

Adult Learning and Civic Participation



One of the public benefits of adult learning is increased civic participation and social cohesion. Some measures that are often used to show the health of a civic society include:

- voting in elections,
- levels of trust in government and democratic structures,
- civic cooperation (not condoning cheating on taxes and fares, obeying the law),
- participation in volunteering, and
- levels of trust in others and in institutions.

Adult and Community Education has a number of roles to play in building civic participation;

- as a provider of basic adult literacy,
- as a potential site for 'public literacies' education, and
- as a generator of bridging social capital.

LEARNING, LITERACY AND VOTING

Australia has a compulsory voting system, so the correlation between education and voting is not as explicit as it is in countries like the United States, where education level has the highest impact of all other factors on whether adults vote. However, Australia has a very high level of informal voting. The Australian Electoral Commission has identified that only a very small proportion of voters cast informal ballots as a protest, with the majority of informal votes occurring due to a lack of understanding of the voting process or difficulty interpreting the ballot paper instructions.

LEARNING ABOUT CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP

The language, norms and behaviours of civic participation are developed informally in the homes of the politically powerful. For groups who have been systematically marginalised from civic and political processes, these need to be explicitly taught and learnt. There is a strong case for public literacies education as one strategy in a multi-faceted approach to supporting communities with high levels of socially and economically marginalised adults. There is also a case for making these types of courses and classes available to groups of adults who are under-represented in Australian civic and political life; arguably women, Indigenous Australians and Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. While civics and citizenship programs are common in the school sector in Australia, they are less common for adults.

LEARNING, TRUST AND TOLERANCE

Robert Putnam, the sociologist most closely associated with theories of social capital, makes the important distinction between bonding capital, that is, links with like people, and bridging social capital; links with people from different backgrounds. Bonding social capital not only has no identified impact on social cohesion, there is some indication that it can

simply reinforce negative or anti-social cultural norms. Bridging capital, however, is closely associated with social cohesion. Adult education is a significant builder of bridging social capital, but only where barriers to participation by diverse groups are removed through attention to, for example, cost, transport and physical access.

LEARNING AND VOLUNTEERING

There is a serendipitous relationship between learning and volunteering. Adults with higher levels of literacy are more likely to volunteer and volunteering provides people with access to learning in the form of inductions, ongoing training, mentoring and learning 'on the job'.

LEARNING AND CRIME

There appears to be a negative relationship between learning and crime, however there are many confounding factors and causality is hard to establish. This is because crime is related to a cluster of factors that interrelate with each other of which low education and poor educational experiences form just one part. These include low income, poor parenting, lack of stable housing, delinquency in family members and psychological disorders. It is safe to say, however, that education mitigates the impacts of all of these features.

ACE AND SOCIAL COHESION

Australia, like most modern democracies, faces increasing challenges including adjusting to globalisation, and adapting to the realities of an ageing population. This will require stronger civic institutions, re-invigorated political processes and higher levels of literacy.

Since the 1980s, state governments have systematically used the appeal of liberal adult education to the middle class, and the lack of direct relationship with the labour market, as a rationale to remove funding, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophesy. As of 2014, according to the ABS, Australians in the highest quintile of socio-economic advantage are more than twice as likely to access 'personal interest learning' than those in the lowest quintile (12% compared to 4.6%). Ironically, residents in the nation's political capital, the ACT, are more likely than those in any other state to pursue a course or class for civic or social reasons.

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