very high extent. While 53.1% believed their organisation was extremely or somewhat innovative, respondents believed their organisation was using only 25.7% of e-learning innovations to a high or very high extent. This disappointing result means that because organisations are failing to implement innovative e-learning practice, it is a sign that they (organisational management) reflect a poor understanding of the importance that adults place on having appropriate opportunities for practice (Reigeluth & Carr-Chellman 2009).

Our investigation of government reports and corporate sector research has revealed there is more evidence from the latter to stimulate and support government sector training. We reviewed valuable scholarly contributions from Canada and the UK to highlight the collaborative nature of the corporate sector towards government sector training interactions. We also identified two other major areas of inter-related research that are relevant to our investigation of online training adoption in Australian government agencies. They involve the human-dimensions of HCI and instructional systems design. We therefore draw on both these important aspects to highlight the special needs of adult learners/government trainees. Then to tease out where the problems may lie, we review the organisational barriers towards adopting e-learning and finish the

discussion by presenting models that are used to measure training effectiveness.

## Adult learning

Knowing how to learn new skills is something that improves as we grow older. For the most part as we travel along our lifelong learning path, it becomes easier to differentiate which instructional strategies are likely to suit us best. The difficulties we are likely to face, especially when learning in web-mediated instructional environments, will depend on whether there are any fast-tracking options for the learning tasks. It is well known that novice learners require the full range of rules and information related to learning something new, whereas an experienced learner might only require a quick revision (McKay 2008). Novice learners will therefore respond best to measured amounts of guidance—through progressively more complex instructional/learning content—with strategic opportunities for interactive practice examples along the way (Tennyson & Bagley 1991). Alternatively, a person possessing a more complete grasp of the task will likely want to experiment first, preferring to refer to the rules and basic information only when they need them. Unfortunately, there are many web-mediated instructional strategies that do not cater for both modes of learning. When instructional systems cannot adapt to this important requirement, they run the risk of demotivating both groups of learners (Tennyson & Bagley 1991). The result may be confusion for novice learners when the primary rules and examples are not sufficiently explicit, and boredom and frustration for the experienced learner who is forced into following the complete, step-by-step, instructional strategy.

Yet because some people's ability to immediately recall prior domain knowledge may slow as they age, we include contributions here from cognitive psychology research to enhance our argument for better understanding of cognitive performance.

Repovs and Baddeley (2006) have contributed a valuable body of work on people's working memory. They say that working memory has proven to be an important part of the human cognitive system, providing the ability to maintain and manipulate information in the process of guiding and executing complex cognitive tasks. Cognitive tasks that include past experiences are encoded and held in our memory as retrievable information. According to Kalyuga (2005), an important principle of acquiring appropriate prior domain knowledge is that the instructional strategy is integrated into our working memory, while the information we receive (Riding & Cheema 1991) is held in our long-term memory. Therefore, the design of instructional materials for online delivery must include consideration of the learners' level of expertise (prior domain knowledge). Research shows that adults often have relevant experiences that either drive them (or demotivate them) to learn, and that, when the content and design of instructional materials do not challenge or interest them, they can become demotivated (Tennyson & Bagley 1991).

Regardless of the fact that an adult may require special strategies to assist them with their recall of prior domain knowledge for everyday events, we must ask: what is known about the interactive effect of individual learning preferences and adult cognitive performance, when engaged with e-learning programs?

The human-dimensions of HCI

While many organisations have e-learning websites that include courseware and other online learning artefacts, these sites often lack a coherent and effective broad-based, e-learning strategy (Rosenberg 2001). We are suggesting that the human-dimensions of HCI offer the strategic 'glue' for successful online training which Rosenberg has noted is lacking. As such, the human-dimensions of HCI are but one piece of the complicated computer-usability or 'techno' puzzle that involves two distinct contexts (McKay 2008). One relates to the human-dimension or social context of computing, while the other

relates to the machine-side, where people's perspectives are shaped by the performance of the technical computing components. The literature deals more often with the latter. It is only in recent times that voice has been given to computer-usability issues that involve the human dimensions.

The human dimensions of HCI provide a useful framework for understanding how adult learners prefer to participate in online training. Attention to prior domain knowledge increases a learner's willingness to take part. It is essential to offer fast-tracking opportunities as discussed above. Yet despite the ample evidence that the corporate courseware creators include some of the principles of instructional design (Merrill 2002), there is little evidence that the government sector's online programs encourage a positive attitude towards such learner-centred participation. We discuss some of these issues below.

### Instructional systems design

Before we do this, it is important to differentiate between learning theories and instructional design theories. The former are about the (internal) processes of the learning, while the latter cover the method (external) nature of the instruction (Reigeluth 1983). Our discussion on instructional systems design principles therefore draws on the views of established experts such as Merrill, Reigeluth and Tennyson. The long-standing principles developed by these experts are applicable to both traditional and computer-enabled educational systems (Anderson 2008). As before, we base our discussion on the multimedia learning principles recommended by the experts from transdisciplinary domains, which include adult learning with ICT-mediated tools.

It will be advantageous to educational-learning systems' design if the courseware creators adhere to the principles of instructional design (Merrill 2002). For example, Merrill's First Principles of Instruction

involve five principles that promote learning. These well-known strategies are effective tools for courseware creators to note when considering how to cater for learner characteristics (Merrill 2002). Moreover, when developing training materials, these principles help to determine the sequencing of the learning content.

Reigeluth (2008) presents key markers for change in educational-learning systems by contrasting the industrial-age with knowledge-age organisations. These key markers provide a general conceptualisation of the ways in which 'learning systems—and the instructional theories and strategies that guide their design—need to change' (Reigeluth 2008: 209). He recommends five factors that point to the need for change in instructional theories: the growing complexity of tasks; the increasing reliance on collaboration in performing tasks; the growth of web-based learning; the increasing power of performance support systems; and the emergence of personal tutorial systems. Reigeluth also points out that developing an individual's learning capacity must include equipping them with skills that enable them to adapt to developments in educational-learning technologies.

Tennyson (2008) recommends that instructional theory be usable, valid, theoretical and linked to learning theory. By 'usable' he means that instructional theory should be stated with sufficient clarity to allow successful implementation. A valid instructional theory should undergo empirical testing and practical evaluation. Such theory should explain how a particular instructional procedure works. The literature highlights the importance of understanding learning theories and instructional design for improving organisational training.

We have seen that adult learning requires courseware creators to pay attention to learners' special needs. This means that e-learning artefacts and instructional strategies should be flexible enough to promote choice of knowledge navigation (locked into a step-by-step

skill development path for a novice) or having the ability to pick and choose what to do next (brushing up on rusty prior domain knowledge). Having said all this, from our review of the research literature, we have identified particular categories of 'resistance' towards adopting e-learning for workforce training in the corporate sector.

## The way forward

### Barriers

A common thread observed in the literature is concerned with (perceived) barriers to the adoption of online training in the corporate sector. We are suggesting that one method to overcome such barriers as they may pertain to government agencies is to gain an understanding of how these barriers are affecting workforce training in the corporate sector. We categorise such barriers towards adoption of e-learning in two levels: the organisation level (Table 1) and the employee level (Table 2). At the organisation level, the barriers include costs, relevance, training effectiveness and technical support, while time, content and training effectiveness are the main barriers identified by employees.

We noticed these barriers are related to the economics, training relevance, policies, regulations, compliance—the (lack of) IS-related standards seem to be factors that deter organisations from achieving their training goals. For employees, the barriers are related to the learning content and assessment, technical and professional support, limited time and access which may prevent participation, and achieving quality learning outcomes. Our general impression arising from the literature review is one that courseware creators in corporate organisations (and government agencies) need to overcome all these barriers, as we believe they affect the successful delivery and implementation of e-learning programs.

Organisation-level issues

Cost is an issue among small and medium enterprises (Murray 2001). The initial costs incurred in developing training materials and purchasing the requisite infrastructure can be prohibitive. This financial burden can be further exacerbated once an e-learning intervention is introduced. It then becomes an ongoing costing issue due to the implementation and maintenance of the educational-learning system (Murray 2001). However, in large organisations, cost is not seen as being so much of a problem, because the value of e-learning is recognised (Schofield 2002). Yet some organisations are concerned about return on investment (ROI) issues (AFLF 2006).

**Table 1:   Organisation-level barriers**

**Adopting online training—organisation level**

| Barriers | Source | Description |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Cost | AFLF (2006, 2007) Brown et al. (2006) Murray (2001) | Infrastructure cost, development of e-learning materials, implementation cost, ROI |
| Relevance | AFLF (2006, 2007) Benninck (2004) Callan (2009), Murray (2001) | Relevance to business, relevance of training content, benefit to organisation, limited understanding of e-learning, compliance |
| Training effectiveness | AFLF (2007) Grant & Danziger (2005) Schofield (2002) | Training outcome, meeting training expectations |
| Technical support | AFLF (2006), Benninck (2004) | Lack of access to industry partners, unavailability of in-house expert |

The relevance of the e-learning outcomes to organisations is another issue identified in the literature (Benninck 2004). Benninck

asserts that one of the issues faced by organisations is their limited understanding of the (educative) nature of e-learning, and what benefits they may gain from such initiatives. This dilemma is apparent in small and medium enterprises, as they do not find e-learning to be relevant to their needs (AFLF 2006). However, e-learning is emerging as a promising industry (Rosenberg 2001). Thus, organisations may succumb to the persuasive marketing proposals made by e-learning product vendors, as they promise better solutions to training programs (Benninck 2004). This type of persuasive behaviour presents a dilemma, as organisations may be vulnerable to such false claims that a particular (generic or off-the-shelf) e-learning course is relevant to their specific training need. In reality, some employers may not find an appropriate e-learning program on the open market. Even when the desired learning content seems to be available, the instructional modules are usually designed for traditional methods of delivery (that means face-to-face), and as such are unsuitable for e-learning (Murray 2001).

In terms of training effectiveness, organisations want to be assured that their investments in training will be worthwhile and will achieve their business goals (AFLF 2007, Schofield 2002). Hence, it is necessary to quantify the general training and overall course effectiveness. In a study by Grant and Danziger (2005), they provide such an example using Donald Kirkpatrick's four-level model that was first developed in 1959 (we describe this model later in the paper). They explored the tangible and intangible benefits (whether realised or not) of e-learning in four large companies. Grant and Danziger reveal evidence that the corporations paid attention to employee satisfaction with the e-learning courseware, yet the indicators they employed to measure satisfaction tended to be informal and unreliable. Better models that are used to measure training effectiveness are described separately below.

A lack of technical support (AFLF 2006, Benninck 2004) is also shown to be a barrier for some organisations. They find it difficult to implement e-learning programs, especially if the training pertains to technical (i.e. ICT) issues. It is clear that such organisations need assistance from a subject-matter expert to offer technical support and independent advice (Benninck 2004).

### Employee-level issues

One of the problems with e-learning that employees highlight is the amount of time they are expected to spend on training (AFLF 2007, Murray 2001). Employees report that they do not have enough time to devote to workplace learning. To this end, Mungania (2003) ranked situational barriers facing employees contemplating e-learning. According to this researcher, situational barriers relate to an employee's environment and life circumstances. More specifically, these barriers result from a lack of time for study, time management problems, over-commitment to multiple roles and responsibilities, and interruptions during study. Similarly, Jasinski (2007) finds that available time and competing priorities are limiting factors for engaging with e-learning.

*Table 2:*   *Employee-level barriers*

**Adopting online training—employee level**

| Barriers | Source | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Time | AFLF (2007)<br>Jasinski (2007), Murray (2001) | Lack of time, situational, time management, availability, priorities |
| Content | AFLF (2007)<br>Benninck (2004)<br>Bowman and Kearns (2007)<br>Callan (2009), Jasinski (2007)<br>Mungania (2003)<br>Murray (2001) | Relevance, suitability, quality, design issues |
| Training effectiveness | AFLF (2007)<br>Brown et al. (2006)<br>Berge and Giles (2008)<br>Grant & Danziger (2005)<br>Mungania (2003)<br>Schofield (2002) | Learning style, instructional, learning motivation, personal, dispositional, organisational, delivery media (preference for blended learning) |
| Technical issues | Mungania (2003) | Lack of ICT skills, cultural |

Low quality e-learning content is cited by employees as problematic (see Table 2). These niggling issues include: relevance, quality, design and suitability of the materials. 'There was little understanding of the human element that is needed to design effective learning activities to be used in conjunction with relevant technology. Technology alone is meaningless and useless' (Benninck 2004: 3). However, e-learning is thought to be particularly relevant to the learning and skills developmental needs of older workers, for example, 'when used in appropriate strategies, and when carefully managed to take account of the diverse needs and preferences of mature age workers' (Bowman &

Kearns 2007: 30). These special requirements call for the customised design of relevant learning materials that are suitable and engaging for adult learners.

Training effectiveness is also identified as a barrier for employees (AFLF 2007, Brown et al. 2006). Employees want to perform better and view e-learning as a skills building tool. Yet many people still feel unable to adopt e-learning programs at work to improve their skills and performance (Murray 2001).

It is reported that mature-age employees encounter difficulties linked to technical issues as barriers (Mungania 2003). Oddly enough, these older workers are described as people over 45 years of age (Bowman & Kearns 2007)—according to this research, most mature-age employees have difficulty coping with the use of computers for training. Frequently they lack ICT and computer literacy skills that are necessary for dealing with e-learning programs. Furthermore, those employees who have broader organisational, managerial responsibilities often face cultural barriers caused by stereotyping based on their age or the differing attitudes that emanate from employers and younger workers (Bowman & Kearns 2007). It is therefore important to reduce the difficulties experienced by mature-age employees. Designing computer interfaces that are easy to follow may help older workers to enjoy using e-learning programs. Another benefit is to improve their understanding of the technology, while maintaining their productivity and usefulness in the workplace.

We have discussed whether there are similarities between the perspectives of the organisation and the employees towards adoption of e-learning in two levels. At the organisation level, the barriers appear to denote a wider business strategic attitude relating to costs, relevance, training effectiveness and technical support. With an emphasis more towards instruction/learning, time, content and training effectiveness were identified as barriers by employees.

However, a real issue for concern is whether we can tell if the e-learning/training is effective or not.

## Models used to measure training effectiveness

The literature reveals that researchers do use a range of models and approaches to measure the effectiveness of training. Among these models are Kirkpatrick's four-level approach, Phillips's Five-Level ROI Framework, the IBM ACE Model and the PEL-IRT model.

According to Aguinis and Kraiger (2009), Kirkpatrick's four-level approach is the most popular evaluation method used by researchers to measure training effectiveness in corporate organisations. The four levels relate to reaction, learning, transfer and results (Kirkpatrick 1998). Level I—Reaction—measures participants' reactions to learning, and questions them about what they think of the program. Level II—Learning—refers to the learning that is gained and measures how much additional knowledge is acquired through the training and whether participants have learned to do something differently. Level III—Transfer—concerns the application/transfer of the learning into a new environment, providing a way of tracking whether people who have been trained improve by using e-learning techniques and may be able to share their learning with other people. Level IV—Results—measures the impact of learning and whether it contributes to improvement of the (corporate) business. In summary, the Kirkpatrick model is focused on the learning event itself and its effectiveness.

Some modifications to Kirkpatrick's model have been introduced. For instance, Phillips extended Kirkpatrick's model to Level V—ROI (Kramer 2008, Phillips 2003), and this is known as the Phillips Five-Level ROI Framework. Nevertheless, for IBM, their latest innovation effectiveness model goes beyond that of Kirkpatrick (Tai 2008). As such, it is known as the IBM ACE Model (ACE stands for accountability, context and effectiveness). This accountability

model reflects that motivation and diligence to learn should be the responsibility of the learner, identifying four partners who share the accountability for a learning program: the learner, the designer of the program, the instructor or facilitator who delivers the program, and the manager who supports the program (Tai 2008). Context involves the organisation's learning that supports the employees' needs. Effectiveness is achieved when employees are given training that is focused on and relevant to their work environment, according to Tai (2008).

Chen et al. (2005) personalise their e-learning system based on the Item Response Theory (IRT)—calling it PEL-IRT. This model estimates the performance abilities of online learners and recommends appropriate course materials for them. Experimental results show that this adaptive, educational-learning system can provide personalised course material recommendations for online implementation based on learner abilities. According to Chen et al. (2005), this learner-centric feature accelerates the learner's learning efficiency and effectiveness. It provides learners with adaptive and personalised, web-based, instructional strategies according to the course materials that are visited by each individual learner and his/her responses.

The studies mentioned above indicate that the effectiveness of training can be measured using different methods and models. Moreover, in measuring training outcomes, it is important to quantify the effectiveness of the training. Even so, there still remains a need to enhance the effectiveness of the instructional strategies that are often employed. We suggest that this improvement can unlock the corporate knowledge of adult learners (DeLong 2004), which all too often lies dormant. We are proposing that, due to the unresolved barriers to the adoption of e-learning described earlier in this paper, the success of online training is currently rather tenuous. Yet we also see there is no reason why efficient and effective ICT training tools

cannot provide the necessary adaptive and flexible, learner-centred, e-learning that is required by adult trainees.

## Conclusion

Corporate organisations wishing to involve their employees in online training require a thorough understanding of the e-learning paradigm. When organisations embrace e-learning, they do need to be assured of the quality of training that the educational-learning system offers to their employees—for example, that the training will assist the business to achieve its goals and improve customer service. In the majority of studies reviewed in this paper, it was noted that the barriers to adopting e-learning that were most frequently identified by employees were learning content and quality of delivery techniques. These barriers must be reduced if not eliminated—particularly in light of the significant investments in e-learning made by such organisations. Both government and corporate organisations invest large amounts of funds, resources and employee time into various forms of training. Clearly, there is a lack of evidence regarding which strategies are effective in different environments to support online training in diverse government agency contexts (McKay et al. 2007).

Content and quality of e-learning instructions also need to be designed with the utmost consideration for the effectiveness of the training outcomes. To achieve this worthy impact, it is perhaps useful to think that the **'e'** in e-learning refers to **'how'** an online course is digitised, while the **'learning'** refers to **'what'** the course content involves. The instructional strategies should be carefully examined to ensure they achieve the expected training outcomes. Furthermore, the **'why'** is about helping individuals achieve their educational goals or assisting organisations to improve employee skills and workforce performance (Clark & Mayer 2008).

We propose that employees/corporate trainees engage more intuitively with e-learning. It is important for courseware creators

to consider the learning needs of adult learners, and to effectively measure their learning outcomes. Jasinski (2007) asserts that e-learning may facilitate highly valuable training and skills development. Even so, if the learning achievement is not measured accurately, employers and employees will be less inclined to participate (or believe in) the potential of adopting e-learning. Due to the verbal/visual nature of the online learning environment, measuring the effectiveness of e-learning can be difficult (McKay 2000)*;* however, this is an educational-learning systems' usability goal and by default is a design challenge that is shared by other types of training and workplace strategies (Jasinski 2007) and should not be bypassed.

We believe that creating a learner-centred, flexible and adaptive online training program that integrates the power of ICT multimedia tools will improve the delivery of e-learning programs. Along with this, it might also address the needs of organisations which seek to become more competitive by building a well-trained, skills-enhanced workforce. Moreover, we also say that a user-centred, flexible and adaptive training program relies heavily on good instructional design and a learner-friendly interface. A poorly designed e-learning interface means that the learners will spend more time on 'learning the materials' than on mastering the information and knowledge provided (Ardito et al. 2006). Finally, we say that the difficulty encountered in adjusting to a poorly designed, e-learning interface will render the whole learning experience ineffective, delaying the inevitable groundswell against implementing good quality e-learning in government agencies and corporate training rooms.

## Acknowledgements

and industry sponsors Government Skills Australia and NetEffective Media Group. Chief Investigators were Associate Professor Elspeth McKay (RMIT University, School of Business IT and Logistics, and Adjunct Professor John Izard (RMIT University, Education) and Australian Postgraduate Award Industry–Information Technology and Communications scholar, Cenie Vilela-Malabanan.

## References

Aguinis, H. & Kraiger, K. (2009). 'Benefits of training and development for individuals and teams, organizations, and society', *The Annual Review of Psychology,* 60: 451–74.

Anderson, T. (2008). 'Towards a theory of online learning', in T. Anderson (ed.), *The theory and practice of online learning* (2nd ed.), Athabasca, Canada: Athabasca University: 45–74, http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120146 [retrieved 8/6/11].

Ardito, C.M.F., Costabile, M., De Marsico, M., Lanzilotti, R., Levialdi, S., Roselli, T. & Rossano, V. (2006). 'An approach to usability evaluation of e-learning applications', *Universal Access in the Information Society,* 4: 270–83.

Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) (2006). *E-learning in industry growing: A review of the use of e-learning in six industries, prepared for the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's Industry Engagement Project*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, http://flexiblelearning.net.au [retrieved 8/6/11].

Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) (2007). *E-learning benchmarking project: Final report*, http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au [retrieved 8/6/11].

Benninck, R. (2004). 'Implementing e-learning from the corporate perspective'*, Knowledge Tree e-Journal*, http://www.knowledgetree.com [retrieved 8/6/11].

Berge, Z. & Giles, L. (2008). 'Implementing and sustaining e-learning in the workplace', in Esnault, L. (ed.), *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies,* 3(3): 44–53.

Bowman K. & Kearns, P. (2007). 'E-learning for the mature age worker: Final report', http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au [retrieved 8/6/11].

Brown, L., Murphy, E. & Wade, V. (2006). 'Corporate e-learning: Human resource development implications for large and small organizations', *Human Resource Development International,* 9(3): 415–27.

Callan, V. (2009). 'How organisations are using e-learning to support national training initiatives', http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au [retrieved 8/6/11].

Chen, C., Lee, H. & Chen, Y. (2005). 'Personalized e-learning system using item response theory', *Computers & Education,* 44: 237–55.

Clark, R.C. & Mayer, R.E. (2008). *E-Learning and the science of instruction: Proven guidelines for consumers and designers of multimedia learning* (2nd ed.), San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

DeLong, D.W. (2004). *Lost knowledge: Confronting the threat of an aging workforce*, New York: Oxford University Press.

DeRouin, R.E., Barbara A., Fritzsche, B.A. & Salas, E. (2005). 'E-learning in organizations', *Journal of Management*, 31: 920.

Eklund, J., Kay, M. & Lynch, M. (2003). 'E-learning—emerging issues and key trends: A discussion paper', http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au [retrieved 8/6/11].

Grant, R. & Danziger, J. 2005. 'Exploring the corporate benefits and employee adoption of corporate e learning', working paper, Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations, UC Irvine, http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/34q832jt [retrieved 8/6/11].

Jasinski, M. (2007). 'Innovate and integrate: Embedding innovative practices', http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au [retrieved 08/06/11].

Kalyuga, S. (2005). 'Prior domain knowledge principle in multimedia learning', in R. Mayer (ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of multimedia learning*, Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press: 325–337.

Kalyuga, S. (2008). 'Relative effectiveness of animated and static diagrams: An effect of learner prior knowledge', *Computers in Human Behavior,* 24: 852–886.

Kirkpatrick, D.L. (1998). *Evaluating training programs: The four levels* (2nd edn), San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Kramer, H. (2008). 'Measuring the effect of e-learning on job performance', PhD dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Florida, microfilm, Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest UMI Microform Information and Learning Company.

McKay, E. (2000). 'Measurement of cognitive performance in computer programming concept acquisition: Interactive effects of visual metaphors and the cognitive style construct', *Journal of Applied Measurement*, 1(3): 257–286.

McKay, E., Axmann, M., Banjanin, N. & Howat, A. (2007). 'Towards web-mediated learning reinforcement: Rewards for online mentoring through effective human-computer interaction', *Proceedings of the sixth IASTED International Conference on Web-Based Education*, Chamonix, France: 210–215.

McKay, E. (2008). *The human-dimensions of human computer interaction, Vol.* 3, The Future of Learning Series, Amsterdam, IOS Press.

Merrill, M.D. (2002). 'First principles of instruction', *ETR&D [Educational Technology Research and Development],* 50(3): 43–59.

Mungania, P. (2003). 'The seven e-learning barriers facing employees: Research report', *e-Learning Consortium*, University of Louisville.

Murray, D. (2001). *E-Learning for the workplace: Creating Canada's lifelong learners*, Conference Board of Canada Publication from the policy business and society division.

Palmieri, P. (2007). 'An environmental scan research paper to inform the 2007 project—Inclusive e-learning: Mature age workers', Australian Flexible Learning Framework, Department of Education, Science and Training, Australian Government.

Phillips, J. (2003). *Return on investment in training and performance improvement programs* (2nd edn.), Boston, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann Publications.

Reigeluth, C.M. (1983). 'Instructional design: What is it and why is it?', in C.M. Reigeluth (ed.), *Instructional-design theories and models: An overview of their current status* (1st ed.), Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 3–36.

Reigeluth, C. (2008). 'New instructional theories and strategies for a knowledge-based society', in M. Spector, C. Ohrazda, A. Van Schaack & D. Wiley (eds.), *Innovations in instructional technology: Essays in honour of M. David Merrill*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 207–215.

Reigeluth, C. & Carr-Chelman, A.A. (eds.) (2009). *Instructional-design theories and models: Building a common knowledge base*, Vol: III, New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Repovs, G. & Baddeley, A. (2006). 'The multi-component model of working memory: Explorations in experimental cognitive psychology', *Neuroscience,* 139: 5–21.

Riding, R. & Cheema, I. (1991). 'Cognitive styles—an overview and integration', *Educational Psychology*, 11(3&4): 193–215.

Rosenberg, M.J. (2001), *E-learning: Strategies for delivering knowledge in the digital age*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schofield, K. (20020. 'On-line learning: Case studies of the corporate experience', *Oval Research Working Paper 02–01*, University of Technology, Sydney.

Statistics Canada & OECD (2005). 'Learning a living: First results of the adult literacy and life skills survey', OECD Publishing, Paris, http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89–603-x/2005001/pdf/4200878-eng.pdf [retrieved 8/6/11].

Tai, L. (2008). *Corporate e-learning: An inside view of IBM's solutions*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Tennyson, R.D. & Bagley, C.A. (1991). 'Structured versus constructed instructional strategies for improving concept acquisition by domain-experienced and domain-novice learners', *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Illinois.

Tennyson, R.D. (2008). 'Learning theories and instructional design: A historical perspective of the linking model', in M. Spector, C. Ohrazda, A. Van Schaack & D. Wiley (eds.), *Innovations in instructional technology: Essays in honor of M. David Merrill*, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 219–236.

Woolley, D.R. (1994). *PLATO: The emergence of online community*, http://thinkofit.com/plato/dwplato.htm [retrieved 8/6/11].

Yu, T. (2007). 'Incorporating prior domain knowledge into inductive machine learning: Its implementation in contemporary capital markets', unpublished doctoral dissertation (Computer Sciences), University of Technology, Sydney, http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/2100/385/02whole.pdf?sequence=2 [retrieved 8/6/11].

Yu, T., Jan, T., Simoff, S. & Debenham, J. (2007). 'Incorporating prior domain knowledge into inductive machine learning', http://www.forecasters.org/pdfs/DomainKnowledge.pdf [retrieved 8/6/11].

### General websites

Flexible Learning Advisory Group, http://www.flag.edu.au/ [accessed 8/6/11].

National School of Government's initiative for e-learning, http://www.nationalschool.gov.uk/cwmp/elearning.asp [accessed 8/6/11].

## About the authors

***Associate Professor Elspeth McKay*** *is passionate about designing effective e-learning resources for the education sector and industry training/reskilling programmes. Her research interests involve investigations of how individuals interpret text and graphics within Web-mediated learning environments. This research involves developing specialist e-learning tools implemented through rich internet applications that include an advanced repurposing pilot system (ARPS) that she has developed for an ARC Linkage research project.*

***Cenie Vilela*** *is currently undertaking her PhD in Business Computing at the RMIT School of Business Information Technology and Logistics. Cenie was awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award Industry Scholarship to work with Associate Professor McKay on the ARC Linkage project entitled: 'An intelligent software-AGENT: innovates adaptive workplace e-training needs'.*

## Contact details

*School of Business Information Technology and Logistics, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, Victoria  3106*
*Tel: +613 99255978 and +613 9925 1509*
*Fax: +613 9841 5996*
*Email: elspeth.mckay@rmit.edu.au  and  cenie.vilela@rmit.edu.au*

# Friendship and relationships in virtual and intercultural learning: Internationalising the business curriculum

Joanna Crossman
University of South Australia

Sarbari Bordia
Australian National University

*Graduates need to be prepared for working in global organisations that increasingly rely on virtual, culturally diverse teams. This paper reports on a qualitative research study concerned with the perceptions of university business students who collaborated on a virtual and international project to learn about intercultural communication. The findings indicated that participants capitalised on the opportunity the project presented to find friends and to negotiate and deepen relationships. In addition, the analysis revealed that social interaction also characterised and influenced the learning experience itself and had implications for engagement. The paper concludes that the subjectivities of social interaction are powerfully embedded in the learning process and may play a part*

*in engagement. Second, the project was perceived as a valuable way of preparing students for workplaces where developing intercultural communication skills and online, culturally diverse team relationships are required.*

**Keywords***: Internationalisation, friendships and relationships, higher education, business education, social nexus, virtual communication*

## Contextualising the project

Evidence suggests that studies in intercultural communication have gained greater focus given the ethical, economic and demographic implications of globalisation (Eblen, Mills & Britton 2004: 28). It is within this broad context that this paper is presented since it shares the findings of a research study about an intercultural, online learning project involving students enrolled in an Australian university.

The rationale for the project was multi-faceted. First, Australian students were enrolled in a first year business communication course and the decision to incorporate the project at that time responded to evidence that positive and early experiences of learning in culturally mixed groups would influence student willingness to engage in culturally mixed university group work later in their academic careers (Summers & Volet 2008: 368). Second, virtual groups working on shared goals across cultures, space, time and organisations (Kirkman et al. 2002: 67–77) have a key role in the successful performance of contemporary organisations as well as in university learning. The findings of a number of studies that multicultural groups have the potential to perform better than homogenous ones further supports the value of universities developing students with the skills and understandings to work in this way (Summers & Volet 2008: 358). Given that social and cultural conflicts often give rise to project

failure rather than technology in online contexts, reflection upon the apparent impact of these influences is important in preparing business graduates (Chang 2006: 372, Cho & Lee 2008: 548).

Preparing graduates for culturally diverse workplaces is one of the major goals of internationalisation (Eblen, Mills & Britton 2004: 28, Volet & Ang 1998: 5) and it is of interest to note that recent cycle two reports from the Australian Universities Quality Agency suggest that the issue of social and cultural inclusivity in some universities between domestic and international students is a matter attracting some attention (AUQA 2010), though Jiang (2008: 351) has suggested that the social and cultural rationales for internationalisation seem to have taken a back seat to political and economic drivers.

Designing the teaching and learning necessary to accommodate the needs for the internationalisation of business, where managers are increasingly leading culturally and geographically diverse virtual groups, is not a simple task (Blasco 2009: 174, Sidle 2009: 19). The process is not made easier by the apparent paucity of empirical research studies that examine the influence of intercultural and social factors in computer-mediated collaboration (Cho & Lee 2008: 549) and the limited studies exploring ways that computer technology can be used within intercultural communication pedagogy (Eblen, Mills & Britton 2004: 28).

A wiki site was constructed where participants in both 'local' (physically located in Australia) and 'international' (physically located in either Australia or the Netherlands) groups could communicate. As a 'participatory social networking software', wiki enabled groups to co-construct knowledge by editing text in online documents (Caverly & Ward 2008: 36). Our study aimed to discover more about how online learning is experienced from the perspective of students, a topic that has reportedly been neglected despite two decades of ongoing research into computer mediated communication and

learning in universities (Ellis, Ginns & Piggot 2009: 303). Ramsden (2003) too, has also more generally expressed concern that student perspectives have been subjugated in educational literature.

Finally, another rationale for the project was to intensify student engagement by taking an experiential approach to the learning and encouraging students to consider the implications of intercultural communication theory for the case study and also their own cultural perspectives, experiences, knowledge and backgrounds in ways that legitimised those things they already 'knew'. In this respect, the project resembled some of the characteristics of Chang's 'wisdom bank', a concept that respectfully acknowledged personal cultural heritage and experiences amongst students in ways that encouraged active learning and motivated students to learn about cultures other than their own (Chang 2006: 372). However, Chang's assumption that the inherent cultural diversity of classrooms in contemporary universities makes any efforts to engineer learning about cultural diversity redundant, would seem to be somewhat optimistic. As Volet and Ang (1998: 20–21) have indicated, intercultural learning between local and international students requires 'careful planning and monitoring' and would not occur spontaneously in the classroom, but rather need to be embedded as part of a focused approach to internationalisation in higher education at the institutional level.

In bringing personal knowledge, experiences and perspectives to the learning, Chang argues that the experience becomes internalised in ways that dig deep into individual conceptions of identity (Chang 2006: 375–376). These personal and social forms of engaged learning thus provide an authentic and meaningful climate where relationships and friendship are not simply a positive but unplanned outcome. They are, in fact, an inherent part of the learning experience and a rationale for engaging in it from the student's perspective.

## Intercultural learning and student relationships

Research concerned with subjective and social aspects of learning in higher education appears to have attracted greater attention within the last decade (Montgomery & McDowell 2009: 455, Summers & Volet 2008, Volet & Ang 1998, Volet & Wosnitza 2004). Researchers are exploring the ways in which emotions (Cartney & Rouse 2006, Crossman 2007, Huyton 2009, McQueen & Webber 2009: 244), spirituality (Crossman 2008, Tisdell 2001) and friendships and relationships (Gareis 2000, Zhou et al. 2008: 63) play a part in learning and assessment. More specifically, the expansion of international education has also given rise to discussion about how some of these subjective, psychological and socio-cultural issues relate to the learning experiences of international students in culturally diverse university contexts (see Chang 2006, Sawir et al. 2008, Zhou et al. 2008: 63). Earlier studies such as those by Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) in Hawaii and Furnham and Alibhai (1985) in the UK were concerned with exploring how cultural profiles influenced choices about friendships and relationships. More recently, the Cho and Lee (2008) study, concerned with collaboration in virtual groups involving an American and two Singaporean universities using social network analysis, also concluded that social factors were important elements in the learning process.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that despite the best intentions of those involved in the intensification of internationalisation in our universities, loneliness and isolation are too often the hallmarks of a 'relational deficit' experienced by international students (Sawir et al. 2008: 148–149). These findings may be connected to Australian research conducted over the last decade that reports a 'disturbing' lack of meaningful interaction between local and international university students (e.g. Summers & Volet 2008: 357, Volet & Ang 1998: 5). Similarly, in the UK it would seem that studies from the mid-eighties have indicated that

few international students could lay claim to enjoying friendships with their British peers (Furnham & Alibhai 1985). Such a state of affairs, particularly in the first year of university, presents a particular challenge for international students experiencing cultural transition and separation from their families while at the same time seeking to establish supportive relationships as well as a sense of their own identity (Cartney & Rouse 2006: 84). The need for research to guide universities in decision-making about social as well as educational objectives associated with internationalisation and multicultural groups has clearly been identified (Summers & Volet 2008: 357, Volet & Ang 1998: 6).

If indeed cultural and social diversity give rise to conflict (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009: 28) and 'militate against integration' (Cartney & Rouse 2006: 79) in ways that could lead to feelings of isolation, then planning for learning in culturally diverse classrooms represents something of a challenge. Although the need to develop close personal relationships amongst students apparently varies from culture to culture, the creation of 'friendly classrooms' would seem to be an obvious starting point for nurturing friendship and meaningful personal relationships (Sawir et al. 2008: 154–170).

The university classroom needs to be a place where varied perspectives are welcome and where personal, racial identity not only holds no risk but is also not downplayed as a cherished and central part of who individuals are (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009: 26–36). Without the fostering of appropriate meta-skills, reflection and the challenging of existing cultural assumptions, many students may well feel anything but secure compared with those who are members of homogenous groups (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley 2009: 36). In addition, the literature suggests the value of linking assessment to learning about culture by capitalising on student diversity (Summers & Volet 2008: 358) and this advice was indeed incorporated into our own project.

Within an organisational context, a number of studies have considered the development of relationships and friendships in computer-mediated, group contexts (e.g. Irmer, Chang & Bordia 2000, Kayworth & Leidner 2001: 7, Stefanone & Gay 2008, Yoo & Alavi 2001: 371). It now seems clear that strong interpersonal relationships can develop in computer-mediated environments as they are in face-to-face settings (Kahai & Cooper 2003: 263, Whitty & Gavin 2001: 623), and the same assumptions might be made with regard to online learning contexts in university business and management programs.

Wikis may provide one way to respond to the need for social interaction and inclusion among university students. Generation Y students born after about 1980 are apparently well-disposed to identify with this form of technology that represents a departure from transmissive learning contexts and has the potential to be conducive to engaging, inclusive and collaborative environments that involve social interaction (Johnston, Duff & Quinn 2009: 27–28, Workman 2008: 23). However, despite the undoubted potential for enhancing internationalisation via online learning, few studies appear to have explored the area in any depth. Noted exceptions include Volet and Wosnitza's (2004) work involving German and Australian students and Gareis' (2000) qualitative case study research focusing on cultural and linguistic variations in how individuals interpret friendship among German international students studying in the USA. Unfortunately, Gareis' (2000) literature review on intercultural student friendships largely relies on sources published between the 1950s and 1980s and may as a result fail to capture the changing landscape of university life, especially in business programs. More generally, the intensification of globalisation since that period will almost certainly have altered how much exposure university students from varied cultures have to one another, how they interact and the understandings individuals bring to those intercultural relationships.

## Methodology

The broad aim of this rich, qualitative, interpretive research study was to discover how students as participants experienced an online, experiential form of learning concerned with intercultural communication. Grounded theory, first conceived in the 1967 seminal text, *The discovery of grounded theory* by Glaser and Strauss and now arguably the 'most commonly used qualitative research method' (Morse 2008: 13), was selected as an appropriate method to achieve the research aim. Grounded theory was chosen since it enables the researcher to probe the intentions and responses of participants in relation to the circumstances presented by the online, intercultural project and explore the meanings they brings to that experience (Glesne & Peshkin 1992). In other words, grounded theory has the capacity to explore the 'behaviours, emotions and feelings' of participants, as well as the 'social moments and cultural phenomena' (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 10). A constructionist perspective on grounded theory was adopted in this study. Simply put, constructionist grounded theorists posit that concepts and theories are constructed by participants and researchers rather than emerging from the data that is construed as some sort of objective truth waiting to be discovered (Cassell et al. 2009: 516, Charmaz 2008b: 401).

As is common in grounded theory, purposive sampling was chosen because the setting, the participants, events and purposes of the research were aligned with the key areas of interest in the study (Johnson & Christensen 2000, Punch 2000). Specifically, we as researchers were interested in the perceptions of students enrolled in an undergraduate, business communication course in an Australian university. Students who participated were organised into study groups as part of an intercultural online learning project that involved collaborating on the analysis of a case study. Although the case study was a required assessment for all students on the course, participating

in the online, collaborative learning project and the research study was entirely voluntary.

While students from a university in the Netherlands also participated in the online project, the data discussed in this paper were gathered from students enrolled in the Australian university only. A total of 27 students in Australia participated in the project. Participating students were divided into two study groups. Group 1, referred to in this paper as the 'international group' (n=19), collaborated online with students from the Netherlands. Group 2, referred to in this paper as the 'local' group (n=8), comprised culturally diverse individuals who were either Australian citizens or international students from Botswana, China, Korea, India, Malaysia and Singapore. The rationale for splitting the two groups was that some 'local' students expressed an interest in the project too late to be included in the 'international' group but nevertheless saw the value of intercultural collaboration among culturally diverse students in the university. They also had the additional opportunity to arrange face-to-face interaction if they wished.

Both the 'local' and the 'international' groups collaborated on the case study about intercultural communication between an Australian franchisor and two franchisees based in the Netherlands and Hong Kong respectively. The case study required students to interpret and critically apply intercultural communication research to the practical context of the case study, but they were also encouraged to draw upon their own cultural and heritage experience in discussing the case study online with other students. Participants were provided with ongoing information and support by a research assistant with regard to the research process, the intercultural case study project and the technological features of the wiki.

The ethical management of the research was approved by the appropriate university committee. Students were alerted to the fact that participation was entirely voluntary and that if they decided

not to be involved in the research study there would be no negative implications in terms of their course grades. Since the researchers were also co-ordinators in the course in which the project was embedded and would have a role in student assessment, a research assistant collected the data and coordinated the research study. The researchers did not receive the data until after the final grades for the course had been released as a further protection against any bias intruding on the assessment process. Participating students were made aware of this feature in the design of the research.

Data were collected from questionnaires and interviews. Open-ended, longitudinal questionnaires were administered at three points; the beginning, middle and end of the online, collaborative project. Open-ended questionnaires were used because in keeping with an interpretive tradition, they were more likely to reflect participant views rather than being unduly influenced by the researcher (Foddy 1999). Anonymity was preserved by using a six-digit, participant-generated code. The primary objective of questionnaires 1 and 2 was to ascertain what participants expected to gain from their involvement in the project, their rationale for participating and what they expected to achieve by the end of it. Questionnaire 3 explored the online intercultural learning experience from the participant's perspective and how the project influenced their understanding of intercultural communication.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of the project in order to provide participants a further opportunity to express their thoughts about the project that had not otherwise been captured in the survey questions. Some sample questions are detailed below. The question asking about how the group interacted was not initially included but, consistent with theoretical sampling in grounded theory (Suddaby 2006), was added when analysis of initial data suggested that interpersonal relationships were an important aspect of the experience.

- Please describe your experience of the project.
- Please give a brief account of how you think the members of the groups worked together to learn in preparation for the assessment.
- Please give a brief account of how you think the members of the group interacted interpersonally.
- What do you believe challenged communication in the groups and what worked well?
- Please indicate how relevant the project has been in terms of preparing you for the workplace.
- Please suggest any ways in which you feel the project could be improved.

Constant comparative analysis, as a grounded theory technique, was used to analyse the data and occurred simultaneously with data collection. Data were initially open coded by comparing *units of meaning* (expressed or couched in sentences, phrases or paragraphs, for example) as new information was received. The process was one of continual refinement where categories were merged or dismantled as new categories (or themes) were generated and different relationships discovered (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). As this process continued, core categories were identified that seemed to resonate deeply with the data in defining ways. These core categories form the basis of subheadings in the discussion of findings section that follows and give rise to the theory that social relationships are powerfully embedded in virtual and intercultural collaborative projects in management learning.

## Discussion of findings

Analysis of data collected from both the questionnaires and interviews as well as from the 'local' and 'international' participant groups has been presented collectively given a high level of consistency in the findings across these data sources. In vivo data have been used to

illustrate findings in order to keep the concerns of the participants to the fore and attract greater confidence in the findings themselves (Strauss & Corbin 1994).

In summary, participants perceived the need to create a friendly atmosphere that would facilitate learning. Doing so was not always easy, as responses indicated that attaining a level and manner of friendliness that was culturally appropriate appeared to be largely a matter of trial and error. Most participants stated their rationale for joining the project was to get more experience with intercultural communication. However, limited experience of intercultural communication may have given rise to a tendency to stereotype in some cases. Participants also expressed frustration when others did not seem to be participating in a committed fashion and developed strategies for stimulating engagement among team members. Thus, the key findings of the study were that participating students capitalised upon the opportunity the project presented to find friends and to negotiate and deepen relationships. Also, the analysis revealed that social interaction also characterised the learning experience itself and had implications for engagement.

### Friendships and relationships are an important aspect of learning

Data analysed from both local and international groups suggested that making 'new', 'more' or 'different' friends and 'getting to know each other' was central to rationales for participation in the project. In other words, learning was perceived as being socially constituted.

Fledgling learning relationships and friendships, however, were not entirely perceived as authentic experiences. For example, when one student commented, 'She is very nice, like friends', there is the implication that being *like* a friend is not quite the same thing as *actually* being a friend. Given the contexts in which associations and distinctions were made, friendship appeared to be viewed as a state of arrival and *friendliness* and being *friendly* as pleasant, indicative of

friendship and indeed simulating friendship but not quite friendship itself.

Certainly, if participants did not make deep friendships, *friendliness* was nevertheless important and determined decision-making about how people would proceed in their social networks online. References to an individual being friendly or not, often preceded accounts and rationales for pursuing some relationships and withdrawing from others. One participant commented, 'I didn't really like X; she was not really friendly at all. So I contacted one friendly person …'. Thus, individuals were considered expendable and could be easily abandoned for others who were perceived as 'nice' or 'friendly' team members even in terms of the emoticons they used.

Friendliness was also a way of operating with those who were yet unknown, to overcome initial uncertainties in emerging relationships and cultivate a climate where individuals could feel comfortable. The literature suggests that intercultural friendships and relationships are more difficult to initiate than mono-cultural ones (Gareis 2000: 72) and certainly much care and sensitivity in cultivating these relationships was evident. For example, one participant felt that she 'always' had 'to be friendly' so that people would feel 'easy as much as possible'. Such care was also evident in crafting email messages to avoid potential 'misunderstandings', 'confusion' or appearing inadvertently 'rude'. It has been argued that good interpersonal skills in virtual teams are at least as important as they are on a face-to-face basis (Kirkman et al. 2002: 69, 74) and analysis of data in this study would appear to be supportive.

Developing an appropriate genre for collaborative communication in learning and establishing levels of friendliness with those who are largely unknown was not always easy for participants. One participant, for example, discovered that she had annoyed group members by sending emails that were 'very friendly', using greetings such as 'hey baby' and finding that her 'more open communication'

and non 'work-oriented style' seemed to give rise rather more to irritability than intimacy amongst project members. Gauging how friendly to be was difficult in other ways, as one participant in the local project implied, '… when I organised the meeting with X on Friday initially, I wanted to tell her to meet each other at my home. But I was embarrassed because I didn't know how she would react to me'. This particular description can be understood better when informed by research findings that an invitation to a student's home will be associated with varied assumptions about the implications for developing intimacy, depending on the culture of those extending or receiving such invitations (Gareis 2000: 71).

Formality in communication was associated with the need 'to get something done' and being task-orientated and informality with developing friendship and 'soft' skills. Distinctions between formality and informality were evident in decision-making about whether to conduct the communication using a university or a personal email address, for example, or gauging whether it was appropriate to use MSN, considered a more intimate way of communicating. Noting that one of the participants from the Netherlands did not give her an MSN address, one participant commented, 'I never pushed it, she only communicate[d] with me through e-mail. I never push[ed] it, as long as she communicate[d] with me'. Relationships conducted online in the project that subsequently led to face-to-face meetings involved some adjustments being made to initial impressions. Someone who seemed 'organised' and 'goal-directed' online appeared more dependent face-to-face. Thus interpersonal relationships required constant re-adjustment as switching channels of communication allowed for additional perspectives of an individual's identity to come to the fore.

Consistent with other research findings, humour was associated in the data with social, cultural and emotional connectedness in the learning (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000: 100, Volet & Ang 1998: 10). As

a strategy, humour was used in cultivating a climate of informality in order to promote closer relationships and collaboration. One participant wrote, 'I tried to use humour a lot …That's … how we got to talk'. The remark, 'She can joke', was clearly positive in the context of describing a student from the Netherlands and the relationship enjoyed between them. Humour was also adopted as a strategy for repairing relationships under some strain, for example, 'She was upset with me. I said, "[Y]ou can slap me!". After that, she was happy to help me'.

Clearly, finding ways to become more experienced intercultural communicators and developing friendships in the process was attractive to many, and may suggest that not all participant needs were met in this regard, as international students in Australia. Certainly, one international student, alluding to her face-to-face tutorials in Australia, commented somewhat wistfully, 'I didn't know other people, I would love to' and another reflected that she communicated largely with Asian international students rather than 'Australians'.

Although 'local' groups had an opportunity to meet face to face whereas 'international' groups did not, few local participants appeared to take advantage of the fact. This finding is particularly curious given that face-to-face communication was viewed positively by participants as a 'secure' means of communication that had implications for developing trust and intimacy, whereas Internet was perceived by some as 'very scary'. One female participant commented, '[y]ou never know what happens. It might be different when you actually meet the person who you contact over the Internet'. In face-to-face situations, one participant declared he 'would be more friendly' and take relationships 'to the next level', because he felt more secure than when he interacted with others using the Internet.

However, while some were more cautious in terms of developing online relationships, others viewed the medium as liberating,

describing themselves as 'more talkative' and 'more friendly', where they felt 'more free to talk'. Correspondingly, face-to-face meetings did not result in automatic trust, as is made clear in the statement, 'she didn't realise that I don't want to tell everything that I have done to her. She expected to write everything at the meeting ... but she can't do that'. In other words, trust building was also associated with a fair trade of information and effort.

### Intercultural communication

'Meeting', 'making', 'interacting', 'studying with' 'new friends from different countries' and 'cultures' 'around the world' in order to know more about those cultures was a common rationale. This desire was particularly important for some international students in cases where few opportunities existed in their homeland to interact with people from cultures other than their own. The taken-for-grantedness of multicultural Australia and other countries, where there is at least the *potential* for forming interpersonal and intercultural relationships may mean that academics overlook the unfamiliarity of culturally diverse learning groups for some individuals.

In the process of identifying the influence of culture on communication, there was a tendency for stereotyping to occur. According to Eblen, Mills and Britton (2004: 29), the literature suggests that stereotyping may be more common in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face situations because these kinds of messages are shorter and provide less interpersonal information, resulting in the importance of any information received becoming inflated. Dutch project participants were cast as 'strict', 'efficient', 'organised', 'goal-orientated', 'very driven', 'strong willed', 'hard workers' who were 'more interested in getting the job done ... than making friends'. They were perceived as people who wanted 'to finish everything on time', approach things 'step by step' and provide 'instruction' on tasks.

Participants commented that their peers in the Netherlands did not 'communicate personal backgrounds'. One student in Australia noted, 'We didn't really talk about personal thing[s]. [We] talked about the project'. These observations and others like them appeared to indicate a participant perception that students from the Netherlands tended to be *goal-focused* rather than *friendship-focused*. A study by Eblen, Mills and Britton (2004: 43), concerned with online intercultural learning between students in the US and New Zealand, suggested that personal relationships tended to be developed following communication about the task in hand. It is possible that the students in our study, many of whom were international Asian students in Australia, would have expected the development of personal relationships to precede discussions about the task, given the emphasis upon relationship building in that region.

Participants also conceptualised behaviour in terms of politeness and rudeness. Despite some references to students from the Netherlands being 'more polite', 'positive', 'fantastic' and 'quite nice people', for example, tensions clearly arose from intercultural and interpersonal communication. One Asian student in the Australian group remarked that in:

> 'Asian culture' people have 'to be polite' to one another. We don't get used to it [Western culture]. Asian students have to learn about this. However, I strongly recommend, Asian students should keep our traditional culture, being polite.

One participant struggled with assumptions about frankness and rudeness, and sought help from a tutor in order to make sense of the experience. Despite efforts to explore ethnocentric assumptions, the participant remained somewhat affronted:

> She said, 'If you don't help me, you can leave the group'. I was taken aback a bit. She was very frank … My tutor told me today, 'People in The Netherlands are more frank and straightforward. You should not be offended. That's just culture'.

Thus, as Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) argued, while effective management of cultural conflict can promote growth within individuals and in their relationships with others, mismanaged expectations can lead to biased intergroup perceptions, emotional frustrations and ethnocentrism where the ways in which an in-group do things is considered superior and the ways in which an out-group conduct their affairs is considered backward.

Participation on the project also gave rise to other painful and sensitive memories in forming intercultural relationships that involved feelings about identity, assimilation, intense and repressed emotions, racism, and again, politeness and rudeness:

> You need to be same or similar with Australian people. When I went to the high school, I tried to learn more about different things. Although they [Australian students] are rude, they didn't mean that. Don't be sensitive [she thought to herself]. Initially, I thought, 'they don't like Asians' … it is just a remark, let it go. They tend to think that Asian students can't speak English. They made negative remarks. Just walk away [she thought to herself]. Otherwise, you will be very angry'.

There was a clear indication in the data that students learned to value the varied perspectives that intercultural communication in teams could offer in the learning experience. Participants frequently expressed appreciation in learning to 'understand differences and … to accept [other] views people [held] in this project' or 'gaining a better understanding of the issues in the report through [other] perspectives', and becoming aware of how 'different opinions' helped with the 'experience'. One participant commented, 'people looked at it with different perspectives and that is how this project has assisted me'. Another found that 'other people have curiosities … other students have different experiences, insights and opinions than I do'. Thus, these learning relationships facilitated a *looking out and looking inwards* in a meaning-making process of constructing

understandings about intercultural communication and the interpersonal implications.

## Issues concerned with engagement

The data yielded many positive references to the high level of support participants received from both peers and academic staff. However, in pursuing negative cases, some evidence revealed incidences of poor engagement in the project that had consequences for developing relationships, friendships and, indeed, ultimately learning.

A persistent scenario would be where an individual initiated communication online and received no response, which gave rise to feelings of 'frustration', 'disappointment' and 'confusion' about apparent lack of commitment. One participant commented, 'I don't really understand. People wanted to do this project at the beginning, signing on … After that, they didn't want to participate'. Despondency and irritation intensified when individuals failed to meet workload expectations or where there were mismatches in the degree of social interaction sought—a finding discussed elsewhere in the literature (see Kirkman et al. 2002: 73). Eblen, Mills and Britton (2004) have also indicated that, when students delay in responding to emails, in an online intercultural project the result is discouragement and setbacks in motivation that placed the project at risk.

Participants on the project adopted various strategies to encourage engagement among other team members and the formation of relationships. Such strategies included persistence, personalisation, threats and switching communication channels. Personalisation would be achieved by sending individual emails to group members and a threat might come, for example, in the form of seeking changes in group membership (in other words, expulsion of a group member). Threats of this nature could prove effective. One participant responded by apologising and adding, 'I am enjoying this and I am back'. Finally, participants switched communication channels from

the wiki to email, for example, although participants noted that email made it 'easy not to respond', since individuals could simply delete messages if they were 'too hard to reply'.

Participants conjectured that some individuals at least 'didn't care' about ignoring emails because only face to face made the relationship 'real' and therefore email-based relationships would not attract the same level of commitment. Illustrative data included:

> If we see each other, people don't want to be impolite … they will care about that person.
>
> I don't feel [any] connection … [to] send email. If I met one person even just once, I would have more sense of my responsibility ethically and relatively to that person. Although I am very busy, I would think about that.

Thus, when a person becomes 'real' as opposed to merely virtual (and by extension, hypothetical), expectations, obligations and commitments inherent in those relationships become more pressing. Research indicating that it is vital for individuals to project themselves as 'real people' and to establish a social presence online (see Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000: 89) would appear to be consistent with this analysis.

Some participants felt they 'didn't have enough time to get to know each other' much beyond the superficialities of introductions until the very end of the project, when assessment was imminent and they began to give it greater attention among competing assessment responsibilities. Given studies finding that developing deeper cultural understandings are less likely when students have not had a chance to develop their relationships (Volet & Ang 1998: 10), and that students working in culturally mixed groups need longer periods of time to overcome initial social challenges and develop positive feelings about the interaction and learning (Summers & Volet 2008: 359), encouraging engagement and interaction from the beginning of a project like this is crucial.

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted the importance of the potential for friendship in attracting students to intercultural learning projects. Although *friendliness* was more often perceived as an adequate substitute for friendship itself, expressing friendliness in appropriate ways interculturally presented something of a challenge and was influenced by whether a participant was perceived as more task/ goal-focused or relationship-focused. On occasions, such cultural orientations could give rise to some level of conflict when perceived breaches of 'polite' behaviour occurred based on ethnocentric evaluations. Some participants attempted to manage the poor engagement of team members by adopting particular strategies, including threats. Online communication may have compounded both engagement in the learning as well as the development of friendships in that a party may be perceived as less 'real', more virtual and thus, ultimately, hypothetical. The successful establishment of both friendship and student engagement was also clearly associated with the time spent on the task, as well as the duration of the project.

The findings of the study, therefore, appear to support the literature suggesting that academics need to attend to emotional and social factors involved in learning as well as to the learning tasks *per se* (Cartney & Rouse 2006: 80–85). That students appear to view some kinds of learning as a means to forge friendships and broaden their social networks suggests that designing these kinds of activities has potential for deepening academic, social and cultural engagement. Providing students with the opportunity to reflect upon the way that culture may impact upon intercultural communication and online group relationships while working on tasks, may also prove to be useful in preparing graduates for working in globalised, culturally diverse workforce contexts. However, while the project design might aspire to preparing graduates to this end, we have no evidence to support such a claim. Further studies involving employed graduates

and employers, for example, could well explore the implications of projects like this one in terms of their perceived impact upon employability and performance in culturally diverse workforces.

## References

Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) (2010). AUQA audits, http://www.auqa.edu.au/qualityaudit/universities/.

Blasco, M. (2009). 'Cultural pragmatists? Student perspectives on learning culture at a business school', *Academy of Management Learning and Education, 8: 174–187.*

Bochner, S., McLeod, B. & Lin, A. (1977). 'Friendship patterns of overseas students: A functional model', *International Journal of Psychology*, 12: 277–294.

Cartney, P. & Rouse, A. (2006). 'The emotional impact of learning in small groups: Highlighting the impact on student progression and retention', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11: 79–91.

Cassell, C., Bishop, V., Johnson, P. & Buehring, A. (2009). 'Learning to be a qualitative management researcher', *Management Learning*, 40: 513–533.

Caverly, D.C. & Ward, A. (2008). 'Techtalk: Wikis and collaborative knowledge construction', *Journal of Development Education*, 32: 36–37.

Chang, J. (2006). 'A transcultural wisdom bank in the classroom: Making cultural diversity a key resource in teaching and learning', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10: 369–376.

Charmaz, K. (2008a). 'Grounded theory in the 21st century: Applications for advancing social justice studies', in Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Charmaz, K. (2008b). 'Constructionism and the grounded theory method', in Holstein, J. & Gubrun, J. (eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research*, Gillford Press, New York: 397–412.

Cho, H. & Lee, J. (2008). 'Collaborative information seeking in intercultural computer-mediated communication groups. Testing the influence of social context using social network analysis', *Communication Research*, 35: 548–573.

Crossman, J. (2008). 'Breaking the silence: Exploring spirituality in secular professional education in Australia', in Willis, P. McKenzie, S. & Harris, R. (eds.), *Rethinking work and learning: Adult and vocational education for social sustainability,* Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer: 237–248.

Crossman, J. (2007). 'The role of relationships and emotions in student perceptions of learning and assessment', *Higher Education and Research Development,* 26: 313–327.

Eblem, A., Mills, C. & Britton, P. (2004). 'Walking the talk: Teaching intercultural communication experientially', *Communication Journal of New Zealand,* 5: 27–46.

Ellis, R., Ginns, P. & Piggot, L. (2009). 'E-learning in higher education: Some key aspects and their relationships to approaches to study', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 28: 303–318.

Foddy, W. (1999). *Constructing questions for interviews and questionnaires, theory and practice in social research*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Foldy, E.G., Rivard, P. & Buckley, T. (2009). 'Power, safety, and learning in racially diverse groups', *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 8: 25–42.

Furnham, A. & Alibhai, N. (1985). 'The friendship networks of foreign students: A replication and extension of the functional model', *International Journal of Psychology*, 20: 709–722.

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*, Chicago: Aldine.

Glesne, C. & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming a qualitative researcher*, New York: Longman.

Gareis, E. (2000). 'Intercultural friendship: Five case studies of German students in the USA', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 21: 67–91.

Garrison, R.D., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (2000). 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education', *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2: 87–105.

Huyton, J. (2009). 'Significant personal disclosure: Exploring the support and development needs of HE tutors engaged in the emotion work associated with supporting students', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 1: 1–18.

Irmer, B., Chang, A. & Bordia, P. (2000). 'The development of social and task cohesion in computer mediated and face to face task groups', Best paper presented at the Academy of Management Conference: A1–A6.

Jiang, X. (2010). 'Towards the internationalisation of higher education from a critical perspective', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 32: 347–58.

Johnson, B. & Christensen, L.B. (2000). *Educational research. Quantitative and qualitative approaches*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Johnston, H., Duff, A. & Quinn, D. (2009). 'Cutting the cloth to fit new needs and communication preferences', *ERGO*, 1: 27–38.

Kahai, S.S. & Cooper, R.B. (2003). 'Exploring the core concepts of media richness theory: The impact of cue multiplicity and feedback immediacy on decision quality', *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 20: 263–299.

Kayworth, T.R. & Leidner, D.E. (2001). 'Leadership effectiveness in global virtual teams', *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 18: 7–40.

Kirkman, B.L., Rosen, B., Gibson, C., Tesluk, P.E. & McPherson, S.O. (2002). 'Five challenges to virtual team success: Lessons from Sabre, Inc.', *The Academy of Management Executive*, 16: 67–79.

Maykut, P. & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research. A philosophical guide*. London: The Falmer Press.

McQueen, H. & Webber, J. (2009). 'What is very important to learning? A student perspective on a model of teaching and learning', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33: 241–253.

Montgomery, C. & McDowell, L. (2009). 'Social networks and the international student experience. An international community of practice?', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13: 455–466.

Morse, J. (2008). 'Tussles, tensions and resolutions', in J. Morse, P. Stern, J. Corbin, B. Bowers, K. Charmaz & A. Clarke (eds.), *Developing grounded theory. The second generation*, Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation methods*, London: Sage Publications.

Punch, K.F. (2000). *Introduction to social research. Quantitative and qualitative approaches*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education*, Oxford: Routledge.

Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C. & Ramia, G. (2008). 'Loneliness and international students: An Australia study', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12: 148–180.

Sidle, S.D. (2009). 'Building a committed global workforce: Does what employees want depend on culture?', *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 23: 79–81.

Stefanone, M.A. & Gay, G.K. (2008). 'Structural reproduction of social networks in computer-mediated forums', *Behaviour and Informational Technology*, 27: 97–106.

Suddaby, R. (2006). 'From the editors. What grounded theory is not', *Academy of Management Journal*, 49: 633–642.

Summers, M. & Volet, S. (2008). 'Students' attitudes towards culturally mixed groups on international campuses: Impact of participation in diverse and non-diverse groups', *Studies in Higher Education*, 33: 357–370.

Strauss, A. L. & Corbin, J.M. (1994). 'Grounded theory and methodology' in Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (eds.), *Handbook for qualitative research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications: 273–285.

Strauss, A.L. & Corbin, J.M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Ting-Toomey, S. & Oetzel, J.G. (2001). *Managing intercultural conflict effectively*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Tisdell, E.J. (2001). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Volet, S. & Ang, G. (1998). 'Culturally mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for intercultural learning', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 17: 5–23.

Volet, S. & Wosnitza, M. (2004). 'Social affordances and students' engagement in cross-national online learning', *Journal of Research in International Education*, 3: 5–29.

Whitty, M. & Gavin, J. (2001). 'Age/sex/location: Uncovering the social cues in the development of online relationships', *CyberPsychology*, 4: 623–630.

Workman, J.P. Jr. (2008). 'Wikis in the classroom: Opportunities and challenges', *Marketing Education Review*, 18: 19–24.

Yoo, Y. & Alavi, M. (2001). 'Media and group cohesion: Relative influence on social presence, task participation and group consensus', *MIS Quarterly*, 25: 371–390.

Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K. & Todman, J. (2008). 'Theoretical models of culture shock and adaption in international students in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 33: 63–75.

## About the authors

**Dr Joanna Crossman** *is a senior lecturer in the School of Management at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include international education in business contexts, intercultural communication and spiritual leadership in secular organisations and higher education. She is a co-editor of the Journal of International Education in Business, published by Emerald. Joanna teaches conflict, negotiation and communication at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and supervises a number of Management PhD candidates in areas related to her research interests. She has worked in academic and management positions in Australia, the UK, Malaysia, Norway and the UAE.*

**Dr Sarbari Bordia** *is a senior lecturer at the Australian National University. She conducts research on internationalisation of management education, linguistic issues in corporate communication and the management of psychological contracts. She is the co-editor of the Journal of International Education in Business. She teaches cross-cultural management in undergraduate and postgraduate levels.*

## Contact details

*Joanna Crossman, EM4–32, Campus West, North Terrace, Adelaide, South Australia 5000*
*Tel: +61 8 8302 9114          Fax: +61 8 8302 0512*
*Email: joanna.crossman@unisa.edu.au*

*Sarbari Bordia, School of Management, Marketing and International Business, Australian National University, LF Crisp Building 26, Canberra, ACT 0200*
*Tel: 02 6125 7338          Fax: 02 6125 8796*

**PRACTICE ARTICLE**

---

# Informal learning in the workplace: A review of the literature

Megan Le Clus
Edith Cowan University

---

*In the last few decades, the workplace has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate environment for learning new skills and knowledge, which in turn enables workers to participate more effectively in ever-changing work environments. Within the workplace, there is the potential for continuous learning to occur not only through formal learning initiatives that are associated with training, but also through informal learning opportunities that are embedded within everyday work activities. This paper surveys the growing body of literature on informal learning, makes some critical observations about the importance of informal learning, and explains the various ways that informal learning can occur in the workplace.*

---

## Introduction

In the last few decades, the workplace has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate environment for learning new skills and knowledge, which in turn enables workers to participate more effectively in ever-changing work environments. Many scholars agree that the workplace provides a rich environment for learning (see for example, Hager 2001, Beckett & Hager 2002, Boud & Middleton 2003). Billett (1996) proposed that changes in the contemporary workplace represent the importance of workplaces as significant sites for learning. Therefore, learning has become important on many organisational agendas. However, there is no clear or consistent definition of workplace learning and, although often confined to learning that takes place in the workplace, definitions can be broad and include other types of work-related learning which support work roles.

Consequently, in the literature learning in the workplace has become a somewhat confusing concept that is represented by a variety of meanings. Hager (1998) described workplace learning as ambiguous and Spencer claimed that 'much of the rhetoric proclaiming the virtues of workplace restructuring seldom matches workplace reality' (2002: 298). A year earlier, Engeström noted that current theories of organisational learning were 'typically weak in spelling out the specific processes or actions that make the learning process' (2001: 150). For this reason, workplace learning has become a contested notion by some educationalists, despite the processes involved having received little research attention (Boreham & Morgan 2004). The emerging body of literature related to learning in the workplace suggests that this is widely researched and in continuous development.

The way co-workers and their organisations perceive learning can be very different. This is perhaps, as Hager (2001) suggested, because the term 'learning' is used in so many diverse ways and it can refer to

either process and product, or both. In general, these views include formal types of learning that are organisational (see for example, Senge 1990, Rylatt 2000), and more non-formal types of learning, such as informal and incidental learning (e.g. Marsick & Watkins 1990 & 1999, Marsick & Volpe 1999, Hager & Halliday 2006). Therefore, within the workplace, there is the potential for continuous learning to occur not only through formal learning initiatives that are associated with training, but also through informal learning opportunities that are embedded within everyday work activities. This paper surveys the growing body of literature on informal learning in the workplace, beginning with an overview of learning in the workplace.

## Learning in the workplace

Today's co-workers are constantly faced with challenges that affect both the way they perform their job and their participation in everyday workplace activities. They are expected to continually modify and update their work practices in order to sustain competitive advantage, remain employable and perform well. For this reason, the workplace is increasingly recognised as a legitimate environment for learning new skills and knowledge that enable co-workers to better participate in everyday, work-related activities. If learning through life is essential to the labour market, then workplaces and co-workers are crucial in supporting, valuing and developing opportunities for learning.

In the workplace, learning can be described as situated in the context of social practice (Lave & Wenger 1991), in which the work setting provides an opportunity for co-workers to acquire knowledge that connects theory to practice in a realistic and efficient way (Billett 1996). Workplace learning includes experience-based learning, incidental and informal learning (Marsick & Watkins 2001, Marsick & Volpe 1999, Foley 1999, Hager & Halliday 2006),

self-directed learning (Foley 1999) as well as formal organisational learning (Senge 1990). Learning new skills and knowledge makes it possible for co-workers to manage change, perform well and be satisfied with their work. For this reason, work and learning are synonymous as experiences accumulate in the course of everyday participation in work activities. The work and learning experience encompasses the way co-workers make sense of the situations they encounter in their daily lives and especially in the work setting.

Learning in everyday settings has been coined situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991, Billett 1996). Situated learning emphasises the dynamics of everyday learning and interaction, and focuses on the interactive relationship between co-workers and their work environment. Situated learning provides models of learning in context, and suggests that learning does occur in the workplace context (Lave & Wenger 1991, Billett 1996). For example, Billett (2001: 1) suggested that 'workplaces and educational institutions merely represent different instances of social practices in which learning occurs through participation'.

An important part of situated learning is the construction of knowledge within the social and cultural circumstances in which learning occurs, namely the social context. For example, Billett (1993) conducted several studies of coal miners and workers in other industries, concluding that, in the informal learning setting of the workplace, effective learning resulted from learners' engagement in authentic activities, guided by experts and by interacting with other co-workers. Although learning was unique to each co-worker, it was also shaped by workplace culture. According to Billett, the quality of learning depended on the kind of activities engaged in, access to support, guidance and how co-workers constructed their knowledge of different situations:

> ... these factors influence the process of learning and what is learnt. In doing so, they reflect the interdependence between

work and learning, providing a basis to consider not only the contributions of the workplace as a learning environment, but also how the workplace might be organised to improve learning (2001: 21).

If learning occurs as part of everyday experiences and participation, then there is also the potential for learning to occur in many different ways. This includes informal strategies, as well as formal learning initiatives that are associated with training. The importance of learning in the organisation is not new; however, much of the emphasis has been on the way co-workers formally acquire and develop new knowledge and skills in the workplace.

Research by Enos, Thamm Kehrhahn and Bell (2003) and earlier by Bell and Dale (1999) suggested that most of the learning that takes place in organisations is informal and forms part of everyday work activities. Marsick and Watkins (1990) distinguished between informal learning, which they view as predominantly experiential, and incidental learning, which occurs as a by-product of another activity. The importance of informal learning focuses on the interplay between informal learning activities, the environment where they occur and the characteristics of those engaged. Learning in the workplace, from the perspective of informal learning, is meaningful, everyday learning and participation in work activities. It involves making sense of the daily learning that occurs in organisations and involves examining embedded knowledge and encouraging learners to be self-directed and reflect on their learning experiences.

In sum, learning in the workplace represents a variety of strategies and perspectives that enables co-workers to learn as part of their everyday experiences at work. Learning in the workplace can be formal learning that is planned and provided by the organisation in an effort to increase co-worker effectiveness. Workplace learning can also be informal learning that is unintentional and results from interaction with other co-workers. Informal learning 'takes

place although people are not always conscious of it' (Marsick & Watkins 1990: 12) and is often taken for granted and the result of unplanned or unexpected events (Carter 1995) in people's lives through everyday experiences. Informal learning occurs whenever people have the need, motivation or opportunity for learning (Marsick & Watkins 2001) and is often linked to the learning of others (Marsick & Volpe 1999). As informal learning emerges during everyday activities in the workplace, there is the potential for this type of learning to occur more often than formal learning.

## Informal learning—past, present and future

Although explicit writings about informal learning did not emerge until the 1980s, characteristics of informal learning can be traced back to the early writings of Lindeman (1926), Dewey (1938) and Knowles (1970) who suggested that adult learners become aware of their learning experiences through self-direction. Writings by Watkins and Marsick (1992), Marsick and Volpe (1999) and Bell and Dale (1999) considered the relationship between the learner and the environment and acknowledged that much of the learning occurring in the workplace took place through interaction with others. Additionally, much of the learning that takes place in the workplace occurs as a by-product of other everyday activities and is often haphazard or unsystematic. Informal learning is represented by a range of strategies including conversation, social interaction, teamwork and mentoring. Informal learning involves interaction between people and is not limited to a predefined body of knowledge.

The term informal learning was introduced in the 1950s by Malcolm Knowles in his pioneer work on informal adult education. Since then, many authors have written about informal learning and offered their unique perspective on the meaning of the term. Informal learning provides a straightforward contrast to formal learning and suggests greater flexibility for adult learners. However, Eraut described

dichotomies as 'indicators of lazy thinking' (2004: 250) and prefers to describe informal learning as learning that comes closer to the informal rather than the formal end of a continuum. This includes learning that is implicit, unintended, opportunistic and unstructured (Eraut 2004). Eraut (2004) also implied that informal learning also recognises the social significance of learning from other people and has greater scope for individual agency than socialisation. Earlier, Marsick and Watkins (1997) suggested that not only is informal learning unique to the individual, but control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Informal learning draws attention to the learning that takes place in the spaces surrounding people, activities and events in the workplace. It can also be considered as complementary to learning from everyday experience.

Following Knowles' work during the 1950s, the role of informal learning has emerged in the workplace learning literature, although 'few studies to date have problematized the phenomenon itself with reference to its accomplishment in moment-by-moment interaction' (Sawchuk, 2003: 291). Boud and Garrick (in Boud & Garrick 1999) have acknowledged informal interaction with work colleagues as a predominant way of learning in the workplace; however, it is often considered 'part of the job' and not acknowledged as formal learning (Boud & Middleton 2003).

Informal learning has been described by Marsick and Volpe (1999) as haphazard, idiosyncratic and driven by serendipity. The informal learning literature (e.g. Coffield 1999, Cofer 2000, Bell & Dale 1999, Marsick & Volpe 1999, Marsick & Watkins 1990 & 1999) represents the way 'in which people construct meaning in their … shared organisational life' (Marsick 1987: 4). According to Marsick and Watkins 'people learn in the workplace through interactions with others in their daily work environments' (1990: 4). Boud and Garrick (1999) later described informal learning as learning from others. According to Marsick and Volpe (1999), informal learning

involves both action and reflection which involves 'looking back on what we have done, measuring it against what we wanted to achieve, and assessing the consequences' (p. 7). The problem, however, is that reflection is difficult to recognise (Marsick & Volpe 1999) and so co-workers and their organisations may not recognise or be able to identify informal learning experiences in the workplace. Despite this difficulty, examining how informal learning occurs has the potential to contribute to current debates surrounding the notion of workplace learning.

Informal learning is represented by a range of strategies including conversation, social interaction, teamwork and mentoring. Informal learning involves interaction between people and is not limited to a predefined body of knowledge. This had led authors like Coffield (1999) and Hager and Halliday (2006) to advocate informal learning as an important form of learning. Other authors have suggested that informal learning can be successful if used in conjunction with formal learning (Bell 1977, Bell & Dale 1999). According to Alpern (1997), organisations are no longer relying just on technical skills, but are placing more emphasis on competencies in other areas, like knowing how to learn, problem-solving, creative thinking, interpersonal skills, ability to work in a team, communication skills and leadership effectiveness. Most of this learning is situated within social situations and is also referred to as incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins 1990).

Over the last three decades, a number of researchers have started to show an interest in non-formal types of learning (e.g. Marsick & Watkins 1990 & 1999, Boud & Garrick 1999, Bell & Dale 1999, Boud & Middleton 2003, Conner 2003). During the early 1990s, Marsick and Watkins (1990) offered a theoretical framework to define and describe informal learning. According to Marsick and Watkins (1990), informal learning may include self-directed learning, networking, mentoring, coaching and trial and error and can occur anywhere and

at any time. Marsick and Watkins continued to examine the difference between formal and informal learning and became leading writers about informal learning. In 1992, Watkins and Marsick wrote about new ways of increasing efficiency in the workplace and emphasised the need for employers to recognise the benefits of informal learning as opposed to formal learning activities. In the literature, informal learning is often contrasted to formal learning. Marsick and Watkins (1990: 12) described this contrast in the following way:

> Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but is not typically classroom based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner... informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organisation or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning.

Non-formal learning includes learning that is not highly structured or classroom-based, not formally assessed, and does not lead to formal qualifications. Marsick and Volpe (1999) argued that, despite past attempts by organisations to support organisational effectiveness by providing formal training and education, 'most workplace learning has been left in the hands of employees and has been gained through informal methods and through trial and error' (p. 1). They argued that as the ethos of organisations has changed, more and more organisations are focusing on ways of fostering informal learning. Furthermore, they stated that organisations now need to purposely provide a working environment that promotes and encourages continuous informal learning. A summary of empirical research on informal learning will now be provided.

### Empirical research on informal learning

In 1988, research by McCall, Lombardo and Morrison about managerial learning revealed that the acquisition of managerial skills such as negotiation and proficiency were predominantly developed

through informal learning. They found that out of 35 managerial job skills, managers self-reported having developed 30 of them through informal learning. In the late 1990s, Garrick's (1998) research in the building industry and Boud's (1999) study of academia highlighted that a major part of informal learning involves learning from others at work. Bell and Dale (1999) also considered the importance of informal learning in the workplace. In their study on informal learning in the workplace, Bell and Dale (1999) described informal learning as learning which takes place in the work context and relates to the individual, their job and their performance. They argued that such learning is not formally integrated into a learning program or activity by the employer and that informal learning may be motivated by everyday activities or need and could take place in conversations and social interactions. Furthermore, Conner (2003) has stated that informal learning is a learning process whereby the learner can acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge as part of their daily routine.

Research by Enos, Thamm Kehrhahn and Bell (2003) on the extent to which managers engaged in informal learning found that employees successfully learned core managerial skills from informal learning activities. They found that significant informal learning activities included interaction and watching others to make sense of their experiences and learn new skills. On the basis of their study, the results indicate a move away from formal training to the recognition of informal learning opportunities like interaction with others, observing others and encouraging reflection, and challenging experiences. Furthermore, research by Fuller, Ashton, Felstead, Unwin, Walters and Quinn (2003) conducted in a variety of workplaces including a hairdressing salon, accountancy practice and a car dealership, found that informal learning was a part of everyday work practices and occurred outside of formal education and training settings. Similarly, by applying theories of informal learning to social movements, Foley (2004) described informal learning as the type

of learning that occurs consciously when a co-worker is trying to learn from an experience. According to him, informal learning can occur during a management committee meeting or by employees re-designing their job through consultation with management.

The type of knowledge gained via learning informally in the workplace can be also referred to as tacit knowledge. Although McAdam, Mason and McCrory (2007) have suggested that there is considerable disagreement in the literature on how best to define tacit knowledge, for the purpose of the present study, tacit knowledge is interpreted as the subjective and personal knowledge acquired by individuals. Gourlay's (2002, 2004) review of research studies from different disciplines characterises tacit knowledge as personal, experience based, job specific, transferred through conversation, and both known and unknown to the user. Informal learning, then, can be one way to acquire tacit knowledge.

In sum, informal learning can be planned but is often spur of the moment. Informal learning may occur through networking with other employees, or a particular person may be identified as being an 'expert' in the area and helps contribute their knowledge. Interaction between co-workers may initiate social and personal relationships that contribute to the well-being of other co-workers and the organisation. Most of this learning is tacit and situated within social situations and therefore co-workers may have little control over when or where the learning occurs. More specifically, the learning may occur during the process of performing other activities and may be more incidental than informal (Foley 2004).

While the term 'informal learning' generally dominates in the literature, it is sometimes used interchangeably with incidental learning. In 1990, Marsick and Watkins drew a distinction in focus between informal and incidental learning. They described informal learning as focusing on experiential forms of learning and incidental learning as focusing on unintentional forms of learning. In this

context, learning is assumed to be an action arising from experience that may enable the learner to develop and acquire new skills. The learner may not be conscious of this learning as it is unintentional and occurs as a by-product of everyday experiences and activities in the workplace. For example, through repetition or observation, employees may learn basic computer skills or new ways of doing everyday tasks in the workplace. This learning may occur through informal interaction with other co-workers, and therefore social interaction may play a significant role in how this type of learning occurs. For this reason, the nature of incidental learning will be examined in greater detail in an attempt to determine the role of social interaction and its impact on informal learning in the workplace.

## Incidental learning

The term 'incidental learning' is a sub-set of informal learning and is sometimes used interchangeably with informal learning. Incidental learning is described as the unintentional activities that occur as a by-product of everyday experiences (Marsick & Watkins 1990). As incidental learning is a sub-set of informal learning, it is also defined in terms of the tacit, taken-for-granted, everyday activities occurring in the workplace (Marsick & Watkins 1999). In most cases, incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities in the workplace. In comparison to informal learning, incidental learning can be a result of learning from mistakes or the hidden curriculum that may be associated with formal learning, suggesting that incidental learning is not a planned action. Other examples of incidental learning are the hidden agenda of an organisation's culture, learning by mistakes, or through trial and error (Marsick & Watkins 2001).

Previous studies have shown that incidental learning includes learning through conversation (van den Tillaart, van den Berg & Warmerdam 1998), observation, repetition, social interaction

(Cahoon 1995) and problem solving (Kerka 2000). Similar to the view taken by Marsick and Watkins (1990), Foley (1999) suggested that learning through social action is incidental and, consequently, is not legitimately recognised as learning as it 'almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it' (Marsick & Watkins 2001: 25). Therefore, learning is taken-for-granted, tacit and unconscious. Incidental learning is also unintentional or unplanned learning that is a result of other activities (Kerka 2000). In research conducted by Callahan (1999), interviewees commonly referred to incidental learning as the 'karma in the walls and halls'. The most significant characteristics of incidental learning, however, are that it is always occurring and is 'highly influenced by the social and cultural norms of others' (Marsick & Watkins 2001: 31).

A review of the literature on informal and incidental learning highlights that incidental learning is unplanned (Tusting 2003), unintentional (Marsick & Watkins 1990, Bell & Dale 1999, Tusting 2003) and takes place in the work context although is often not recognised by the employer (Bell & Dale 1999), at least not formally. Marsick and Watkins (1999) have defined incidental learning in terms of the tacit, taken-for-granted, everyday activities occurring in the workplace. In most cases incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities, such as interaction with co-workers. In contrast to informal learning, which may be facilitated through strategies like mentoring, incidental learning can be the result of learning from mistakes, but not always.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted on incidental learning by Astin (1977), Mealman (1993), Cahoon (1995), Van den Tillaart, Van den Berg and Warmerdam (1998) and Lawrence (2000). Research conducted by Astin (1977) found that university students learned through incidental learning simply by being on campus and interacting with their lecturers and peers. In a similar study, Mealman (1993) suggested that unintentional learning, through interaction

and personal contexts, played an important part in students' overall experience. In his study on the computing industry, Cahoon (1995) found that most learning in the workplace occurs in the course of everyday work practices and contributes to a socialisation process, and in turn, benefits on-the-job learning. Cahoon (1995) established that incidental learning about computers through coaching and problem solving was more important in developing skills than formal training. Accordingly, Van den Tillaart, Van den Berg and Warmerdam's (1998) research in the printing industry showed that employees were able to keep their skills and qualifications current by problem solving and through assistance by more experienced workers. During adult learning workshops Lawrence (2000) found that more effective community-based learning took place as much during social activities as during the formal course structure.

On the basis of these studies by Astin (1977), Mealman (1993), Cahoon (1995), Van den Tillaart, Van den Berg and Warmerdam (1998) and Lawrence (2000), incidental learning occurs through work-related interaction and socialisation processes. Incidental learning can be described as unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities including observation, repetition, social interaction and problem solving. Although adult learners do not necessarily distinguish or recognise incidental learning opportunities (Cahoon 1995) in the workplace, co-worker interaction is assumed to play a significant role in how new skills and knowledge are acquired. In light of the studies reviewed in this section, incidental learning can be described as a social process and can be conceptualised using Lave and Wenger's (1991: 53) notion of a 'community of practice' where:

> Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of a broader system of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons... Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) statement implies that learning is a social process and can be influenced by the relationships in which individuals engage. In his studies on social movements, by comparing the learning experiences of mine workers and homemakers, Foley (1999) argued that social action and interaction can facilitate incidental learning. Foley described how male mine workers discussed and critiqued management practices over dinner with other co-workers, indicating that workers retreated to a safe place and with people they felt comfortable with to reflect on work practices and experiences. By reflecting on work in this way, it can be said that these co-workers engaged in a type of social learning occurring in what Lave and Wenger (1991) would describe as a community of practice.

The literature on incidental learning has highlighted that this type of learning is unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities in the workplace. It occurs often in the workplace through observation, social interaction and problem solving. Incidental learning is often not recognised by employees as learning *per se*, and like informal learning, is not always recognised by the organisation as legitimate learning. As previously highlighted, Marsick and Watkins (1990) used informal and incidental learning to distinguish between planned and unplanned learning. They described informal learning as experiential and non-institutional, and incidental learning as unintentional, a by-product of another activity.

## Concluding comments

In summary, this review of the literature on informal and incidental learning in the workplace has shown that informal learning is a broad term that describes a wide range of experiences and activities that facilitate non-formal learning in the workplace. The nature of informal learning suggests that the social and cultural environment in which learning takes place has the potential to influence how learning occurs. Researchers including Marsick and Watkins (1990, 1999, 2001), Garrick (1998), Bell and Dale (1999) and Coffield (1999) have considered the role of informal learning in the workplace. Their studies have shown that informal learning is planned or unplanned learning that is often spur-of-the-moment learning, self-directed, and involves trying new things and learning along the way. More significantly, these studies have highlighted the importance of the social context in which informal learning occurs. This is important because if informal learning emerges during everyday activities in the workplace, there is the potential for this type of learning to occur more often than formal learning.

## References

Astin, A. (1977). *Four critical years*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Beckett, D. & Hager, P. (2002). *Life, work and learning: Practice in postmodernity*, Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education 14, London: Routledge.

Bell, C.R. (1977). 'Informal learning in organisations', *Personnel Journal*, 56(6): 280–313.

Bell, J. & Dale, M. (1999). *Informal learning in the workplace*, Research Report No. 134, Department for Education and Employment, London, England.

Billett, S. (1993). *Learning is working when working is learning*, Centre for Skill Formation Research and Development, Griffith University, Australia.

Billett, S. (1996). 'Constructing vocational knowledge: History, communities & ontogeny', *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 48(2): 141–154.

Billett, S. (2001). *Learning in the workplace: strategies for effective practice*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Boreham, N. & Morgan, C. (2004). 'A sociocultural analysis of organisational learning', *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(3): 307–325.

Boud, D. (1999). 'Situating academic development in professional work: using peer learning', *International Journal for Academic Development*, 4(1): 3–10.

Boud, D. & Garrick, J. (eds.) (1999). *Understanding learning at work*, London: Routledge.

Boud, D. & Middleton, H. (2003). 'Learning from others at work: Communities of practice and informal learning', *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 15(5): 194–202.

Callahan, M. (1999). 'Case study of an advanced technology business incubator as a learning environment', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia: Athens, Georgia.

Carter, G. (1995). 'Stroke survivors: Finding their way through informal and incidental learning', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas: Austin, Texas.

Cofer, D.A. (2000). *Informal workplace learning*. Practice Application Brief No. 10, Educational Resources Information Centre. Retrieved 14 March, 2003, from Proquest.

Coffield, F. (1999). 'Breaking the consensus: Lifelong learning as social control', *British Journal of Educational Research*, 25(4): 479–499.

Conner, M.L. (2003). 'Informal learning', retrieved 5 June 2003 from http://agelesslearning.com/backg/informal.html

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*, New York: Collier Books.

Engestrom, Y. (2001). 'Expansive learning at work. Toward an activity—theoretical reconceptualisation', *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1): 133–156.

Enos, M., Thamm Kehrhahn, M. & Bell, A. (2003). 'Informal learning and the transfer of learning: how managers develop proficiency', *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 14(4): 369–387.

Eraut, M. (2004). 'Informal learning in the workplace', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2): 247–273.

Foley, G. (1999). *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education*. London: Zed Books.

Foley, G. (ed.) (2004). *Dimensions of adult learning: Adult education and training in the global era*, Maryborough, Victoria: Allen and Unwin.

Garrick, J. (1998). *Informal learning in the workplace: Unmasking human resource development*, London: Routledge.

Gourlay, S.N. (2002). 'Tacit knowledge, tacit knowing, or behaving?', paper presented at the 3rd European Organisational Knowledge, Learning and Capabilities Conference, Athens, 5–6 April.

Gourlay, S.N. (2004). 'Knowing as semiosis: Steps towards a reconceptualisation of "tacit knowledge"', in H. Tsoukas & N. Mylonopoulos (eds.), *Organisational knowledge systems,* London: Palgrave Macmillan: 86–105.

Hager, P. (1998). 'Recognition of informal learning: Challenges and issues', *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 50(4): 521–535.

Hager, P. (2001). 'Workplace judgement and conceptions of learning', *The Journal of Workplace Learning,* 13(7/8): 352–359.

Hager, P. & Halliday, J. (2006). *Recovering informal learning: Wisdom, judgement and community*, Lifelong Learning Book Series, Vol. 7, Dordrecht: Springer.

Kerka, S. (2000). 'Incidental learning: trends and issues', Alert 18, ERIC/ACVE.

Knowles, M. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy vs pedagogy*, New York: Associated Press.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lawrence, R.L. (2000). 'Transcending boundaries: Building community through residential adult learning', article retrieved 11 December 2002 from http://nl.edu/ace/Resources/Documents/Transcending Boundaries.html

Lindeman, E.C. (1926). *The meaning of adult education*, New York: New Republic.

Marsick, V.J. & Volpe, M. (1999). 'The nature and need for informal learning', *Advances in Developing Human Resources,* 1: 1–9.

Marsick, V.J. & Watkins, K. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*, London: Routledge.

Marsick, V.J. & Watkins, K. (1999). 'Envisioning new organisations for learning', in D. Boud. & J. Garrick (eds.), *Understanding learning at work,* London: Routledge: 199–216.

McAdam, R., Mason, R. & McCrory, J. (2007). 'Exploring the dichotomies within the tacit knowledge literature: Towards a process of tacit knowing in organisations', *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 11(2): 43–59.

McCall, C., Lombardo, D. & Morrison, A. (1988). *The lessons of experience: How successful executives develop on the job*, Toronto: Lexington.

Mealman, C.A. (1993). 'Incidental learning by adults in a non-traditional degree program', in *Proceedings of the 12th Annual Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference,* Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Rylatt, A. (2000). *Learning unlimited: Practical strategies for transforming learning in the workplace of the 21st Century* (2nd ed.), Warriewood: Business Publishing.

Sawchuk, P.H. (2003). 'Informal learning as a speech-exchange system: Implications for knowledge production, power and social transformation', *Discourse and Society*, 14(3): 291–307.

Senge, P.M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organisation*, Sydney: Random House Australia.

Spencer, B. (2002). 'Research and the pedagogies of work and learning', *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 14(7): 298–305.

Tusting, K. (2003). *A review of theories of informal learning*, Lancaster Literacy Research Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster.

*Van den Tillaart, H., Van den Berg, S. & Warmerdam, J. (1998). Work and learning in micro-enterprises in the printing industry, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Thessalonica, Greece.*

## About the author

*Dr Megan Le Clus is a lecturer in the Faculty of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University. Throughout her academic career, Megan has developed a strong research interest in the way that co-workers learn in the workplace, and more specifically, how opportunities for informal learning are potentially afforded or constrained by the social context.*

## Contact details

*270 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup 6027, Western Australia*
*Tel: +61 8 6304 2418*
*Email: m.leclus@ecu.edu.au*

# Brothers Inside:
# Fathering workshops with Aboriginal prisoners

Craig Hammond
Family Action Centre
The University of Newcastle

*This paper describes a fathering program that has been operating for a number of years for Aboriginal men in the corrective system. The discussion groups focus on how the men see their role as fathers whilst in jail. The discussions examine ways of changing and developing new skills for them on release. The basis of the program is that just because they are incarcerated does not mean that they are bad fathers or not a father at all. The discussions involve learning from each other. We sit down and listen to each other about stories of being a father with a group of Aboriginal men. A lot of them are from the same background—where they grew up, how they grew up and their lifestyle. The fathers' program is an environment where no-one is judged for their behaviour, their answers or how they talk.*

## Background

Between 2004 and 2009, I developed Fathering workshops for Aboriginal inmates in local prisons. I had already been working to support Aboriginal Dads in the community and had helped produce a number of resources promoting the strengths of Aboriginal men and Dads.

The prisons' project is called Brothers Inside. Underpinning the workshops are beliefs that we all have strengths as Dads and that Dads are very important in the lives of their children. Many prison workshops focus on stopping particular behaviours (e.g. drug use, violence, theft), whereas fathering workshops engage men in a more positive process where the focus is on something very important to them—their children. This article discusses the experiences of some of these Aboriginal fathers, some of the challenges involved in running the workshops and what was learnt through the process.

Overall, we hoped that the workshops would help the men rejoin their families and communities successfully when they were released, strengthen the relationships between the men and the services that could support them in returning to their communities and strengthen the men's capacity to be fathers and father figures.

Brothers Inside came out of a school-based project in four schools in NSW. That project was all about trying to engage fathers in the school setting with their kids. One of the ways we engaged the Dads was to have father/child activity afternoons. A number of kids turned up without their Dads but had their Mums with them. Some said the Dad was away or at work but some of the Dads were in prison. We got a number of requests from the Mums to have a yarn with the men in prison. Because the prison was in the region, we could do that. I made a number of visits to the prison and talked with the Aboriginal staff to find out if a father's project would be relevant and how that could be organised. This step took roughly twelve months to complete.

## The first workshops—us learning

Because we had already been working with Dads in the schools, we adapted that program to suit the fathers in prison. The first workshop was very challenging, because the setting had its own challenges and was so foreign to us. We learnt so much from this first workshop series in terms of the timing of workshops, length of the workshops and working in a prison environment. We ran the workshop for four hours a day one day a week over an eight-week period. We had a lot of interest in the program but, because it was over eight weeks, many couldn't attend. Some men were in transit to other prisons, some were due to be released or had court dates and such like, and so we learnt that the whole program needed to be conducted over a shorter period of time, ideally over two days a week for two weeks.

## Yarning where the men are safe is a place to learn

We found there was a keen interest from the men to participate because this was a topic they really wanted to talk about and they were waiting for the right program and setting to come along. The good thing about this program is it's all Aboriginal men sitting around yarning about topics that never get discussed. It's a more relaxed setting—they have the same upbringing, the same issues growing up and lots of the same issues with their partners, kids and families. Because this was an environment where they could talk openly without being judged about being an Aboriginal man in prison, after being put down all their lives inside and outside prison, they felt comfortable talking in this way. Because they were talking about issues that are close to them, they 'held it in' until they're comfortable talking openly. Also the facilitators had to get to know the participants so they felt comfortable talking with us. They didn't want to disclose too much to anyone whom they didn't feel they could trust. So in the early part of the program, the facilitators talked openly about themselves, their families, their Mob, so the men knew we're just average fathers like them, not experts who know it all. This helped

to set the tone of the workshop so that both the participants and the facilitators felt comfortable.

## Focusing on strengths

A lot of the topics focused on the strengths and skills they have as Aboriginal men and fathers. The participants really had to think deeply about what strengths they had, because it's not something that's usually discussed with them. Being in prison doesn't help when you're trying to talk about your skills and strengths. But when they get together hearing other men's stories, they realised they do have these skills and strengths and it's just that this isn't seen by the wider community. But in the end, it's the kids they want to notice that their Dads have these skills and strengths and that they are there for their kids.

Here are a few of the initial responses of the men in the workshops:

> I found it very interesting speaking amongst other Brothers that are in the same position as me, in gaol away from our kids. I really like talking about our role as Dads and our strengths—strengths that I didn't even know I had.

> Many of the Brothers were hesitant about doing this program as they did not want someone to stand there and tell them how to be a good Dad. We were all surprised and happy to find out this program was not like that and instead made us think about what it means to be a Dad and that we can still be a good parent while in gaol.

The men made specific comments on the key features of the workshops that made them good places to talk about these issues. S's child had been killed while he was in gaol. S talked about it in the workshop quite a bit. He said he had spoken about it more in the workshop than he had elsewhere and had found talking with the other Brothers more useful than when he had talked with counsellors about it. He said it 'felt right' to talk about it with his Brothers.

During the second day of one of the workshops, some of the Brothers reflected that the workshops were encouraging them to talk about their kids more back in the wings. Some of the Brothers said that the workshops allowed them to talk about issues they faced with their kids and how they dealt with them in ways that they normally did not. D said he went back to the wing and spoke, for the first time, to another Brother (who wasn't doing the workshop but had a child about the same age as his) about their children. P, who had been in and out of gaol for about 15 years, said they normally did not really talk about their kids and that it was good to be able do so with other Brothers. He said that he had never heard the Brothers talk like this before.

## Looking for learning

Despite the challenges many of them were trying to be the best fathers they could and did not want to be considered 'bad' fathers just because they were in gaol. The workshops allowed participants to consider positive options and to learn from what other participants were doing. As L said, 'I hope I pick up some things that help me to be a better father'.

> T said that every time he rings his kids, he tells them how much he loves them and that he's proud of them.

> A couple of the Brothers said they kept diaries to show their children later.

> S said that he maintained a good relationship with his children by using the phone, even though his family hasn't been able to visit him in five years. He said that he even helps them with their homework over the phone.

These types of examples were the springboard for quite meaningful discussion about the ways in which the Brothers could keep in touch with their children and build relationships with them. Rather than focusing on what the participants were doing wrong (as often

happens in workshops conducted in gaol), Brothers Inside provided the men with the opportunity to be recognised as fathers, to discuss their strengths as fathers and to consider ways in which they could strengthen their relationships with their children. The Brothers responded well to this opportunity and we were privileged to be part of their journey.

## Building the facilitator-participant relationship

Where possible, individual discussions were held before the workshops with participants to find out what they wanted from the course, some family background, their relationship with their family and elders, what contact they had with their families while in gaol, how being in prison had affected their relationship with their children and what they would like for their children.

During the interviews we also explained what participants could expect from the workshop, our expectations (e.g. attendance) and began the process of building a relationship. We were not able to conduct the interviews prior to some workshops, which resulted in problems arising that we believe could have been prevented by the interviews.

The workshops involved a variety of activities such as building a sense of community, yarning together and videoing messages to their children. We also ensured that each workshop included creative activities such as drawing and writing poetry. These activities were taken seriously by the men and once again allowed a change in learning style. We tried to cover topics such as the importance of fathers, their strengths as fathers, communication skills, keeping kids safe (e.g. child abuse, discipline), experiences of being fathers, child development, what makes a good father, their roles as fathers, resilience and ways of strengthening their connections with their children. We also discussed the men's experience of being fathered themselves.

The Brothers ranged in age from 18 to their mid 50s. Most of them had between one and three children, but there were a significant number who had between 8 and 12 children (either with the same partner or a number of different partners). Some also had a number of grandchildren. Each workshop had one or two participants who did not have children. We decided to allow participants without children to take part because they intended to become fathers and were able to consider their relationship with nieces and nephews or other children. Not surprisingly, participants without children were more likely to drop out of the course or not to be as actively involved.

While we did not explore their offences, comments made by various men indicated that there were a range of offences including minor ones (such as driving while disqualified), drug-related offences including theft, and violent crimes such as rape, double manslaughter and murder. The length of sentences ranged from a few months up to 13 years. Some of the participants had been in and out of prison since they were teenagers.

> C had a 2½ year old daughter who was in care because he was in gaol and his partner was using drugs. He was quite angry about the whole situation and expressed great frustration because he had been told that he could have a video link visit with his child but it had not happened yet. He said he was being 'ripped apart' by the situation and his frustration and anger kept coming up during the workshop. He was hoping the workshops would help him regain custody of his child when he was released.

> P had been in gaol for over 10 years and was due for release in 12–18 months. While he had been in regular contact with his children (who were now teenagers) during this time, he used the workshops to help prepare him for his return home.

> B had four children aged from 14 to 25 and also four grandchildren aged 8 and under. He considered himself to be part of the stolen generation, being removed from his family when he was about 10. When he was gaoled, his ex-partner stopped him from seeing his younger children and changed the phone number so he was unable

to ring them. He was hoping to gain access through the family court. His eldest son was in gaol with him for a while. They shared a cell for some of the time but the relationship was not easy.

D had two children (aged 10 and 5). D had sole custody of the 10 year old so the child went into care when he was gaoled. During the course he had the first visit with his 5 year old since being gaoled, but had not seen his 10 year old while in gaol. He said that the worse thing about being in gaol was not being able to hold his children and that 'it just tears me apart'. He said he had stopped taking drugs so that he could get better access to his children: 'It was drugs or my kids, and I'm not going pick drugs over my kids'.

M had two children (2 and 3 years) and said that when he first went into gaol, he quit smoking because he had to choose between buying cigarettes or ringing his family. By quitting smoking he had the money he needed to be able to ring every day. He said it was an easy choice and that he did not have any cravings because he knew why he was doing it. Making phone calls was not always an easy process. Men can have six phone numbers at a time (which have to be authorised by the prison and can be changed as often as the men wish) pre-set into the limited number of inmate phones. After six minutes the phones automatically disconnect and the men have to return to the back of the queue for the phone. Because M's family lived quite a long way away, his family could not visit often and the phone calls became quite expensive. Many of the Brothers found the process of making phone calls difficult.

After a workshop, T spoke to his daughter for the first time in about two years. During the workshop, we had discussed what he might say and how he might handle it. He said that the conversation had been 'funny but OK' and that our discussion had been helpful.

Some of the Brothers said they tried not to think about their children too much because it was too painful. As one said, 'I try to put it at the back of my mind, but they are always there'. They spoke about getting through gaol without focusing on 'all the negative stuff'. Likewise, some of them did not want their children to visit them for a variety

of reasons. Some of the children were scared when they came to visit, some felt their families were treated quite badly by custodial staff and were treated like they were criminals as well. One did not want his children to know he was in gaol and so told them that he had a job in a remote location. Others said that it could sometimes take nearly two hours to get through reception, and that their families could be patted down and be subjected to sniffer dogs. Some of them did not want to put their children through that.

## The role of a father

Protecting their families, even when they were inside, was very important to most of them. Some of the Brothers said that if anyone touched their families they would take the law into their own hands to deal with the offender. They would not care if they were gaoled for a long time because their children would know that they stood up for them.

The Brothers believed that most people had no idea of what their experience as fathers in gaol was like. As one commented, 'Try putting yourself in our shoes and seeing what it is like being a father inside'. They wanted people to know that 'we are still fathers and we still have a strong sense of being a father'. Another participant said, 'even though we are criminals, we are still humans and still have families. We know how to show affection.' They felt that many people judged them without meeting them. While they may have committed a crime and were in prison, it did not mean they were all bad, nor did it mean that they were bad fathers. In particular, they felt that the Department of Community Services judged them as bad fathers regardless of their crime. They also felt that it was not always recognised when they tried to better themselves while they were in prison. One said he attempted to do what he thought was best for him and his children and did not care how other people might judge him for it. They wanted their children to know that they would be there for them, that they wanted

to have contact with them and that they were loved. They hoped their children would be willing to have a go, be happy and not end up in prison.

Many of the Brothers spoke about how it had been their mothers who held their families together and that their fathers had not been around much. Some did not have strong father figures in their lives, while others had a significant uncle, brother or pop who acted as a father figure. In one of the workshops, three of the Brothers spoke about how things started to fall apart for them (eventually leading them to prison) when the main father figure in their life (a grandfather, an elder brother and a father) died. Some of the Brothers spoke about how it was their children's mothers who held things together now. One of the Brothers said that his partner was the 'brains of the outfit', and that when it came to his family, he did not make decisions without her and that she 'kept me in line'.

## Learning about fathering

One of the biggest issues in the workshops (besides issues related to being separated from their children) was how to discipline children. Nearly all the Brothers had been 'flogged' as children (e.g. with bare hands, thin branches from trees or electrical chords). Some of them thought it was too harsh and that they would never do it to their children. Others thought 'a good flogging didn't do me any harm', and that it taught them respect and to tell right from wrong. One of them commented, jokingly, that his parents' discipline had not worked because he had ended up in gaol. Most of them, however, said it was not their parents' fault that they ended up in gaol.

When asked about discipline, most of the Brothers said they would talk issues over with their children and try to see their side of things. Their actual strategies, however, were more authoritarian. Most of them believed it was appropriate to use physical discipline (within limits), although some preferred to use strategies such as groundings.

One of the Brothers spoke about how his children had smashed things up at the school and as a punishment he told them to pack up their things and get in the car. He drove for a while before stopping by the side of road. After telling them to get out and find themselves new parents he drove off, but kept them in sight. After his children started crying, he waited a little while and returned to pick them up. Most of the other Brothers believed this was an appropriate response.

It was a topic we regularly returned to, not just during the session on keeping kids safe. For example, K spoke about being in a pub late one night and seeing his 13 year old daughter out, which led to a discussion about how they might handle the situation. Most of their responses were initially quite authoritarian, but we were able to discuss other responses by using real-life examples.

I had developed a series of posters and a DVD promoting positive images and messages about Aboriginal fathers. The Brothers appreciated the positive approach (most images of Aboriginal men are negative) and the resources opened up significant opportunities for discussion. As in most workshops, some participants were more actively involved than others, but generally there was good participation. At times the men were willing to challenge each other about their attitudes towards fathering. For example, H (who was hoping to make contact with his children for the first time in 12 years) was not sure what to say or how to say it, so he was thinking that he would leave it to his daughter to ask lots of questions. The other Brothers said that he needed to take more of the initiative because he was the father and should not just leave it to his daughter. S said that his kids got into trouble no matter what he said or did and that his behaviour did not really influence their behaviour. The other Brothers challenged him and argued that, as a role model for his children, his behaviour did matter and that he had a large influence on their lives.

The workshop content attempted to achieve a balance between exploring their experiences and current roles, and input of ideas and

strategies that could improve their fathering skills. Part way through the first program, we learnt that some of the Brothers had been concerned that we would tell them how to be 'good' fathers and that we would assume that they were 'bad' fathers. Through the workshop we were careful to respect their experience and be non-judgemental. When we received feedback from them they said that they felt respected and listened to. It was important to the Brothers that we did respect their experiences and expertise.

Prior to the workshops commencing, the prison had established fathers and children days. None of the Aboriginal men had participated but following the second workshop, two of the men took part in a day. Brothers from later workshops also participated in further days. The fathering workshops created an environment where the Brothers were more receptive to take part in the days and provided an indication to staff about who could be approached to participate. Some of the Brothers said the workshops were the best courses they had ever done.

As facilitators, we needed to be flexible to cope with changes in attendance and being able to adapt agendas and process depending on the participants' priorities and interests. The men really appreciated the fact that we brought in biscuits and sweets. While this may appear a relatively insignificant part of the workshops, it demonstrated that the facilitators valued the men and helped promote a positive relationship between the facilitators and men.

## Challenges in facilitating the workshops

There were numerous challenges with the workshops, most of which arose from the context of the prison environment. Lockdowns occurred at least once during each workshop series. Lockdowns could be a result of security breaches (e.g. a gun was found near the perimeter of the prison), cell searches, stop-work meetings or for some other reason (e.g. there was a lockdown on the afternoon of

the Melbourne Cup). Workshops that coincided with 'buy-up' days, when the men receive goods they ordered from the prison store, were more likely to be disruptive. We found that the participants were often more distracted on these days as they often wanted to make sure that they had received their purchases, they needed to settle accounts (between inmates) and were generally somewhat unsettled. Where possible we avoided buy-up days and if we were unable to do so, the Aboriginal teacher attempted to organise the buy-ups in a way that disrupted the workshop as little as possible. Attendance varied from session to session which interfered with the continuity of the program. As our main aims for the first workshop were to build relationships and gain credibility with the men, it did not matter too much for the first program. Attendance was much better in the other workshops, although at times there were still problems. Non-attendance occurred for many reasons, such as men being released or transferred to another prison, having another appointment (e.g. a meeting with their solicitor or appearing before the classification review panel or parole board), receiving bad news (e.g. having a re-classification rejected or family problems) or deciding the workshop was not meeting their needs. Workshops over a short timeframe (i.e. two to three weeks) were more successful than ones spread over more weeks. The shorter timeframe meant that participants were more likely to complete the workshops. But overall the workshops could not have occurred without support from prison staff.

Some of the rooms we had to use were not really suitable for the workshops (e.g. one was too open to interruptions, another was too small). Where possible the Aboriginal teacher organised us one of three rooms that were suitable. The one we found the most appropriate was a large room (used for carpentry) which had an outside section and was fenced off from other inmates. This meant we were less likely to be interrupted and less reliant on custodial staff to let us in. With most of the other rooms, a custodial officer had to be

present in the building or we could not proceed, which occasionally meant we were delayed.

Although most workshops have some challenging behaviour, the context of prison workshops meant that there was often the potential for incidents to escalate. Most of the incidents were relatively minor but, if addressed inappropriately, the situation could have become uncontrollable or the facilitators could have lost the respect of the participants. There is the need to have skilled facilitators who are able to address challenging behaviour in a non-threatening manner. At times we felt that the Brothers said what they thought we wanted to hear in the hope that it would help with re-classification (e.g. so that they were eligible for weekend leave) or when applying for parole. We needed to work hard to ensure that the workshops remained as genuine as possible.

## Helpful aspects of the workshops

Having some older fathers in the group and some fathers who had been in gaol for a number of years was helpful. The more experienced fathers brought valuable insights to the workshops, while the people who have been in detention for some time could bring stability and an understanding of prison culture. Many of the Brothers had not had much contact with their children and wanted to build a relationship with them. They were often unsure about how to go about it.

The Brothers said they would like more information about their legal rights as fathers and would like the workshops to be recognised by the Department of Community Services. Many of the participants were mistrustful of people in authority and, like any workshop, the facilitators needed to demonstrate their credibility to each group. For example, at the start of the second series of workshops L asked if they needed to say anything and, if they did not, whether or not it would affect their certificate at the end of the workshop.

Something I hope to see come from these workshops is for the community/health family services and government departments, such as Department of Community Services, which work with families to recognise the value, the skills, the strengths and the importance of Aboriginal fathers to their kids, their family and their community. These agencies must recognise that things can be achieved with Brothers Inside and similar programs that will have a positive impact on the men going back to their families. If an agency has been involved with the family while the father has been inside, that agency needs also to support these kinds of programs for the Brothers so that the whole family, including the father, can be supported as a whole unit by these agencies. In the longer term, supporting the father as well will only make the family stronger and ensure a future for the children that is positive and not a future that includes crime and prison.

By talking about the issues in and around their family and kids in the workshops, the Brothers remained aware of the role and responsibilities they can still have while inside and also when they are released. It keeps them grounded, knowing that there is a life with their family outside the prison and that they will have an important role to play in that family. It reinforces that there is that family out there waiting for them, whether that's a partner and kids, or just the kids, knowing they will be welcomed back into the family environment.

## Conclusion

At the end of the day, I hope that the Brothers are able to come away from these workshops knowing that they have particular skills and strengths as a father, knowing about communication with their kids and partner, and believing in themselves as a father and as a man. These men have a role to play, not only in their kids' lives, but in the making of a community, because sometimes the things we do as men

in the community have an effect on the whole community and more importantly on our family. When a Brother gets out of prison, the first place he will go is to his family. When he settles back in there, he will come back into the Aboriginal community and that is when, if men come together, it will make the community a stronger community. Brothers Inside helps the men to know where they sit within the family and the community.

## About the author

***Craig Hammond*** *is Indigenous Programs Manager, Family Action Centre, The University of Newcastle. Craig has published in the Aboriginal and Islander Health Journal and has produced DVDs and visual materials to show positive images of Indigenous men.*

## Contact details

*University Drive, Callaghan, NSW 2308*
*Tel: (02) 4921 6821*
*Email: Craig.Hammond@newcastle.edu.au*

BOOK REVIEW

## What happened to history

Willie Thompson
London: Pluto Press, 2000
ISBN: 9780745312637
176pp, pbk, approx. $29.00

### A personal reflection

This is a history of historiography from Classical Modernism in the early nineteenth century through to what I call 'post-Postmodernism'. At a larger level, it is also a history of cultural change, starting with the certainties of Modernism followed by the 'age of catastrophe' in the twentieth century, through to the complicated present. For those interested in how we got to where we are, it is a book worth buying.

The book starts off with those two foundation thinkers of Modernism, from Prussia—Leopold von Ranke with his idea of history as scientific fact and G.W.F. Hegel with his idea of history as progress through a process of dialectics. It then goes on to consider the various challenges

and criticisms in the twentieth century, including R.G. Collingwood's idea of history as what was thought fact by the actors of the past, through to Marx's theory of ideology as distorted fact, through to the Soviet idea that history is infinitely malleable in order to serve the cause of revolution—to the postmodern idea (from Nietzsche) that there are no facts, only interpretations. Over against this, there is the practical view by those often found in politics and business who don't care a damn for theory—that history does help in explaining certain trends as well as events.

As a historian who spent a life-time on one magnum opus, *Great Central State*, I lived through all these stages. I have come to the conclusion that extreme relativism and Nihilism (whilst at first seductive to students) leaves you nowhere to go. As a result, there has been a return to empiricism and objective facts in the twenty-first century. But the return has been an empiricism made complex (Complexity Theory) by all the doubts and criticisms of the twentieth century.

This is not to say that the postmodern turn has not had a profound effect. We are now all deeply aware of 'the bewitchment of language', especially as used over time. Postmodernism has also killed stone dead (here I agree with Thompson) all Grand Theory—be it Soviet Marxism or Universal Liberalism or Scientism or Universal Progress.

In his final chapter, Thompson concludes that postmodernism, poststructuralism, deconstruction are essentially literary phenomena and should not be allowed to be imperialistic into other disciplines. He also concludes that all three are not wholly relativistic because they tend to hang on to the Modernist principle of emancipation and progress. In this sense, an extension of Modernism. He also concludes that today historians should use all methods available to them (including empiricism) and not let one method cannibalise the other.

The world after postmodernism has become complex, mysterious, multi-faceted and not necessarily (in the binary sense) logical. This makes possible many approaches to history.

As part of the long debate about 'What is History,' the field of history has broadened – from history as high politics in the days of Ranke, to proletarian history, to history of ideas and the mental superstructure, to so-called history from below, women, indigenous peoples, etc. Thompson's book traces some of this spread. It all adds to the complexity of the subject. But then all disciplines, Science, Philosophy, Religion, Social Science, have become complex.

❈

Writing this review has forced me to consider again my own historiography.

Thompson uses examples from UK, America and Europe. Is history different in the southern hemisphere?

I started my apprenticeship in history writing, for five years, as a Research Fellow under a distinguished Australian historian (originally from China) called Douglas Pike. Pike described himself as an empiricist—to some extent in the tradition of Leopold von Ranke. He laid down a strict regime—which I call his magnum opus approach:

Stage one: I was to write the book totally from the records without reading any secondary sources.

Stage two: I was then to consult all known secondary sources and re-write the book.

Stage three: I was then to refine the text by re-writing each chapter 12 times.

As a self-conscious individualist, Pike was worried how historians follow the leader. The result of this approach was that it took me 40 years (five years full time) to complete *Great Central State.*

Pike also held that good history is good story-telling. He urged me to tell a good yarn through the use of 'judiciously chosen examples.' At one stage Pike had been a shearer (150 sheep a day) and station manager in the bush. He also believed in the very detailed documentation preferably at the bottom of each page.

In the latter part of my career, I found work as a historian of ideas. It made me acutely aware of how words shift their meaning with time. In the nineteenth century, race was the respectable way of accounting for cultural differences.

As a kid I was encouraged to write by A.D. Hope. I decided that good historians have a voice. I injected my own wry humour into the text: my sense that human beings are both courageous and frail. Life is tragic and comic at the same time.

The above is of course only the beginnings of an historiography. I remain an empiricist bewildered by complexity. But I have less faith in binary logic. And when students ask me where I stand—I describe myself as 'a bit of a mysterian,' which sends them scrambling for their dictionaries.

**Jack Cross**
**Adjunct Associate Professor**
**University of South Australia**

## Footnote

*Great Central State The foundation of the Northern Territory*, described by Nicholas Rothwell in *Late Night Live* as a 'beautiful book', is published by Wakefield Press, 2011, and retails for $39.95.

## ESSAY REVIEW

## In search of civilisation: remaking a tarnished idea

**The utopian and cultivated philosopher: John Armstrong's gentlemanly vision of a better world**

> *I think the really central idea of civilisation is the integration of material prosperity, that's the getting and spending bit, and spiritual prosperity, that's the meaning, ideas, the finer things, depth of meaning, depth of understanding. And that the idea of civilisation is that these two human projects are integrated and really help one another. It's not just that they co-exist, it's that they actually assist one another.*
> (Armstrong, ABC radio, October 2009)

One of the hardest tasks has been for gentle souls to gain much purchase in popular opinion against the black and white tough guys

in the modern world. One has only to think of leaders of modern governments, their appeal to a largely sensationalist media and their language of winning, of the war on terror, of supremacy. Alternative values of cooperation and service, while acknowledged to have their place, have not been given the same weight and have lacked significant purchase in popular Western culture.

Against this have been the philosopher and the adult educator seeking to recreate and make accessible a less confrontational imagination of peace and good will. The challenge has been to find accessible ways to highlight and promote a more collaborative way to promote human flourishing using a culture of celebration, negotiation and collaboration to complement the need for defence against attack.

John Armstrong's latest popular volume, complete with a glowing reference from his fellow humanistic and popularist conspirator Alain de Botton, is another accessible piece of his largely optimistic, even utopian, writing that has challenged the more popular, critical and empirical academic ways of pursuing scholarship.

Armstrong begins by tracing his desire to write about civilisation to bedtime reading with his children to whom the book is dedicated. In the story he was reading, Bridget, one of the child characters in the book, asks what civilisation might be since they had apparently ended up far from it in their adventures. Her knowledgeable, older brother defines civilisation in terms of its consumer benefits—in this case, ice cream. On reflection, Armstrong realises that civilisation has many meanings which may be why it has failed to be the useful and valuable idea it needs to be. He mentions four linked meanings.

The first refers to *accepted values* that structure the inner life of those who belong to a defined group. It shapes their sense of right and wrong and creates predictable customs, usually defined and applied by language. The second refers to *material progress*, particularly through technology—this being the meaning from which icecream

production could be derived. The third refers to civilisation as the *sophisticated pursuit of pleasure*. The latter days of the Roman civilisation before the invasion of the Barbarians carried this notion and revealed its capacity for decadence and weakness. The final meaning is to do with *artistic and intellectual excellence*, where civilisation sponsors a quest for aesthetic perfection rather than a win against competitors.

The author then addresses each of these meanings in four sections: Civilisation as belonging, as material progress, as the art of living and as spiritual prosperity.

He reflects on the meanings and experiences of civilisation under these four headings, wondering what kinds of activities might be encouraged in order to build up a kindly, refined, creative and enriching form of human, physical and social life that he, and by inference his readers, would like to be part of. His largely egalitarian and conversational writing is in part wistful and singularly free of struggle, suffering and the kind of competition where one loses. He thinks of times and places where he encountered a nurturing kind of civilisation, where there were courteous and respectful relations between people in personal and family life. He thinks of civilian life, where individuals pursue their activities as responsible and sensitive members of the social world. His reflections on a civilised work life pay attention to the spaces workers inhabit which could so be enriched by appropriate design and technology. What comes across is the kind of custom and style that Armstrong longs for which is highly nuanced and courteous. Perhaps the cause of some of the criticisms of this book is that the author and implicitly his readers may be somewhat unaware of unconsciously affluent and unconsciously deep cultural capital that comes from careful and in depth formal and informal humanistic education. It is unlikely that the author received any of his considerable liberal arts education by correspondence. This is the writing of a courteous and perhaps somewhat unconsciously

gifted romantic. He may not be all that aware that a lot of the essential marks of the life-giving civilisation that he dreams of (and perhaps to some extent unconsciously manifests in his own revealed tastes and talents) are not taken up by others, not necessarily because they don't want to but because they have no road to such enrichment. This road block is caused not by their own fault but by unjust and uncaring social structures and institutions.

This element of unawareness of implicit privilege and affluence while possibly irritating lesser mortals has an endearing, old-world sense of *noblesse oblige*. People of material means are obliged by their common humanity to contribute to the spiritual flourishing of the commonweal.

Richard King in his review of this book in the *Sydney Morning Herald* said that:

> By adopting Matthew Arnold's notion of the upper-class 'barbarian' —the aristocrat who declines to pursue 'the best that has been thought and said'—Armstrong avoids the charge of elitism.

Armstrong conflates the life of the mind and heart, whether involving belief in transcendent beings or not, into 'spirituality' which he sees as in tension with 'materiality'. He gets quite a good run in terms of the balance required in a humane civilisation between these two complementary life arenas. He suggests that currently there is a radical imbalance between *material flourishing* with technology and medicine and built environments which is doing well, and *spiritual flourishing* which is not keeping up its moderating and enlivening work in human civilisation.

His gentle and folksy and more than occasionally oversimplifying writing enraged one of his erstwhile students, Cameron Shingleton, who has torn into him in a very funny, venomous and dismissive

way. I suppose you could say that Shingleton's attack was not very civilised. He attacks Armstrong's innocent, conversational strategy of revealing a little about his personal life and enrichments as self-indulgent. He attacks Armstrong's tentative lecturing style, dragging him into the dialectic arena of his academic debate and, while striking considerable blows in his attempt to make Armstrong look ridiculous, reveals the very unpleasantness of the 'winners and losers' discourse that he espouses ironically in the name of a kind of liberation. The frustrating part is that one feels that Armstrong needs further searching conversations particularly when the agenda is completeness and classic, pragmatic 'usefulness' rather than the claim for an absolute truth that divides but does not enrich. If you Google 'Armstrong', you also get Shingleton playing Salieri to Armstrong's Mozart.

A weighty challenge along the same lines comes from a scholarly reviewer, Felipe Fernández-Armesto, in *The Times* of London (18 July, 2009). He challenges Armstrong's attribution of a lack of civilisation to various predecessors of current European society and chides Armstrong for lack of attention to their contribution to human flourishing.

Apart from this criticism which might invite Armstrong to re-write certain dismissive passages in his book's next edition, Fernández-Armesto raises the critical question of the lack of enough attention to power and freedom and their place in human civilisation. I agree that this is another serious element which could be more developed in Armstrong's next edition. I found it could do more in addressing the question on how a life-giving civilization can work socially to confront and overcome inequality and the human capacity for cruelty. On the other hand, I welcome it in its celebration of the interpersonal and aesthetic dimensions of a life-giving civilisation.

As one with considerable sympathy for Armstrong's project, I found this book very helpful, accessible and groundbreaking with an

invitation for more work to be done, particularly in dialogue with the robust commentary of Fernández-Armesto. It is risky, popular books like this that can serve to open awareness for educators and trainers of adults of the multiple elements of human, social and creative life and inspire readers to look more seriously at the civilisation they consciously or unconsciously help to build and maintain.

## References

Collins, Joseph (2010). 'Book review: In search of civilization: Remaking a tarnished idea', *Knowledgeconnect,* 18 November.

Fernández-Armesto, Felipe (2009). 'Book review of In Search of Civilization: Remaking a Tarnished Idea by John Armstrong', *The Times (London),* 18 June.

King, Richard (2009). 'Review of John Armstrong: In Search of Civilization: Remaking a Tarnished Idea', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September.

Saunders, Alan (2009). '*The philosopher's zone',* ABC Radio National, 3 October.

Shingleton, Cameron (2009). 'Review of *In Search of Civilization* by John Armstrong', *The Age*, 5 September.

**Peter Willis**
**School of Education**
**University of South Australia**

# NOTES FOR INTENDING CONTRIBUTORS

1   Papers are to be sent to the Editor, Professor Roger Harris, Adult and Vocational Education, School of Education, University of South Australia, Mawson Lakes Boulevard, Mawson Lakes, South Australia 5095. Phone: 08 8302 6246. Fax: 08 8302 6239. Email: roger.harris@unisa.edu.au

2   Submission of an electronic copy of a contribution is preferred, with one paper copy posted, against which the electronic print-out may be checked for accurate layout.

3   The paper should not exceed 5,500 words in length. The paper (and its title) is to be clearly typed on one side only of A4 paper.

4   Authors are also to submit, *separately* from the paper:
    (a)   the title of the article (repeated), name(s) of the author(s) and your institutional affiliation(s);
    (b)   an abstract of between 100 and 150 words;
    (c)   a five-line biographical note on present position and any information of special relevance such as research interests;
    (d)   complete contact details, including postal and email addresses, and telephone and fax numbers; and
    (e)   a clear indication of whether you want your paper to be refereed (that is, blind peer reviewed by at least two specialist reviewers from Australia and/or overseas)—if there is no indication, the paper will be considered as a non-refereed contribution.

5   Any complex tables, figures and diagrams are to be supplied in camera-ready copy, on separate sheets with an indication of the appropriate location in the text.

6   Authors are to follow the style used in this issue of the *Journal*. Footnotes should not be used. References should be indicated in text with the author(s), the year of publication and pagination, where necessary, in parentheses; for example, Jones (1998), or (Collins 1999:101). References are then listed in full, including pages, at the end of the paper in consistent form; for example,
    for books:      Athanasou, J. (ed.) (2008). *Adult education and training*, Terrigal, NSW: David Barlow Publishing.
    for articles:   Hamer, J. (2010). 'Recognition of prior learning—Normative assessment or co-construction of preferred identities?', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 50(1): 98–113.
    for chapters:   Newman, M. (2009). 'Educating for a sustainable democracy', in Willis, P, McKenzie, S & Harris, R (eds.) (2009), *Rethinking work and learning: Adult and vocational education for social sustainability*, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer: 83–91.

7   Papers are accepted on the understanding that they are not being considered for publication elsewhere. Authors of main papers accepted for publication in the *Journal* will receive one copy of the *Journal* and five reprints of their paper. Other authors will receive two reprints of their contribution.

8   Brief research reports and book reviews (of approximately 800 words) relating to adult learning would be welcomed.

9   Some issues of the *Journal* are thematic. While papers published in a particular issue are not restricted to the theme, intending contributors are encouraged to submit papers on themes announced from time to time.

AJAL is indexed and abstracted in the Thomson Reuters product and custom information services:
•   Social Sciences Citation Index ®
•   Social Scisearch ®
•   Journal Citation Reports/ Social Sciences Edition