



THIS WILL BE THE FINAL NEWSLETTER BEFORE THIS YEAR'S FEDERAL ELECTION, AN ELECTION WHERE EDUCATION WILL BE A KEY DECIDING ISSUE.

A new learning ecology

The parties will try to differentiate their approaches to university funding, scientific research, innovation and early childhood education. But more is at stake than just compiling policies on separate education sectors and interests. Here is an opportunity for the parties to present a vision of how education and learning can contribute to a more informed, productive, tolerant and democratic society.

The first election of the 21st century carries with it more than symbolism. In the 20th century, establishing compulsory school education and then later opening access to higher education were seen as progressive measures closely aligned to ideas of increasing democratic participation.

In the 21st century there are new needs. We no longer believe or behave as though we have acquired the knowledge and skills that will equip us for life by the age of 18 or 21. Extending learning opportunities throughout one's life, especially

to those who have previously missed out, is the new challenge for strengthening democracy and equipping people with the knowledge and skills for a rapidly changing society.

We need to do more than just open up classrooms. We need to rethink where learning takes place, people's motivations for learning, and to develop policies that recognise that people learn in diverse sites. People learn in classrooms but also in clubs, trade unions, workplaces, within political and social movements, voluntary and community associations, around issues of health, the environment and welfare, orally among indigenous peoples, and so on.

Canadian research into informal learning shows that on average a Canadian adult spends four times as much time pursuing informal learning as they do in formal education. It is likely that a similar situation exists in Australia. We need to conceive of a new learning ecology that incorporates both the formal and informal and asks: How can

learning be fostered and supported in the community?

Barry Jones' diagram or mind-map in Knowledge Nation is one attempt to sketch such an ecology. Rather than hold it up to ridicule we would be better off if the idea of identifying and strengthening links between various learning sites and interests was taken seriously and discussed.

In this issue we reproduce statements from the political parties on what they plan for adult learning after the election. We also invited a group of adult educators to make three wishes of the incoming government.

This is also the final issue before Adult Learners Week, where for one week the focus of the adult learning community is on the achievements and aspirations of learners. The Week presents an opportunity to discuss the issues involved in winning a broader understanding of learning, and to consider what the learning age in Australia would be like. ■

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