

Social capital outcomes: the new focus for adult literacy and numeracy courses

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Since the early 1990s in Australia, adult literacy and numeracy courses in vocational education and training (VET) have been focused on human capital outcomes, that is, on developing the literacy and numeracy skills believed to improve the economic performance of individuals, enterprises and the nation generally. However, some researchers have expressed the concern that these outcomes are insufficient in explaining the socio-economic impacts of these courses. This paper reports on a recent study of the social capital outcomes of adult literacy and numeracy courses (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2006). The findings indicate that it is a complex mix of both human and social capital outcomes from these courses that results in socio-economic impacts. The authors contend that social capital outcomes should be recognised and accounted for, along with human capital skills, in a reframing of adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice.

Introduction

By the word 'capital' we usually mean a stock of wealth which in turn can be employed to create yet more wealth (Macquarie Dictionary, 1992). Educational policy-makers and planners prefer to use instead the term 'resources', and in times of scarce and shrinking resources, the different types of resources (capital) and how they are developed and used become vitally important. Portes (1998:7) differentiates the three types of capital – economic, human and social – in the following way: '[w]hereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is in their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships'. This paper is about the role and value of the latter form of capital, a less tangible form of resource involving relationships and networks. In relation to adult literacy and numeracy courses, social capital outcomes have to date been relatively neglected.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, adult literacy and numeracy courses within the Australian vocational education and training (VET) system have focused exclusively on human capital outcomes. That is, these courses have focused exclusively on developing the adult literacy and numeracy skills which are believed to lead to greater economic productivity. The research reported in this paper reveals that this exclusive focus on human capital outcomes has concealed the presence of social capital outcomes from participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses and their contribution to socio-economic wellbeing.

This contention is timely in view of the current state of play in the field of adult literacy and numeracy. It is now fifteen years since the publication of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (DEET, 1991) and there are new agendas and new policy imperatives. In recent years there have been calls for a new national policy on language and literacy in which social capital features prominently (Castleton, Sanguinetti & Falk, 2001). Literacy forums have been

grappling with the need for new definitions of literacy and numeracy (DEST/ANTA, 2004), and currently there are policy tensions as the field is influenced both by the need for community capacity models involving cross-sectoral partnerships (Wickert & McGuirk, 2005), and by industry and business groups promoting the concept of 'essential skills' (DEST/ANTA, 2005). In this fluid and contested environment, we argue that social capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses should be an important factor influencing policy and practice in this field.

Human capital outcomes

The concept of human capital should be well recognized by everyone who has worked in the VET system over the past fifteen or more years; it is the idea that improving people's education and training skills will automatically lead to greater economic productivity for individuals, enterprises and the nation generally. As Marginson (2005:4) recently explains, the focus is on the attributes of the educated (and in this paper, the more literate) individual: 'Educated individuals carry intrinsically higher productivity which becomes translated into higher earnings and in aggregate terms, greater economic production'.

This argument is applied especially in the field of adult literacy. The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) which has guided the field since the early 1990s states literacy is a 'pre-condition' for success in life, including obtaining work (DEET, 1991:1). Another federal government publication at the time utilizes a resources metaphor in claiming that literacy (and language) skills are 'just like farmland and goldmines, we can use them to help our country grow and prosper in the 21st century' (DEET, 1992:1). Thus these skills are seen to be investments which add to the economic value of people, to produce in effect, *economic* citizens (Marginson, 1997:147). It needs to be stated that the adult literacy and numeracy skills referred to

here are usually viewed as so-called 'basic' or 'functional' skills, that is, the set of autonomous literacy and numeracy skills that are taught in the formal schooling system (Falk & Guenther, 2002:4–5).

The argument for human capital outcomes constitutes the dominant discourse underpinning adult literacy and numeracy policy and provision in Australia (e.g. Black, 2002; Castleton & McDonald, 2002) and indeed internationally in the developed world as various Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publications demonstrate (see McKenna & Fitzpatrick, 2004). In view of this underpinning rationale, it should be no surprise that since the early 1990s the federal government has given priority in its adult literacy and numeracy funding to jobseeker and workplace literacy and numeracy programs where a direct link with increased productivity and workplace performance can be assumed.

The need for both human and social capital outcomes

This focus on human capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses has been criticized for a number of reasons, including the argument that there is 'no across-the-board connection between increased work literacy skills and economic productivity (Luke 1992:11). But the focus of this paper is not to critique the value of human capital outcomes, rather it is to argue that the exclusive focus on human capital outcomes is insufficient for explaining socio-economic impact or wellbeing which results from adult literacy and numeracy courses. An exclusive focus on human capital outcomes suggests firstly, that only a particular type of skills, vocationally relevant skills like 'basic' reading and writing, will lead to jobs and increased productivity, and secondly, that adult literacy and numeracy courses only produce these types of skills. Thirdly, it suggests that these job-related skills are the only ones that are of value. It is these claims we wish to counter in this paper.

Falk (2001) attacked the first claim several years ago in relation to federal government funded jobseeker literacy programs. He argued that for the desired employment outcomes to be attained, students need to acquire not only improved literacy skills in a technical sense (that is, the human capital outcomes believed to lead to greater productivity), but also social capital outcomes, including social networks involving bridging ties. He explained that getting a job can be as much about who people know and what networks they can tap into as the work-related skills they may possess. The other claims noted above, that adult literacy and numeracy courses only produce human capital outcomes, and that these are the only ones that are of value, are both addressed later in this paper in the description of our research study on social capital outcomes. Certainly, Falk's (2001) early social capital argument in relation to jobseeker literacy programs reflected much of the broader discussion in Australia and overseas involving the role of human and social capital in society, and in particular the role of adult and vocational education, and it is to this discussion we now turn.

Social capital

In our work we use the definition of social capital that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004:5) has adopted from the OECD (2001) which describes social capital as the 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups'. When we talk about people acquiring social capital, we usually refer to the number and the type of groups (networks) they relate with, and the qualities of those relations, including levels of trust, and how people support one another. The point needs to be made that the concept of social capital remains contested. While social capital has gained considerable popularity within the last decade or more, there is lack of consensus over the precise understanding of the concept and how it can be applied in

adult education or VET generally (e.g. Ecclestone & Field, 2003; Kilpatrick, Field & Falk 2003).

Social capital has been popularised largely through the work of researchers such as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1990) and Putnam (2000). The last two researchers in particular, have linked the extent of social capital in a community to the health of that community, and society generally. The greater the extent of social networks and membership of community organisations, and the higher the levels of trust within them, then the healthier society is considered to be. Thus social capital can be seen as a valuable resource with largely favourable benefits (though there can be negative social capital such as when the internal cohesion of a group acts at the expense of outsiders). This approach to social capital with its emphasis on networks and increased civic engagement is sometimes referred to as 'communitarian' and is influencing policy-makers in advocating education as a central part of social renewal (e.g. Gewirtz, Dickson, Power & Whitty, 2005).

Bourdieu (1986) represents a different interpretation of social capital insofar as he sees social capital as another form of capital (along with economic and cultural) which interacts within the processes of social reproduction to essentially maintain society's social class structure. Thus Bourdieu is considered to adopt a macro social class viewpoint on social capital while researchers such as Coleman focus on the micro – for example, particular neighbourhoods and disadvantaged schools. Our work to date has stronger affinity to that of Coleman and Putnam than to that of Bourdieu.

While the concept of social capital is not new, what is new is the extent and rate at which it is being recognised as important. Major international organisations such as the OECD (2001) and the World Bank (1999) are embracing the concept, and they are doing so precisely because it is seen to be linked, with human capital, to socio-economic development and well-being. Similarly in this paper,

we are not arguing human capital *versus* social capital, rather that social capital has to date been neglected or concealed relative to human capital. In fact, both forms of capital need to be recognised for their combined contribution to socio-economic well-being. As researchers have pointed out, the skills and knowledge of human capital are only able to be brought into socio-economic circulation through social means (Balatti & Falk, 2002). Certainly in Australia, at a national political level, social capital is now on the agenda (Costello, 2003) and national agencies are developing the concept further (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Productivity Commission, 2003).

In recent years there have been many studies which have sought to unravel the links and relationships between human and social capital, especially in terms of the wider benefits of adult learning, both formal and informal (Field, 2003; Kilpatrick, Field & Falk, 2003; Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brasset-Grundy & Bynner, 2004). Australian studies feature prominently, indicating in particular the role of adult learning to community development (Kearns, 2004), and especially rural communities (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). But these relationships are complex. Balatti and Falk (2002), for example, explain how the learning process, seen in terms of change in knowledge and identity resources, both draws on and builds social capital in making socio-economic contributions to communities. Their findings are based on a study of ten adult community education (ACE) programs in Victoria (Falk, Golding & Balatti, 2000) which demonstrates the significance of ACE programs in producing socio-economic benefits at individual and community levels and how social capital is produced at each of these levels. One of the conclusions of the study is that social capital production is the *modus operandi* of ACE and not a by-product. This encourages the question: if social capital within ACE programs can result in important socio-economic benefits, what role might adult literacy and numeracy courses have?

A research study: social capital and adult literacy and numeracy courses

Recently the authors of this paper undertook a Commonwealth-funded research study to consider specifically the social capital outcomes of adult literacy and numeracy courses and the implications they may have for policy and practice (Balatti, Black & Falk, 2006). What follows is a summary of the main elements of the research project and its findings.

Methodology

A total of 57 students and 18 teachers were interviewed from adult literacy and numeracy courses in Sydney (two student cohorts), Townsville and Darwin. All courses were 'stand-alone' literacy and numeracy courses conducted in formal VET institutions. The student cohorts were chosen to represent a wide spectrum of demographic groups, including young (under 25), non-English speaking background, Indigenous and mature-aged (45 years and older) people. Taped, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these students and teachers and these interviews were later transcribed in full.

In the interviews with students, questions sought information about why they participated, what they got out of the course, and what they were involved in now that they weren't before. Students were also asked if they could attribute the changes, if any, to participation in the course. Teacher interviews sought information about the outcomes that their students experienced and the pedagogies that they used to encourage such outcomes. Because the teacher data about outcomes were secondary data, they were not used in the analysis described below

From the interview transcripts, data segments were extracted that referred to outcomes. A segment may have consisted of a few short

words; the segment was much longer if the student chose to talk of outcomes in story form. Data were then analysed and coded according to two frameworks. The first framework was based on an application of the ABS (2004) social capital framework (see Figure 1). A segment was considered to be evidence of social capital outcomes if it contained evidence of one or more changes listed in the third column of Figure 1.

The second framework was based on the OECD (1982) indicators of socio-economic well-being and comprised the eight bands or categories of: health; education and training; employment; time and leisure; command over goods and services; physical environment; social environment; and personal safety. This table was used to code the data segments according to their location in one or more bands.

Figure 1: Application of ABS Social Capital Framework (ABS 2004)

Groupings	Elements	Indicators for the Study
<i>Does participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses result in:</i>		
1. Network qualities (including norms & common purpose)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and trustworthiness • Sense of efficacy • Acceptance of diversity and inclusiveness 	1a. Changes in trust levels? 1b. Changes in beliefs about personal influence on his/her own life and that of others? 1c. Action to solve problems in one's own life or that of others? 1d. Changed beliefs and interaction with people who are different from the student?
2. Network structure (including norms & common purpose)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size • Communication mode • Power relationships 	2a. Change in the number and nature of attachments to existing and new networks? 2b. Change in the number or nature of the ways that student keeps in touch with others in their networks? 2c. Change in the nature of memberships?
3. Network transactions (including norms & common purpose)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing support • Sharing knowledge, information and introductions 	3a. Change in the support sought, received or given in the networks to which the student is attached? 3b. Change in the ways the student shares information and skills, and can negotiate?
4. Network types (including norms & common purpose)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bonding • Bridging • Linking 	4a. Changes in the activities undertaken with the main groups with which they interact? 4b. Changes in the activities with groups that are different from the learner? 4c. Changes in the links that the student has to institutions?

Findings and discussion

The study found that almost 80% of the interviewed students experienced social capital outcomes from participating in the courses. There were many examples of changes in their lives which resulted from this participation, and by way of illustration we include some of them below:

A 17-year-old boy now has his mother's trust because she knows he spends his days at TAFE, unlike previously when he was truanting from school (*change in trust levels within his family network*).

A 50-year-old woman originally from China can now make phone calls to institutions such as banks and the local council to lodge complaints or make enquiries (*change in action to solve problems in one's life, and also bridging ties*).

A 47-year-old Indigenous man has made new friends with people in the course and with whom he socialises out of class time (*change in the number or nature of attachments to existing and new networks*).

A 15-year-old boy is now prepared to help out at home in a reciprocal relationship with his parents, whereas in the past he resisted being told what to do and was hardly at home (*change in the nature of memberships in networks, e.g. power differential*).

A 50-year-old Indigenous man no longer relies on others to read his mail for him (*change in the support sought, received or given in networks*).

A 54-year-old woman originally from Columbia is now able to be more effective at work because she can communicate and work in teams better (*bonding ties*).

A 50-year-old woman originally from China and who has been attending classes for two and a half years recently went on a cruise

knowing that fellow passengers would not be Chinese. She would have refused to do so earlier (*bridging ties*).

Of course, students also reported human capital outcomes such as an improvement in their spoken and written English skills. Participants also spoke about the impact of the course in the whole range of bands of socio-economic well-being. The categories most evident from the OECD list were social environment, command over goods and services, and health.

The dual coding of the data segments on the social capital framework and the socio-economic well-being framework revealed that social capital outcomes do impact on socio-economic well-being. This suggests a relationship exists between the social capital outcomes that students experience and the socio-economic impacts that participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses has on their lives (see Balatti, Black & Falk 2006: 20–27). This suggests that social capital outcomes are, in fact, socially and economically worthwhile.

The interviews with students revealed some interesting mixes of human and social capital outcomes. Take the case of Bill, a 17-year-old student, who participated for a year in an adult literacy and numeracy course for young people. His teacher commented that he was making very little progress in completing his course modules and actually improving his literacy and numeracy skills. Thus in terms of human capital outcomes he was achieving little. But in terms of social capital there appeared to be strong outcomes, as Bill explained:

Teachers at school treat you like you're six years old. When I was at school I figured that older people, adults who had power over me, would all be like that, but now once I come here I seen that they can treat you as though ... treat me the way they should ... So I treat them with a lot more respect, because I realise they are not all like that... Although they have authority over us, they speak with us as equals, sort of makes it easier to speak to authority figures.

According to Bill, as the result of now being able to speak with 'authority' figures, he has obtained work in casual jobs such as landscaping and bricklaying and he can mix better with adults and other students. In his case, it was the social capital outcomes from the adult literacy and numeracy course that led to important socio-economic impacts (indicators of well-being) including work and an improved social environment.

With another student in a mainly non-English speaking background adult literacy and numeracy course, the social/human capital mix was different. Amy, a Chinese-born student with a teenage son, improved her language skills sufficiently to enable her to interact better with her son's school. She can now write absence letters independently, attend parent/teacher meetings and negotiate for her son to receive English as Second Language assistance. In her case therefore, human capital skills (better English language skills) led to social capital outcomes (relating better with teachers at her son's school).

The findings indicate that the role that social capital outcomes have in the learning process and their relationship to socio-economic impacts are complex. In some cases, the social capital outcomes experienced were as a result of the language/literacy skills acquired; in other cases (for example, Bill) where social capital outcomes were experienced, there was no evidence in improvement in language/literacy skills; and yet in others, it was not possible to determine if the social capital outcomes were a prerequisite to the student achieving human capital outcomes or vice-versa. Furthermore, not all students experienced the same social capital outcomes. There were differences within each demographic group and between groups. For example, for the young people in the study, social capital outcomes were derived principally from changes in network qualities (see Figure 1), while for the Indigenous students, changes in network transactions were most significant. Finally, another set of outcomes related to self-confidence and self-esteem that students reported in this study but not discussed

here adds further complexity to how social capital outcomes are produced. These aspects require further investigation, as does the issue of **how** these outcomes occur.

Conclusions: the need to reframe adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice

This research represented an initial foray into analysing social capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses and aspects of our methodology were necessarily problematic. To begin with, as we have indicated, the concept of social capital is relatively new and contested. The means of measuring social capital are in the process of development and frameworks for accommodating the type of qualitative data produced in our study were not available, thus we adapted our research data to a recent framework designed by the ABS primarily for large scale quantitative and survey-style research work. Furthermore, the ABS social capital framework excludes outcomes such as self-confidence and self-esteem that are considered social capital resources in other interpretations of social capital (e.g. Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000).

Further, the outcomes documented by the respondents can be challenged as being a conclusive assessment of what they got out of their courses. For example, for ease of access, students were interviewed during their participation in the courses and not following completion. Thus, we cannot determine if students experienced further social capital outcomes after completing the course. This can only be established through longitudinal studies which to date have not been funded within the adult literacy and numeracy field in Australia (the one exception is Griffin & Pollock, 1997).

We consider the findings from the above research project are significant in that they provide evidence of the extent of social capital outcomes from formal VET adult literacy and numeracy courses and

their contribution to socio-economic well-being. Notwithstanding the above qualifications, we consider this research is particularly important in view of the prevailing policy directions currently influencing both the adult literacy and numeracy field and the broader fields of adult learning and VET. In the former, the role of social capital would appear to be having an influence with the call for greater cross-sectoral partnerships in order to improve community capacity building and to address issues of social exclusion (for example, ACAL, 2004; Figgis, 2004; Wickert & McGuirk, 2005; Black *et al.*, 2006). And in the VET field generally, there is now a strategic focus not just on business and individual skills but on building inclusive and sustainable communities (ANTA, 2004) and promoting partnerships (Billet *et al.*, 2005; Guenther *et al.*, 2006). Developing social capital is seen to be integral to these policy directions (Kearns, 2004, 2005).

In view of the research evidence on social capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses outlined in this paper and in light of the current policy imperatives briefly outlined above, we suggest there is the need to reconsider adult literacy and numeracy policy and practice and to reframe them by taking into account the role of social capital. As we indicated at the beginning of this paper, it is timely that we should focus on these issues because currently there are significant debates over the role of literacy and numeracy in society, including how literacy should be defined and the relative focus on the needs of local communities and specifically those of business and industry communities (ACAL, 2006). In light of the research on the social capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy courses described in this paper, the social capital perspective should play a significant role in informing these debates.

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