



Lifelong learning, social capital and capacity building: individualising the politics of social cooperation

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The current rhetoric around education and training presents an upbeat view of the potential of learning through life. As educators we are urged to build capacities for action in our students and organisations, and to build social capital to reinvigorate communities. Moira Scollay's (2000: 12) vision, for example, is lyrical about 'education and training as the cornerstone of Australian democracy'; in the 'creation of a "learning society"'; in enhancing 'national economic performance, sustainable growth and ... international competitiveness'; and in which 'intellectual and human capital [is] acknowledged as the heartbeat of national, enterprise and individual wealth creation and prosperity in the 21st century'.

Such purple prose, calling on us all to work together for the common good, is a little unnerving in the light of recent governments' actual record in supporting education and training. There is no doubt that educational investment has been oriented to skills formation which will enhance national economic performance but it has also sustained a remarkable privatisation of learning - both by individuals, who must now be self-responsible learners, and amongst education and training providers.

Skills formation is, of course, the old story of education and training. The development of workforce skills and discipline was the original rationale for government investment and, since the 19th century, has underpinned the formation of public systems of schools, TAFE and universities. Such investment increased the 'productive power of labour' which not only served the nation and those individuals but also the private appropriation of profit.

Privatisation is both an old and new story. The old story is about reproducing cultures and prevailing patterns of privilege. Private provision enabled particular communities and employers to induct young people or employees into preferred beliefs, practices and social disciplines, and their place in the social order. Historically, certain faith communities and the rich had the political clout to assert that their culture needed special treatment in terms of education and were able to maintain schooling outside the public system. The rest were

scooped up in public systems, irrespective of their claims to cultural distinctiveness.

The new story of privatisation is less about cultural reproduction, although the rich and faithful continue to renew their cultures and privilege across generations, and more about the state supporting rational investment strategies. The assumption is that families and individuals will, as a priority, seek the best returns on their educational investments and, therefore, it is important to open up access to private provision so that individuals can choose to invest through either a public or private educational enterprise. Reconfiguring the public-private debate in this way individualises the ethic of learning and work. Individuals seek rational investment in skill formation rather than their educational choices being guided by older loyalties to particular communities and cultures.

Such individualisation is crucial for contemporary capitalism. In the mid-19th century, Karl Marx pointed out that industrialisation brought workers into factories and disciplined them through a labour process that harnessed their skills in cooperative ways. But the increased productivity and profits arising from cooperation between workers was seen as a benefit of capital rather than of labour. He states:

The socially productive power of labour develops as a free gift to capital whenever the workers are placed under certain conditions, and it is capital that places them under these conditions. Because this power costs capital nothing, while on the other hand it is not developed by the worker until his labour itself belongs to capital, it appears as a power which capital possesses by its nature - a productive power inherent in capital (Marx, 1976: 451).

Through the 20th century, the discipline of work became largely accepted. Workers expected that they would work together both to meet employer demands and to protect their own interests. Now, at the turn of the 21st century, social cooperation is presupposed in all the operations of informational capitalism (Negri, 1996).

This expectation of social cooperation shifts the fracture line of industrial politics away from

struggles over the organisation of work and work time. Politics increasingly centre on the antagonism between social cooperation and profit-oriented command. At heart, the question is whether the productive power that is released through the orchestration of social cooperation within contemporary capitalism will be directed by the collective capacity of cooperative citizen-workers or the imperatives of privately-oriented profitability?

The rhetoric of lifelong learning, capacity building and social capital is ambiguous but, more often than not, it plays into the politics around social cooperation in individualistic terms that generally do not acknowledge the way individuals are always embedded in cultures and communities. This rhetoric drives an individualisation of responsibility, skills, capacities and networks that are usually disconnected from older ties to communities, cultures and patterns of collective action. It

supports new forms of collective and civic action informed by an individualistic ethic and realised through individual's life style, investment and consumption choices. And with this individualisation, the imperatives of privately-oriented profitability are both generalised by becoming part of us all and freed in ways which define and drive our future.

References

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