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EDITOR'S DESK

The times, they are a-changing! The end of June brings the demise of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) with which we have all grown accustomed to working over the past 12 years or so. Its functions, we are told, will transfer to the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). We ponder: What will such transfer bring? What will it mean for adult educators at the coalface? How will it affect Adult Learning Australia? These are just some of the questions over which we will continue to ruminate and there is no way at this stage that we can even begin to contemplate the answers. From our current vantage point, we can see through the looking glass but dimly. It will only be with the advantage of hindsight that we will be able to make judgements on what transpires.

The Journal enters its 45th year of publication. How exciting? Much has altered over this period. Policies and practices have altered in nature and emphasis. Institutions and people have come and gone. Even the journal itself has undergone remarkable change over this time as it reflects the shifting sands of adult education policy,

philosophy and practice over 45 years. But its prime function to surface news of the latest theory, research and practice on adult learning and to promote critical thinking on issues that concern us all as adult educators remains.

This issue contains five refereed articles and two other articles for your enjoyment, as well as the usual book reviews and journal scan. The first couple of papers focus on learning in the workplace. **Leona English**, **Tara Fenwick** and **Jim Parsons** start the ball rolling with their paper on why interest in spirituality in the workplace is increasing and what challenges it presents. They question for what purpose and in whose interests, raising queries about what they see as its appropriation for organisational motives and raising issues about adult educators falling, albeit unwittingly, into roles as "hawkers of the holy" to corporate interests. In doing so, the paper provokes an interesting discussion on effective educational practices that can integrate spirituality into learning environments in ethical ways. It prompts us to ask critical questions about our own teaching and to examine the ethical dimensions of our decision-making as educators. **Raymond Smith** explores, in an ethnographic study, the workplace learning of three new employees, arguing within the frame of a constructivist epistemology of necessity – learning as the necessity of the demands of context and learning as the necessity of individual agency. In doing so, he attaches new emphasis to the role of the individual in the social construction of knowledge, characterising the new employee-learner as the manager of their own workplace learning agenda.

Terry Clark then argues for a broader interpretation in policy and practice of notions of lifelong learning to incorporate life-wide learning that extends beyond formal dimensions of learning. He contends that, in Australia, life-wide dimensions of lifelong learning are often overlooked in official policies. While the lifelong dimension can be seen "as relatively non-problematic, as it simply comprises

what an individual learns throughout life", the life-wide dimension is "more complex, as it embraces an extensive range of learning settings and contexts". The challenge, of course, is always how to proceed beyond generalities and pinpoint more closely ways in which such notions of learning may become embedded in policies and practices.

There follow two papers on the practicalities of two programs in different areas and in different parts of the world, though each striving to help learners in need. **Aya Aoki** reports findings from an evaluation of an adult functional literacy program in Ghana. She examines the areas of learning best fostered by a national approach to functional literacy, focusing on two aspects: assessment of individual learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy (based on written tests), and evaluation of development impact (based on interviews, focus groups and observations). The paper raises issues relating to the effectiveness of such national programs in countries like Ghana for those who missed formal education for reasons such as poverty and access, and draws a number of lessons from the findings. In stark contrast to the above national study, **Jennifer Debenham** and **Jo May** analyse the experiences of a tertiary entrance program in New South Wales from the perspectives of one adult student and her enabling lecturer. The authors use their own enabling education biographies to connect their review of the literature to their lived experiences. They believe that their paper confirms literature findings on the powerful transformative effects of such programs in all spheres of students' lives and the importance of making connections in enabling programs. It is an in-depth story which highlights issues in the return of mature women to higher education and the "often painful dilemmas that occasion it".

The remaining two papers also relate to the learning of mature-aged students. The first by **Helen Russell** focuses on the narrative of one adult computer learner on their learning journey in a non-formal, voluntary peer-tutor learning environment for seniors. Her paper,

based on 19 interviews in the Sydney metropolitan area, enables us to listen to the voice of 'Millar', an amalgam of the case studies, where her understandings as a computer teacher of each of the cases have been consolidated into a composite, non-gender specific account. The paper raises issues about the placing of oneself in unknown territory and about how new learning efforts open opportunities for pleasure and pain, and in doing so, Helen affords us insights from a qualitative perspective into the complex and dynamic nature of older adults learning how to use a computer. In the second paper in this section, **Karen Milheim** discusses the wide variety of characteristics of 'non-traditional' students returning to study within higher education programs. She contends that these characteristics are different from those of 'traditional' students, and discusses, for example, personal life barriers, financial responsibilities and different learning styles. The paper suggests a number of ways in which educational institutions can respond in their attempts to meet these different needs and to make the learning experience a positive one for the adult student.

The 44th Annual Conference of Adult Learning Australia in Adelaide last November, entitled *Bridging Cultures*, was a very successful event. Particularly stimulating were the five keynote addresses around the conference general theme, each of whom from their different perspective and in their own distinctive ways brought new ideas and in particular reinforced the significance of values in the enterprise of adult education. There were also 35 workshop sessions that focused around the sub-themes of cross-cultural communication, Indigenous learning, workplace cultures and intergenerational learning. These papers may be found on the ALA website.

Happy reading!

Roger Harris
Editor

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Interrogating our practices of integrating spirituality into workplace education

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Workplace education's interest in spirituality is examined, with an emphasis placed on why this interest might be increasing and what challenges it presents. This article interrogates commonplace strategies to integrate spirituality in workplace education, – providing holistic education, creating sacred spaces and mentoring – questions each approach and suggests ways that they might be integrated in an authentic manner into the workplace. The authors then examine how educators might interrogate their teaching practices by inquiring into their own motivations, ethics and values. An attempt is made to stem the flood of spirituality in workplace education by asking: For what purpose is spirituality being promoted in this workplace? And in whose interests?

Introduction

The growing number of works on the spirituality of learning in the workplace (e.g. Briskin 1998, Ealy 2002, Guillory 1997, Mitroff & Denton 1999, Pierce 2000, Secretan 1996) is obvious to anyone who spends time in bookshops, libraries or even on the web. Although there is quite a variety in the texts that are available, there is a common tendency for them to offer uncritiqued spiritual strategies and practices without regard for the integrity of the organisation, the workers and the concept of spirituality itself. This article is an attempt to offer critical comments and questions about these strategies and practices.

We are three researchers and teachers in higher education who have an interest in how spirituality gets appropriated in workplace education. Personally, we hold spiritual and religious commitments though our concentration here is on spirituality which we see as a search for meaning, value and purpose that brings us closer to others and to God. Professionally, we have experience in a variety of workplaces and a particular commitment to authentic teaching and learning processes in these workplaces. In this article, we draw on the published research, including our own, and also on our experience in higher education and other organisational settings (see English, Fenwick & Parsons 2003).

We explore first how spirituality can be operationalised or practised in the workplace, then move to a discussion of the theory and the conceptual frameworks for a spirituality of work. We suggest how spirituality can be interwoven authentically with educational practice in the workplace, as well as acknowledge the tensions and dilemmas of promoting spirituality as part of teaching. Our central question is: How can our theories-in-use be interrogated and continuously monitored so the 'spirit' of spirituality is respected?

Linking spirituality and work

There is growing interest in spirituality at work in many organisational settings where educators practise, such as colleges and universities, health care and social services, business and industry, and not-for-profit agencies. According to popular management theory, business is becoming reinvented as a "community of souls" through shared values, love, trust and respect. In the past decade, bestselling business titles have included *Complete idiot's guide to spirituality in the workplace* (Ealy 2002), *Handbook of workplace spirituality and organizational performance* (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz 2003) and *The stirring of soul in the workplace* (Briskin 1998). A common argument in these texts is that productivity can be enhanced if a spiritual "sanctuary" is created within the workplace. And, of course, there is a simultaneous growth in "merchant-missionaries who are busy marketing spirituality-based worker development programs to corporations" (Fenwick & Lange 1998: 69).

From the organisation's point of view, a sense of spirituality in the workplace can produce employees who (a) are less fearful of their organisations, (b) are far less likely to compromise their basic beliefs and values in the workplace, (c) perceive their organisation as significantly more profitable, and (d) report that they can bring significantly more of their complete selves to work, specifically their creativity and intelligence (Mitroff & Denton 1999: xiv). McMillen (1993) explains that putting resources into spirituality can produce more fully developed workers, highly attuned to their identity, strengths and weaknesses. Spiritual employees bring more energy, effort and clarity to their jobs. Thus, issues of initiative, responsibility, motivation, commitment and productivity resolve themselves. And, of course, as McMillen points out, health insurance costs, absenteeism and enthusiasm are all affected positively.

Why has a controversial topic like spirituality emerged from the corporate closet? Imel (1998) identifies a number of reasons for the

growing focus on spirituality. She points out that downsizing and layoffs in the workplace have created a culture where workers are questioning the value of work and seeking meaning and spirituality. When workers are under-valued by the organisation to which they were loyal, questions about significance and the need for personal support increases. Another reason, according to Imel, is the ageing of the workforce. The sixties' generation, the Baby Boomers, are now pursuing personal questions about life's meaning and spirituality, and negotiating mid- to late-career stages, which are typified by increased reflection on the purpose of their work in the big picture.

Imel (1998) also points to the decline in traditional networks of support, such as the family, which forces people to question the location of meaning, hope and inspiration for what they will do in this world, and how they will make their living. Finally, according to Imel, changes in organisational structure have created a workplace with less structure and more people-orientation. These open-format organisations, sometimes characterised by fewer boundaries between managers and workers, tend to promote closer working relationships among employees. The quality of talk changes as people become closer and they become more intimate in sharing personally held beliefs such as spirituality.

This interest in spirituality appears also to be related to higher stress, general malaise and what Dirkx (2000) argues to be a "crisis of meaning" in the contemporary workplace. Dirkx explains that, fundamentally, adults seek identity and purpose in work, or a spiritual centre. This purpose is echoed in the writings of Fox (1994) who argues that work is an expression of our deepest being and is an innate need of all human beings. From this worldview, which is shared by many writers on workplace spirituality (e.g. Vaill 1998), our purpose is to move toward a vision of education within the workplace that is humane and that acknowledges both the relational dimension and the power dynamics of all workplace learning. This

vision of generative work, although perhaps seen rarely, is not new. It has been offered by many writers concerned about how workers are affected by the naturalising of productivity and efficiency, the division of labour, multi-tasking and the hyperspeed of technological change. For instance, feminist work theorist Mechthild Hart (1992) suggests a vision of "sustenance work" whose ultimate purpose is to maintain and improve life, not produce commodities. These perspectives are consistent with a spiritual perspective of work.

This authentic vision of education within the workplace moves toward the inclusion of human values, respect for people, and the integration and recognition of spirituality, without subjugating these to the material gain of the organisation and its elite. This is what former Czechoslovakian president Vaclav Havel (1994) calls the transcendental anchor. Havel's vision is consistent with our own views about the possibilities for spirituality in workplace education. This is the standard against which we measure all workplace education initiatives. This vision rails against any notion of a 'spiritual curriculum' in the workplace, and against any attempts by the workplace educator to develop others' spirituality. Instead, this vision favours encouraging those educators interested in spirituality to pursue their own spiritual quest, to seek coherence between their spiritual insights and their daily living, and to embed their work with responsible spiritual practice. We hold that educators can do much to suffuse the spaces and communities around them with invitation, compassion and care – and a sense of anchor beyond productivity and material gain.

Yet, what is concerning is an apparent seamless conflation of corporate purpose with the discourse and promises of spirituality. When people are encouraged to abandon rationality and open themselves to spiritual ways of knowing, their human vulnerability is open to manipulation. 'Spiritual' educators may unwittingly become soul harvesters serving the organisation's bottom line. Many are

themselves competitive businesses seeking a novel market niche, and they are apparently finding it as hawkers of the holy to corporate interest. One rather uncomfortable example is illustrated by Pacific Institute's "Purpose of Life" curriculum, offered to its Fortune 500 company clients by educators such as Roman Catholic priest Father Bob Spitzer (Finlayson 1997). This curriculum focuses on developing spiritual ethics and 'happiness' among workers, "the happiness we feel from making a difference to someone or something beyond [ourselves]" (p. H4). Father Bob demonstrates how such happiness increases productivity, markets, return on investment and long-term viability.

Work choices that are, at bottom, moral/ethical decisions are increasingly seen as technical decisions to increase productivity. When a 'do more and faster' mentality predominates, both workers and management can become blind to how so many everyday work decisions in their workplaces are really ethical decisions that attend relational learning – choices of the spiritual realm. For example, think of how often workers are faced with choosing actions that will protect their job but hurt a friend or contravene an ethical principle they value. Then think of how many people claim that the work they used to love – their vocations – have become stress-filled, devoid of creative expression, compromised in ethical integrity, and burdensome with paperwork and administrivia that seem constantly to get in the way of meaningful action. Think of processing e-mail, which for many office workers swallows more and more numbing chunks of time. And, how does email reshape the personality of an interaction, of a relationship? How can one connect meaningfully with people through a medium that expects efficient, concise immediacy but distances people from each other? Our preoccupation with productivity overloads our days with tasks crowded into breathless timelines, leaving little time to connect with people through meaningful talk, to connect with our activities and environments through mindful engagement, or to connect with our own feelings, meanings and bodies through reflection. Why do more and faster? What is truly being accomplished? These are questions of the spirit.

Bringing spirituality into our teaching

As adult educators and trainers, the first ethical question we must ask is whether it is even ethical to discuss spirituality in the workplace or to combine spirituality with workplace education. In the words of management writer Nadesan (1999): Should the corporation save your soul? Is it ethical to debate an issue that is so personal? These questions are the first many ask when starting to explore the place of spirituality in education and training.

Lawler's (2000) recent examination of the ethical dimensions of continuing professional education, for instance, raises specific issues for adult educators and trainers who plan educational programs for professionals within a structured organisation. When introducing spirituality into education, there is always a potential problem when the organisation's vision (e.g. religious orientation, focus on servant leadership, exclusivity, lack of tolerance for difference) conflicts with the educator's vision of what is ethical and right. The educator must decide whether the right course of action is to challenge organisational leaders, refuse to be part of the proposed plan to implement the vision, leave the organisation, or even act as whistle-blower. Most adult educators and trainers encounter ethical dilemmas that affect how they carry out programs and plans. However, when it comes to spirituality the issues are amplified because the topic is personal and difficult to separate from other individually held views. Therefore, it is imperative that adult educators and trainers seriously consider these questions in light of their own selves: What are our assumptions? What do we believe about spirituality? Where are potential conflicts for us? How can we prepare ourselves to negotiate the conflict?

Holistic Practice

Against this backdrop, we move now to examine the idea of a holistic perspective in our educational practice, seemingly a cornerstone idea in spirituality. By holistic, we mean both educators and learners are more than the sum of their physical, emotional, social or cognitive parts. New Zealand-based educator Heron (1999) explains that holistic education incorporates the spiritual and is an integral part of how we educate. For him, every aspect of life is spiritual, and spirituality is always life. Holistic learning or, as Heron (1999) calls it, "whole person" (p.1) learning, engages the person as a "spiritually, energetically and physically endowed being encompassing feeling and emotion, intuition and imaging, reflection and discrimination, intention and action" (p.1). Whole person learning assumes that adult educators and trainers are also involved in whole person living, or that they cultivate lifestyle practices that support their whole person. One of the often neglected aspects of living holistically is spirituality. Although this holistic perspective sounds positive, we want to ask the critical question: Can we teach holistically and not invade the personal/ professional boundaries that come into play in a workplace environment? At the point where these boundaries are blurred, we may have gone too far in our spirituality endeavours.

The belief that educators should incorporate a spiritual and holistic perspective into their teaching is not new. Some other names that describe the link between spirituality and adult education or training include "renewal of personal energy" (Hunt 1992), "holistic learning" (Boud & Miller 1996) and "aesthetic education" (Harris 1987). Even Dewey (1959) used the term "experiential education" in what we believe is a spiritual way. For Dewey, the insights gained from experience itself actually "en-spirited" and guided every aspect of living – making education itself a political act focused on the democracy of humanity.

Holistic education practices involve learners, teachers and the learning environment itself. A key proponent of holistic teaching and learning, MacKeracher (1996), in her book, *Making sense of adult learning*, turns attention to all the ways that adults need to facilitate learning. She focuses on the emotional, cognitive, social, physical, spiritual aspects of the learner in her discussion of how to facilitate adult learning. MacKeracher sees learning as a kaleidoscope where "the characteristic shape and color of the separate pieces matters much less than the combinations created as colours and shapes mingle" (p.243). She advocates using metaphors, recording dreams and writing journal entries as ways to help educators and learners increase their self-understanding and self-knowledge. Again, we challenge educators to ask the question: Do these personal approaches such as dream analysis contribute to the workers' well-being or are they a way of allowing the organisation to seize control of the workers' personal growth for work purposes? At every juncture the educator needs to ask: In whose interests and for what purpose am I using this strategy? Is my purpose justifiable?

A holistic approach sees the spiritual health and well-being of the learner and the educator as important to education. Holistic perspectives embrace multiple views of educational practice and a breadth of educational dimensions. They view the practice of personal spiritual exercises as intricately related to the everyday practice of education. Yet, we challenge the holistic perspective that the division between personal and professional is artificial (MacKeracher 1996), insofar as it makes normative incursions into the personal life of a worker for workplace gain. Below we look more closely at specific ways that educators can be more holistic in their teaching.

Cultivating learning environments as sacred spaces

One specific way advocated for integrating spirituality is to cultivate learning environments as sacred spaces (see especially Tisdell 2003). As educators and trainers, we have a special role to play in

the cultivation of a truly sacred or spiritual learning environment. This process involves many things, but one of the most important is examining what we mean – and what others have meant – by the word 'spirit'. Whether it is called *spiritus* in Latin, *pneuma* in Greek, *ruach* in Hebrew, or *ch'i* in Chinese (Whitehead & Whitehead 1994), the notion of spirit implicitly carries with it the idea that spirit is something we cannot live without. Our spirit fills our being, and is all of us. It is our life, our sustenance.

Our spirit is a place where the sacred part of us may live – in fact, must live. We must create a space for the spiritual. The theme of sacred spaces is hardly new. It has been taken up by a variety of writers, including Heron (1998), who suggests that any understanding of the sacred must promote the connection with a "sacred space." A sacred space is much more than a geographical entity. Sacred space is created not so much with things as with attitudes and dispositions. A space can never be embodied with a sacred nature until it is inhabited with particular thoughts, people and care.

A sacred space is an area conceptually sanctified or separated from the everyday world, often for the purpose of worship. Obviously, as Davidson (1988) says, all religions have sacred spaces – holy places of communication between humans, gods, spirits and the forces of nature. The importance of the place as sacred is also underscored in writing on spirituality and adult education or training. For instance, Vogel (2000) refers to the importance of place, a holy ground, on which any educator walks in the presence of others, that respects those others. The questions we ask here are: Are we as educators mindful and aware of the power we exercise as a teacher or a leader in this situation? Are we careful not to turn the workplace into a place of worship or to overstep our roles as educators with the learners? Do we maintain our professionalism? Do we respect the boundaries between the personal and the professional that is respectful to workers as learners?

Sacred space, according to Vella (2000), consists of several elements, the first of which is *dialogue*. Vella says that "the heart of a spirited epistemology is respect for dialogue" (p.11). She holds that sincerity about engaging in dialogue means that the teacher is not an expert on everything. However, Vella does not mean the teacher is vacuous, rather that educational experiences are designed in ways that listen to adult learners' experience and knowledge base and build on what is known to help understand what is new.

Second, Vella suggests that a strong sense of *respect* for learners is important when creating sacred space. Respect needs to be both part of the design phase of adult education and training, and part of the interactions between teacher and student. Respect means, first and foremost, asking about learners' needs and really **listening** to the answers, and being present to them. Gabriel Marcel (1949), twentieth century French philosopher, describes presence as "something which reveals itself in a look, a smile, an intonation or a handshake" (pp.25–26). Our respect for our learners is conveyed in our tone and the ways we speak to them. Respect is also embodied in how we handle conflict. As in any human-to-human contact, negotiating differences respectfully is one of the greatest challenges of being an educator or trainer.

Vella suggests that *accountability* is a third way to convey respect. The teacher is accountable to the learner for the 'design' of the educational experience. Therefore, designing education experiences is an act of reverence with the learner foremost in the educator's mind. The educator and the learner are in "a dynamic reciprocal unity" (p.14). This accountability precludes sloppiness and inadequate planning, and ensures that everyone does his or her best work. Vella's wisdom is obvious. It simply makes sense to us as adult educators that the triumvirate of respect, dialogue and accountability will effectively help adult educators create sacred spaces in the learning environment. Our questions here are: If you cannot be accountable,

should you consider incorporating spirituality into your work? Can you be accountable to the learners and effect a "dynamic, reciprocal unity" if the learners are not equal partners in the planning and designing?

Mentoring as Spiritual Learning Activity

Since Roche's (1979) seminal study of executives on Wall Street, the use of mentors as a way informally to educate employees has gained a foothold in the business world. The use of mentoring for on-the-job or informal learning has personal ramifications and for this reason we discuss it here as a strategy for informal workplace education. Promoting mentoring is a specific way to improve the spiritual dimension of adult education and training. Most recently, Darwin (2000) has argued that mentoring is a mixed blessing in the workplace. She also suggests that using mentoring as a strategy needs further critique and careful consideration. It ought to be about relationship, support and increasing the human spirit. We take seriously Fenwick and Lange's (1998) critique that spirituality cannot be marketed; it is not about the bottom line. Mentoring, Zachary (2000) says, is a highly-developed concept and practice. Daloz's (1999) work on mentoring as an approach to teaching and learning has helped bring a fresh perspective to mentoring. He sees mentoring as reciprocal, with the potential to nurture self, others and the work world. Yet, Daloz is not unaware of the dangers of arranging mentoring relationships or mandating them. Mentoring is not a hierarchical supervisory relationship. It is a reciprocal and dialogical approach to working and learning. Mentors offer care, concern, resources and outreach – helping people reach out to others. We suggest that all educators who use mentoring as a form or workplace learning ask the critical questions: Is mentoring done to increase both the personal and professional goals of the worker or is it only intended to increase the bottom line? Does mentorship assume traditional hierarchical and patriarchal forms (see Stalker 1994) or the reciprocal, mutual self-giving forms of learning in relationship?

Adult educators need to practise honouring and respecting learners by using gentle speech, giving helpful and honest critique of the learner's work, being present and available to learners, and preparing carefully and thoroughly for learning activities. These actions convey respect and honour for the relationship. Mentoring can be a means of revitalizing teaching and of promoting a continuous learning culture (Cohen & Galbraith 1995, Schulz 1995). Mentorship can foster more collaborative communities in education and the workplace that respect new people, new ideas and new skills while honouring traditions and collective knowledge. At this point, we must ask if there are serious inquiries and concerns about the possibility for abuse of power, and for the control of mentees (Darwin 2000). These possibilities undergird the need for a more spiritual approach to mentoring, one that allows for difference in work styles, values and communication styles, and needs and wants.

Asking critical questions of our own teaching

The most straightforward way to promote a spiritual dimension in teaching and learning is to make a deliberate attempt to think and act ethically. Almost every daily decision in the learning environment has an ethical component. Teachers can also raise deliberate and provocative questions that spark conversation and evoke comments from learners.

These common activities are the heart of ethical teaching because they are based on those choices and decisions fundamental to teaching and learning. These ethical choices centre on decisions about the boundaries that constitute pedagogical relationships, about the nature of the spirit within the exercise of teaching, and about the real reason spirituality is being incorporated. These activities necessarily include thoughtful decision-making and making sure that decisions are weighed against how they help the environment, the people in the corporation and the learners. Ethical choices implicitly include a basic

recognition of the person as spiritual. This means making ethical choices throughout the whole business of education, including choices about how we educate learners and choices about how we involve learners in decisions.

All spiritual traditions are concerned with questions of morality. What actions are moral – what actions are right or wrong, good or bad – both in terms of intent and their implications? Western traditions seem more concerned with intent; Eastern traditions include a consideration of the responsibility for the impact of an action that transcends questions of what an individual hoped to do. And, questions of morally good action – combining the ethic of care, the ethic of justice and the ethic of critique (Merriam & Caffarella 1999) – link personal decisions about the different ways to act with the groundings of one's spiritual belief. Few spiritual traditions would not seek a consistency between belief and behaviour.

Morality is always linked to one's understanding of the nature of the spirit and the spiritual universe, the meaning of life, the purpose of the spiritual journey and the 'right response' to spiritual pursuits. There are key distinctions between the ethical systems of different spiritual traditions. A key question for adult educators and trainers centres on how these different frameworks, based on these ethical systems, can be useful. A specific question is how to deal with pluralistic moral stances in making ethical choices in a diverse community of learners. We ask educators: How often do you take time critically to reflect on your own practice? How often do you examine the ethical dimensions of your decision-making?

Questioning purpose, values and congruence

Asking or raising questions is one of the simplest yet most effective teaching strategies, used since the creation of teaching. To a considerable extent, these questions have become their own personal art form of teaching and learning. The point of raising powerful

questions is not necessarily to find a specific answer, but to learn to dwell in the questions until, as Rilke (1984) suggests, you live yourself into the answers.

Yet, not all questioning or reflective practice is necessarily spiritual; indeed, there are many orientations to reflective practice (see Wellington & Austin 1996). We are mindful that it is possible to be a reflective practitioner, as we are advocating here, without engaging spiritual, moral and ethical questions. The mode of reflective practice that we follow is similar to Hunt's (1998), which does indeed engage these questions and which has a spiritual basis.

Questioning is often a way of challenging ourselves. "Spiritworks" writer Judy Neal (2000) has suggested some questions that she uses to uncover the spiritual in work, especially her online conversations. These questions are: What role, if any, has spirituality played in the career choices you have made? How did you come to be interested in integrating spirituality and work? Tell me about a particularly satisfying or meaningful time when you were able to practise one or more of your principles, values or beliefs at work? Tell me about a time when you had difficulty integrating your spirituality and your work? What are the costs and benefits to you of focusing more on spirituality in your workplace?

Assessing the spiritual dimensions of your teaching

Adult educators who really care will likely evaluate their practice rigorously, especially those who take seriously the ethical mandate of incorporating spirituality into their work. We offer a list of questions that an adult educator or trainer might ask in evaluating whether he or she was effective. Our list is adapted from a list compiled in 1991 by Rolph:

- Do I encourage a questioning attitude towards the self? Does my teaching challenge the learners to ask questions of ultimate

meaning, such as: Who am I? How do I relate to others? Does my practice help learners interpret purpose and meaning for their lives?
- Does my teaching encourage the development of a sense of worth and a respect for the human dignity of others?
- In my teaching, do I encourage the use of the imagination? Do I provide periods for reflection and inner exploration?
- Does my teaching encourage learners to look beyond the ordinary to the transcendent?
- In my teaching do I integrate religion, literature, poetry, art and music, and help students search for the meaning and value that they contain?
- Do I encourage learners to identify and own their particular faith stance?
- Do I give learners breathing room and space to create their own meanings from the learning experience?
- Do I provide opportunities for learners to share what they are thinking and feeling, including their negative thoughts?
- Do I practise being caring and concerned for learners?

Summary

In this article we have explored some ways that adult educators and trainers can examine closely their efforts to bring spirituality to their teaching. Ultimately, we want to promote authentic and holistic learning in our educational work, learning that incorporates the thinking, willing and feeling capacities in all of us.

We believe there are three ethical and defensible approaches to promoting spirituality in work. First is acknowledging, developing and expressing one's own spirituality as an inherent part of one's practice as a workplace educator. Second is ensuring that the environment of one's practice as an educator is both congruent with one's spiritual values, and invites others, where appropriate, to express and explore their own integration of spirituality and work.

Third and perhaps most important is continual questioning of one's intentions and actions when invoking the spiritual in workplace education. We must ask: For what purpose is spirituality being promoted in this workplace? and In whose interests? We maintain that the only defensible purpose is dedicated to creating a more compassionate life-giving workspace, and is concerned with enabling people to find fulfillment and personal meaning in their work, one which nurtures connectedness and caring.

How, in fact, workplace educators can address spirituality in their work is a question that obviously challenges us for an answer. We have argued here that the best approach for educators concerned about spirituality is to attend to their own spiritual development, and the integration of their spirituality into the way they live their own practice. This approach has worked for us in our own practice in higher education. Integration does not necessarily require incorporating explicit discussion of spirituality into one's conversations and educational materials, although for some like Neal (1997) it might. For others, it is more a matter of living one's spiritual beliefs, whatever they may be. Many of the spiritual authors appear to share beliefs in connectedness and compassion for people, reverence for of all living things and the potential sacredness of each task and moment in one's work life.

This article has also shown the potential for manipulation when presenting spiritual programs in the workplace. Even when these are aimed at improving workers' morale and well-being, many tend to target employees as requiring 'fixing' through spiritual development. Not only does this render systemic problems to be the responsibility of individual workers, but it subjugates individual spirituality under the authority of the employer – who wields the enormous power of a pay cheque. But rather than ban spirituality from organisations, we have suggested that tolerance and understanding, and even careful encouragement, of individual spiritual expression in work might be

an acceptable approach. However, when doing so, we must be highly sensitive to the development of any dominant norms which can impose subtle forms of exclusion or discrimination. Ethical issues surrounding spirituality and workplace education deserve to be pondered at length, especially given the implications for the quality of the work environment and the needs of the worker. Perhaps the most important spiritual task facing educators involves clear-eyed discernment of their own and their organisation's intentions for the role of spirituality in workplace education.

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Epistemological agency and the new employee

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The necessary learning actions new employees must undertake to meet the performance requirements of their new job may be said to constitute a constructivist epistemology of necessity. This view forms a useful basis of inquiry into new employee workplace learning as it seeks to explicate the significance of what new employees 'do' in and through their learning. This paper briefly outlines the rationale and findings of one such inquiry. It proposes that what new employees 'do' may be best conceptualised as exercising their epistemological agency. An interpretive analysis of this 'doing', through a framework that identified the mediating factors of new employee learning, characterises the new employee-learner as a manager of their personal workplace learning agenda. It gives new emphasis to the role of the individual in the social construction of knowledge. Such an understanding of the new employee-learner suggests possibilities for enhancing a sociocultural constructivist view of learning that seeks to account for the personal purpose and consequence of learning.

Necessity in action: new employee learning

The necessary learning actions new employees must undertake to meet the performance requirements of their new job may be said to constitute a constructivist epistemology of necessity. This learning necessity may be evidenced in two fundamental ways.

Firstly, learning can be viewed as a necessity of the demands of its context (Lave 1993). That is, learning is an inevitable consequence of circumstances that require working (Harris, Willis, Simons & Underwood 1998). Workplaces are not venues of inactivity. They are sites of goal-orientated activities that make demands of their participants. New employee learning is, therefore, necessitated by the contextual requirement of work. Production purposes, both for and not for profit, can mask the numerous workplace practices that together achieve the primary work activity goals (Noon & Blyton 1997). Learning practices as such may be indistinguishable from production-orientated practices (Billett 2001b). In any workplace, new employee learning, whether supported or otherwise, may be viewed as the unavoidable consequence of the contextual requirement to work. The new employee will have something to do. Doing something is the learning (Rogoff & Lave 1984) that the workplace necessitates.

Secondly, learning can be viewed as the necessity of individual agency (Fuhrer 1993, Wertsch 1995), as indispensable personal involvement in workplace activities. The personal choices and decisions that new employees make at work, together with the equally personal thoughts and actions that underlie the exercise of this agency, represent the unavoidable learning that is the new employee's personal response to the workplace. Learning is a necessity of the new employee's condition. Their need to learn in part defines them as new. This need may be minimal – perhaps little more than new names and terminology to remember or new routes to and from work to calculate. Alternatively, this need may be significant – marking

the very beginnings of a new career that will require prolonged and sustained effort before acceptable workplace performance is realised. This learning necessitates personal agency. Learners need to be selective, discriminating; that is, regulative of their actions as they evaluate and choose from the wealth of information contained in their situation (Valsiner 1998).

The new employee's ability to contend with this necessity may be found in the qualities of the workplace, that is, the degree to which the workplace enables or affords the necessary learning (Billett 2001a). Concomitantly, their learning may be viewed as a personal predicament, a self-defining circumstance through which their efforts and capacities for learning will be utilised and tested (Goodnow 1990). In this way, new employee learning may be viewed as the inevitable experience of their situation. The indispensable thoughts and actions that constitute this personal experience define it as learning necessity – "If we are thinking and acting, we are learning" (Billett 2001b: 6).

Personal agency and learning at work

An epistemology of necessity views learning as the conjunction of contextual and agentic necessities. Such a view forms a useful basis of inquiry into new employee workplace learning. It seeks to explicate the significance of what new employees 'do' in and for their learning through contextually-based issues related to the workplace and the learning environment it represents. These issues include workplace cultural practices related to power and status distribution (Napier & Gershenfeld 1999), procedural practices that constitute the flow of products and knowledge throughout the workplace (Billett 2001b) and issues related to basic working conditions such as starting and finishing times, accessibility and amenities provision (Noon & Blyton 1997).

Similarly, personal agency-based issues that include the willingness of the new employee to engage in the required workplace practices (Olekalns 1999) and their receptivity to and acceptance of the learning contingencies their work practices afford (Billett 2001b) need explication. Preferred learning styles and abilities to utilise prior learning (Harris et al. 1998), personal lifestyle priorities and expectations that give purpose to motives and intentions at work (Channer 2000), communication issues that influence how new employees and their workplaces interpret each other's questions and instructions, attitudes and decisions (Rogoff 1995) and the negotiation that shapes shared understandings such as performance indicators and what constitutes controversy and conflict and its resolution within the workplace (Noon & Blyton 1997) may all prove significant.

These issues are indicative of the problematic nature of workplace success for new employees and highlight the complexity of considerations necessary to gain an understanding of their learning at work. Importantly, these issues begin to address the dialectical basis of workplace learning necessity as a co-participatory practice established by the new employee and the workplace (Billett 2001a, Valsiner 1994). That is, workplace learning, what is learned and how it is learned, and the subsequent performance success it may or may not generate for its participants, is the conditional outcome of the interaction between the new employee and their workplace.

Working perspectives of epistemological agency

It is the nature of this interaction that is the focus here. Specifically, this paper reviews the findings of research that sought to understand new employees' learning through its conceptualisation as the exercise of epistemological agency – a term used in recognition of knowledge as conditional beyond personal beliefs (Bauer et al. 2004), practised

through social activity (Leontev 1981) and personally utilised across all life domains (Schommer 1998).

Epistemological agency can be defined as the personal practice of constructing knowledge (Smith 2004). New employee learning, as such, may be understood as an individual's active, consequential and iterative, regenerative and transformative engagement with their workplace. It is a 'lived out' dialectical experience, which makes it above all, personally intentional, purposeful (Harris et al. 1998). It is this purposeful aspect of agency that the two dominant constructivist conceptions of knowledge do little to illuminate. They are cognitive psychology and sociocultural constructivism.

Cognitive psychology, through its dominantly internal conception of knowledge construction, renders epistemological agency as individually idiosyncratic, that is, as specifically characteristic of the individual learner. Learning, despite being viewed as universally developmental within the province of the mind through active memory (Piaget 1968), is the personal process of using idiosyncratically organised cognitive structures to make sense of or represent new knowledge. It does not seek to identify the sources of, nor how the nature of these sources mitigates, such constructions. Similarly, sociocultural constructivism, through its dominantly external conception of knowledge construction, renders epistemological agency as individually idiosyncratic. Appropriation, the process of socioculturally sourced knowledge construction (Rogoff 1990), acknowledges the participant lead co-construction of knowledge through negotiation and reinterpretation from within its contextual constraints, its communities of practice (Rogoff 1990, Lave & Wenger 1991). It cannot account for what types of knowledge will be constructed and how that knowledge will be personally utilised in any particular practice that characterises the context from which it is generated. These failures to account for the idiosyncrasies that shape knowledge discount the purposeful practices that generate it

and, in part, deny the learner's epistemological agency. Exploring these failings requires an examination of personal experience that may reveal the intention and purpose implicit in the individual's epistemological agency.

As an act of epistemological agency, new employee learning is self-regulatory, deliberate, intentional, and therefore indicative of the evaluations and decisions that predicate agency (Harris et al. 1998). Learning has personal purpose that must be accounted for by theories that seek to define it. It is therefore important to acknowledge the role of the individual in the social construction of learning and to focus accounts of learning on the learner, in this case, adult new employees.

Researching epistemological agency

The investigation described and discussed here explores how the purposeful nature of epistemological agency can be identified and analysed. The goal for the investigation was to address the questions:

- What constitutes the epistemological agency of the new employee?
- How and on what basis might it be enacted in the initial stages of their employment?

There were three participants in this investigation, all new employees. Michael – a salesman/buyer, Chris – a storeman/packer and Alice – a packer, voluntarily participated in the research that was conducted through the first six months of their employment with FruitCo, a wholesale fruit and vegetable business operating in the central market of an Australian capital city. Their work, the preparation and packing of fresh produce for delivery, requires no training qualifications and none of them had specific previous experience of this work. Michael, in his early twenties, came from work in a fast food chain and was passionate about high performance vehicles. Chris, in his late teens, had picked fruit and worked for a demolition company. Alice, a mother of teenage children and in her early forties, had worked many part-time jobs.

The ethnographic study used extensive participant observation and multiple semi-structured interviews to gather and verify data that captured the work practices and personal motivations and intentions of the three participants. The initial coding and analysis generated a set of five useful explanatory categories that acted to gather the dominant influences mediating the new employees' learning practices. Together, these categories created a framework that enabled an interpretive analysis of their epistemological agency as personally mediated learning.

The framework consists of five mediational categories. They are:

- time
- the organisation
- motivation
- learning strategies
- identity

Each of these categories supports the aggregation of individual actions as interrelated mediational practices in which learners are actively engaged. 'Time' convokes influences of its perception, management and imposition on learning. 'The organisation' concerns issues of the workplace culture. 'Motivation' considers the necessity and goals of learning. 'Learning strategies' acknowledges prior learning, experience and its deployment, while 'identity' examines issues of the self, its roles, responsibilities and capacities to meet the demands of its situation. Together, these categories affirm an understanding of epistemological agency as the new employee's personal and pragmatic construction of knowledge in the workplace across a broad range of personal and contextual mediational means. The purchase provided by these categories and their utility in understanding the epistemological actions of new employees as learners is elaborated in the next section.

Viewing new employee learning through the mediated learning framework of epistemological agency

Michael, Chris and Alice could be described as successful self-directed learners. Given the conditions of minimal learning guidance and support afforded them by their employer, their success as new employee learners is evidenced by a willingness to persist in their learning and their capacities to manage that learning. Persistence implies the willful decision of the new employees to continue in the course of action necessitated by their new jobs despite opposition. At FruitCo, this opposition comes from its limited provision of learning support. New employees were expected to do their job with little instruction and access to more experienced staff. Opposition is likewise founded in the personal barriers and limitations that hinder learning. For example, lifestyle choices that reduce sleep and cause fatigue prior to work or poor communication skills that inhibit the fostering of workplace relationships can represent oppositions to learning that require willful personal persistence to overcome. Management similarly infers the volition and desires of the three new employees. It implies their considered decisions and the subsequent actions that regulate the pursuit of their goals. It does not necessarily equate with success in the sense that goals are realised and outcomes are expected and planned for. Rather, it denotes a demonstrated willingness personally to guide and control those factors that influence and direct actions. These qualities of persistence and management are clearly articulated by the framework as interpretable characteristics of the epistemological agency of the three new employees.

To illustrate, the new employees' actions across all categories of the framework demonstrate self-management and contextual-management practices. For example, within 'time', all three of the new employees demonstrate an evaluative awareness of their work tasks in relation to the duration, arrangement and utilisation (Noon & Blyton 1997) of time necessary (personal) and time required

(contextual) to successfully complete their tasks. Their efforts are directed towards balancing these competing time pressures. Alice intentionally slows down – taking the time to get things right saves time. Michael checks his order list – the time necessary includes review and assessment time. Chris stops occasionally – reflection time is a component of the time necessary to complete his tasks. In these different ways, the new employees, in part, manage their learning and workplace performance as a function of their management of time.

Further, within 'the organisation', factors such as product quality and customer expectation represent necessary information the new employees must have if they are to perform their work successfully. Accessing the different workplace knowledge bases that hold this information (Billett 2001b) requires the fostering and maintenance of numerous inter-personal relationships. The personal communications management this demands equates with the new employees' matching necessary information for the specific situation with the appropriate co-worker with sufficient access affordability. That is, knowing who knows what and how to relate to them is a management skill based on interpersonal communications. Within this management capacity, Michael is identified as more skilled than Alice and Chris. His conversational ease with staff and customers, in combination with his relationship with his bosses, contrasts sharply with Chris'. Chris, however, is no less in control of his learning in this regard. Less skilful than Michael, he nevertheless demonstrates management practices that evidence his autonomy and personal priorities.

Within 'learning strategies', Chris' choice of what learning to attend to when being reprimanded by the boss clearly reveals this autonomy and priority in action. Such management practices are both brought to the job as previous experience and developed on the job as situated learning (Harris et al. 1998). They in part constitute the learning skills and strategies purposefully and considerately deployed by Michael,

Chris and Alice who each demonstrate an understanding of the consequences of getting it wrong or poorly managing their learning.

Within 'motivation', the reasons and purposes underlie their searching out, accepting and working to maintain their employment at FruitCo. These, together with the actions necessary to their workplace participation, constitute the motivations that could be said to evidence the establishment and development of the new employees' agendas. When motivation is understood in this way as a product of all the actions necessary to secure and maintain their employment, the new employees' learning may be viewed as the management of their personal agendas. Their agendas are more than the requirements of their job descriptions. Their agendas are the actions that must be undertaken to secure the reasons and purposes of their employment. The agenda represents the manifest of motivations, that which has to be done. Of course, not everything that has to be done, will be done. Michael, Chris and Alice are not construed as automatons driven by personal management practices that preclude the irrational and/or uncharacteristic. Unfound fears and abilities, fatigue and forgetfulness, serendipity and surprise, wonder and amazement are no less probable for new employees in the workplace than for anyone. The unfathomable is not discounted by the necessities of practice in context. For the new employees, there are unmistakable necessities that dominate in the otherwise unimaginable possibilities their engagement in the workplace could generate. Meeting the necessities means doing what has to be done, however inconsistently, creatively or improbably it is accomplished. Doing so equates with managing their personal agendas.

Within 'identity', the 'who' that is managing their agenda can be seen as a complex set of identities (Ryan & Deci 2003) that constitute the self. Managing the self's agenda requires the capacity and willingness to adopt workplace identities that reflect the necessary group affiliations the new employees establish. The private and independent

individual becomes a co-worker, a staff team member, who in turn becomes a company representative. These different performance roles must be self-regulated and controlled (Baumeister 2001), that is, managed and developed. The new employees learn how to be team members and what is required of company representatives. As they manage this learning, their agendas grow and subsume the new reasons and purposes of engagement in workplace activities that attach to their variously operant identities. For example, Alice negotiates her boss' acceptance of a condition of her employment that she be able to go home during the morning and get her daughter off to work and then return to complete her hours. The private and independent Alice appreciates the freedom this affords her to prioritise her family concerns. However, as Alice begins to identify herself as a staff team member, she realises how her personal priorities impact negatively on the team's efforts. Her absence means more work for the rest of the team. She acknowledges this on those days when she does not have to attend to her daughter and is able to contribute fully to the team workload. She recognises and enjoys the team's achievements and her new self-identity as a team member. Similarly, Michael is developing the identity of himself as a salesman who represents the company. His increasing communications with customers and suppliers necessitate his actions on behalf of FruitCo. He wants and welcomes his developing new 'we' identity. The subsumption of these new identities and associated new actions in new agendas reveals, in part, the individual's active co-participation (Billett 2001a) in the co-construction of knowledge (Valsiner 1994) that results from their interaction with the cultural requirements of the workplace. Their work necessitates the expansion of the self's identity set. Their capacities as managers of their learning-agendas enable this expansion.

Utilising a sociocultural constructivist view of learning and development (e.g. Vygotsky 1978, Leont'ev 1981, Rogoff 1990, Wertsch 1998), these findings propose the need to privilege the

actions of the learner within the influences of the social origins of knowledge. Further, it is asserted that the individual learner is best understood in their active role as the agent who, through the necessity of their situation, personally imbues their learning with intentionality and goal-oriented purposes. To view this as merely idiosyncratic is to discount the volition and power of the individual learner to shape their immediate and post-mediate circumstance. Additionally, such discounting denies the transformative qualities of learning to influence and change the context in which the learner is engaged (Rogoff & Lave 1984, Renshaw 1998). The learner is understood as an agent, exercising their agency in the personal construction of the knowledge necessary for their participation in the activities of the workplace. This agency is best conceptualised as epistemological agency. It is elaborated through the mediated learning framework as a concept that encapsulates the necessary actions and purposeful intentionality of the adult learner.

Defining epistemological agency

The findings here tentatively move the definition of epistemological agency as the personal practice of constructing knowledge to the amended, personally mediated practice of constructing knowledge. This amendment acknowledges all action as mediated action (Wertsch 1995) and thus accounts for its contextuality as the interaction of personal and situational cultures (Valsiner 1994). This definition privileges the individual subject with a regulative role that enables some personal control over the external influences that impact their learning. Personally constructing knowledge becomes participatory appropriation (Rogoff 1995) that is transformational of both the learner and their context, in this case, the worker and the workplace. It remains, however, the learner who governs the nature of their participation in the practices necessitated by their context, the learner who substantiates any transformation.

As the research progresses to observe and analyse the actions of Michael, Chris and Alice, numerous metaphors for learning emerge as descriptors of their workplace activities. The new employees *respond* to and are *productive* of the necessities of their workplace. Time is *utilised* and *manipulated*, relationships are *negotiated* and *managed,* learning strategies are *assessed* and *deployed,* motivations are *promoted* and *engaged,* identities are *established* and *enacted.* Further, information is *accessed,* products are *differentiated,* procedures are *familiarised*, customers *recognised,* actions *prioritised* and decisions *taken*. What Michael, Chris and Alice 'do' is most fully captured by the descriptive action metaphor of 'manage'. That is, they take charge of the conduct and accomplishments of their actions at work. Additionally, what their actions constitute is most fully captured by the descriptive collection metaphor of 'agenda'. What they manage is their agendas. Their agendas equate to the reasons and purposes of their working, that is, all those mediated actions necessitated by their engagement in the practices required of their new job.

Epistemological agency is therefore more fully defined as the personal management of the necessary mediational means and actions that constitute the new employees' workplace-learning agendas. The nature of the items on this agenda is identifiable through the framework. Qualifying this agenda as the workplace-learning agenda properly contextualises its contents. Thus, succinctly stated, epistemological agency is the personal management of the individual new employee's workplace-learning agenda (Smith 2004).

Some implications of epistemological agency for sociocultural constructivist learning theories

The analysis above tentatively demonstrates the significance and salience for learners in the exercise of their epistemological agency. Their respective workplace-learning agendas can be seen to expand and reprioritise in directions that are consistent with and observable

through the mediated learning framework. This movement in their agendas can be said to evidence the knowledge construction that is accomplished through the exercise of epistemological agency. From this directionality of learning arise two key issues that impact sociocultural constructivist learning theories.

Firstly, epistemological agency suggests that knowledge that expands the individual's agenda in ways commensurate with their management capacities will characterise their initial engagement in their new job. These are the actions of the independent self-identity, the 'I' who arrives at work with established ways of knowing, established ways of managing the actions this encounter will necessitate. The mediated learning framework indicates how the individual's agenda may expand relative to this foundation. So for example, Chris, who initially did not know all the products listed on the packing sheet and would simply choose whatever was at hand in the hope that his error would later be pointed out to him, comes to understand this trial and error approach to product selection as inappropriate. He alters his learning strategies to reflect this necessary change in his workplace-learning agenda and persists with his questioning of the other staff, a task made difficult by the lack of learning support afforded him. Had he not done so soon enough, it is reasonable to assume he would have been sacked. Epistemological agency has learning directional qualities that are evidenced through movements in the individual's workplace-learning agenda. These movements are the knowledge in use (Lave 1993), that is, sociocultural knowledge construction (Rogoff 1990).

Similarly, these learning directional qualities may be indicative of learner resistance and incapacities. Michael, Chris and Alice not only learn to solve the problems their work presents, they also decide what problems are worth solving (Goodnow 1990), in whose interests, and how much effort they will expend in solving them (Harris et al. 1998). The three employees' avoidance of the boss, reputedly a 'hard' man

who sacks people on a whim, is a clear example. The numerous and valid personal reasons that support this choice of action temporarily deny the three new employees access to a rich information source that potentially affords them increased learning support. Equally, this choice of action temporarily weakens the threat of discomfort or perhaps job loss that the boss represents. Their management of this particular relationship, revealed primarily through the organisation category of the mediated learning framework, supports an agenda that initially reflects resistance to expansion within this area of the category. In this way, epistemological agency has learning directional qualities that may be interpreted as indicative of resistance to learning, inappropriate learning or failure to learn.

Secondly, epistemological agency involves the negotiation and shared acceptance of workplace understandings that create congruence between the individual new employee and the workplace. The mediated learning framework enables an analysis of the mediational moments (Wertsch 1995) that comprise this congruence. These moments can be read as the individual new employee's agenda. Similarly, the workplace may be viewed as a set of moments that represent its agenda for the management of the activities that occur within it. As knowledge is co-constructed, expansion of these different agendas may correspond to a growing congruence between the new employee and their workplace. When this expansion is managed similarly by the new employee and the workplace, intersubjectivities, that is, shared understandings, may be seen to develop. This collision of cultures (Valsiner 1994), workplace and personal, is the contested terrain (Billett 2001b) in which the conflict of competing agendas establishes the epistemology of necessity that is the learning experience of the new employee. That experience is best conceptualised as the exercise of epistemological agency.

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Lifelong, life-wide or life sentence?

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This paper examines the life-wide dimensions of lifelong learning. Although the benefits of a life-wide approach to learning are well recognised, there appears to be little explicit attention given to the concept of life-wide learning in Australia. It is argued that recent pronouncements by the Australian Government about the challenges of an ageing population would be better informed by reference to lifelong learning that includes its life-wide dimensions, rather than continued concentration on formal learning.

Introduction

This paper examines the life-wide dimensions of lifelong learning in light of recent pronouncements by the Australian Government regarding the challenges posed by an ageing population. It argues that government responses to predicted economic problems would be

better informed by recognising that lifelong learning includes a life-wide continuum, rather than concentrating on the formal dimension of learning.

Lifelong learning

The term lifelong learning has been around for well over 70 years. It was first articulated in the United Kingdom by Basil Yeaxlee in 1929. Yeaxlee was active in the YMCA (1915–1918); the Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee (1917–1919); Secretary, Educational Settlements Association (1920–1928); Principal, Westhill College (1930–1935); University reader in Educational Psychology, and lecturer and tutor in the Department of Education, Oxford (1935–1949). The concept lay relatively dormant until UNESCO took it up as a central organising idea in the early 1970s (Faure 1972). Lifelong learning may simply be defined as "all learning activity taken throughout life" (European Commission 2002: 9), whether it is in formal, non-formal or informal settings.

According to Tight (1996: 36), lifelong learning exhibits three main features:

> First, lifelong education is seen as building upon and affecting all existing educational providers, including both schools and institutions of higher education... Second, it extends beyond the formal educational providers to encompass all agencies, groups and individuals involved in any kind of learning activity... Third, it rests on the belief that individuals are, or can become, self-directing, and that they will see the value in engaging in lifelong education.

Merriam and Caffarella (1991: 138) describe four distinct orientations to the various components of lifelong learning: behaviourist, cognitivist, humanist and social and situational. While there are distinct orientations and pedagogies for the component parts of lifelong learning, there does not appear to be distinctive lifelong pedagogies. Zukas and Malcolm (2001: 1) contend that lifelong learning pedagogies do not yet exist in the United Kingdom. They see few conceptual connections between adult and further education, higher education, training and professional development and a growing wall between these sectors in the pedagogical literature. Although the term 'lifelong' implies some continuity within the system, they argue that, so far, lifelong learning pedagogies are marked by disjunctions. They identify at least five pedagogic "identities" in the literature (Zukas & Malcolm 2001: 2).

- The educator as critical practitioner
- The educator as psycho-diagnostician and facilitator of learning
- The educator as reflective practitioner
- The educator as situated learner within a community of practice
- The educator as assurer of organisational quality and efficiency; and deliverer of service to agreed or imposed standards

During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, lifelong learning in most OECD countries was overshadowed by vocational education and training (VET) with an emphasis on economic, rather than social or personal outcomes (Clark 2000; Jarvis 2002). Recently there has been a re-focus on lifelong learning by the Commission of European Communities. At its meeting in Lisbon in 2000, the European Council issued a Memorandum stating that "Lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts" (European Commission 2000: 3).

The Commission undertook a consultative process based on the Memorandum which produced over 3,000 submissions and involved over 12,000 participants. The findings of the consultation stated that lifelong learning has "four broad and mutually supporting objectives: personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability/adaptability" (European Commission 2002: 9). In this regard, lifelong learning has life-wide dimensions that transcend narrow economic and vocational aspects.

The European Lifelong Learning Initiative defines lifelong learning as

> ...a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment, in all roles, circumstances and environments. (Watson 2003: 3)

Life-wide learning

Life-wide learning is hardly a novel concept. Eduard Lindeman, a colleague of John Dewey, wrote about the links between adult education and community development in 1921 and 1926, and with social education in 1933. Lindeman (1926: 4–7) contended that adult education was based on four assumptions:

- That *education is life* – not merely preparation for an unknown kind of future living
- Education is conceived as a process coterminous with life and revolves about *non-vocational* ideals
- The approach to adult education will be via the route of *situations*, not subjects
- The resource of highest value in adult education is the *learner's experience*

Lindeman was strongly committed to action-oriented education, "not designed merely for the purpose of cultivating skills, but ... something which relates [people] definitely to their community..." (quoted in Brookfield 1987: 129–130).

Adult educationists who followed and further developed Lindeman's traditions included Knowles (1970), Freire (1972), Brookfield (1983) and Jarvis (1987 & 1995). These writers continued to stress (1) the value of problem solving and learning from experience, (2) the community building benefits of adult education and (3) its transformative and emancipatory outcomes.

Embeddedness of learning in the daily lives of individuals and communities was observed as early as 1916 by Lyda Hanifan (1916). Hanifan (1920) is also credited as being the first to discuss the notion of social capital. More recently, Bourdieu (1983) with regard to social theory, Coleman (1988) in his discussions of the social context of education and Putnam (2000) have added to our understandings of the nexus between learning and social capital.

The interconnectedness of adult and community education (ACE), lifelong learning and social capital in ten Australian communities was confirmed in a research report by Falk, Golding and Balatti (2000). "Here ACE expands social capital by calling on existing networks and by generating new networks and connections... Social capital production is the *modus operandi* of ACE not a by-product" (Falk et al. 2000: 78–79).

These writers all make linkages between lifelong learning and social capital. They also confirm the broader, life-wide dimensions of learning that extend well beyond formal education and training settings.

In Sweden, the National Agency for Education has put forward a conceptual framework for both lifelong learning and life-wide learning (Skolverket 2000). Lifelong learning is seen as a holistic view of education and recognises learning from different environments. The concept also consists of two dimensions (Skolverket 2000: 19):

- life-long learning, recognising that individuals learn throughout a lifetime, and
- life-wide learning, recognising the formal, non-formal and informal settings.

Lifelong

Death
▲

Life-wide Formal ← →Informal

▲
Birth

The life-long dimension is relatively non-problematic, as it simply comprises what an individual learns throughout life. It is widely accepted that as knowledge and skills become obsolete, individuals need continuously to update their competencies in a process of continuous learning.

The life-wide dimension is more complex, as it embraces an extensive range of learning settings and contexts, such as the following:

Formal	**Non-formal**	**Informal**
ACE institutions	Labour market programs	Clubs
Universities	Professional associations	Libraries
VET providers	On-the-job training	Museums
High schools	Work experience programs	Art galleries
Primary schools	Volunteer organisations	Playgrounds
Pre-schools	Childcare centres	Families
U3As	Learning circles	Eldercare homes

The distinction between formal and non-formal learning environments is about **where** learning takes place. Formal learning occurs within institutions established primarily to deliver education and training, often leading to recognised outcomes and qualifications. Non-formal learning has intended education and training outcomes, however, the setting is outside dedicated learning institutions, most often in places where learning is not the primary business.

Informal learning is distinguishable by an absence of primary **intent**. It can occur almost anywhere, but as a by-product of other activities. It is often unplanned and without explicit emphasis on learning, yet may still lead to the acquisition of valuable skills, knowledge and attitudes.

This Swedish analysis of lifelong learning differs from that postulated by the OECD which classifies formal learning as a program of study that is recognised through a qualification, non-formal learning as a program of study that is not recognised through a qualification, and informal learning as that which is achieved outside an organised program (Watson 2003: 2). While the OECD version dominates in Australia, it can be argued that such an analysis privileges formal learning over non-formal and informal learning (Clark 2000, Jarvis 2002). For example, a manifestation of this hegemony is the failure of many Australian governments to develop thorough adult learning policies or adequately resource their ACE sectors, as the following grants demonstrate (NCVER 2003):

Australia total ACE grants 2002 - $50,298,000 - 100%
Victoria - $31,027,000 - 62%
NSW - $16,690,000 - 33%
SA - $1,252,000 - 2.5%
Qld - $647,000 - 1.3%
ACT - $536,000 - 1.1%
NT - $86,000 - 0.17%
WA - $36,000 - 0.07%
TAS - $24,000 - 0.04%

In order to reposition non-formal and informal learning as equally valid contributors to lifelong learning and national skill formation, it may be useful to use the Skolverket model, rather than that of the OECD.

Although some writers have discussed the benefits of non-formal learning (Billett 2001), informal learning (Foley 1999) and ACE (McIntyre 1998) in Australia, there have been relatively few explicit references to the life-wide continuum of lifelong learning (for example, ALA 2004: 4 & 14, Cross 2004, Brennan 2004, O'Toole 2003). With exception of the ALA, these writers have not discussed life-wide learning in any great depth. Government policy and position papers are largely silent, while indirect references may be found in Birch (2003), DEST (2003) and DETIR (2000). A few professional associations and peak bodies (e.g. LLCQ 2002) have also made indirect references to life-wide learning in policy documents and submissions to governments.

In Europe, substantial discussions about life-wide learning have been published by the European Commission (2000 & 2001), Jarvis (2002) and Sweden's National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2000). Government agencies in Belgium, Denmark (Undervisnings Ministeriet 2004), Ireland and Romania also make references to life-wide learning and its applications.

In Hong Kong, life-wide learning is referred to quite frequently, but in the narrower context of school education (Yip 2002). The concept was introduced by the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Curriculum Development Council in *Learning to learn* (2001). It generally refers to life-wide learning experiences as those which "take place beyond the classroom" (Employment and Manpower Bureau 2004). This interpretation of life-wide learning is about experiential learning in "authentic environments". As such, it mainly concentrates on the formal and non-formal dimensions, rather than on the informal. Local primary and secondary schools have started to design

various modes of life-wide learning activities tailored for their own needs.

According to Yip (2002), life-wide learning is seen in Hong Kong as a long-term educational strategy, which is supported by a set of complete philosophy. Its slogan is "support from the community and learning beyond the classroom". It aims at enabling students to learn efficiently from authentic experiences or experiences different from those of the classroom to strengthen whole-person education. From a macroscopic point of view, the strategy of 'life-wide learning' contains the following four characteristics and strengths:

- "learning-focused" rather than "activity-focused"
- closely linked with the curriculum: extending, enriching, enabling
- the three elements in the contextual matrix: the coordination of time, place and people
- community support: enhancing social trust

Thus in Hong Kong, government focus on life-wide learning appears to concentrate on forging links between formal and non-formal learning environments. While this is consistent with the well-established tenets of lifelong learning, it remains to be seen whether Hong Kong embraces a more holistic approach by (1) formally recognising the relevance of informal learning and (2) articulating policy beyond school education.

Life sentence?

Australian Treasurer Peter Costello (2004) recently put forward policy suggestions to improve the affordability of retirement. Citing his *Intergenerational report* (Costello 2002), he observed that by 2042 the proportion of Australians aged over 65 was projected to almost double from 12.7% of population to around 25%, with the largest increases being in persons aged 85 and over. During the same time period, annual growth of the Australian workforce was expected

to decline from 1.2% to zero. In 2002 there were approximately five working people to support each person over 65. By 2042 this will have fallen to 2.5 working people to support each person over 65. The implications of an increasing dependency ratio between those in the workforce and those in retirement have been widely canvassed. If no action is taken, it is estimated that by 2042 the additional annual cost of social security and other aged care services to the Australian Government will be approximately five percent of gross domestic product, or $40 billion.

Costello's suggestions, drawn from his discussion paper, *Australia's demographic challenges* (The Treasury 2004), call for a significant increase in the participation rate in the Australian labour force, which in 2002 was 78% and ranked 12th among OECD countries. The paper sets out three complementary policy areas to lift labour force participation: (1) improvements in the capacity for work, through better health and education, (2) better incentives to work, and (3) improved flexibility in the workplace.

The paper contends that 12% of 15 year old Australian students and around 20% of adults

> ... continue to have very poor literacy skills. Further improvements in education would have widespread benefits. Individuals can derive financial and economic benefits while society overall benefits from a higher average level of education and skills that lead to greater productivity and employment (The Treasury 2004: 4).

The paper trumpets a range of Australian Government education and training initiatives that will supposedly address these demographic challenges including: higher education reform, Backing Australia's Future, New Apprenticeships, reforms to literacy and numeracy education in schools, improvements in teacher quality, common curriculum outcomes, uniform school starting age and programs for 'at risk' teenagers. It also states:

> Over the past 20 years, unskilled workers have not been as involved in the labour force as their more skilled counterparts ... Improving skill levels – particularly for the low skilled – is a key element of improving overall participation levels (The Treasury 2004: 4).

Most of these initiatives are in the formal learning sector and concentrate on pre-employment, or entry-level education and training. If, as forecast, new entrants into the labour force halve over the next forty years, then such an emphasis on 'front-end' solutions seems misdirected. Although the paper recommends applying "remedial efforts to improve the participation rates of the current group of adult workers, particularly the low skilled and mature-aged" (The Treasury 2004: 6), there are no new suggestions for assisting older people to remain in or re-enter the workforce.

Later, the paper cites Job Network Training Accounts, Training Credits gained through Work for the Dole, Transition to Work Programs (which require a person to be unemployed for two or more years) and Intensive Assistance as remedial strategies (The Treasury 2004: 15). However, these tend to be reactive interventions which have been criticised for their limited scope, restrictive eligibility and modest employment outcomes (Brophy 2001). More futures-oriented solutions are required to prepare people for tomorrow's needs rather than yesterday's.

The paper makes useful observations about current training opportunities tending to privilege those with relatively high skills levels, negative employer attitudes to mature-aged workers and restricting self-images held by some older people. Overall, however, *Australia's demographic challenges* merely spells out the obvious and provides no new strategies or policies.

If in the future, as Costello has declared, "...there will be no such thing as fulltime retirement" (Olsberg 2004), then many older Australians appear to face a life sentence of myopic education, employment and

training policies and practices. Major barriers to labour market participation, such as the lack of access to recognition of prior learning by older people (Bowman 2003) and affordable training for the low waged have been overlooked.

While lifelong learning is recognised by the Australian Government (DEST 2003: 5, 8–9) as a key to improving employability, there is little acknowledgment of its life-wide dimensions. The current narrow policy focus on front-end, formal learning is inadequate, as is the discontinuous patchwork of state and federal adult learning policies (Clark 2004). All Australian governments need to develop comprehensive, integrated lifelong and life-wide learning policies and implementation strategies. It is significant to note that European countries, including Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom with comprehensive and well-articulated lifelong learning policies, exhibit higher levels of labour force participation, even though their demographic profiles tend to be even more aged than Australia's (The Treasury 2004: 2).

Summary

In Australia, the life-wide dimensions of lifelong learning are often overlooked in official policies relating to education, training and employment. The current focus on 'front end' skill formation strategies is likely to have little impact on Australia's demographic challenges. Fundamental and pervasive issues, such as poor literacy levels among significant proportions of school leavers and adults, require urgent, remedial action supported and resourced by governments. It is both inadequate and inappropriate to leave this task largely to volunteers. Recognition of prior learning must also become more accessible and affordable to older people.

If Australians are to participate more equally, and for longer, in an economy that is increasingly knowledge-based, then learning in all its forms should be valued and supported. Mainstream providers and individuals with existing high levels of skills are privileged under current arrangements. The prevailing market-driven approach to learning is failing around one in five people. Overseas experience suggests that Australian governments should develop integrated lifelong learning policies which support a broader range of education and training options. Families, businesses, not-for-profit organisations, ACE providers and community organisations all need to be included in new learning partnerships so that lifelong learning embraces its inseparable, life-wide dimensions.

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Assessing learning achievements and development impact: Ghana's national functional literacy program

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This paper summarises findings and lessons from a recently conducted evaluation of an adult functional literacy program in Ghana. The study attempted to assess learners' literacy and numeracy skills, and ascertain participants' knowledge and skills in various development aspects as well as their impact.

The literacy and numeracy skills assessment exercise suggested that the learners are gaining significant reading skills and modest numeracy skills, while achievements in writing appear to remain weak. The findings also highlight the question of sustainability of these skills, which implies a need for improvements in post-literacy programs.

The assessment demonstrated significant impact of the program on various areas of development. In particular, the study revealed the

program's strong impact on learners' and their children's education and livelihood activities. In addition, the learners gained knowledge and skills in health, environment and civic awareness.

Introduction

This paper summarises findings and lessons learned from a recently conducted evaluation study of an adult functional literacy program in Ghana. The study was an attempt to assess literacy and numeracy skills levels at different points of the learning cycle, and to ascertain the levels of knowledge and skills in various development aspects acquired through the program and their impact on the individual participants, their families and communities. The findings from this study are intended to help improve the current and future functional literacy programs in Ghana as well as in other countries.

Literacy programs in Ghana

Adult literacy initiatives have a long history in Ghana. Local language adult literacy work in Ghana (then the Gold Coast) was introduced in the early eighteenth century by the Dutch Reformed Church. Later in the nineteenth century, other missionary societies also started literacy work. After the Second World War, in 1948, the British Colonial Government officially adopted literacy as a component of the national education system (Amedzro 2004).

The first large-scale literacy program in Ghana lasted from 1948 to 1968, preparing people to participate more effectively in the process of independence which was finally realized in 1957. Basic literacy, adopting UNESCO's definition of literacy at that time (namely, the ability to read and write simple sentences in one's own language), was the main focus of the program. No conscious efforts were made to relate literacy to the occupational or civic needs of the participants.

The program granted about 250,000 certificates to the participants during this period but collapsed by the end of 1968 (Amedzro 2004, CIA 2004, The World Bank 1992). Amedzro (2004) attributes the reasons for the program's decline to politicisation and change of government, large class sizes and ineffective teaching methodologies, learning materials that did not reflect the interests of learners, and learners' disappointment with the ineffectiveness of certificates for job hunting.

Between 1968 and 1986, in the midst of an economic decline in the country, adult literacy programs were left in the hands of various religious and secular organisations. Realizing the significance of non-formal learning approaches and the need to coordinate different non-formal education activities in the country, the government under the Rawlings administration created the Non-Formal Education Division in the Ministry of Education (NFED/MOE) in 1987. Motivation for the National Functional Literacy Program (NFLP) heightened after the 1989 census showed an adult illiteracy rate of 67% (The World Bank 1992, 1998).

The first phase of NFLP lasted between 1992 and 1997, training 1.3 million learners in literacy in 15 Ghanaian languages, numeracy, and functional knowledge and skills. Based on lessons from earlier experiences, efforts were made to meet the learning needs of the participants by integrating literacy/numeracy learning with knowledge and skills in health, environment, community development and economic activities.

Current program description

Today, Ghana is a country of about 20 million people, with an average gross national income per capita of $270 in 2002. The net primary enrolment rate is approximately 60% and the estimated adult illiteracy rate is about 26% total and about 34% for females (The World Bank 2004). Following its successful implementation of the

first phase, NFED/MOE, with support from the World Bank, has been implementing the second phase of the NFLP since 1999. Its principal objective is to increase the number of Ghanaian adults (15–45 years), particularly women and the rural poor, who acquire literacy and functional skills. Under the program, a functionally literate person is defined as "one who can engage in activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community's development". NFLP II operates in 15 national languages (covering about 85% of the population), plus English for those who have completed the national language course, and targets a total enrolment of one million learners (The World Bank 1999).

Approximately 750,000 learners in three batches have participated so far under NFLP II: Batch 8 (2000–2002), Batch 9 (2003–2005) and Batch 10 (2004–2006). Sixty-two percent of the learners are women, an estimated 60% of the classes are in rural areas, and 32% of the classes are in the northern three regions, that is, the poverty stricken areas. Learners select volunteer facilitators who are usually from the same community. Facilitators receive brief pre-service and in-service training in their locality. They are not paid, but receive 'incentives' of their choice such as sewing machines and bicycles from NFED at the end of the learning cycle. Supervisors, who are on contract with NFED, visit classes and assist the facilitators in their teaching.

Each learning cycle (batch) consists of 21 months, with classes typically meeting three times per week at a convenient time and location. Some classes are women or men only, others are mixed. The program adopts integrated approaches to literacy, numeracy, and functional knowledge and skills development, such as health and civic awareness with income generating activities. In most cases, the learning group chooses one income generating activity and forms a group or cooperative during the program, while some learning groups are already in these work environments when they join the NFLP.

Methodology

The main evaluation data were collected in two ways by the author and NFED in February 2004. Data for the learning outcome assessment are based on written paper tests assessing literacy and numeracy skills obtained at different points of the learning cycle. Data for the development impact evaluation are based on field interviews and observations (Alreck & Settle 1985, Waters 1998) of the learners and their communities to assess knowledge and practices in health, environment, civic awareness, economic activities, education and other aspects. The assessment tools were based on the curriculum (NFED 2001-a, NFED 2001-b) and developed by the author in collaboration with NFED.

For the learning outcome assessment, 1,200 learners were drawn for the written assessment through multi-staged random sampling from Batch 8 (who participated about two years ago), Batch 9 (who have gone through about one year – half of the program), and Batch 10 (who are in the beginning stage of the program). Batch 10 learners' scores were collected in lieu of baseline data. A written test to assess reading, writing and numeracy skills was developed, field tested, translated into six major languages and administered in ten sample districts.

For the development impact evaluation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observation were used, aiming to identify the level of knowledge and skills in various development areas and proof of physical and behavioural changes. For example, in individual interviews concerning health, learners were asked questions such as: Could you tell us anything you know about immunization? Where did you learn about it? Do your children receive immunizations? If so, for what, and when did they get them? Interviews were conducted in 28 communities in three regions with NFLP Batch 8 learners in various settings (rural, peri-urban, semi-urban, urban). Due to a lack of baseline data, seven comparison communities were selected within

the same regions. A total of 329 Batch 8 learners (177 male, 152 female) and 105 comparison group people (55 male, 50 female) were interviewed, in addition to group discussions which included other community members.

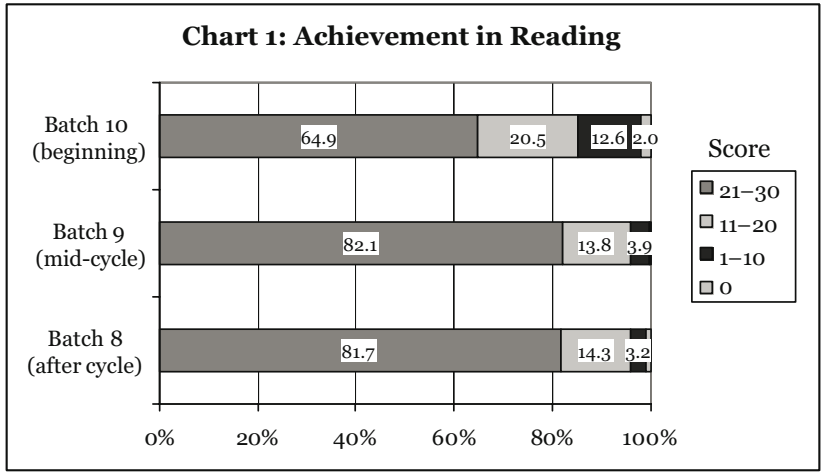
Findings from the learning outcome assessment

In this part of the study, written tests to assess NFLP learners' reading, writing and numeracy skills were conducted. One thousand two hundred questionnaires (400 each for Batch 8, 9 and 10) were distributed and 1,078 were returned for analysis as valid responses.

Achievement in reading

The items in this part included letter recognition, syllables, word recognition, sentence recognition and paragraph recognition. The NFLP learners generally achieved well in the reading skills assessment (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Achievement in Reading



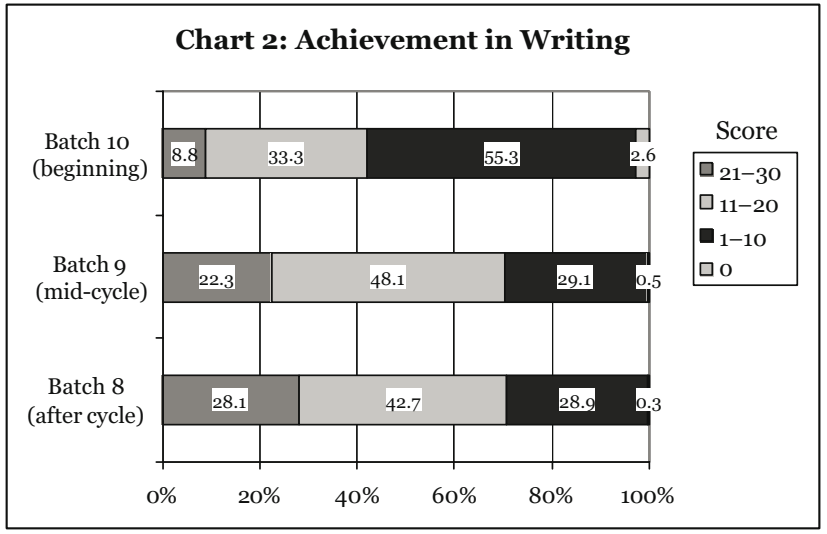
- Score 0: Cannot read at all (illiterate)
- Score 1–10: Can recognize some words
- Score 11–20: Can read at least one complete sentence
- Score 21–30: Can read paragraphs without difficulty

Approximately 82% of the Batch 8 and 9 learners could read and understand a few simple paragraphs of text, and about 95% of the Batch 8 and 9 learners could read at least one full sentence. Batch 10 learners also scored high in this area – about 65% could read paragraphs.

It is notable that there was very little difference in scores between the Batch 8 learners who completed the full program cycle about two years ago and the Batch 9 learners who have done about half (1 year) of the program at the time of the assessment. One can speculate the reason being either that some of the Batch 8 learners have lost their reading skills after completion of the course, and/or the learners could reach a sustainable reading skills level within one year of the course, and spend the second year gaining livelihood/life skills and knowledge by utilising their new literacy skills.

Achievement in writing

The items in this section included word tracing, word copying, word writing, sentence forming and paragraph forming. While the program seems to have a positive impact in this area, the overall performance in writing was weak (see Chart 2).



- Score 0: Cannot write at all
- Score 1–10: Can write some words
- Score 11–20: Can write at least one complete sentence
- Score 21–30: Can write a short letter

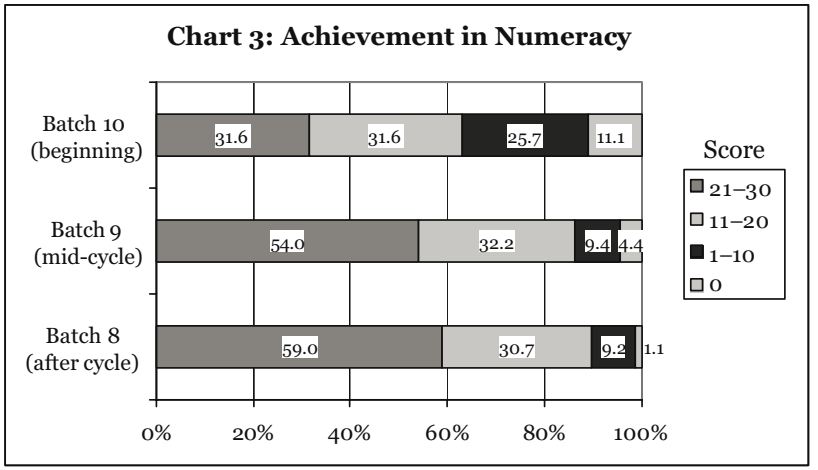
Only about 28% of the Batch 8 learners reached the level of being able to write a short letter. Approximately 22% of the Batch 9 learners scored the same level. For both Batch 8 and 9, about 70% of them could write at least one complete sentence. The majority of the remainder could write one or two words, for example, their name and/or the name of their village.

The Batch 10 learners scored much lower than the others, which may support the effectiveness of the NFLP. Nearly 60% of them had either no, or only word level, writing skills at the beginning of the NFLP participation.

Achievement in numeracy

The numeracy section of the assessment included four arithmetic operations up to six digits. In addition, an oral situational math question was incorporated. The situational question was translated

and read by the test administrators to the participants. The learners achieved modest results in numeracy skills (see Chart 3).



- Score 0: Cannot calculate at all
- Score 1–10: Can do one to two digit calculation
- Score 11–20: Can do three to four digit calculation and/or five digit oral situational math
- Score 21–30: Can do six digit calculation

Approximately 60% of the Batch 8 learners were able to perform six digit calculation. Almost 90% of them could correctly answer either three to four digit written calculations and/or the five digit oral math question. The Batch 9 learners achieved similarly, only slightly lower – 54% scored at the highest level.

The Batch 10 learners scored significantly lower than others, which again may support the program effectiveness. Nearly 40% of them either could not calculate at all or could only calculate with one or two digits.

Findings from the development impact assessment

This part of the study was based on interviews, focus group discussions and community observation in 28 Batch 8 and seven

comparison communities. Out of 329 Batch 8 learners interviewed, approximately 53% (N=177) were male and 47% (N=152) were female, and out of 105 comparison group people, approximately 52% (N=55) were male and 48% (N=50) were female. By occupation, the majority of the interviewees were engaged in farming. The areas of interview included health, environment, civic awareness, education, and income generating activities and topics were chosen from the curriculum.

Knowledge and practices in health

Among the NFLP learners, many of them, both men and women, mentioned knowledge of family planning as one of the greatest benefits they received from the program. Another area in which the effect of NFLP seems more prominent, was reduction of teenage pregnancy. In addition, the Batch 8 learners indicated substantial knowledge of and practice in safe motherhood, childcare, immunization, safe drinking water, personal and environmental hygiene, and food preservation. With regard to HIV/AIDS, many people interviewed had basic knowledge but also revealed mixed understanding – some correct, some not. In most cases, we were able to confirm that they were actually practising what they know by requesting them to give us specific examples or proof shown and through observation, while it was obviously impossible to confirm practices in some of the areas, such as HIV/AIDS.

The responses from the comparison groups indicated their limited knowledge in this area. The topics in which people had some idea were those they had heard through campaigns or extension work by other agencies, including HIV/AIDS, immunization and food preservation. Even in these areas, their knowledge tended to be very basic. For instance, some mentioned that nurses came to their community to vaccinate children, but could not identify names of the diseases they are trying to prevent. In some communities, food preservation methods were introduced by agricultural extension officers. People had either no or very little knowledge about other

topics, including safe motherhood, family planning, nutrition and childcare, hygiene, safe drinking water, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy in the comparison communities.

Knowledge and practices in environment

Concerning environmental aspects, the learners showed fair knowledge and certain levels of practices in environmentally-friendly farming, tree growing, energy saving, fishing and environmental deterioration, though the practices seem to be limited overall and may need more rigorous reinforcement and long-term efforts to change behaviour and show greater actual impact on the environment. The most effective area seemed to be environmentally-friendly farming methods. All responded positively on the usefulness of new knowledge gained through the course, such as lining crops and cultivating less land with more intensive care and use of compost manure instead of chemical fertilizer.

The comparison group had some knowledge of environmentally-friendly farming (mainly due to agricultural extension officers), fishing and sand weaning. Some also had limited knowledge about bush fires but could not explain how they can be prevented and were not taking action to prevent them. They had almost no knowledge about tree growing and energy saving and very little on environmental pollution and keeping the environment clean. There was also less communal labor organised for environmental purposes than in the communities with the NFLP.

Knowledge and practices in civic awareness

In this category, the program seems to have substantial positive influence in several areas related to civic awareness, one of which is promoting community empowerment and participation. The majority of the interviewed learners indicated that the NFLP strengthened bonds among community members, which started organising communal labour to clean the surroundings and 'community talk'

to discuss how to improve their community situation. Here it is important to mention that the NFLP learners and their communities developed a sense of self-help. In some of the communities, the learners organised themselves to build and start primary schools, which were later supported by the government. In another community, the learners described that if the road is not good, people used to say it was the government's fault, but now they know that they have to start something themselves in order to bring about change.

The program is also effectively introducing gender equality and communication issues. Many have reported that the program helped improve understanding between spouses who now agree on topics such as spacing of child births and other household matters. In fact, after joining the NFLP program, 40% of the sample learners agreed that they have changed the household decision-making process, that is, either from husband only to husband and wife together, or strengthened communication in the process. On other topics, the learners had good knowledge about elections and taxation, but limited or no knowledge on child labour, land disputes and intestate succession laws.

In the comparison communities, people had some knowledge about elections, land disputes, child labour and taxation, but the depth of knowledge was very limited. People reported that they vote, but could not explain why, or some said it is good if all of them belong to one party. For taxation, people pay tax because officials come around to collect it. There was obvious difference in responses to the community empowerment and participation question between the Batch 8 and the comparison communities. People from the comparison communities either had no idea about community development or were involved in only communal cleaning.

Knowledge and practices in income generating activities

The study revealed that the program is helping participants through providing knowledge and skills on various livelihood

activities, how to form cooperatives, and how to borrow money from financial institutions to expand business. Ninety-one percent of the learners and 74% of the comparison group people were engaged in income generating activities. As described in the earlier section on occupation, the majority of them were in farming-related activities.

Ninety-seven percent of the Batch 8 participants confirmed that the skills and knowledge they gained from the NFLP helped either to start or to improve income generating activities, and they were able to give specific examples of how the program helped. Farmers gained knowledge on how to increase yield. Some also mentioned that they are choosing crops that are more profitable in the area, and learned harvesting and packaging skills to sell more effectively. Many had formed cooperatives and borrowed money from banks and Non-Government Organisations to expand their farms. The program also helped learners engaged in other income generating activities.

Among the Batch 8 participants from whom valid responses were able to be obtained to questions on their income and/or productivity (300 out of 329, or approximately 92%), 83% reported that they have increased their income and/or products after joining the program, 13% maintained the same level and 4% have less income than before. The responses were given in various forms, including (but not limited to) monthly income, quarterly income, yearly income and monthly profits. According to the respondents who gave specific figures in one of the various forms described above, the income/product increase varied from 1.3 times to 12.5 times, with an average 3.3-fold increase.

Knowledge and practices in education

The study revealed that the NFLP had significant impact on learners' own lifelong learning, their children's education and general awareness towards education in the community. Through NFLP, some have gained admission into formal school even up to university,

and interviewers were told that they are performing well or even better than regular learners.

On children's schooling, 75% of the NFLP learners with school-age children said their children were attending school before they participated in the program, and 98% of them are now sending children to school. According to the learners, they are also supporting children's education for longer periods of time to allow them to complete higher grades. Some communities are paying voluntary teachers to help schools. For the comparison groups, 54% of parents with school-age children said their children were schooling five years ago, and 49% of them are sending their children to school currently. The main reasons for not sending children to school were unavailability of schools in the community and financial reasons.

NFLP participants are more likely to help their children's study at home and encourage others to get education. Eighty per cent of the learners with school-age children reported that they closely support children's learning at home through asking children what they learned at school, reading with them, teaching them whenever they can, sitting together to review what they learned, ensuring that children do their homework, helping them set up a physical environment to study (for instance, lighting) or finding them somebody to tutor when necessary. Ninety-six per cent of the learners also assured us that they are encouraging others (family and community members) to get an education. Equivalent figures for the comparison groups were 69% helping children's study at home and 68% encouraging others to learn.

Lessons learned

The lessons learned based on the findings of the study are as follows, some of which are also confirmed by other literature.

(i) Adult functional literacy programs could be an effective means to provide learning opportunities for deprived adults (Carr-Hill 2001, Cawthera 2003). The participants, community leaders and members, facilitators and supervisors all strongly supported continuation and expansion of the NFLP in Ghana. The study found fair gains in literacy and numeracy skills by the participants, and significant impact on various development aspects to help improve their quality of living.

(ii) Post-literacy programs, or intervention to ensure sustainability and usage of skills, are the key (Cawthera 2003, The World Bank 2001). Without such efforts, the learners could lose their literacy skills over time. The study suggests a need for semi-systematic post-literacy programs, such as reading circles and word games, as distinct from merely distributing supplemental readers to communities. Multi-organisational partnerships, particularly with local NGOs/CBOs may be helpful in this area.

(iii) Provide good support in the selection, financing and marketing of income generating activities. Support for these activities is often the key to success of functional literacy programs, as it is closely linked to poverty reduction of program participants and their communities. Nurturing entrepreneurship among learners and program supporters, avoiding over-crowding of particular activities in the same area, and linking to micro-credit schemes would be effective here. Exploring partnerships with the private sector could broaden the horizon and opportunities for income generating activities.

(iv) Ensure the basics: logistical arrangements and timely delivery of teaching and learning materials. This frequently faced problem can greatly harm learning and often seems to stem from inadequate communication and coordination among different implementers. A simple review of planning mechanisms and rigorous efforts to improve communication among actors seem to be a solution to ensure the timely delivery of the correct materials.

(v) Promote curriculum, teaching and learning methods that help build knowledge based on learners' experiences (Archer & Cottingham 1996). For numeracy skills, programs should explore ways of achieving closer linkages between mental calculations, the form with which learners may be more familiar, and written arithmetic operations.

(vi) Enhance partnerships among governmental and private organisations in implementing functional literacy programs. Particularly in terms of life/livelihood skills (for example, HIV/AIDS campaign, environmental issues, income generating activities), programs could considerably benefit from developing and enhancing partnerships with existing organisations (governmental and non-governmental) and their programs. It is encouraged that such partnerships be explored at both national and local levels.

(vii) Strengthen monitoring and evaluation and learners' assessment (Easton 1997). Monitoring and evaluation has been a weak component in NFLP as in many other adult literacy programs around the world (Abadzi 2003). While aiming to improve the quality of learning, the study found that regular monitoring is also desired by the learners as a 'source of encouragement'.

(viii) Explore the feasibility of offering more local and international language options. The study suggested there is demand to translate materials into more languages. The study also found that there is high demand by learners to start English after respective local language training. Considering the importance of mother tongue learning as well as mastery of language of wider use (UNESCO 1999), tapping into volunteers and exploring partnerships may help open more language options to adult learners.

(ix) Make good use of radio and other mass media (Lafrin, Quarmyne, Ansre 1999). While piloted only on a very limited scale and geographical areas, the radio program in Ghana was very popular and seemed effective in recruiting learners to the program and transferring key messages, such as importance of education, how to prevent HIV/AIDS and so on to large groups of people, including rural areas.

(x) Consider problems external to education, such as better eye care. Eyesight problem is fairly common among adult learners in Ghana. NFED started the eye care initiative by procuring and distributing eyeglasses and is exploring some of the regional and district level initiatives, such as subsidies to commercially available eyeglasses. What is preventing effective learning may not necessarily be teaching and learning processes, but physical obstacles that require attention.

(xi) Keep literacy programs un-politicised and promote communication. In some areas, community leaders presume or even propagate that NFLP is linked to political activities and, as a result, refuse to cooperate with the program. Similar phenomena can be observed in literacy programs and campaigns elsewhere. Politicised programs could suffer from sudden interruption or changes in leadership. To avoid such interruption of learning and promote sustainability, it is important to separate educational programs from political activities and to promote proper communication at different levels, from grassroots to national.

Conclusion

The literacy and numeracy skills assessment exercise suggested that the NFLP learners are gaining significant reading skills and modest numeracy skills, while achievements in writing appear to remain weak. The findings also posed a question relating to sustainability of these skills, which calls for improvements in the post-literacy program.

Interviews, discussions and observations indicated significant impact of the program on various areas of development. Particularly, the

study revealed the program's strong impact on learners' own lifelong learning, awareness towards education in the community, and children's education, especially for girls. The program also seems to be contributing to improvements in the income generating activities of participants. In addition, the learners gained knowledge and skills in health, environment and civic awareness areas.

In many parts of the world, for those who missed formal education for reasons such as poverty and lack of access to schools, adult functional literacy programs are one of the rare entry points to re-open the doors to learning. In fact, some of the earlier NFLP graduates have moved on to secondary or even tertiary level education. The study confirmed that, while their voices may be small, such programs are very much needed and appreciated by the disadvantaged people, and that they can be an effective means of offering life and livelihood skills to help people improve their quality of life.

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Making connections: a dialogue about learning and teaching in a tertiary enabling program

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This paper concerns the experiences and effects of a tertiary entrance program from two perspectives: that of a former student now engaged in her Honours program and of her enabling lecturer. The main aim of the paper is to present a literature review of published studies about mature women's engagement with tertiary study at the entry level. The authors utilise their enabling education biographies to connect the review of literature to lived experiences. The study asks: how far does the literature cover their experiences and what gaps, if any, are there? The first section briefly outlines the approach taken in the paper. In the second section the enabling experience is discussed in three parts: motivations to enter, the first assignment and course encounters. The third section examines the wider effects of participation in enabling on the self, family and friends. The paper bears out the findings of recent literature that highlighted the powerful transformative effects of such programs in all spheres of the students' lives and the importance of making connections in enabling programs. It suggests that more research needs to be carried out in a number of areas, especially gender, race and class.

Introduction

Higher education systems everywhere are undergoing significant changes, including 'massification'. This quantitative growth has also been accompanied by a qualitative shift in the perception of higher education participation as a privilege to a right, and as a lifelong learning site. In a recent study of participation and exclusion in higher education across ten 'developed' nations, including Australia, researchers identified that the participation of 'non-traditional' students, most often used as a proxy for adult students, was one of the fundamental changes occurring in higher education (Scheutze and Slowley 2002: 312). Mature age tertiary access schemes have provided one of the ways in which these far reaching changes have been achieved. The Open Foundation at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, has been in operation since 1974. For thirty years it has provided a pathway into tertiary study for mature-age students (May 2003c). Further the Open Foundation has a unique place in Australia in that it takes over one third of the total national enrolments in such programs. Open Foundation students generally perform at a higher level than other types of entrants to the university. Cheong (2000: 79) wrote that the Open Foundation 'is Newcastle's flagship in terms of its contributions to the enhancement of the well-being of the local community it serves.'

In this paper, we examine the experience of the Open Foundation from two perspectives: those of the student and of the teacher. Our aim is to explore and test the research findings on the experience of access programs and mature age tertiary learning from those perspectives. The first section briefly outlines the autobiographical

approach employed. In the second section the paper discusses the enabling experience in three parts: motivations to enter, the first assignment and course encounters. The third section examines the wider effects of participation in enabling on the self, family and friends. The paper bears out the findings of recent literature that relates the powerful transformative effects of such programs in all spheres of the students' lives and the importance of making connections in enabling programs. It suggests that more research needs to be carried out in a number of areas.

An autobiographical approach

Researchers in adult education have embraced a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Among the latter group many have been informed by postmodern and feminist sensibilities regarding the importance of life story work, narratives and linguistic analysis (Gough & Maddock 1978; Baxter & Britton 2001; Maher 2001; Heenan 2002; Illeris 2003). Jarvis (2001) has outlined recently the 'delights and dangers' of autobiographical methods in exploring adult education. She stated that the value of such studies is that they allow marginal voices to appear (see also Tett 2000); they show how research and researcher interact; they add complexity and depth to research; and they have warmth and directness. The dangers include: self-indulgence, over-particularity, and that narrative or 'mythic' structures may construct reality for the researcher. In this paper we follow the qualitative trends while acknowledging their dangers and inadequacies.

Our approach also stands within the interpretive humanist research tradition. According to McLean, this tradition emphasises that social reality cannot exist separately from humans. Thus 'the ontological status of social life is produced and given meaning by individual actors. In effect, human beings are active creators of their worlds, rather than being passively shaped by social processes' (McLean 1999: 27). The interpretive humanist framework understands adult

education is 'a series of negotiated encounters' between students and processes such as 'courses' or 'learning'.

Qualitative papers from Australia and overseas in the area of mature returners to higher education tend to be based on small samples. In Australia, Passe (1997) based her paper on two case studies; Cantwell and Mulhearn in the same year looked at the experience of seven women. In South Africa, Castle (2002) reported on three case studies while in the United Kingdom, Reay (2003) examined the adult education experiences of twelve women. These small-scale studies allow for in-depth analyses of experiential data, although they are limited in the production of generalisable data. As we do here, they rely on rich literature surveys to provide thick interpretations.

The authors have known one another since 1996. The paper grew out of a series of meetings by the authors over coffee and by email. The process has been joyful but it has also been disorderly, risky, experimental and undertaken over distance. Productive collaboration, according to Kamber and Thomson (2001), arises from play and 'flourishes when both serious and playful'. Our main aim was to survey and test the literature about enabling in general, and about the Open Foundation in particular, in the light of our experiences. The Open Foundation Program has been subject to steady research since the 1990s (see Collins & Penglase 1991; Penglase 1993; Bourke Cantwell & Archer 1998; Cantwell, Archer & Bourke 2001; Cantwell & Grayson 2002; May 2003abc). As two mature-age women returners to formal education, we present research on our own adult education encounters in the Open Foundation Program, one as a former student and the other as a lecturer in Australian History in the program. Our narratives are subjected to reflexive critique in comparison with a sample of the literature about mature-age women returners and the enabling experience. This paper, then, is not 'about' but 'by' adult returners: the research and the researcher are fused. We recognise the limits of this approach, yet hold that this exploration of our

own stories in the light of the literature about women returners may yield worthwhile knowledge. The next section examines the enabling experience in three parts, beginning with re-entry. Each part is preceded by a review of the relevant literature, followed by our stories.

The experience of returning

Re-entry

Researchers have noted a number of reasons why women return to formal education, and the emphasis varies depending on the site of the study. Fulmer and Jenkins (1992), in their evaluation of a bridging program offered at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, cited personal enrichment, the need to retrain for the workforce, a desire to change present circumstances and to develop new interests. Kaziboni (2000) studied women pursuing further studies at the University of Zimbawe and the emphasis there was mainly economic, arising from changes in their family situations, but also as Australian Passe (1997) and British Reay (2003) found in the case of working class female returners, included the desire to act as role models for their children. For the Open Foundation Program, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) found that re-entry primarily concerned self-improvement and identity generation.

The process of re-entry to higher education for mature-age women has been characterised as 'problematic' (Reay 2003). Macdonald and Stratta (1998: 70) show that returning to education for adults includes a change in power relationships. Adults 'go back' to a 'state where others have control'. 'Going back' for many also includes memories of low quality educational encounters, often in secondary school. It has also been noted that women experience 'extra rather than redistributed workloads in the domestic environment' as a result of re-entry (Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997). Jenni's story illustrates the maxim that there is usually more than one reason for taking an

action. Adult education theorist Mezirow said that transformative learning occurs most often as a result of a 'disorienting dilemma' triggered by a life crisis or a major life transition (see Imel 1998). Both Jenni's and Jo's motivations to enter included such a dilemma, and the desire for escape from it into an area of challenge and self-growth. For both women, the rhetoric of 'self-improvement' seems not to be present as an overt motivation and financial considerations did not figure at all, although Jenni mentioned retraining as an aim.

Jenni's re-entry – a conjunction of events

My motivation for going to university resulted from a conjunction of events. My husband and I had wanted to start a family, with many years of no success. We decided to adopt and in due course we became parents. Our second child, another girl, arrived sixteen months later. I did find it very difficult to cope with the girls; they were very demanding. In retrospect, the lack of coping was probably associated with not really fitting into the motherhood mould as snugly as some of my peers did. In the following year my husband took the opportunity to work overseas for a year, however, on our return, I had real problems settling back into my old life and feelings of being at odds with my peers seemed to be intensified.

I decided a change was needed and took the opportunity to enrol at Macquarie University as they had a special admissions year to celebrate their jubilee. Would you believe it – I fell pregnant! I did not cope with this turn of events at all. Despondently, I scrapped the university idea to cope with the impending arrival. As noted above, Mezirow (1997) suggested that a 'disorienting dilemma, which is triggered by a life crisis or major transition, although it may also result from an accumulation of transformations in meaning schemes over a period of time' (Mezirow 1997: 50) is significant in the process of mature-aged students returning to the educational process. I experienced the 'accumulation of transformations' over time of

feeling at odds with the motherhood stereotype, and the 'disorienting dilemma' of a totally unexpected pregnancy.

Some time later, I read an article in the local newspaper about the Open Foundation Program at the new regional campus of the University of Newcastle at Ourimbah. The location of the campus on the Central Coast nearby made it much more accessible than the Macquarie option. Regarding adult participation in Zimbabwe, Kabazoni (2000) has noted 'the tendency to locate universities in urban centres limits access to rural women', and this is no less true for Australia. My husband encouraged me to go to the Open Foundation information session. I did not want to go. What was he thinking – me undertake university studies in my state of dysfunction? I still was not coping with the children. I was also already anticipating what the literature has since confirmed, that 'for many mature-aged students, the experience of university involves significant impositions on family life and relationships' (Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997: 4). How was I going to cope with more pressure and deadlines? Still, I was having a really bad day with the children so I decided I needed some time out and ended up at the meeting and was enrolling before I knew it – it all sounded so wonderful and liberating.

Connecting Jo's re-entry and teaching in the Open Foundation

I returned to higher education in my early thirties. The act of applying for a university place after many years away from formal study was the result of a process that I still do not fully understand. Like Jenni, the causes for my return were many, but mainly were of an existential character. My 'disorienting dilemma' was a brush with death from which I had recovered with all of my old certainties shaken, and with a growing understanding that if I was to realise my potential, whatever that was, I had better get cracking – time was clearly awasting. My re-entry was filled with self-doubt and nameless fears that persisted for many years, although lessening as I went along.

When I look at a new group of Open Foundation adults, I assume that they have decided to try to gain a place at university for many different reasons, some known and some unknown. Further, I assume that all are nervous about their decision. I always begin therefore with my own story of re-entry. I do not attempt to massage away the complexities and contradictions in the telling. I am often surprised at how powerful this story is when students from many years ago recall this opening self-revelatory monologue, as Jenni demonstrates below. Telling stories about the past is also a powerful way of making connections and can be empowering for students (Chase 2000; Hartford, Morgan & Watt 2003).

The first assignment

From our experience, the first milestone in an enabling program for both students and lecturers is the submission and return of the first assignments. Little has been written about these pivotal events in enabling programs from either the teacher or student perspective. Rickwood and Goodwin (2000: 52) have noted in their longitudinal study of eleven students in an Open University program that:

> assessment is certainly an important justification and in the eyes of our respondents the most important one … it was clear that assessment generally helped motivate, reassure and sustain the students, as well as affording them proof of achievement.

It can be asserted, however, that the first assignment is surrounded on all sides by anxiety.

In general it has been found that initially students are threatened by 'academic work' and feel 'different' from traditional school-leaver students whom they perceive as 'advantaged'. The initial stages of their studies are concerned with learning 'the rules' and much of this hinges on the return of marked work (Macdonald and Stratta 1998). Moreover, students entering enabling programs often have low

self-efficacy beliefs with regard to academic performance (Cantwell, Bourke and Archer 1997; Hartford et al. 2003). Castle (2002) reported that the mature-age women returning to higher education 'confronted a new teaching style … [and were] required to observe and question former constructions and practices, to find a voice and to take personal responsibility for their views'. This learning trajectory demanded from students has been characterised as the move from concrete to abstract styles of thinking (Fulmer et al. 1992), moving from passive to active modes of learning (Castle 2002) and engaging in deep rather than surface learning (Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997).

The anxiety surrounding the first assignment is clear in our stories. As a lecturer, Jo's concern about returning the first assignment centred on her knowledge of its importance as a stage in the creation of scholarly identity. She understood that, for some, the first marked assignment would be a positive affirmation, while for others, a disappointing mark would pose a challenge that some would choose not to meet. In order to manage her anxiety about the first assignment, Jenni adopted what could be termed a 'harm minimisation strategy' in which performance at the first assignment would guide her regarding further participation – or not.

Jenni and the first assignment – making connections

For one of my subjects, I think I was fortunate to have a lecturer with whom I connected from the start. 'The teacher's role in establishing an environment that builds trust and care facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners and is a principle of fostering transformative learning' (Taylor 1998, cited in Imel 1998). She was open and truthful about what lay ahead (Wilson 1997, in Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997: 3). As she was speaking, it was as if I was the only person in the class. I was hooked onto all the possibilities and what I might be able to attain. Nevertheless, failing to matriculate in high school reinforced my anxiety about my 'worthiness' to be at university, even though I felt I had arrived at a place that had

meaning for me. So at the outset I decided to set myself some short-term goals, that in retrospect were quite dangerous. I decided to see how I went with my first assignment and take action depending on the outcome.

Coming to this point, I had made three important connections. The first connection was with my lecturer. Unknowingly, she had triggered within me what Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997: 2) refer to as the 'deep or achieving approach'. Drawing from the discussion they present, it could be suggested that this approach to learning, by their rating, needs to be in the positive for the student to succeed (Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997: 15–16). In another study, Harford, Morgan & Watt (2003: 75) found 'students identified that their level of connectedness [with the lecturer] enhanced a belief in their ability to succeed'. The observations made by these studies suggests the positive connection between student and educator is strongly linked to the establishment or enhancement of the deep or achieving learning experience being in the positive mode (also Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997: 3).

The second connection was with the Learning Skills Centre at the Central Coast Campus, which was a vital part of my learning experience. There I was taught how to write an academic essay. Until the first assignment was due, I had very little confidence that I had any ability to put two words together that made any sense. Understanding sentence structure, key signal words and mapping out a coherent argument have made me a better student and able to achieve an academic level beyond my imagination. Kamber and Thomson (2001) have suggested that 'academic writing is very strongly tied to the formation and negotiation of scholarly identity'.

The third important cluster of connections I made was with my fellow students. Sitting in the classroom was very threatening. However, when you finally pluck up enough courage to talk to your classmates, you realise everyone feels that way. Cantwell & Mulhearn (1997: 3) construed this adjustment period as one of asserting a

'sense of self-agency', but perhaps there is a period too when the 'group-agency' must also be affirmed. One of the gaps in the research literature concerns the nature of the identity of groups of learners. I tended to gravitate to the people who were positive about their learning experience and eager to take up the challenges this process presents. The interactions with other students helped toward resolving new and strange feelings of social isolation brought about by attending university (Cantwell and Mulhearn 1997: 4).

When I received my first assignments back, I could not believe what I had achieved, especially when I was considering that a pass would be great. I was ecstatic since this was not just the case for my History subject but for the distance learning one as well. I was amazed when they contacted me for permission to copy my first essay as an example for other students to follow. I thought: hey, maybe I could do this after all? Cantwell and Mulhearn identify the enhancement of self-efficacy as part of the process that students experience when adjusting to the formal learning process (1997: 2) which also supports the findings of Youlden and Chan (1994) and Cholowski and Chan (1992). Having those first successes was fortunate for me. It made me realise I could achieve and did belong at university. If not for my early successes and the connections made between the lecturer and the Learning Skills Centre people, I very much doubt that Open Foundation would have been such a great experience. University became the release I desired from my domestic roles and a confirmation of who I was. Some studies have noted that it was 'only whilst they were at university that they felt they could be themselves rather than somebody's mother or partner' (Hughes 2002: 419).

Jo and the first assignment: a crisis of expectations

As a lecturer there is nothing I dislike more than handing back the first assignment. Even though I spend a great amount of time marking these assignments, I know that the marks are going to hurt some, disappoint others, anger still others and create the most joyous

emotions in the few who gain high distinctions or any result beyond their heartfelt expectations. This is because adults entering higher education usually have not been tested formally for many years. They carry with them ideas gleaned about their level of skills and ability from many sources. From my own experience I know that some also carry with them an idea that goes something like: 'the amount of effort should equal the amount of return'. Taras (2003) has found that this situation 'is external to the actual standard of their work and their awareness of this'. Further, students' self-worth is often deeply implicated in their written work – they feel that they, and not their work, are being marked in what Ilott and Murphy (1997, in Hawe 2003) described as 'the destructive association between failure on a prescribed task and as a person'. Sometimes the return of the first assignment is crunch time and some will leave at this point. This 'personalisation of the outcomes of assessment' applies not only to students but also to assessors. Hawe (2003) found that assessors have difficulty assigning a fail grade and that doing so is accompanied by 'anxiety, distress, self-doubt, guilt, regret and relief'. In my experience of teaching in a tertiary enabling course, the assignment of a pass or indeed a credit grade can also provoke such anxiety. Many adult entry students regard less than high grades as inadequate given the imposition of 'returning' to their personal lives. They also recognise that high grades are necessary for their purpose of gaining a place at university within an increasingly competitive market. Unfortunately they are right.

Knowing all this is complicated for me by the importance assessment had in my own academic career. Despite the fact that my first assignment in history was in my view 'a nightmare' (I 'only' received a pass), I gained high marks consistently in my studies. 'Success' propelled me forward. Despite my growing scholarly confidence, however, the memory of the first mark and the 'only a housewife' identity I had embraced in my years away from study, encouraged me to sometimes think that the marks I was receiving might be some sort

of mistake – or worse, kindness. Soon I would be uncovered for the incompetent fool I really was – it was only a matter of time. I don't know when exactly this feeling of being an impostor receded, but thankfully it has, although remnants appear from time to time like some reptilian artifact of a less evolved self.

The course

Having survived the first assignment, mature-age students will settle to a level of commitment and engagement with their courses as suits their abilities, temperaments, commitments and needs. In general adult learners can be distinguished from other types of learners by their characteristics. For example, according to Jerram (2002), adult learners engage in self-motivated learning; they have a wealth of experiential knowledge and an ability to transfer knowledge from one area to another. Adult learners exhibit commitment to the requisite work for learning. They also have pre-determined limits imposed by other serious commitments such as families and jobs. Adults need to link learning to a meaningful life application and finally, they have an awareness of life-changing ramifications of learning (Jerram 2002).

Research on adult learners' experiences of tertiary access programs show a fairly consistent suite of problems that they encountered. Time availability and management appeared to be critical factors (Castle 2002, Rickwood & Goodwin 2000, Kaziboni 2000, Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997, Scott, Burns & Cooney 1996, Fulmer *et al.* 1992 and so on). Other factors were level of family support, workload, economic pressures, and academic challenges, epistemological and institutional. However, the research presents a more complex picture with regard to learning outcomes. Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) charted a decline in students' self-efficacy over the course of their access program, and an increase in surface learning and self-blame. On the other hand, Fulmer *et al.* (1992) noted a significant movement from concrete to abstract styles of learning in their sample. At the same time, most qualitative studies affirmed the positive outcomes of their

learning experiences, whatever the learning outcomes. Rickwood and Goodwin's (2000: 51) case studies exemplify this statement: 'the general conclusion of all the academic journeys was very positive. By the time the students had reached the end of their courses, and before they knew the results, they were recording very strong feelings of worth and achievement.'

Jenni

So much of the Open Foundation experience has been to a large degree the interaction with specific individuals. Each student is sure to have a different experience based on their expectations and willingness to achieve. Assistance and the openness of Open Foundation lecturers play a vital part in the learning process for mature-age students. Loughlin (1993) sees the responsibility of the teacher is to create a 'community of knowers,' individuals who are 'united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience' (Imel 1998). Cranton (1994, in Imel 1998) said that 'the teacher also sets the stage for transformative learning by serving as a role model and demonstrating a willingness to learn and change by expanding and deepening understanding of and perspectives about both subject matter and teaching'.

Many students have negative memories of previous education experiences. I think the hardest thing for students is conquering the fear of feeling foolish when asking questions. Many times I would wait until after the class to ask questions. Being given the confidence to ask during the class was enabled by sensitive and intelligent responses from the lecturers – even to the bleeding obvious and the downright ridiculous.

Jo

As the research has asserted, time was without doubt my greatest problem as an adult student. My experiences concerned the isolation I felt. Firstly, from the general academic life of the university and secondly, isolation from other students and inability to 'waste' time

pursuing extra curricula activities. Like a thief in the night I attended lectures, 'hit' the library for photocopying sessions in short loans, then home to my duties as wife and mother. I worked after my children's bedtime and sometimes after my spouse's bedtime. These experiences have shaped my teaching practice in the Open Foundation. I am careful that workloads are testing but achievable, and that submission dates are well understood and flexible if needed.

The effects of returning on personal worlds

The consequences of the changes that occur to the individual in their enabling program move beyond acquiring academic skills and knowledge. The 'regeneration of identity' through engagement with academic study (Cantwell & Mulhearn 1997: 4) is also identified by Rickwood and Goodwin (2000) and Baxter and Britton (2001: 87). The latter refer to Giddens' idea of 'elective biography' that implies a proactive process of a re-representation of the student's identity. Additionally, Maher (2001: 11) has identified that for many women 'it isn't just about career, it isn't just about the pursuit of knowledge, but about a new way of being in the world'. Further, Imel (1998) has identified that 'transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frame of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds'. While this body of literature is mainly about women returners, we would like to believe it is a similar experience of many men, though the literature is largely silent on issues affecting mature-age male returners.

Jenni

In a personal sense, the goals with which I started university are different from those I have now. These changes have occurred largely due to an evolving realisation of what I could achieve. I have an increased self-confidence, however, at numerous times I still seem uncertain of my ability. Like Jo, I keep waiting for someone to 'find

me out' and to be excluded from the learning process at university. I have become more critically aware of media reports and other sources of knowledge (see Katie's story in Baxter and Britton 2001: 90). This is what Mezirow calls 'a perspective transformation' (1991: 167, cited in Imel 1998). This transformation on numerous occasions has made me feel socially at odds with my friends and family; sometimes it is just not worth voicing my viewpoint due to any friction it may cause. Again, Baxter and Britton found that many mature returners found their social activities 'involve[d] them in the quite stressful strategy of concealing aspects of their new selves in certain situations' (2001: 92). Other researchers such as Wakeford (1994: 224) noted that mature returners feel the need to segment their lives 'or to wear different hats' to cope with the disparities between their university and social worlds.

At other times, I seem to have been so absorbed in achieving my academic goals I have been unaware of the needs of family and friends. Kaziboni (2000) related how the opposing roles of student, mother and wife have to be constantly negotiated in order to achieve further education in conjunction with the 'cultural expectations with which they have to abide' (2000: 7; also Maher 2001: 17). I have had the 'luxury' of having a supportive partner. Many other students, especially women I have met through university, have been actively and passively sabotaged during their studies. Still I sometimes feel guilty about the amount of time I spend on university work (Kaziboni 2000: 7). It has been observed in some of the studies that one of the arguments for women returning to education is that they provide a positive example to their children (Kaziboni 2000, Paase 1997, Hughes 2002). This reason seems to be a minor one however. It may be suggested that this rationalisation is being used by a number of returners to justify their decision and/or to resolve feelings of guilt associated with the changes in domestic priorities returning to formal education may entail.

As I progressed in my studies, it became more difficult to bridge the gap between my old and new friends. Baxter and Britton (2001) have identified that fragmentation and compartmentalisation is accentuated by 'new forms of cultural capital'(Baxter & Britton, 2002: 89). Ultimately, the friends I met at university have become very important to me. I have developed some long-term friendships, which have helped to redefine me as a person. The friends I have kept from before I started university have been my greatest assets. Their encouragement and acceptance of my 'growth' has cemented strong bonds.

Jo

When I returned to study, I knew that what I was doing was potentially disruptive to my life as it was lived. I knew that my relationships would change – I hoped for the better. My close and wider family network were almost unanimously helpful in my quest for education. Like Jenni, I was fortunate to have a partner who supported my changes. I believe that my children were beneficiaries of my tertiary study in that I was happier and more fulfilled. I am sure that they might have other recollections, including perhaps my short temper around assignment or examination times, or my general absentmindedness. For my part, I was determined that our quality of life would not be affected by my decision to study. Nevertheless changes did occur and I gradually became a less careful housekeeper – this was absolutely necessary since I had been unrealistically clean and tidy for years. Meals were not always as attractive as once they had been and I sometimes was not available for social functions. There was guilt, but it was more than outweighed by growing sense of personal mastery and achievement.

This process of individualisation has paradoxically enabled me to contribute to my society in a previously undreamed of capacity as educator, and must also been seen within a collectivist framework that is not just about being a good role model for my children, the

'good mother' and 'the acceptable face of femininity' as suggested by Reay (2003). For me it is also about citizenship, the opportunity to provide a modest form of leadership, and participation in the reproduction and generation of knowledge. The gains of this transformation have been real, although as Hey (2003) has noted, 'it has not been cost-free'. My own journey has paradoxically been a 'coming out' from the working class with its restrictive gender norms and 'a no going back' (Hey 2003: 320).

Regarding friendships, I have kept many of my old friends but we rarely see one another. I seem to have spun off into another world. Still our orbits cross at pivotal moments and I regard myself as their friend for all weathers. I have not discussed with them how my changes have impacted on our relationships, although perhaps my 'busyness' over the years has rankled. If it has, they have been too kind to mention it. Being a scholar by nature and now by profession means that I love the company of words and ideas and can cheerfully rattle around on my own with little need beyond my family circle who accept what some might regard as my social isolation as part of my identity.

My embrace of the academic life has affected two other important relationships: to knowledge and to the university. I am now a confident, lifelong, passionate and respectful learner. My relationship to knowledge has above all been a personally defining one. Similarly my relationship to the university has been defining as well, but less unequivocal. I have never felt completely comfortable within the middle class, WASP, masculinist culture of the institution and attribute this to my sex and, more self evidently, to my working class background – I am the first person of any gender in my immediate family to go university. The term 'class' in this sense is not a materialist but a cultural category, comprised of shared information about the world. Hey (2003: 235) alludes to the consequences that come from leaving working class culture behind for the feminist

academic who is then subject to 'ambivalent attitudes to academia, feelings of guilt, fraudulence and alienation'. Sometimes I sense a secret code that I cannot quite break – a kind of taken-for-grantedness about what is acceptable or possible within this context that I do not have. In losing my working classness economically and socially by becoming an academic, it is paradoxically intensified as a lived experience. The irony is, as Skeggs (1997) has noted, that working class female academics 'try to fit others into a system from which we feel alienated'.

Conclusions and recommendations

Using our learning and teaching enabling biographies as sounding boards, we have reviewed a range of literature about enabling and mature women's return to higher education. We examined the problematic nature of return, and the often painful dilemmas that occasion it. While the research canvasses a range of motivations to resume formal education, our experience shows that no one reason predominates. Instead, there is a cluster of reasons that accumulate and lead to action. We then examined the research about the first assignment after return. This event is of great importance to students, either confirming or challenging their efforts. We found that more work needs to be carried out on lecturers' attitudes and practices regarding assessment. Hawe (2003) has made a valuable start. The section on course experiences revealed that mature women potentially face a wide array of problems in their engagement with higher education, although time is the critical factor. It is also clear that the journey is positive and worthwhile, no matter the outcome. Further, the effects on the personal worlds of the students are far-reaching. Relationships to self, to knowledge and to others, undergo change. The overall heuristic of both the literature and our stories concerns the metaphor of *movement*. Mature women's engagement with enabling is variously about embarkation, challenge, change, growth, journey, initiation, transformation, making new connections,

opening up, re-birth, coming into self, and leaving the old behind. The emotional tenor of the movement seems to involve polarities of negative and positive states: doubt and confidence, joy and grief, fear and bravery. The mythic element seems to flourish in this type of context where movement occurs within the self and where energetic polarities exist (see the work of Seary & Willans 2004).

Hughes (2002) provides the most satisfying understanding of the woman who returns to (and stays in) higher education. She suggested that the woman returner is 'an exemplary case for the study of subject-as-process' (p.413) who can be understood in terms of two metaphors: the exile (drawn from the work of Benhabib 1992) and the nomad (from Braidotti 1994). The exile has moved 'beyond the walls' of their old culture and attained a 'critical perspective'. The exile is simultaneously 'connected and disconnected' in relation to both the host and the home society (p.416). Through our encounters with higher education, we have evolved from exiles to become members of that other 'luscious' category, the 'nomad'(Hey 2003: 326). The metaphor of the nomad lends agency and autonomy to the woman returner. Nomads make purposive choices to move from one place to the next. Nomadism is not about grieving for a lost homeland as the exile does, but in higher education, it emphasises the pleasures of academic life. According to Hughes, the metaphor of the nomad moves away from the woman-as-victim focus of much of the literature on mature-age women and concentrates on the sheer pleasure of intellectual pursuit and what women *become*.

Overall we found that, while our experiences were recognisable in the literature, more research needs to be carried out in a number of areas, especially with regard to experiences and effects of teaching in tertiary enabling programs about which the literature is almost silent. Some investigation into the dynamics involved with early assessments needs to be undertaken. Another gap in the literature concerns gender, especially the experience of male students, and of

male and female students together, and of groups of learners, in these programs. Further, multi-class and race perspectives need much more work. Finally, small studies need to be followed up with larger, longitudinal research. The massification of higher education and its interface with the current emphasis on lifelong learning means that, more and more, universities will be called on to deliver education to mature students.

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Millar's story: The dynamic experience of an older adult computer learner

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The participation of older adults in computer learning environments is a recent phenomenon. Older adults of the twenty-first century have not grown up with information and communication technologies and are not likely to have used computers in their working lives. They may even feel alien in the world of technology. The purpose of this paper is to present a narrative description, and tentative analysis, of one person's learning journey in this world. The interpretative analysis is guided by the principles of qualitative research, using case studies, and focusing on the individual experience of the learner. This article represents current findings in the early stage of a PhD thesis.

Introduction

The world is in a constant state of rapid change. For older adults living in developed countries, the world of today is very different from the world into which they were born. Jarvis (1992) believes that, for some, it might even be very different from the world into which they retired. The sources of these changes are historical and cultural and affect the everyday lives of people and their interactions with other people. Advances in information and communication technologies have contributed greatly to this change. The widespread use of digital devices for communication, banking, shopping and domestic use necessitates a familiarity with such devices and disadvantages those unable to use them. Evidence suggests that older adults in Australia are increasingly using the Internet, engaging in computer lessons and purchasing computers. In 2000, 26% of all 55–64 year olds and 9% of all 65+ year olds were regular users of the Internet with a steady increase each year expected for some time to come (ABS 2003). Participation numbers for older adult computer lessons affiliated with the National Peak Body for Seniors and Technology have risen from a handful of people in 1998 to over 60 clubs with an estimated number of participants in a five-year period to be in excess of 50,000 (Bosler 2002). The strongest growth in computer ownership exists in the over-55 year age group (Bosler 2002). This growth applies to the purchase of new computers. It is unknown how many older adults obtain computers as "hand-me-ups" from relatives and friends. However, what is clear is that older adults are increasingly making computer-related decisions.

The willingness to use the Internet, attend lessons and obtain computers is only the beginning. Older adults may believe knowledge, skills and attitudes learnt in the past to be of less and less relevance in the world of today. This creates a dual challenge for them. They need to engage in learning in order to keep up-to-date and yet find their past learning and experiences of less and less value.

Jarvis (1992) suggests that older adults might find themselves in a constant state of disjuncture between their current world and their past life. The machinery of the computer may be unlike anything they have encountered. It has the potential to be seen as a powerful and mystical object and this mystique and awe can intimidate first time users (Granick 2002). Older adults are less likely than young people to have a sense of familiarity with computers. They have been introduced to computers at a later age and probably associate computers with the world of the young. They have been observers, not users, and watching younger people effortlessly manipulating the controls may give them a false sense of "this is going to be easy" (Granick 2002). She says they can lose any confidence they may have had very quickly when they discover they are unable to control the mouse. Unanticipated learning needs and loss of self-confidence may also prove disconcerting for older adult computer learners.

While specific technical skills and knowledge may initially be unknown to older adults, they may bring strengths to the learning. These strengths include maturity (Cloet 2000) and motivation (Perlmutter & Monty 1992). The learning strengths brought to the learning are as complex and idiosyncratic for older adults as they are for any age group.

I wish to highlight the dynamic experience of learners and to capture the meaning of this experience in their own words. Bruner (1986) suggests that a good story has the potential to convince readers by its lifelikeness (Willis 1999). I have chosen to include Millar's voice throughout the interpretation and discussion in the belief that this will provide resonance for readers.

Research questions

What is the nature of the learning experience for older adult computer learners?

What interpretations do older adult computer learners place on their experience?

What are the outcomes of the learning experience for older adult computer learners?

Methodology

Guided by the research questions, I investigated the experience of older adult computer learners by using a case study with a qualitative approach using a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry method. This methodology was chosen because of its relevance in answering the questions. The complexity of the phenomenon with its many layers necessitates qualitative data that provide the opportunity for greater understanding. The learners and their experiences are the focus of the research and the qualitative approach is suitable for eliciting responses of an affective nature that will provide meaningful discussion. The learners may consider what they are doing as ordinary and an every-day occurrence but it is unique and out-of-the-ordinary. To bring this to light requires an interpretative approach. The fact that the phenomenon of older adults learning the computer is taken as self-evident in being beneficial and worthwhile, is proof that it needs to be explicitly revealed in its uniqueness. Hermeneutic phenomenological research has the potential to expose aspects of human life that are taken for granted in such a way that readers are more thoughtful and attentive to the phenomenon (van Manen 1997).

Method

I conducted 19 interviews in 2003 and 2004 in the Sydney metropolitan area. The questions were open-ended, providing for extended responses. Participants were over the age of 63 and learning in non-formal, voluntary, peer-tutor learning environments, specifically for seniors. They had not used a computer during their paid working life and they volunteered to participate in the research.

Data analysis

I applied thematic analysis to the interview transcripts, in a process of immersing myself in the data, and constantly referring to the question of the nature of the lived experience of the learners. I attempted to discover the pragmatic aspects of the phenomenon in the manner formulated by van Manen (1997) when he talked about the experiential structures that make up the experience. For this paper, I have consolidated some of my understandings of each of the case studies into a composite non-gender specific account, and have chosen what I believe to be the essential aspects of the learning experience. My perspective as a computer teacher has also informed my selection and interpretation. I hope that by using the voice of Millar, an amalgam of these case studies, the interpretation will resonate with other older adult computer learners. The chief role in the drama of learning is not played by external situations, but by the learner (Thorndike 1932, cited in Kidd 1973). This is my first published paper based on data analysis and I would like to use this opportunity to honour the participants in my study by telling their story. I am also hoping this may assist other learners in their journey and that they may recognise parts of the narrative in their own experience.

Interpretation and discussion

The learning experience for older adults is complex and dynamic. Millar's experience begins with what has been variously termed a trigger event, a disorienting dilemma or a disjuncture (Brookfield 2000). Millar describes the situation that leads to learning:

> I am a voluntary reading and writing tutor at my local primary school. My job is to listen to the young children read and to help them with their writing. About six months ago, I was helping a 3rd class child with her writing and she asked me how to underline on the computer. I had absolutely no idea. Another 3rd class child came along and helped her and I thought right then and there that I had to learn how to use the computer. I suppose it was my pride, because I couldn't help her but another child could. Also, I'm there to help them. That's my job.

Literature (Brookfield 2000, Jarvis 2001, Mezirow 2000) suggests there is a period of reflection after an unexpected event, in which an attempt is made to understand the dilemma, and seek to lessen the discomfort by "doing something about it". In Millar's case, the doing something about it could have meant no longer engaging in voluntary tutoring at the school or learning how to use the computer.

Millar's trigger event was sudden, explicit and easily traced, and identified. However, it may also be a series of events, which, in themselves, do not have the same effect on the individual that this one had on Millar. However, over a period of time and collectively, trigger events may accumulate from a series of integrating circumstances to provide just as powerful a sense of agency (Mezirow 2000).

Throughout the narrative, Millar recounts unexpected and potential learning events that lead to confusion, disquiet and dialectical thinking. This seems to involve a process of a negative construction as a computer user, deconstruction as a learner and the development of a re-defined computer learner. Millar begins the process of negative construction when faced with the inability to assist a young child with a computer problem. Seeing another young child assist supports this idea. Throughout the experience, Millar observes many situations in which people of all ages appear competent users, such as the grandchildren:

> My grandchildren came over to show me some of the things on the computer and they said, "Oh, it's easy. You just do this, and this, and this." I said, "But it's not that simple", and they said, "Yes it is, you just go click, click, click." But it doesn't work like that. To them it does.

and at the beginners' lessons:

> First up, I went to a beginners' course. When I got there all the computers were turned on and there were people using them. They all seemed to know what they were doing and I was the only one who had no idea. It was advertised as a beginners' course but they didn't seem like beginners to me.

Millar purchases a book in an attempt to better understand the computer learning environment. The choice of a text, *Computers for idiots*, suggests that Millar's self-concept is one of a computer idiot. Even this book didn't make sense so the conclusion Millar reaches is of being far behind the starting line.

> I bought myself a book, *Computers for idiots*, because I thought that would help. It didn't make any sense to me because it started off with a lot of the basic things that I didn't know about. So really, I knew I was a bit behind the eight-ball right from the start.

During the learning, Millar reinforces the negative construction by admitting the words are like a foreign language,

> The words they used were like a foreign language to me. Words like text, icons, desktop, default, hardware, software, scroll. I had no idea what they meant.

causing a program to crash, knowing this was not recommended,

> I had a problem with my email program. I got so frustrated with it when it wouldn't work, I pressed a whole lot of buttons, and the computer shut down. I'd read somewhere that if you don't do the right thing by turning it off properly, you could damage the computer. Serves me right, I shouldn't have pressed all the buttons.

and being unable to close a program without ringing the daughter,

> One day I was just clicking around on the computer, opening various programs and up came 'Links'. I clicked on it and it was a golf game. I started to play it and after a while decided I'd had enough of that and wanted to get out of it. I couldn't see a way of getting out of it because it was all automatic and the girl kept hitting the golf balls. I thought I'd be there forever because there were nine holes to play. So I pressed a button and it kept saying, "Press Start and then end the game", but I couldn't see how I could because it was taking up the whole screen. So I fiddled and kept playing for a little bit and it wasn't getting anywhere, so I rang my daughter to ask her what to do. She told me to press Control, Alt and Delete, but that didn't work either, so she said, "Just turn the whole thing off". I thought, "Oh no, I don't think I'll go and have any more computer lessons. I think I'm really past it".

Millar takes a positive view on the ability to learn, based on past successful learning, particularly of machinery:

> I thought I'd be able to learn OK because all my working life I'd had to learn new things, especially machinery, and I'd never had any trouble. Anyway, I thought if young children can use computers, it can't be all that difficult. And I look around and see people who don't look overly clever to me and they can use computers. I don't consider I'm any bright spark or anything like that, but I still thought that I could get a hold of it.

There is an element of excitement about the prospect, and the challenge of learning, and openness in admitting ignorance.

> I wasn't nervous or embarrassed about going to computer lessons. I knew I didn't know and I found that exciting. It gave me a challenge and the prospect of learning something new. I was a little bit hesitant because you don't really know what you're in for, but I thought I'd go along and see and take it as it comes.

When the vastness of the computer reveals itself, it is a frightening and uncontrollable world. Millar has serious doubts about the ability to learn and reflects on the possibility of discontinuing lessons. The experience with the 'Links' program creates doubt about the ability to

learn and the worth of future computer lessons. To continue or not to continue?

The negative construction as a computer user and the deconstruction as a learner could have led to the withdrawal from learning. Millar seriously contemplates this. A period of critical reflection in which Millar questions the self-constructions of computer user and learner, results in an analysis of: "that's what learning's all about and it's not like anything you've ever learnt before". The previously constructed self as a capable learner and the recognition that the computer environment is unfamiliar provide a sound basis for Millar's positive self-efficacy and confidence, despite the early negative constructions.

> In the beginning you think you can do it, then when you realise just how much is involved, it turns out it's not as simple as you thought. There are so many things to learn on the computer. It's just so vast. I can never remember when to click once or twice or what to click first. It's a slow process and that's been a shock for me. It's slower than I anticipated. I expected to go in and after a few weeks think that I could do a whole lot which I can't. You have a one hour lesson and you don't think you've achieved much in that one hour, but you've gone through several different things and branched out into different things, but eventually it will all come together. It will take a bit of time; it's just a slow process, of learning. That's what learning's all about, I suppose. You really have to take a little at a time.
>
> This is a whole new experience and it's really daunting. It's not the learning so much as the techniques. They are strange. Something you wouldn't have even thought of 20 years ago. It's not like anything you've ever learnt before.

This leads Millar towards the process of constructing a positive self-image as a computer user and learner. Success provides grounding for this redefinition.

> I feel a great sense of satisfaction when I finally manage to do something after running into brick walls. A couple of weeks ago, I made an order for an anti-virus program. A special deal that was offered to me because my old one had just expired and I ordered the new one over the net. I was lacking confidence in doing it myself, but I thought, "Well, I've got to do it", but I wasn't real sure how to do it. Anyway in the end, I went into it. Half way through it I got into a panic because it asked for my serial number and I couldn't find it. I didn't realise you could switch from one program back to another to find it. I had already given my name and address and bank card number. So as I said, I panicked and then I aborted the whole thing. I switched the computer off. I tried to make a phone call to the help line but they closed at 5pm and this was 8pm. Right, I decided, I have to go through with this, it's not going to get the better of me. So I turned the computer back on and had another go, starting from the beginning again. I entered in all the information for a second time and followed the cues and finally came to the end and saw the word "SUCCESS" flash up. I thought, "Right, well I can do something. Thank goodness, I've learnt something."

The narrative reveals the complex and dynamic nature of the learning experience. Millar repeatedly confronts the disjuncture of the past and present in the way that Jarvis (1992) suggests. The computer language and environment are strange and incomprehensible. Millar is unable to grasp the concepts and finds the learning is not proceeding as planned. Jarvis suggests the world of older adults may have changed significantly since retirement and the period of 20 years is mentioned by Millar in reference to the techniques being unthought of 20 years ago. This is the period since Millar retired from paid work. Confused by the seeming ease with which young children manipulate the computer, Millar considers withdrawing from lessons. The vast potential of the computer provides further cause for thoughts of the inability to learn. Granick (2002) refers to the effects on older adults of watching young people effortlessly manipulating the computer environment and the potential this has for loss of confidence. This is the case for Millar, who observes grandchildren

clicking with ease and confidence. Millar considers how simple it all looks when young people use the computer, but how different it is when older ones try. Strengths of motivation, maturity and critical reflection are continually being brought into play to counter the obstacles and difficulties encountered. Cloet (2000) believes maturity is a significant strength of older adult learners and Perlmutter and Monty (1992) state that motivation is another strength. Millar demonstrates these qualities in being able to reflect on the learning process generally and in overcoming difficulties in order to continue learning. The experience provides Millar with opportunities to face challenges and to experience significant developmental gains. There is recognition that learning at any age involves time and practice and is never straightforward. There are times of self-doubt and loss of self-confidence, but Millar is able to take great satisfaction in personal achievements, particularly "after running into brick walls".

Summary and conclusion

I have attempted to present Millar's story without undue interference and for it to be the focus of this article. Despite preparation and planning, Millar experiences repeated disharmony in dealing with the computer learning environment. The risk of placing the self in unknown territory pervades the whole experience. Each new learning effort provides another opportunity for pleasure or pain, at great affective risk. Millar's strengths appear to be in the ability to be critically reflective and self-directed and these attributes are combined with maturity and a tenacious resolve. I have taken a pragmatic perspective on Millar's experience and attempted to present the nuances of the experience. I hope that I have drawn attention to Millar's experience and not the actual events, in the way that Bruner (1986) and Thorndike (1932) suggest. Bruner (cited in Willis 1999) suggests that readers will relate to the story if it is told in a lifelike form. I have used Millar's voice in an attempt to present the story as being told by Millar. In a similar way, Thorndike (cited in Kidd 1973) believes that learners play the chief role in the learning experience and this has been the focus of this paper.

The phenomenon of older adult participation in computer learning environments is well documented in quantitative terms. Millar's story provides an opportunity to view the experience from a qualitative perspective. I believe it enables a more human understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of older adults learning how to use a computer. This paper represents early data analysis. Further research may uncover evidence that will have implications for policy direction, and contribute to discussion on lifelong learning, most particularly about the place of older adult learning in the life course.

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About the author

Helen Russell *is a full-time PhD student currently undertaking qualitative research of older adult computer learners. The focus of the research is on the beginning stages of learning in non formal community-based learning environments. Teaching is provided by voluntary peer tutors, and learners are aged over 63 years, with no prior experience of using computers in their work life. Helen has considerable computer teaching experience with students whose ages range from 5 years to 90 years.*

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Identifying and Addressing the Needs of Adult Students in Higher Education

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As the number of adult students enrolled within higher education programs increases, educational institutions must respond by addressing their needs on a continual basis. Adult learners possess a wide variety of characteristics which are not common to a traditional student, including personal life barriers, financial responsibilities and different learning styles. This article identifies some of these characteristics, and discusses ways for administrators and educators within higher education to address them in order to cultivate a positive learning experience for the adult student.

Adults have become an integral part of the total enrolment composition within higher education institutions (US Department of Education 2003) for a multitude of reasons. In the past, many chose

to return to school for the sole purpose of advancing their degree, and the focus of climbing the 'corporate ladder' meant dedication to an organisation for a long timeframe within one's career, eventually working up to management levels or above.

The consequences of a poor job market have forced today's workers to look for new ways of remaining marketable and competitive. People are not staying with one company for the majority of their careers, and the opportunities to work up to management levels within a traditional organisation are not as common any longer as in the past. In addition, adults must rely on dual incomes to support a family, and the traditional family unit of the past does not generally exist.

As a result of these changes in the job market and corporate structure, many adults are choosing to return to school to obtain advanced degrees, and this choice has become a vitally important step for those who would like to advance in or change their careers. Not only does a college degree allow one to remain competitive in the job market, it also provides a foundation on which to build a career that allows opportunity to transition their careers into other fields, rather than remaining 'stuck' in one career path all of their lives. With increasing enrolments of adult students, it is important for educators and institutions of higher education to understand common motivators which cause adult students to choose to return to formal education, and the subsequent barriers they face when returning to the classroom. This article will discuss these motivators and barriers, and suggest techniques to overcome them for administrators and instructors.

As stated, corporate downsizing and a poor job markets have forced individuals to re-examine their careers, and focus on new ways to remain competitive in the workplace. Corporate cost-cutting initiatives often require many to take on multiple roles and function in a variety of capacities, often outside of normal roles and responsibilities within the organisation. Organisations have also

slimmed and de-layered, thus removing structures that supported the traditional career (Mallon & Cohen 2001); therefore, the linear career path that once kept people working in the same job, often for the same company, is no longer the standard career route for today's workers.

While the initial experiences of corporate downsizing forces many to become extremely stressed and burnt-out on the job, downsizing has not been all negative. Many people report that they are far happier in their new jobs, working for themselves, going back to formal education, or simply retiring (Nadler 1998). Many workers are also pursuing varied career paths that reflect sequential career changes, and this set of ongoing changes in career plans, direction and employers portrays the lifetime progression of work as a composite of experiences (Brown 2000). Today's workers must be entrepreneurial and function as free agents, marketing themselves and the skills they can offer to employers who serve as their 'customers' (Brown 1998).

With the current movement towards downsizing or 'rightsizing' by both large and small employers, many adults have experienced the need to re-evaluate their careers (either voluntarily or by being forced) and as a result of that re-evaluation, pursue some form of education. In addition, an adult experiencing an unexpected mid-life career transition may find many opportunities to move into an educational situation that will eventually lead to a new job or career. This work-to-school transition may be a self-induced transition, or it may be one forced by a change in the economy (Boulmetis 1997).

There is also an on-going, steady increase in individuals finding themselves in transitional career situations, resulting in more adults returning to formal education, with work-related courses and personal interest courses being the most popular forms of adult education in 2001. In an age of rapid economic and technological change, continued learning can provide benefits for individuals and for society as a whole (US Department of Education 2003). Due

to this boom in non-traditional students, adults now constitute the majority of students in higher education, and what drives them, what they bring to, want and need from universities are important questions for research and in the development of a more responsive system of higher education. In turn, those working in higher education need a fuller understanding of the impact of education on learners' motivation and sense of identity (West 1995), as well as the barriers which separate adult learners from traditional students. Educational institutions must respond to these needs as effectively as possible in order to remain competitive and accessible to non-traditional adult learners.

First, it is important to define non-traditional students, a definition which changes from campus to campus. Non-traditional students are generally thought to be over twenty-five years of age and pursuing a baccalaureate degree, but in a world of change, continuing education is the imperative of both college graduate and non-graduate (Burkett 1968). In addition to corporate downsizing and transitioning of a career, there may be other reasons for students returning to education, including a decision to return to study once children are older, a divorce situation requiring the need for new training and education, or an opportunity to finish an interrupted degree (Wynman 1988). Continued employment of non-traditional students is tied to lifelong learning and ongoing skill development, practices which enhance career growth and the potential for career advancement and mobility. This trend toward career independence is reflected in the new breed of independent contractors and temporary workers who move from job to job and project to project, marketing themselves for temporary assignments in a variety of organisations rather than seeking permanent jobs (Brown 1998).

In a transition to career independence, some individuals move into self-employment. The decision to become self-employed is a choice of independence and autonomy over dependence and the rules of the

organisational world (Mallon & Cohen 2001). Regardless of whether or not someone chooses to work for an organisation, create a project-based career or become self-employed, individuals will continue to seek educational opportunities which will allow them to remain marketable and competitive in today's economy.

Educational opportunities within continuing education include formal classroom instruction, workplace seminars or workshops, and professional association conferences (Borgen 1995), and adults need ready access to these types of opportunities in order to fulfill their desire continually to learn. A large part of an educational institution's responsibility is to provide these types of opportunities, while being sensitive to the barriers faced by non-traditional students.

Most non-traditional students are familiar with the delicate balance among family responsibilities, work schedules and academic calendars (Compton & Schock 2000). However, there are other issues encountered by non-traditional students when returning to the classroom environment. One of the most apparent problems includes the overall discomfort of older students (Bishop-Clark 1992). To overcome this discomfort or uncertainty, educational institutions should put the student at ease, before they step foot into the classroom, by implementing some of the following resources:

- accessible registration procedures, which allow for simple course registration. This includes providing any on-site counsellors at designated times in the evening or weekends prior to the start of the semester to assist with enrolment issues
- on-going tutorials on how to use the institution website. Now, more than ever, students are required to use the school portal to access grades, enrol, and pay bills. This can be intimidating to individuals who are not familiar with the use of the Internet
- campus tours, orientation of the student to the library, cafeterias, parking procedures and the campus bookstore

All of these resources will aid the student during the first several weeks prior to the start of the semester, and allow them to feel more comfortable when they step foot into the classroom on their first day.

Once in the classroom, the adult student faces several barriers that the typical undergraduate might not face, including (Bishop-Clark 1992):

- discomfort of older students
- different orientations towards the professors
- different learning styles
- hostility between age groups

It is the responsibility of the course instructor to attempt to implement course teaching methods and facilitation strategies to help overcome these barriers. This includes encouraging personal contact, discussing differences during class, increasing awareness of similarities and allowing time for students to get to know one another (Bishop-Clark 1992).

There are a variety of expectations among non-traditional students who are returning to an academic environment. While many individuals can take advantage of job training, specialty classes or continuing education credit, others are looking for specific college courses or degrees (Compton & Schock 2000). In addition, higher education is not the central feature of their lives, but just one of a multiplicity of activities in which they are engaged every day. The relationships these students want with their college is like the one they already have with their banks, supermarkets and the other organisations they patronise (Levine 1993).

In response to these academic issues, programs must be designed to address these issues, while also meeting the expectations of the students. There are numerous ways in which educational institutions can address these prevalent barriers and student expectations.

Institutions are faced with increasing numbers of non-traditional students who often have difficulty taking classes during regularly scheduled times (Daniel 2000); therefore, institutions must be creative with scheduling by offering coursework during evenings and weekends, or extending or shortening academic semesters to be more conducive to the students' schedules. Intensive or time-shortened courses taught outside the traditional semester are becoming common at many colleges and universities due to the increasing number of non-traditional students (Daniel 2000).

Educational institutions must also be prepared to provide course offerings through a variety of means, rather than relying on the traditional classroom environment. Several types of non-traditional education programs include (Vangen 1998):

- independent learning, allowing students to work completely free of the classroom setting at their own pace
- open learning, which combines the benefits of independent learning with opportunities for group discussion
- contract programs, that merge the needs of businesses to train employees with a college's teleconferencing capabilities
- satellite classrooms, which lease off-site classroom space to provide educational facilities to students outside the general radius of the college
- distance-learning centres, that allow students to work from course plans through the use of the Internet and to access class curriculum from anywhere

Non-traditional students, particularly those who have been away from the classroom for a significant period of time, may find the library to be intimidating, particularly for those students unfamiliar with technological advances within the library system. Capitalising on non-traditional students' strengths and helping to support and re-acquaint them with the library is part of the task facing the academic librarian. Some of the following suggestions may provide starting

points for working more specifically with non-traditional students in the academic library (Wynman 1988):

- assigning staff members to work specifically with non-traditional students
- establishing a recognisable core of librarians available to give assistance
- taking a step-by-step, concrete approach when explaining research strategies or explaining an index
- fostering the independence of non-traditional students who typically prefer working at their own pace through use of guidelines and clear instructional signage
- providing in-depth answers for non-traditional students who usually demand more thorough explanations than typical students
- creating quiet areas and study spots, which are prized by non-traditional students

In addition, the library should also offer frequent tutorials on web-based research strategies, the library website, and other online information that may be pertinent to research and coursework.

Many adult students who are not currently employed lack financial resources to return to school. Educational institutions may incorporate a payment program or deferred tuition payment to help off-set course costs. In addition, if possible, institutions may have work study available in order to offer partial tuition assistance to students working within the institution.

In summary, corporate loyalty is not as prevalent as it was in the past, and working professionals must be prepared to take on a multitude of roles outside of their normal role and responsibility within an organisation. Individuals must continue to build their resumes to reflect a variety of skills and abilities in order to be versatile in today's competitive job market and adults are finding that they must return to the classroom to upgrade their skills or obtain additional education to remain competitive.

Due to these on-going pressures, along with the added responsibilities of adults which are not experienced by traditional students, the non-traditional student faces a variety of barriers when entering the classroom which the traditional student does not typically encounter. These barriers include pressures to balance work, school and family, lack of financial resources, and overall discomfort with the new technological advancement and procedures of the educational institutions that exist today, which did not exist several years ago. It is the responsibility of the educational institution and the course instructors to recognise and overcome these barriers in every way possible, to help ensure that the non-traditional student feels comfortable and welcomed when returning to the classroom.

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BOOK REVIEW

Education and the ideal

Naomi Smith (ed.)
Epping, NSW: New Frontier Publishing, 2004
ISBN: 0 9750907 2 0, 310 + x pages, 29–95

In January 2004, Prime Minister John Howard triggered a heated debate when he claimed that an absence of values in government schools was a cause of the drift to independent schools. This was not the first time that he had chosen to speak out on education matters. After visiting Gallipoli in 2000, he expressed concern that history was not being taught in the right way and that too much emphasis was placed on issues at the expense of facts and much of the content projected a negative view of Australia's past—a view popularised in Geoffrey Blainey's 1993 notion of Black Armband history (for an analysis of the struggle over school history, see Clark 2004).

Howard's claims were yet another reminder that education is a highly contested and politicised arena. At the core of this struggle is the

question of the curriculum itself. Hartley (1997, p.43) reminds us that there is no absolute, universally agreed curriculum, rather 'it is always a selection from a culture which is itself framed socio-historically'. The question as to who does the selecting and on whose behalf has always been a contentious issue. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the aims and outcomes of schooling have been shaped by a neo-classical and vocational orientation that has become embodied in a competitive academic curriculum that has acted as a gatekeeper to universities and the labour market. Although this approach has retained major elements of a liberal education in the form of a core of subject disciplines, it has been increasingly influenced by the voices of industry and the push for skills formation and vocational learning. From the 1970s onwards, it has also come under fire from sociologists and cultural critics concerned about the hegemonic nature of the curriculum, its tendency to reproduce existing inequalities and the marginalisation of knowledge and perspectives of minorities (Connell, 1993).

Given the current concerns about curriculum content, school values and funding arrangements, is timely indeed to take a fresh look at the broader purposes of education and the theoretical foundations of curriculum. *Education and the idea*, edited by Naomi Smith, is a collection of essays which sets out to examine the directions of contemporary education in Australia. In the main, the contributors to the book comprise former and current academics, school principals and heads of departments in New South Wales secondary schools and universities. Their chief concern is the demise of the ideals and values of a liberal education which they believe has led to a fractured curriculum and a cultural crisis in Western society. Christopher Koch sets the scene with a vitriolic attack on postmodernism and its influence on curriculum writers in state education bureaucracies and humanities departments. Dismissing Derrida, Lacan and Barthes as 'second rate minds' (p. iv) with 'little real wisdom to impart' (p. v), Koch laments the ascendancy of relativist values, the demise of

grand narratives and a preoccupation with deconstructing texts at the expense of literary criticism. Other contributors to the book are more circumspect in their rhetoric but overall there is little evidence of any serious engagement with feminist, poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives and the ways in which they might actually support rather than undermine the ideals of a humanist education. By and large, contributors gloss over ongoing problems of educational disadvantage and the attendant issues of school retention, alienation and student engagement.

The book is divided into three sections. In the first part, Alan Barcan provides an historical overview of the major ideological influences on curriculum in Australian education. He argues that it is difficult to discern any specific philosophical tradition or set of values guiding education today, and instead we have an amalgam of competing and overlapping ideologies with traditional liberal/humanists clamoring for a voice alongside post-Marxists, Christian fundamentalists and those promoting instrumental and vocational goals of schooling. According to Barcan, a cultural revolution in the 1970s spawned new ideologies that ultimately resulted in the deterioration of the ideal of a liberal education and the emergence of issues-based studies and thematic teaching approaches. Somewhat predictably, the culprits in this scenario are the teacher unions, left wing educators, feminists, postmodernist thinkers, politically correct bureaucrats and advocates for environmental causes, peace studies and social justice issues. Progressive educators are criticised for their emphasis on process rather than content, the abandonment of phonics and the advocacy of child-centred approaches to education.

The second section of the book focuses more specifically on five subjects that once made up the core of a traditional school curriculum—English, mathematics, history, classics and science. An expert in their field, each writer provides a rationale for their subject and the way in which it contributes to the ideals of a liberal

education. In the process they raise some well-founded concerns about the adequacy of teacher development in specialist subjects and a lack of curriculum rigour in some school courses. Barry Spurr talks of English Studies in crisis as a consequence of the abandonment of formal grammar and the importation of postmodernist ideas into a 'reader-centred' syllabus in which 'Marvell is no better than Mickey Mouse' (p.82). In defending the tradition of literacy criticism, Spurr speaks of the 'potentially enduring influence of great authors' (p.82) but it seems he has little place for texts outside the established canons. By way of contrast, Emily Matters provides a thoughtful analysis of the decline of classical studies and shows how the introduction of the Cambridge Latin Course with its emphasis on story telling, culture and daily life sparked the interest of young adolescents in the classics. She shows how the classics were enlivened by educators who made more overt connections with traditional topics to students' lives.

The third section contains six chapters which examine topics in educational philosophy, including the questions of values and character formation. There are some well balanced contributions here, including Naomi Smith's chapter on the development of values in three state secondary schools. A good deal of ill-informed criticism has been levelled at public schools in recent times and it is reassuring to read how an ethos of inclusivity and a focus on values promoting respect, acceptance and social justice are integral to the mission of government schools. In an age of consumerism when young people are being bombarded with new technologies, leisure products and lifestyles, we do need to find space in the curriculum to discuss and debate philosophical matters. Moreover, we need to create opportunities for students to participate in social and spiritual activities that extend beyond the acquisition of vocational competencies.

Reflecting on my own learning, there is much that I valued in terms of the liberal education I received at secondary school and university in the 1960s. Through my English, history and geography courses in particular, I appreciated the opportunity to study the writings of eminent poets, playwrights and novelists, to explore the roots of our language and civilization, to become familiar with the great events and personalities that have changed the course of history, and to learn about the physical and cultural elements that have shaped our landscapes. But there were gaps in my education. I learnt little of the history and heritage of Aboriginal people. The history I studied was strongly grounded in European traditions and ideas. The perspectives of women and minorities were largely missing from historical accounts. It was not until the 1980s that I began to redress these imbalances in my own teaching practices through courses in Aboriginal studies, society and environment and global studies. Now the notion of text has expanded to include a wide range of expository materials, films, electronic data and artifacts from popular culture. Students are encouraged to construct original and personally relevant interpretations of texts which encouraged teachers and students to think outside the boundaries of traditional disciplines.

In an age where so much of the curriculum is being driven by economics and vocationalism, there is much that children can gain from a broad and balanced liberal education. However, the classical curriculum favoured by many conservative educators and academics has historically worked against cultural minorities and working class students. As the American sociologist Henry Giroux (1994) points out:

> by refusing to acknowledge the relations between culture and power, the dominant educational discourses fail to understand how schools are implicated in reproducing oppressive ideologies and social practices. (p.56)

Aside from broadening the canons to include great literature from non-Western societies, a major challenge for advocates of a liberal education is to show the relevance of such studies for all students not just an elite minority. Instead of dismissing the educational value of media and cultural studies as 'soft options', they might be better served by demonstrating how these courses might be enriched by knowledge and insights from the classics and 'great' literature. In short, a pursuit of the ideal in education should not bind us to past glories; we need to be able to engage in a meaningful dialogue with new texts, new ideas and new discourses.

Peter McInerney

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BOOK REVIEW

New approaches in social research

Carol Grbich
London: Sage Publications, 2004
ISBN 0 7619 4932 1, 152 pages, pbk. (price unknown)

Carol Grbich is an associate professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Flinders University, South Australia. She has previously published *Qualitative research in health*, also published by Sage, and is editor of *Health in Australia: Sociological concepts and issues* (3rd edition), published by Pearson.

This is a challenging book, not only because it is about postmodernism, but because it is written in a very unusual style. I confess that I am not a postmodern scholar. I am, however, a qualitative researcher, and I like to venture into new territory to see what lies there. I knew as soon as I opened this book that I was in for a very interesting experience.

On the back cover of the book, John Costello says: 'This ground-breaking book is one of the first to explore the implications of

postmodernist ideas within the research context'. Costello goes on to suggest that the book will be useful for 'postgraduate students and researchers across the social sciences'. I am glad he provided this summary because the book contains no introductory remarks by the author to tell the reader what to expect, why the book was written, or for whom. Any author is, of course, quite at liberty to begin her work where she chooses and to include what she likes. But I found it odd, as if I were suddenly thrust into a conversation halfway begun, with no background, no idea of who was talking to me or why, or who else was listening.

As I continued reading I changed my mental metaphor. Now I felt like the bus tourist who knows it is Belgium because it is Tuesday – in other words, I felt tangled up in a speedily changing landscape of facts and ideas. Like the pressure-cooker tourist, the reader traverses history and ideas at lightning speed, with little to hang on to other than a few orienting notions (like Tuesday in an exhausting schedule). In Chapter One, for example, which explores the origins of modernism, we move from the thirteenth century to the twentieth and across religion, reason, art, architecture and politics. The chapter ends with a critique of modernity. And all in 16 pages. By page 49, we have been introduced to postmodernity and postmodernism, structuralism and poststructuralism. The three chapters that make up the first part of the book are absolutely jam-packed with ideas. All the big name philosophers are mentioned and all the key ideas are indicated. Gbrich must be an extraordinary reader. Unfortunately, there are fewer references than I think would be wise – some very big ideas are presented as fact rather than being attributed to schools of thought that might be contested. I will return to this problem later.

The second part of the book is devoted to discussion of the impact of postmodernism, poststructuralism, complexity and chaos on social and scientific research. Again, the major ideas in the literature are all canvassed, along with some very helpful suggestions about writing

and representation. One chapter is devoted to a case example that students may find useful as a model to follow.

The book ends with an eight-page glossary and an extensive reference list. Unfortunately there are no references contained in the glossary and no indication is given as to how the definitions were arrived at. In my opinion this severely weakens this section of the work, though the final reference list is a useful resource for researchers in any social science discipline for which the approaches described in the book are useful.

At the end of this book I was left feeling rather frustrated. Grbich undoubtedly has an admirable knowledge of the field she covers in this book. I alluded earlier to my disappointment about the lack of acknowledgement of the breadth and depth of contention regarding postmodernism (including what it really is) in this book. In presenting the field as straightforwardly as she does, I think Grbich has missed an opportunity to use the extraordinary knowledge at her fingertips to really examine this difficult but fashionable area of science.

On the other hand, the author's straightforwardness might be turned to an advantage. Grbich has compiled a bricolage, a pastiche, an assemblage of ideas in her book. It is a truly postmodern work. The chapters read a little like a lecture series, and those academics amongst us who have had to help our students traverse vast temporal and ideological landscapes in one semester will appreciate exactly what the challenge has been for the author. This is the perfect textbook for a postgraduate class, whose learning and assessment tasks should be to find the evidence, read the original author, criticise and discuss. I wish I had found it earlier.

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BOOK REVIEW

Doing practitioner research differently

Marion Dadds and Susan Hart, eds.
London, Routledge Falmer, 2001
(with Tish Crotty, Linda Ferguson, Ros Frost, Joe Geraci,
Jacqui Potter and Liz Waterland)
Routledge (UK)
ISBN: 0415237572, 208 pages

The main authors of this book – perhaps collection is a better word – are both involved with educational studies at differing universities in the UK. Marion Dadds is a professor of Education at St Martins College, and Susan Hart lectures in education at Cambridge. Both have previously published in the field, including for Dadds, *Passionate enquiry and school development* (published by Falmer Press) and for Hart, *Thinking through teaching* (published by David Fulton).

These authors (rather than their collaborators) propose that the book is a demonstration of 'innovation' in practitioner research, and they have aimed to examine the forces that support such innovation. Readers who are postgraduates themselves will no doubt identify strongly with what the contributors describe as 'a tension between accepted modes of research and what they felt they *needed* to do' (p.143, their emphasis). Similarly, those readers will understand when the authors note that their book arose partly due to their awareness of how researchers face a 'complex interplay of different factors: personal, academic and professional' (p.144) when issues of relevance, practical engagement, emotional experience and often highly personal encounters occur during research. As demonstrated by the title, it would seem that the authors' main aim is to offer an insight into alternative means of undertaking and presenting practitioner research across a variety of educational practices. The book is presented as a collaborative project, with the different voices acting almost as counterpoints between the lecturers and their research students. Despite this apparent 'conversation', its structure allows the reader to access and 'dip in' at different levels and through a number of eyes. The publication should, therefore, appeal to both supervising academics as well as postgraduates, or aspiring postgraduates who are intending to take on practitioner-based research at either masters or professional doctorate level.

The engagement with a number of alternative methodological avenues taken by the contributors makes interesting and informative reading. The developed pieces are offered almost as stand-alone case studies, and while each account is quite personalised, their developed presentation has a sureness that is indicative of its inherent validity. Three differing styles of enquiry are available across seven studies, encompassing visualisation, conversation and fictionalisation. In the final section, the authors, as supervisors of the contributors, offer a wide-ranging reflection on the styles and on how these innovations might offer new ways of thinking about and doing practitioner research. The book is clearly written with entirely accessible and jargon-free language and provides a number of useful references

throughout, although the provision of research texts would seem far from its main purpose.

The contributing authors, whose work is presented and explored, were all undertaking masters' degrees and were willing and prepared to share their work to become part of the publication. These working contributions are, perhaps, what gives the book its heart, and offer the greatest value to the reader. The majority of the studies presented in the book are about the practitioner's work within children's education, while only a couple investigate practice that involves adults. However, this should not deter the adult educator or workplace investigator, as the focus of these studies and the later discussions are as much concerned with the methods of research as they are with the contextual situation of the findings. The insights and interpretations presented by the various writers are analogous to a variety of opportunities that adult educators or researchers might find themselves encountering, and would certainly adopt across wide areas of study. Each case ends with a concluding, and briefly analytical, commentary by the main authors as they discuss issues that arose from the student's research. While such commentary is interesting and may be useful to those in a supervisory role, the main value for the reader is arguably found in the thoughtful discussions of their work by each research student.

Whether the research methods are particularly innovative is a moot point. What is more pertinent, I would argue, is that the contributors show in their writing how they wrestle with ideas and interactions, while at the same time needing to validate their work in terms of certain acceptable standards acknowledged within the context of higher degree awards. The authors demonstrate this factor and provide an interesting argument when suggesting that, by doing research differently, quality is not compromised by the contributors. Rather, by defining their own paths as the means by which they take control over their own research, the students learn about research to a

point where they are able to develop criteria for judging the quality of their own work through the internalised process they are undergoing (p.153). Whether this is the case or not, the ideas will likely resonate with many a research student.

The authors suggest that the contributors' studies are illustrative, rather than demonstrative, and they aim to 'create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness' (p.169). While what is presented *is* inventive, it is by no means exhaustive. Nor perhaps, would the methods be entirely new to the experienced supervisor who has a tradition of allowing/supporting students to look outside the traditional methods of doing and writing up practitioner research. What the authors and their contributors do offer, however, is a publication that gives legitimacy to a practitioner student who might be looking for the impetus to move beyond the normally accepted boundaries of the research process.

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JOURNAL SCAN

Gorard, S & Selwyn, N 2005, 'Towards a Le@rning society? The impact of technology on patterns of participation in lifelong learning', ***British Journal of Sociology of Education,*** vol.26, no.1, pp.71–89.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) appear to offer hope in opening up opportunities for adults to participate in the lifelong learning agendas being established by governments, both here in Australia and overseas. ICTs are seen to offer flexibility and convenience to learners, enabling them to overcome a variety of situational, organisational and dispositional barriers to participation. Initiatives such as 'UK Online' aim to achieve 'mass market penetration of learning' (p.72) and reduce limited opportunities previously afforded to groups under-represented in adult education activities.

As the authors point out, however, there is little by way of empirical evidence to support the thesis that the introduction of ITCs has widened participation in adult education – especially for those groups who are traditionally under-represented in post-schooling learning activities. This article reports on one of a few large-scale surveys designed to address this gap in the literature. Specifically, the research was designed to address four questions:

- Who participates in adult learning experiences in the United Kingdom and how do these people differ from those who do not?
- What are the factors that determine participation in adult learning?
- What are ICTs used for and to what extent does this usage involve learning?
- Can ICTs be used to 'create' adult learners and learning?

Data were collected by a semi-structured interview that asked for self-report data from respondents. The survey was conducted with a random sample of households across four local authorities in the west of England and South Wales in mid-2002. The final sample comprised 1001 adults – 41% were female; the mean age of respondents was 52 years (standard deviation of 18 years). The sample was deemed to be over-representative of female respondents when benchmarked against 2001 census returns for the four areas. For the purposes of this research, an 'episode' of learning was defined as 'all formal learning including health and safety training at work, adult evening classes and ITC training courses' (p.74). Participants were categorised as adult learners in one of four ways:

- *Non-participants* – those individuals who had no episodes of education and training since leaving school;
- *transitional learners* – individuals who participated in education and training immediately after leaving school but who reported no subsequent episodes;
- *delayed learners* – individuals who reported no education and training immediately after leaving school but who participated in at least one educational episode since then; and

- *lifelong learners* – those individuals who reported at least one episode of learning post-schooling and at least one subsequent episode.

The results of this study mirror other studies examining participation; only 46% of respondents reported any formal learning other than that undertaken directly after reaching compulsory school age. One third of respondents reported participating in no formal learning at all. The study also confirms that participation in formal learning in post-compulsory schooling is influenced by a range of social factors including socio-economic status, gender, year of birth and type of school attended.

The outcomes of the study show ICTs' apparent 'failure' to make any significant differences to deeply-rooted patterns of participation. On balance, the authors argue that all that may be asserted (on the basis of this study) is that ICTs are increasing participation levels for those people who would have participated in learning in any case. The limited impact of ICTs on educational participation is in part explained by people's access to and usage of these technologies. Respondents reported limited usage (both in terms of frequency and scope), with usage being shaped by factors such as socio-economic background and educational background.

The authors argue that understanding the apparent inability of ICTs to impact on participation in adult education lies in considering the 'social, economic and political realities' (p.85) of ICT-based education in the United Kingdom. They posit that the expansion of ITC-based education has been driven by 'human capital notions of competitiveness' rather than notions of social inclusion (p.85). The economic rationalist arguments used to promote the growth in ICT-based education do not take into account the 'lived realities' of people's lives – in other words, for many people, ICTs and education are not relevant. For many people, their daily lives do not fit with the rhetoric such as 'giving people the tools they need to participate in decision-making structures…etc.' (p.87).

The authors conclude by warning against the tendency to ascribe 'transformatory powers to technology' (p.87), and the need to adopt more measured expectations of ICTs as well as continuing to pay attention to the need to provide 'off-line' learning opportunities for adult learners.

Hodkinson, P, Hodkinson, H, Evans, K, Kersh, N, Fuller, A, Unwin, L & Senker P 2004, 'The significance of individual biography in workplace learning', ***Studies on the Education of Adults,*** vol.36, no.1, pp.6–25.

This article addresses an identified gap in the literature relating to how learners are understood in social learning theories. The outcomes from four-linked research projects (conducted under the auspices of the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Program) are drawn on to illustrate the importance of considering the individual and what they bring to the process of learning in the workplace.

The authors initially argue that studies of learning in the workplace usually emphasise organisational or social perspectives of learning. The reasons for this approach include:

- the rationale that learning is not the main task in workplaces and there is a need to understand first the organisations as workplaces as a precursor to examining how individual learners might fit into these organisational structures; and
- the acknowledgement that much of the current theorising about workplace learning has arisen out of the work of social psychologists and anthropologists, with the result that socio-cultural explanations of learning have been fore-grounded.

The authors then go on to analyse current literature on workplace learning. They emphasise the strong focus on participation (evidenced by research examining communities of practice – particularly the work of Lave and Wenger 1991) and learning in and between activity systems (Engestrom 2001). Two dilemmas are noted in relation to trying to separate out the individual within participatory theories of workplace learning. The first of these dilemmas relates to the artificiality of such separations – that is, in these perspectives on learning, the individual becomes subsumed in the social. The authors suggest that Billett, who sees an individual as 'separate from the social but interacting with it (p.8) and Beckett and Hager's view that it is the 'whole' person (where this includes thinking, learning, judgement-making) are what interrelates with the social world as starting to move from this somewhat limiting view.

The other inherent dilemma in an over-emphasis on a social understanding of learning is the risk of silencing the 'social dimensions' of the individual – that is, social class, gender and ethnicity. This absence of attention to these social variables is further exaggerated by studies which take 'snapshots' of individual workers, thus missing significant variables which affect workplace learning over time – for example, the gendered nature of workplaces.

It is suggested that one way of moving on from these dilemmas is to draw on the work of Bourdieu and his concept of 'habitus'. By adopting this perspective, the authors argue that we are better able to express 'the integration of social structure and person in a more complete manner' (p.9). While individual and social structures are inter-related, people are separate from their workplaces because of their lives outside of work and their life stories which pre-date participation in their current workplaces. However, an individual cannot 'step outside' social structures that are part of their habitus and part of their work and the workplace. It is through the exploration of this critical conjunction that the authors believe we can enhance our understanding of learning in the workplace.

The next section of the article is devoted to an examination of data from four pieces of research to illustrate ways in which individuals and workplace context overlap and interact in quite complex ways, particularly in the ways in which:

- individuals bring prior abilities and experiences to the workplace;
- individual dispositions influence the nature and use of the potential learning available in the workplace;
- individuals contribute to the (re)development of workplace cultures and structures that support learning; and
- work and learning contribute to the development of learner/worker identities.

The authors conclude with ways in which these new insights might be adopted in order to improve the quality of workplace learning.

Porter, S 2004, 'Raising response rates: What works?', ***New Directions for Institutional Research,*** no.121, pp. 5–21.

This article examines the thorny issue of survey response rates in the context of increased use of survey methods in educational planning and evaluation. It notes that falling response rates with surveys is a noted and widespread universal phenomenon with sometimes serious consequences for the validity and generalisability of survey outcomes.

The paper commences with a good overview of the theoretical literature on survey responses. These theories can be roughly divided into two groups:

- those that explain response to surveys in terms of 'reasoned action' of respondents – that is, the ways in which prospective respondents weigh the costs and benefits of participation (participation here is explained by way of social exchange theory); and

- those that explain response to surveys in psychological terms, where the participant decides to participate using a set of simple rules.

Drawing on social exchange theory, survey design and implementation may be better conceptualised as attempting to address adequately the following questions:

- How can we increase the rewards for participating?
- How can we reduce the perceived costs?
- How can we establish trust so that the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs?

Psychological explanations of participation emphasise the idea that people are usually not prepared to spend a lot of time and energy deciding to respond to a survey. Rather, factors such as the value of reciprocity, helping tendencies, compliance with legitimate authority and perceptions that there is only limited scope for responses (the perception of scarcity) may play a role in this process.

The author emphasises that both sets of theories (psychological and social), at least in part, help to explain survey responses and both perspectives must be borne in mind when developing strategies to promote response rates.

The second part of the paper provides a useful summary of the empirical evidence on factors that affect response rates to surveys. The author particularly refers to issues relating to paper versus web-based surveys; the use of multiple contacts; the length of a survey; the use of incentives; the perceived relevance or importance of a survey to respondents; the use of statements of confidentiality; the inclusion of specific requests for help in primary approach letters and survey information; the impact of sponsorship; and the use of deadlines. The paper concludes with some very useful comments on the concept of leverage – that is, the idea of how particular factors known to impact

on participation might be paid greater attention in order to maximise the likelihood of participation. For example, the need to conduct surveys on issues that are of low importance to respondents might require greater attention to the number of contacts/reminders sent to the respondents as well as the length of the survey. The article ends with the timely reminder that it is important to ensure that 'every survey must be designed to make the respondents' job of filling it out easier, not to make the job of administering surveys easier' (p.18).

Yielder, J & Codling A 2004, 'Management and leadership in the contemporary university', ***Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management***, vol.26, no.3, pp.315–328.

This article is taken from an edition of the journal devoted to examining issues of policy and management in the higher education sector. The article commences with an overview of the contextual factors shaping universities and the management and leadership of these institutions. Factors such as the dramatic growth in participation in the sector, increased competition and the influence of market forces, a loss of distinctiveness amongst universities in favour of the establishment of 'national system' and the impact of information technology are discussed with particular reference to their impact on the 'managerial environment' in which universities are required to operate.

The concepts of leadership and management are then discussed in broad terms, followed by a more detailed analysis of the distinctions between 'academic' and 'managerial' leadership with the former being less well defined and the latter following more traditional understandings of the role. Managerial leadership encompasses functions such as managing finances, resources, staff and strategic and operational planning. The authors argue that the roles of academic and managerial leadership are quite different, often

confused and sometimes in competition with each other. Academic leadership is based with a person who is an authority because leadership has been vested in the person on the basis of their discipline knowledge, experience, recognition by peers, personal qualities and their expertise. Managerial leadership, in contrast, is leadership based on a position with specific and defined areas of responsibility. Academic leadership is collegially based; managerial leadership is based on corporate ideals. The authors argue that these conceptualisations of leadership carry inherent dilemmas for universities. They go on to present a leadership model which they believe to be more appropriate to their context (a 'comprehensive dual sector institution' in New Zealand) as it values both managerial and academic leadership and promotes team-based approaches to leadership in the sector.

Note: Other articles from this edition of the journal which might be of interest to readers of the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* include:

- 'Is there an Australian idea of university?' (Chris Duke, pp.297–314)
- 'Quality or control? Management in higher education' (John Milliken and Gerry Colohan, pp.381–391)
- 'The outsourcing of classroom instruction in higher education' (Timothy Schibik and Charles Harrington, pp.392–400)