

Adult Learning: Removing barriers, not creating them

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Introduction: Structures and barriers

Learning is a fundamental, naturally occurring, activity. Like sleeping and eating, learning is a survival instinct, something that we all do automatically, without much effort or thought. No matter one's place within – or outside – society, one will learn through everyday activities and occurrences.

When we talk about lifelong learning in the context of government policy, we do not mean this instinctual activity but, rather, what might be termed 'structured learning'.

What do we mean by structured learning?

Structured learning means that the learning activity is sequenced in such a way that it has a beginning, middle and end. Each new piece of knowledge or each new skill is introduced strategically, not haphazardly, so that it connects to a skill or piece of knowledge gained earlier. The process is characterised by a steady progress, steady accumulation over time, taking the learner towards a goal or several goals.

Structure can also mean that a specific parcel of time is apportioned for learning activity and that during this time learning is the primary focus of activity. Structure can suggest that participants in the learning process have roles that are defined by where they stand – literally and figuratively - in relation to others. Structure can be good. It can help maximise the effectiveness of the learning.

But there is a point at which learning structures can become a barrier - an obstacle to effective learning or an active disincentive to participating in the first place. This is especially true for the socially disadvantaged who already face considerable structural barriers and are disinclined to face any more, even though positive outcomes may be achieved down the track.

Learning is not necessarily easy – in fact there is one school of thought that claims learning has to be a challenge in order to be effective – however it should not be harder than it needs to be.

To be effective, any adult learning policy or practice must incorporate, at its core, and allow to flourish, the fundamental and well-established principles of adult learning. While these have been expressed in many ways, they essentially boil down to two things: placing the learner at the centre of the experience, and flexibility.

I want to propose three strategies that will help ensure that the principles of adult learning are woven into the fabric of lifelong learning policy and practice:

1. valuing all venues and forms of learning;
2. valuing all outcomes of learning; and
3. empower learners and potential learners.

I now want to spend a little bit of time expanding on the three basic principles that I have proposed. My focus is on adult learning and I speak from an Australian perspective. Furthermore my comments are informed by my experiences with an adult learning advocacy organisation; in other words from outside, not within, government.

The importance of valuing all venues and forms of structured learning

No one form of learning or type of learning provider can be expected to service all the learning needs of an entire community or, indeed, a single individual, throughout their life. Government policy and discussions about learning must facilitate and promote a smorgasbord approach; promoting a range of learning venues and modes to meet a range of community needs and individual situations. Nobody benefits when a learner finds herself or himself in an ill-suite learning environment.

In addition, when talking about the socially disadvantaged, there is a need to concentrate on the preparatory work – the early stages of the learning pathway - the stuff that needs to occur before you can even think about qualifications.

In Australia, many of the learning needs of the socially disadvantaged are not met by large well-funded formal institutions such as universities and technical colleges, but by community-based learning providers - neighbourhood houses, community education colleges, community groups and local libraries – places that may be considered ‘informal’ learning venues.

In Australia neighbourhood houses often provide the first step on the structured learning pathway for the poor, for people recovering from addiction or depression, for refugees and for women who have suffered domestic violence, among others. Neighbourhood houses are an environment where individuals can develop a strong sense of self worth.

What goes on in a neighbourhood house may not be glamorous and may not lead to a high level qualification or, indeed, any formal qualifications at all. But these venues play a vital role in introducing the socially disadvantaged to the options in front of them, empowering them to make choices, and helping them overcome or remove barriers. In Australia, neighbourhood houses have yet to obtain realistic government funding despite the vast amount of programs and services they provide to communities.

Social groups and clubs – such as seniors’ computer associations, environmental protection groups and volunteer fire fighting associations – are places where considerable and valuable learning takes place, especially among people who are turned off by formal learning environments.

Museums and galleries are also valuable adult learning venues, and could provide a whole lot more adult learning, especially for people with poor literacy skills or who learn best through visual stimulus, if given encouragement to do so.

In a similar vein, libraries provide numerous opportunities for adult learning – ranging from peer education programs for computer skills to discussion forums among people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Peer education – including mentoring - is another effective learning mode for the socially disadvantaged – indeed for all of us – but it is often overlooked in terms of government policy and funding, possibly because it doesn’t sit well with administrative systems.

Learning circles is a peer education tool with a century-long tradition and proven effectiveness among the socially disadvantaged, indeed the methodology grew out of socially disadvantaged communities in northern Europe and in America.

Learning circles or study groups do not require an expert – a teacher in the traditional sense – but, instead, engage a facilitator who helps participants pool their existing knowledge and develop new skills or understanding collaboratively at their own pace and under their own steam. The strength of the methodology, especially for the socially disadvantaged, lies in the fact that

participants are empowered to steer the learning activity themselves and their existing life skills, strengths and wisdom play an active part in the process.

Recently, in Australia, a successful learning circle program was developed to help lone parents, especially women, enter the workforce. Conducted in a lower socio-economic outer urban area, the learning circle was highly effective in helping participants identify their options, and gave them the confidence and skills to pursue their learning or employment pathways.

As a result of this non-formal program, some participants developed the desire and skills to go onto more formal study. Others are now active volunteers in the community. Although the program did not lead to formal qualifications, many of the participants found employment simply on the strength of the generic skills learned and the confidence gained.

The things most valued by employers - interpersonal skills, lateral thinking, a positive outlook, an ability to cope with change, and a positive attitude towards learning – are more likely to develop in informal learning environments, than in formal programs designed around the development of a specific skill set.

If nothing else, participation in an informal learning activity can help an adult develop a love for learning – or at least positive feelings about it; a love that will be conveyed to the children in their lives, encouraging them to stay at school longer and, through this, help the next generation escape the cycle of social disadvantage. This is how a learning society is born; through fostering a love of learning.

If we are genuine in our wish to overcome the problem of social disadvantage, then there should not be, among the different forms of learning modes and venues, a hierarchy of status that replicates that of the wider society – learning is learning no matter where or how it occurs. Policy, and especially the way funding is allocated, should not create a situation in which the venues and modes that are most effective for, and most favoured by, the socially disadvantaged are themselves the most disadvantaged forms of learning within the community of learning providers. Adult learners who have participated in one form of learning should not have to face the barrier of snobbery as they try to have their previous learning activity acknowledged at another learning venue.

Even though the results are difficult to measure, progress may be slow and the achievements may, in the big picture, appear almost insignificant, informal learning modes and venues play a vital role in the lifelong learning community. Their outcomes are just as valid and valuable as the more formal, higher profile, forms of learning.

Policy and practice around lifelong learning, especially for the socially disadvantaged, must acknowledge the importance of the preparatory groundwork and the effectiveness of less formal learning modes and venues in giving the socially disadvantaged the skills and also the confidence to play a more active role in society.

The funding of informal learning requires patience and faith – something that does not sit well with government accountability systems nor the general public who holds government accountable - but this does not mean that these learning modes and venues of adult learning any less important or less effective than those that are easier to quantify. Nor does it mean these modes and venues should be absent from government-sponsored promotions of adult learning options.

The importance of valuing all outcomes

Increasingly, adult learning, in the Australian policy environment at least, has been formulated solely as a pathway to employment. I am not convinced that this serves the interests of this socially disadvantaged well.

The focus on formal vocational training can make the initial engagement with learning frustrating, if not downright threatening, as it can rush or curtail the learning process or place undue stress on outcomes rather than process.

While obtaining a certificate may be important for some learners and, indeed a matter of great pride, the processes around giving the qualification should not obscure, limit or prevent the full and effective transference of knowledge and development of skills. We must be careful not to focus on the attainment of certificates, at the expense of ensuring good learning experiences. Moreover, while the attainment of formalised competencies may allow for an incredible boost in self esteem, the flip side is the ever present possibility of failing to reach these externally determined benchmarks. A sense of failure – or even the possibility of failure – does not seem to be a constructive message to be sending to the socially disadvantaged, especially those making their first hesitant steps back into the world of structured learning.

But there are other problems with adult learning policy and practice that revolves solely around competency-based training.

For many people – for example the elderly or the self-employed - the attainment of a qualification, or participation in a learning program developed around an off-the-shelf package of competencies, is not relevant to their needs. For these people, the promotion of competencies and qualifications may actively work as a disincentive. It may create an impression that structured learning is more trouble than its worth or that it lacks the flexibility to address their specific and immediate learning needs in a timely manner.

For other cohorts, an exclusive focus on the vocational outcomes of learning creates the impression that learning will automatically lead to employment. This is not always the case. In many regions there are insufficient employment opportunities.

Discrimination against older people or people from specific ethnic backgrounds, for example, rather than a lack of education or skills, may be the principal reason why unemployment among certain cohorts is prevalent in some areas. No amount of re-training that an individual undertakes can overcome work shortages, racism, sexism or ageism. This is where community-wide learning programs to foster entrepreneurship, civic renewal, leadership and diversity all come to the fore, in helping the socially disadvantaged.

In addition to establishing false hope, an exclusive focus on learning for work can also overshadow the other very powerful benefits of participating in learning activity. If we only honour the narrowly defined vocational skill outcomes of learning, we are potentially devaluing the equally important generic, personal and health outcomes that may be derived from the same learning activities.

Other reasons to learn must be promoted, and the non-vocational outcomes of structured learning must be monitored and reported on just as diligently as the vocational. These outcomes include learning for better health, learning to achieve better relationships, learning to become more actively involved in civil society, and learning to care for others. Each of these outcomes leads to very real economic benefits by helping to reduce public spending on health, crime and family dissolution.

As the Centre for Research into the Wider benefits of Learning reported in May 2003, 'Participation in adult learning contributes to positive and substantial changes in health

behaviours' including in the rate of giving up smoking, reduction of alcohol consumption and taking up more exercise. The report also comments that the 'effects of taking leisure courses on the adoption of health practices are particularly persuasive.' (Leon Feinstein et al, *The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital*, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, May 2003)

Sadly, though, in my country at least, the vocational emphasis of adult learning policy has created a culture in which non-vocational learning and non-vocational outcomes is given little value. For example, recreational learning is dismissed by policy-makers as being the frivolous indulgence of middle-class white people and, as such, outside the realm of government policy. Although there is clear evidence to show that so-called leisure learning has significant individual and community benefits, the impact of which can be measured in real economic terms, federal government policy, funding and consumer advice does not, in my country at least, encourage the socially disadvantaged to participate in non-accredited, non-vocational learning activity. This, despite the fact that of all social cohorts, the socially disadvantaged are more likely to suffer from the health and other social problems that leisure learning can so clearly and positively help to address.

I am not critical of competency training packages *per se*, and I understand Australia is a world leader in this area. But there are limits to the usefulness of an adult learning policy build around vocational training packages. Competency-based training should be viewed as only one part - not the whole - of adult learning policy.

The full range of learning outcomes need to be valued within policy – and acknowledged in promotional work – so that practice can accurately honour and serve the diversity of motivations people may have for engaging the services of structured learning.

The importance of empowering learners and potential learners

If the purpose of learning is to empower, then the practice of learning should not disempower. The process of education should enhance personalities and desires, not inhabit or prevent them. The socially disadvantaged are already silenced, they are looking to education for a voice and an opportunity for expression. They should not be forced to radically change who they are or strive to be in order to participate in structured learning.

To be truly effective, policy and practice should be developed in collaboration with, and not developed externally for, the learners who will participate. Evaluations of adult learning policy and practice must take account what the learners' consider to be meant by the word 'quality' and must undertake measurements of effectiveness in terms of whether learners' needs and expectations are being met.

As difficult as it may be to capture the voice of learners, and as hard as it may be to meet some of their requests, every effort must be made to ensure that their participation in the formation of policy and practice is equal to that of education professionals, government and industry. While many of the socially disadvantaged will not have formal education, they do have life experience, desires, preferences and wisdom all of which are not only important to consider, but present valuable insight into the learning strategies that will – and will not – work for these audiences. Just because someone does not have formal qualifications or social standing, just because someone expresses their ideas crudely, does not mean that they are dumb or are unable to contribute constructively to the development of systems that will impact upon them, and which are supposed to serve their needs.

While some learner requests may be impossible to meet, others will, undoubtedly be easily met, and may even lead to more efficient use of available resources. Listening to the disengaged, and designing policy and practice in consultation with them, is a shrewd way of ensuring maximum return on the investment.

Of course, simply asking people what they want is not enough. Their answers are likely to be restricted by whatever notions they already have about learning – probably school-based education. To ensure that learners' voices are clearly heard, and to ensure that their requests and choices are informed, investment needs to be made in helping the wider public learn about the mechanics and potential of adult learning. To create an effective consumer voice, the whole of the community needs opportunities to learn about learning.

Conclusion: Making learning good again

Generally, people do not have an aversion to learning. Learning is a survival skill – it keeps you alive and it gets you ahead.

What people dislike – what can turn them off – are the accoutrements of formal education: the paperwork; the classrooms; the assignments; the impersonal architecture; the pace; the inconvenient session times; the off-the-shelf curriculum packages; the power structures; the pressure to play an uncomfortable role; the lack of control; the feelings of inadequacy... In other words, the trappings of structure. Such attributes are especially confronting when they do not appear to serve the learners' immediate interests. No good can come from making the world of learning a depressing or disagreeable place.

Best practice does not come about from increased resources, although this helps. Best practice is born of innovation, and from a commitment to and application of fundamental principles to both means and ends of the learning process. By valuing all forms of structured learning, by valuing the many different outcomes of learning, and by using learners as a resource to guide policy and practice – or in the case of peer learning engaging learners as teachers - considerable steps can be made towards engaging, more effectively, the disadvantaged and the disengaged.

Useful resources

Learning advocacy groups

- Adult Learning Australia: <http://www.ala.asn.au/>
- Campaign for Learning (UK): <http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk>
- National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE – UK): <http://www.niace.org.uk/>

Examples of learners' forums

- The All Wales Adult Learners' Forum: <http://www.niace.org.uk/niacedc/Learnersforum/Default.htm>
- Adult Learners' Forum in Edinburgh: <http://www.alfieforum.edin.org>

Research on the outcomes of learning

- The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (UK): <http://www.learningbenefits.net/>

Promoting the learning smorgasbord

- Adult Learners Week (Australia): <http://www.adultlearnersweek.org/>

Learning communities

- Learning Communities Catalyst (Australia): <http://www.lcc.edu.au/>

Competency-based training

- Australian National Training Authority (ANTA): <http://www.anta.gov.au/>

Peer, community & informal learning modes or venues

- Learning Circles Australia: <http://www.learningcircles.org.au/>
- Study Circles Resource Centre (USA): <http://www.studyircles.org/>

- National Link of Neighbourhood Houses and Community Learning Centres across Australia: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~natlink/>
- Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association: <http://www.seniorcomputing.org/>
- Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (UK) <http://www.mla.gov.uk/index.asp>
- Campaign for Learning through Museums and Galleries (UK) <http://www.clmg.org.uk>