



Coming to grips with ANTA's lifelong learning strategy

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I am trying to come to terms with ANTA's 'Marketing Strategy for Skills and Lifelong Learning'. I want to get a feel for its politics and strategic significance in terms of our common goal of building and strengthening Australian adult education. I've felt inspired, depressed, confused and irritated by the strategy. What follows are some questions and problems that it raises for me.

First, a source of irritation: 'lifelong learning' is used loosely throughout the document. It's constructed variously as 'commodity', 'product', a 'habit of learning throughout life', a 'core value' and a 'system'. Can it be all of these at once? Of course, there is no such 'thing' as 'lifelong learning': it's an idea with many facets. But the semantic sliding makes it difficult to grasp what is actually being proposed.

By contrast, the three European policy documents reproduced in ALA's booklet *Lifelong Learning: Making it Work* construct the notion of lifelong learning in a more straightforward way: as a rubric of education policies and strategies that promote a rich, comprehensive education system with opportunities for people to learn throughout life and to adapt to rapidly changing global economic and social conditions.

In Moira Scollay's words, such strategies would be directed towards "a 'learning society' ... that deeply values skills, knowledge and lifelong learning". This is a marvellous objective, but to what extent do the proposals in the ANTA document for the social marketing of learning promise to fulfil it?

Here, 'lifelong learning' attempts to serve both right and left politics. A kind of missionary zeal exudes from the idea that lifelong learning will solve the individual, national, economic and social problems of our time. ANTA claims that "only lifelong learning can guarantee our standard of living" and that "only lifelong learning can guarantee that individual

Australians will be prepared for change". Such claims are surely an exaggeration.

A more sober prediction of Australia's future standard of living might take into account political and economic factors. Australians who are employed, financially secure and optimistic about the future are the ones most likely to adapt to change and to take advantage of learning opportunities.

The social marketing strategy's primary aim is to encourage a passion and a desire for learning and skills acquisition amongst all sections of the community. But is it a lack of passion preventing people undertaking further community or vocational education? Would a marketing campaign with slick advertisements touch the hearts of those most in need of continuing educational opportunities?

Implicitly, the proposed social marketing strategy blames people for not being passionate enough about learning. But with adequate resources and intelligent planning, Australia's educational infrastructure (school, TAFE, tertiary, community, private provider and industry-based) could be developed into the 'seamless' system of programs and opportunities which Moira Scollay calls for. Perhaps this should be the central focus of the lifelong learning strategy. Public promotion of learning and learning opportunities has a role, but should "effective marketing" be the main focus at this time?

Another concern about the strategy is that it assumes that the market is the only or the best possible mechanism for developing and distributing lifelong learning, understood in this case as a product or as a commodity. Learners and potential learners are 'customers', and the strategy includes such phrases as 'competitive position of learning', 'product differentiation', 'image branding and re-branding' and 'market discipline'. Beneath the discourse of the market is a discourse of commercial, rather than human,

transaction. It constructs us as atomised individual customers rather than as members of communities. In this discourse, learning is a commercial enterprise rather than a project of an equitable, democratic public sector. The market discourse, when examined, is deeply at odds with the discourse of 'social capital', 'social cohesion' and 'prosperity for all'. Who might get left out, if lifelong learning is promoted and funded as a product on the open market?

The ANTA paper draws on an abundant and progressive literature about learning as necessarily complex and holistic; about the importance of flexibility, fun, informal learning and personal growth; and about the role of learning in building social capital and a fair, tolerant and open society. I would like to see more research and debate about strategies for developing our current system more in line with those ideas.

The lifelong learning movement presents a great opportunity for the field to advocate anew for a well-resourced, flexible, adult education sector that would include integrated pathways, articulations between the sectors and a wide range of affordable online, community, TAFE and industry-based learning programs. In working towards lifelong learning (understood as a policy rubric) we need to be wary of the market fundamentalism that underlies the current strategy.

We already have the components of a system capable of offering learning opportunities throughout life. What is needed is the political will and the resources to go further: to build (and promote) an integrated and innovative system that offers unending opportunities for learning and re-skilling accessible at every stage of life. In such a system, social marketing would be one of many strategies in the long-term project of building a commitment to learning throughout the community.