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Cinderella has balls? Other sites for adult community education

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This paper begins by suggesting that the NSW adult and community education (ACE) sector may be turning its back on the principles of adult community education. It does this by drawing attention to some of the contradictions between ACE public discourse and ACE practice in NSW. The paper goes on to argue for the restoration of ACE's principles of adult community education as a legitimate vision for the state, but further suggests that NSW Neighbourhood Centres may be more able providers of adult community education than ACE themselves.

However, little is understood about the actual work of Neighbourhood Centres from within the educational fields in NSW. While the Cinderella Report and other research studies talk about how Neighbourhood Centres contribute to adult learning, these discussions do not reflect the reality of the NSW situation. This paper concludes by suggesting a need for research into the contributions that Neighbourhood Centres are making to the NSW learning landscape.

Introduction

The past decade has seen Adult Community Education (ACE) in New South Wales (NSW) evolve as a recognisable part of the broader adult learning landscape. While ACE is often presented (and understood) by some as a unitary and definable sector alongside schools, university and TAFE, this paper unsettles those understandings and reinserts ambiguity. It does this because acts of naming and defining ACE in NSW have worked to include some organisations at the expense of excluding others. These exclusions dismiss some significant adult learning activity and may thwart its potential to continue the important and necessary work of addressing social inequalities.

It is not news that definitions of adult community education are nebulous. Indeed, one point of agreement in most recent studies of adult community education is the ambiguity inherent in any definition of what adult community education actually is. Birch *et al.* point out the "lack of a coherent and agreed definition" (2003: 13), as do others who suggest diverse definitions which "add a great deal of difficulty to the task of scoping ACE in Australia" (Borthwick *et al.*, 2001b:7). Still others confirm that the definition of ACE "varies greatly among Australian States and Territories" (Golding *et al.*, 2001:8). However, as this paper suggests, it is not simply across state borders, but also within states that definitions of ACE are ambiguous.

This paper is presented in two parts. The first focuses on NSW ACE and addresses questions around what ACE is and what it does. This is followed by a discussion that points out some differences between espoused philosophies and practices of ACE. This discussion highlights some tensions in ACE provision and suggests the need for a broader understanding of adult community education in NSW. In the second part, Neighbourhood and Community Centres are put forward as other possible sites for adult community education. Drawing from the well known *Cinderella* report, the cover of which advocates for

Cinderella to go to the Neighbourhood House in preference to the ball (Senate, 1991), this paper argues that the current work of NSW Centres, while largely invisible, needs to be acknowledged if it is to develop further. The paper concludes by suggesting a need for research into the adult learning activity that is occurring in NSW Neighbourhood Centres.

The New South Wales adult community education sector

In New South Wales adult community education is typically understood by government, those involved in education and the general public to some extent, as the realm of the ACE sector. The sanctioned NSW ACE sector comprises around 70 providers that include Evening and Community Colleges, Workers' Education Associations and Community Adult Education Centres. The core business of ACE providers is to "offer quality, relevant, affordable and flexible adult learning opportunities that reflect the needs of the community" (LCSA, 1999a:16-17). To this end, ACE organisations offer a range of courses including accredited and non-accredited courses in the areas of vocational education, literacy and liberal arts. ACE espouses an investment in the important role of lifelong learning and believes it can contribute to "the Government's social justice objectives" (BACE, 1996:3).

In NSW, ACE providers are supported by recurrent state funding through the Board of Adult and Community Education (BACE). Aside from allocating Government funds to ACE providers, BACE play an advisory role to the Minister of Education regarding the "needs and trends in Adult Community Education" (BACE, 1996:3). This relationship between the 'adult community education sector' and Government was formally recognized in 1990 with an act of legislation, followed by the establishment of BACE in 1991. The events leading up to the establishment of BACE draw attention to the sector's long tradition of political advocacy (Reid-Smith, 2001). This tradition

continues in contemporary times, where early drafts of a 2003 restructure of the NSW Department of Education overlooked ACE, but after what must be considered substantial lobbying by the sector, it reappeared on the agenda. In all, members of the NSW ACE sector have been actively involved in the creation, naming and sanctioning of the sector. However, while the 'ACE sector' *per se* is relatively new, adult and community education activity has a long history in New South Wales and Australia in general. This history includes the work of Mechanics Institutes, trade unions and libraries (Morris, 2002; Reid-Smith, 2001; Whitelock, 1974) to name just a few.

It has been convincingly argued that the contemporary ACE sector has been discursively produced over the last decade (McIntyre, 2001). McIntyre argues that "the term 'ACE' has been skilfully used to name, mobilise, organise, defend, legitimate and control a range of activity in the different states" (2001:57). This idea points towards the way research texts foreground and legitimate particular practices. Others also point to how the ACE sector in some Australian states is utilising research as a political strategy which has a legitimating purpose (Golding *et al.*, 2001:29). One of the most instrumental public texts in the development of the contemporary ACE sector has been the Senate report *Come in Cinderella* (Senate, 1991). This report was commissioned around the time when the training reform agenda had set about harnessing a national approach to fulfil the 'clever country' rhetoric (Hawke, 1991). The *Cinderella* report presents a national picture of a vibrant and diverse sector.

NSW Evening and Community Colleges, Workers' Education Centres (WEAs) and Community Adult Education Centres (CAECs) were among organisations publicly sanctioned as providers of adult and community education in the *Cinderella* report. The consequence for these anointed organisations has been adequate funding (although some would argue the level of adequacy) to sustain, develop and expand adult and community educational provision to the point

where in 2002, just under half a million enrolments were recorded by the sector (BACE, 2003).

Policy and practice

'*Recognising the value of lifelong learning for all*' is the policy guiding ACE provision in NSW. This policy sets out the five broad goals of ACE as: *equitable, effective, responsive, efficient* and *complementary* provision (BACE, 1996). These goals are designed to "guide the development of Adult and Community Education in New South Wales and reflect the broader directions and goals expressed in the National Policy" (BACE, 1992:np). Guided by policy, NSW ACE providers seek to provide access to the spoils of adult community education to "...all adults regardless of background and circumstance" (BACE, 1992:np emphasis added).

However, while 'responsiveness' is a catchcry for ACE, questions are raised around whom ACE is 'responsive' to. Adult community education does not occur in a vacuum, and NSW ACE organisations have strategically shaped and re-shaped their activity in response to broader policy agendas (McIntyre, 2001). This can be noted by tracing NSW ACE activity from a liberal focus, leisure and self development, through to an ever-increasing concentration on Vocational Education and Training (VET) in congruence with powerful encompassing stories and rhetoric, which sees the privileging of learning that leads to paid work. This is further evidenced by the strategic and timely production of a wealth of research that highlights ACE contributions to these broader policy agendas (ABS, 1995; Borthwick *et al.*, 2001a & 2001b; Bowman, 2001; Golding *et al.*, 2001; McIntyre *et al.* 1996; McIntyre *et al.*, 1993). "The point is, priorities change with [government] administrations, and adult educators have a choice: jump on whatever the current bandwagon is, or advocate for a larger vision" (Richardson, cited in Reid-Smith, 2001:175). It appears that much ACE 'responsiveness' is mobilised by concern to strategically position 'the sector' by jumping on the vocational bandwagon.

A related flaw in ACE's increasing vocational focus, despite the underwriting 'lifelong learning for all' document, is that a vocational focus does not respond to the needs of some people, and may exclude at least two groups in our society. For example, people past or nearing retirement age or some women who have chosen homemaking or unpaid caring as their career option may be excluded because their interests do not reflect a 'vocation' (read paid work). This vocational obsession is also in opposition to ACE's claims of 'responsiveness to communities' because it appears that where once these organisations may have responded to community need, needs are now being imposed from elsewhere: people need to be employed! While there might be some truth in this statement, it also closes off the possibility that there are many paths to employment, especially for marginalised and disadvantaged groups (see McIntyre & Kimberley, 1996).

A further tension between policy and practice is that the doors of NSW ACE do not readily open for *all* adults who might gain from what ACE has to offer, despite ACE's insistence on 'accessible provision'. Along with outsiders with little interest in vocation are those people without the financial resources to participate in the user-pays system that ACE has become (McIntyre *et al.*, 1993). The introduction of nominal fees in 1956 has been gradually replaced by cost recovery (Reid-Smith, 2001:95). NSW ACE organisations operate on a not-for-profit basis and so while ACE providers receive some State funding to provide for *all*, this is generally used for administration, and the majority of provision is reliant on participant fees. And while some concessions and fee waivers are offered to disadvantaged members of the community (for example in the areas of adult literacy, discounts for seniors and/or intermittent special programs), *non-VET* ACE focus typically remains on those who can afford to participate. "In comparison with schools, TAFE and higher education, the adult and community education sector is already characterised by a far greater reliance on fees. It is the user pays sector par excellence" (Senate, 1991:16). A user-pays system is a major contradiction to the espoused social justice orientation of ACE

that advocates for 'equitable provision'. While ACE has a history of providing 'second chances' for disadvantaged citizens (McIntyre *et al.*, 1993; Peace, 1994; Reid-Smith, 2001; Whitelock, 1974), there is "...good reason to be concerned about those who under the current policy directions will not have access, namely adults with low incomes" (Whyte & Crombie, 1995:107). This has some interesting ramifications for the NSW ACE sector and the citizens of New South Wales. That is, either ACE are not what they say they are at all (ie, responsive/equitable/accessible to *all*), or those without the fiscal capacity to participate in adult community education are not included in the 'all' of the *Lifelong Learning for All* rhetoric.

If the latter is true then disadvantaged adults of NSW are relegated to a status of non-citizen. However, if the former is true, then researchers might look elsewhere for traces of adult community education and find a wealth of activity that, although typically unrecognised, is working towards addressing social justice through investing in, and importantly acting upon, the principles of 'responsive, equitable and accessible adult community education provision to *all*'. This different perspective of NSW adult and community education activity returns to the idea set out in the *Cinderella* report which described adult community education as a diverse and vibrant sector that comprises provision by a range of organisations and furthermore, that its strength lies in this diversity. While reinvesting in the idea of a diverse field of ACE may work to unsettle the monopoly held by some organisations over limited resources, it also can work to draw attention to the needs of other organisations whose already significant provision of adult learning (particularly for disadvantaged communities) may be further developed.

Limitations

It is important to note two caveats before continuing the discussion. The first is that the contribution of Neighbourhood Centres to

the learning landscape in NSW is only one possible exclusion – the exclusion of a range of other organisations might also be noted: libraries, museums, churches and other non-government organisations for example. The second emphasises an earlier point that highlighted potential difference between (and within) states and territories, and this is pertinent to any discussions around relationships between ACE and Neighbourhood Centres. Some states may not identify with the NSW situation; seeing the work of ACE and Centres as almost synonymous. Other states, with different understandings of what ACE is, may draw different lessons from the NSW experience – as might other non-government organisations in NSW who see potential in exploring this issue from their own perspective. This following discussion of Neighbourhood Centres in NSW is only one of many possible stories that might be told. While it is not the intention here to speak for *all* possible organisations, there is recognition that this (and any other) research story is indeed partial and contestable.

Neighbourhood and Community Centres – other sites?

Neighbourhood Centres were noted by the *Cinderella* report as, “making up the most numerous group of community-based providers operating across the country” (Senate, 1991:59). Indeed the Senate report’s cover features a caricature of *Cinderella* being told to, “stuff the ball – go to the Neighbourhood House!” (1991: cover). In this Senate report Victorian, South Australian and Tasmanian Centres are put forward as examples of sites for adult and community education (1991:59–62) – it is noteworthy to add that in 2004, Centres in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania identify, and are supported, as legitimate ACE providers. This is not the case in New South Wales where approximately ten of the state’s 350 Centres receive resources directly through the BACE.

In contrast to other states where Centres operate from within the ACE sector, NSW Neighbourhood Centres appear to operate within the

wider community sector. The mandate of these Centres is to provide a range of services and activities that build and strengthen communities (Bullen & LCSA, 1997, 2000). As part of this role they champion affirmative action for disadvantaged people, local participation and control and social justice and community development.

Neighbourhood Centres are non-profit organisations that are owned and managed by the community. While most centres' funding comes from the Department of Community Services (DoCS), they also source funding through other state bodies, fundraising and 'in kind' support. The majority of centre users are women, most of whom have social security as their main source of income, and most are not engaged in the paid workforce (Bullen & LCSA, 1998; LCSA, 1999a).

Interestingly, as concerns for 'building community' and 'increasing social capital' gain momentum, Neighbourhood Centres are increasingly being sought after as 'community partners' in a range of cross-government initiatives. This may appear an attractive option because the generalist roles of these centres combined with their connectedness with communities positions them well to undertake local innovative initiatives that achieve the larger objectives of the State.

ACE-like activity of Neighbourhood Centres

The generalist role of the centres is mandated by the State Community Welfare Act, which aims "...to provide for the well being of the people of NSW" (LCSA, 1999:17). While this mandate is to work with *all* people of NSW, centres typically focus their attention on working with marginalised and disadvantaged groups. This work includes a range of services including information and referral, advocacy, support and various other types of groups, as well as over 20 different types of direct service provision (LCSA, 1999:16). In addition to these services there is significant provision of adult learning courses and groups as one of many tools used in the processes of community development.

One study showed that 75% of Centres regularly ran groups/courses as part of their activities (LCSA, 1998b). These groups and courses are in addition to a small project where centres are partnered with 'real' ACE providers (LCSA, 1997, 1998a, 1999b, 2000, 2001). Another study documented approximately 1,580 groups and courses running in centres across NSW during one week alone (Bullen & LCSA, 1998: 65). In short, there appears much resembling adult and community education in NSW Neighbourhood Centres.

However, the naming (or not) of these 'adult education like' activities has important ramifications. These activities in centres (however ACE-like they may appear) are not generally named as adult community education, either by the centres or by others. There is some remote recognition that they may exist: for example, a report by the National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) estimates some 700,000 Australians participate in learning *not* provided by sanctioned ACE providers. This report suggests that Neighbourhood Centre provision may account for approximately 120,000 to 150,000 students nation-wide (NCVER, 2001:34). However, that research may have been unable to capture centre statistics largely because organisations that are not directly funded by the state to provide adult learning are not obliged to collect learner statistics. In all, the national reporting system that sanctions learners only sanctions those in just 240 of over 900 Neighbourhood Centres across Australia (NCVER, 2001:34). Almost all of these 240 are outside of NSW: over 300 NSW Centres do not report their adult education activity to 'education' authorities. Another point of interest around naming can be drawn from Neighbourhood Centres referring to this work as 'community development' rather than adult community education and/or learning.

Notwithstanding the argument so far, acknowledgement of NSW centres being named as adult community education sites is problematic. In NSW, not only have Neighbourhood Centres

traditionally been seen as non-players in adult community education, they have traditionally viewed themselves as non players, or at the very least, community *partners* for 'real' ACE. Ironically, centres use learning as a tool for community development, yet the flip side might also hold true: that is, community development may well be a derivative of the sanctioned adult community education sector. But as this current NSW situation begins to show, the politics of 'naming' activities and organisations has real implications. If the ACE-like activity in Neighbourhood Centres remains unnamed by both centres and those in the sanctioned education sectors, then it loses opportunities to develop at a time where it might be needed the most!

Concluding discussion

This paper has drawn attention to some issues with the current situation of adult and community education in NSW. Through considering some tensions between policy and practice it raises the question of whether 'ACE' is still a useful term to describe the activity of 70 odd sanctioned providers of user-pay and/or vocational education. It has also drawn attention to the politics involved in naming, and demonstrated how acts of naming ACE in NSW has worked to exclude other organisations. In all, it suggests that the whistles and bells of sanctioned ACE may be drowning out the daily buzz of marginalised and disadvantaged people gathering to learn in a variety of ways at Neighbourhood Centres across NSW.

This paper further suggests that the social costs of the invisibility of learning in NSW Neighbourhood Centres are high. The unsanctioned learning of NSW centres is also generally unfunded, and given the current economic environment, centre based learning may be thwarted from developing this further. Indeed the continuation of NSW centres in the shadows of sanctioned Adult Community Education may be in jeopardy altogether. Yet a further problem about retaining the current situation is that centres are missing out

on opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge around adult and community education because they are not relating their work to that of adult community education, rather identifying it as 'doing community development'.

What little empirical evidence there is suggests that this is even more urgent given that centres, more than ACE providers, are working closely with people who are currently under-represented in ACE or other formally organised forms of education (LCSA, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999b, 2000, 2001). Unfortunately, aside from a few limited reports from the centre's peak organisation, or reports where centres have been positioned as partners of 'real' ACE, or the odd article from a NSW centre (eg Coleman, 1995), little is known about the contribution of these centres to the adult learning landscape. And while research from outside the state appears to talk for *all* Neighbourhood Centres it is clear that the contextual realities in NSW do not relate to this universal picture. What is needed is research that specifically explores the contribution Neighbourhood Centres are making to the adult learning landscape in NSW.

In closing it is useful to remember the suggestions of those who promote the goal of lifelong learning. These ideas advocate for recognition of learning in all its manifestations and recognition that significant learning occurs in a variety of sites (Delors, 1996). The NSW 'ACE sector' makes an important contribution to the adult learning landscape: *but they are not the only contributors*. Neighbourhood Centres, too, are contributing, but there is a gap in what is known about their contributions. And so finally, while Nelson, the Australian Government Minister for Education, Science and Training, has suggested that disadvantaged people turn to adult learning, "as a means of overcoming the consequences of significant social, industrial and economic change in their communities" (2003: np), it is also important to remember that some sites for adult learning are somewhat less visible, and this can be problematic if the rhetoric of *Lifelong Learning for all* is to be taken seriously.

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