

Learning and Civic Participation



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Introduction

Learning has a number of public and private benefits. The economic benefits of learning to the individual in the form of income and to the broader economy in terms of productivity are well established and documented. However, learning also has wider benefits including improved health and wellbeing, improved social networks, bonds of trust, and increased confidence. An additional benefit of learning is increased civic participation.

Democracy consists of much more than the right to vote. Civil society is based on 'active citizenship', which can be described as individuals understanding and having input into the decisions that impact on their day to day lives and that of their families. Active citizenship also involves contributing to the broader community well-being via social networks, community based organisations and civil institutions. Schuller, Brassett-Grundy, Green, Hammond and Preston (2002) identified a set of 'metacompetences' that emerge as result of learning and which promote civic engagement. These include an understanding of the place of civic engagement, generic skills that could be put to good civic use; and basic competences (such as literacy) that are necessary for anyone to fulfil minimum citizenship requirements.

The relationship between education and social capital is well established in research and accepted as a policy concept. Education predisposes people towards joining, engaging and trusting, even when controlling for other variables such as wealth, income, age and gender (Putnam, 2000). Participation in volunteering and levels of trust in others and in institutions are often used as measures of social capital, which in turn is considered to be an indicator of greater civic participation and cohesion.

However, social capital and civic participation are slightly different, albeit overlapping concepts. Some researchers have identified that there are many societies with strong social capital at the individual and community level but that this doesn't necessarily always result in social cohesion, strong civil institutions and effective government at the societal level (Green, Preston & Sabates, 2003). As a result, some additional measures that are often used to show the health of a civic society including:

- Voting in elections (particularly in countries where voting is not compulsory)
- Level of trust in government and democratic structures
- Civic cooperation (not condoning cheating on taxes and fares, obeying the law)

The correlation between education and civic participation and cohesion at the societal level, also seems to require not just *levels* of education but also *equality of access* to education. Green et al's compared levels and features of national education systems to explore the hypothesis that education leads to higher social cohesion. It found that there was "no significant relation between mean levels of education and societal cohesion" however there was a "statistically significant correlation" between *educational equality* and societal cohesion (Green et al 2002 p.5). The 'stand out' examples were the northern European countries, Denmark, Finland and Sweden who have high levels of educational equality and correspondingly high levels of social cohesion. A negative example is the United States where steadily rising levels of education over the past few decades has seen no related rise in social cohesion (Green et al 2002).

Learning and volunteering

There is a serendipitous relationship between learning and volunteering. Adults with higher levels of literacy are more likely to volunteer (OECD, 2000), and volunteering provides people with access to learning in the form of inductions, ongoing training, mentoring and learning "on the job". A 2011 survey of Australian volunteers found that four out of five volunteers were provided with training in order to do their jobs (Volunteering Australia, 2011, p, 18).

Volunteering has strong and obvious returns at the individual and local community level. Volunteers have more connections with others in their community; are more likely to attend community events; and are more likely to take on a caring role for others. When asked about their overall life satisfaction, 82 per cent of volunteers reported that they were delighted, pleased or mostly satisfied with their lives, compared to 75 per cent of non-volunteers (ABS, 2011).

Volunteering also increases civic participation. Firstly, a great deal of volunteering occurs in and through political parties, advocacy groups and local government. Secondly, volunteers are more likely to believe that others can be trusted (ABS, 2011) which is a widely accepted indicator of a cohesive civil society.

A number of researchers both in Australia and overseas have identified the benefits that could be derived from closer relationships between voluntary organisations and adult

education providers. In their study of UK adult learners, Schuller et al (2002) identified the value of learning in enabling volunteering at particular points of the life cycle. We found striking examples of civic activity relating to particular life cycle stages. In addition to the targeted population of parents of young children, older people's contribution to such activity is strongly aided by learning (p 4).

Closer to home, Hayes, Golding and Harvey's research into volunteer fire and emergency services organisations, identified these as primary sites of learning for men with limited education and recommended closer collaboration between these organisations and traditional providers of adult education to provide recognition and pathways for these learners (2004).

Learning 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 (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). While Australian adults of all education levels and all levels of literacy and numeracy appear at the ballot box at election time, Australia has a very high level of informal voting¹; 46th out of 146 countries. 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 (Medew 2012).

Literacy and learning also impact the types of democracies that countries achieve. For example, there is a measurable association between literacy levels and female representation in government. More specifically, countries with higher average scores on the 1999 International Adult Literacy survey had a greater share of their parliamentary seats held by women. (OECD, Highlights, 2000, p. 11)

Learning, social networks and social capital

¹ 'Informal voting' means that the ballot paper cannot be accepted as a legitimate vote because it is either blank or incorrectly filled out.

Learning leads to enhanced social networks and social capital (Fujiwara, 2012). The benefits of improved social networks include better health, (particularly mental health) and increased likelihood of caring for others in the community (House, 2001, Hammond & Feinstein, 2006, Putnam, 2006). An additional benefit is that people with improved social networks are more likely to use these networks to become civically engaged. Freire used the term 'conscientisation' (1972) to describe the process of learning about the self and then connecting this to the wider context of power structures, with the ultimate aim of achieving social change. There is a long history of adult education programs in Australia that follow this trajectory, particularly programs targeted at socially and economically marginalised women (Spry & Marchant, 2014)

Lear's research into 3rd age women in a rural Australian community identified this pattern of women moving into civic leadership roles partly as a result of and partly in concert with increased engagement in learning, and improved social networks. The relationship is described in this way;

They emerged from the relative obscurity of the backrooms, kitchens and traditional supportive roles as farmer's wives and mothers to become community activists, leaders and change agents who transformed their small service communities into thriving, vibrant, 'can do' societies better able to cope with the political, social, economic and environmental changes prevailing in regional Australia since the 1990s. (Lear, 2013, p. 376)

Learning, Trust and Tolerance

The research suggests that it is not just the existence of networks that has a positive impact on society, but the *quality* of these networks. Schuller et al's study identified learning as having a complex but positive impact on networks, noting that learning lead to extending a person's networks, enriching existing networks, repairing or reconstructing networks, and on occasion, dismantling them (2002, p 47).

Robert Putnam, the sociologist most closely associated with theories of social capital, makes the important distinction between *bonding capital* that is, links with people like yourself, and *bridging social capital*, links with people from different backgrounds (2006). Bonding social capital not only has no identified impact on social cohesion, there is some indication that it can have a negative impact, as bonding capital can be gained just as easily through participation in a racist gang or a reclusive cult as through more productive social networks. Bridging capital, however, is closely associated with social cohesion.

Schuller et al (2002) identified adult learning as building tolerance and social cohesion in a number of ways. The first was through the development of bridging capital; i.e. the Adult Education programs brought people together across different class, race and gender groups to pursue a common interest. The second was that teachers and other students commonly acted as role models of tolerance. The third was that content of particular courses influenced tolerance, particularly humanities subjects, which allowed people to analyse and challenge the origin of particular values. Finally, somewhat in contrast to the earlier examples, learners often developed tolerance through 'resistance' to the dominant discourses of the classroom. This resistance often emerged through dialogue and discussion and allowed the learners to build a stronger sense of their own values and political positions.

The type of education does not seem to have bearing on the development of bridging social capital or increased civic engagement. There is strong evidence that programs that are often regarded as having only private benefits, such as hobby or recreation programs, have significant outcomes in terms of social capital and cohesion if they are easily accessible to a diverse group of learners. For example, empirical research on the Finish Liberal Adult Education system (which is funded by government but has no mandated content or outcomes and no direct relationship with the labour market) shows strong social capital and civic outcomes including "sense of community", "foreign cultures", "wider life circles" and "participation in society" (Manninen, 2012, p.75)

Green et al's findings about *equality of education* are worth remembering here. Bridging capital can only develop in environments where diverse groups of learners come together and diverse groups of people can only come together in adult education when systemic issues of access, such as cost, entry requirements, and the development of an inclusive culture are addressed. Indeed, Townsend (2011) suggests that Adult Community Education can act as an agent of social exclusion rather than a builder of bridging capital if a concerted effort to include diverse groups is not made. Townsend's study of the experiences of learners from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in a regional Australian community, suggests that Adult education may simply perpetuate the dominant culture, and that the link between social capital and adult learning is "assumed rather than tested" (p. 44).

Learning and Crime

There appears to be a 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, psychological disorders etc. It is safe to say however, that education mediates the impacts of all of these features (Feinstein, 2002).

There are a number of hypothesis about why learning reduces crime. Some of these are direct results of learning and others indirect. The first is that participation in learning increases income, thus reducing the need to turn to crime for a livelihood. Increased earning capacity also reduces the ratio of risk to incentives from committing crime. Another theory is that participation in learning teaches patience. Crime is closely correlated with poor impulse control. A third is that learning, particularly in the humanities, teaches empathy, the lack of which is a factor in crime, including violent crime (Feinstein 2002). Finally, Schuller et als observations about adult education building new networks and assisting people in moving away from other negative networks is relevant here (2002).

Vinson's study of Australian postcode areas with entrenched intergenerational poverty (2007), identified the tight correlation between low education and social and economic marginalisation and recommended adult education initiatives be implemented alongside a number of policy interventions in these communities.

Learning about Civics and Citizenship

Explicit Civics and Citizenship education is common in the schooling system. It is also common in the European Adult Education system, specifically the popular liberal education programs that are run throughout Scandinavia. Although not as common, there are a number of Australian examples of adult education programs that explicitly teach civic engagement.

MacCormack, a Melbourne based adult educator, uses the term "Public Literacy" to describe the literacies required to engage in political debate. He has developed a number of adult education programs in this area including a Literacy for Public

Discourse program conducted at Footscray College of TAFE in the early 1980's. The program involved examining the values that underpin political dialogue and political movements (Tampke 2011).

Building on this work, the Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in the Northern Territory, offered a program that taught creating and delivering speeches as a tool for civic engagement. The program included an analysis of Greek rhetoric as the basis of politically persuasive speech. The program worked on the assumption that if Indigenous community leaders were to engage in local and regional governance, then they would need to understand the speech patterns of political dialogue and discussion, something that occurs informally in the homes of politically powerful communities, but not amongst groups that have been traditionally marginalised from positions of political power.

More recently, the City of Onkaparinga in South Australia has run a Community Leadership Program for a number of years. The program is directed at people who are passionate about their community and teaches skills for developing collaborative community projects and for participating in community governance processes (Tampke, 2011).

Conclusion

Adult Education has a wide range of civic benefits. It is essential to the maintenance of an informed populace and a vibrant democracy. Yet adult education that supports active citizenship is an increasingly neglected area of Australian public policy, as the focus of most post compulsory education moves towards industry and labour market outcomes. Adult Learning Australia recommends the following areas for attention:

Civics and citizenship programs

The language, norms and behaviors of civic participation are developed informally in the homes of the politically powerful. For groups who have been systematically marginalized 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 marginalized adults. There is also a case for making these types of courses

and classes available to groups who are under represented in Australian civic and political life; arguably women, Indigenous Australians and Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Other adult education

The programs outlined above have a direct relationship with civic participation. However, all adult education, when offered in an accessible manner has the capacity to build the 'metacompetences' required for engagement in civic life including diverse networks, tolerance, confidence and self esteem.

Adult and Community Education (ACE) has a particular role to play in building civic participation because it is open to all and appealing to socially and economically marginalized learners, who are under- represented elsewhere in the education system. However, as Schuller et al suggest, the effectiveness of adult education as a builder of civic capacity lies in its accessibility. While it remains low cost and easy to access, there are likely to be strong returns in terms of civic participation.

Since the 1980's, state governments have systematically used the appeal of liberal adult education to the middle class, as a rationale to remove funding, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophesy. As of 2014, 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 (ABS, 2013).

Learning to support volunteering

Learning and volunteering could be described as policy ships passing in the night. It is important that Australian governments support education and training that feeds and supports volunteer organisations. Similarly, closer relationships between volunteer organisations and the formal VET system could enable recognition of learning that occurs as a result of volunteering and facilitate the important pathway between volunteering and paid work.

Australian governments are increasingly rationing access to the VET system so that it is tightly targeted to particular labour market outcomes. Individuals are also being asked to bear a greater percentage of the cost of their training. It is important that governments consider the impact of changes to training entitlements on volunteering

and volunteer organisations. It would be an unfortunate consequence of public policy if Australians' participation in training through their volunteering were to undermine their ability to access training for the paid workforce.

Adult literacy

The ability to understand and fill in a ballot paper, could be described as the most basic of the civics "metacompetences". A concerted effort is needed to provide adults with appropriate literacy and learning programs so that they can take part in this most elementary level of civic participation.

The recent Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey indicated that around 1 in 7 Australians (14.1%) have very poor literacy skills (ABS, 2013). An additional 1 in 3 (30.3%) Australians have literacy skills which are at a level that makes them vulnerable to social exclusion in a modern knowledge based economy and society.

While there has been a concerted effort by Australian governments to address foundation skills for workers and potential workers, there is currently no national policy, strategy and limited Commonwealth education programs available for the almost one half of Australian adults who are not in the labour market.

ALA believes that the right to basic adult literacy and numeracy is an inherent part of the right to a free education. A robust democracy requires that all citizens, regardless of their labour market status should be provided with the opportunity to develop the skills to participate.

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