

Learning in ACE for adults with an intellectual disability.

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Adult community education (ACE) providers claim, as part of their community development role, that they act as a first step for disadvantaged learners in finding voice and social connection, as well as a way into other educational experiences. ACE providers are, in general, successful in providing informal access to education and community participation (Falk, Golding, & Balatti, 2000; Foley, 1993; Guinness, 1998; Kimberley, 1998; Permezel, 2001). However, Permezel maintains the inclusion of certain marginalised groups into neighbourhood houses raises questions about the social and political participation of people with cognitive disabilities. Since neighbourhood houses and other ACE providers are primarily learning organisations, it should also be of interest as to whether or not people with an intellectual disability are participating in such learning.

This paper describes one part of a three year research project (Buckingham, 2004) concerning the inclusion of adults with an intellectual disability into learning and relationships. It starts with an overview of the place of adults with an intellectual disability in ACE, and a consideration of some of the literature on learning for people with an intellectual disability and a description of the research processes and participants leading to a discussion of the findings. The discussion focuses on whether adults with an intellectual disability (especially those in the lower levels of learning) are learning and barriers to learning identified during the research. This leads to an assessment of the implications which can be drawn from the research for potential learners with an intellectual disability, and policy issues for their learning organisations and their funding body.

Adults with an intellectual disability, community education and community development

People with an intellectual disability have a learning impairment. This means they may have difficulties in the sequential processing of information and they are likely to pick up information more slowly. Sometimes there is an associated reduced memory

capacity; short term memory span and conceptualisation may be difficult (Jenkinson, 1984). Yet people with an intellectual disability do learn. This learning may be slow; it may take place in very small increments, but there is evidence that the "vast majority of students with an intellectual disability" (Van Kraayenoord, Elkins, Palmer, & Rickards, 2001:450) can and do learn even such an abstract skill as literacy, given the right teaching and learning conditions and the motivation (Bach, 1990; Bochner, Outhred, & Pieterse, 2001; Moni & Jobling, 2000; Van Kraayenoord et al., 2001; Ziebarth & Van Kraayenoord, 2000).

There are currently over 550 ACE providers in Victoria and 24.2% of post-compulsory vocational education and training (including preparatory and basic education courses) takes place in the ACE sector. Of all students with a disability enrolled in vocation education and training courses, 40% are in ACE: ACE plays a considerable role in providing programs to people with a disability (Access Training and Employment Centre, 2002). Of people with disability, those with an intellectual impairment (75%) have been identified as most commonly participating in ACE programs (Bentley, 2004). They tend to be in discrete programs and activities, rather than in integrated activities (Johnson, 1996).

In the state of Victoria, ACE is funded through the Adult, Community and Further Education Board (ACFE), and is normally delivered in community-managed neighbourhood houses and adult education centres. In Australia, community education has had several definitions. On the one hand, it is used to describe what could more properly be called public education (Newman, 2000). That is, it is interventionist education surrounding campaigns such as drink/driving or cancer awareness. Otherwise, it fits into the three categories that Lovett (1997) puts forward as a further development of Brookfield's work on community education (1983): education *for* the community, education *about* the community and education *with* the community. ACFE funded community education fits the first of these categories. That is, it is formal education (usually after some degree of consultation with the local community) in classes which include both vocationally orientated and accredited learning and more liberal-arts and recreational learning.

Learning of this sort, especially in neighbourhood houses, had its genesis in the work of Freire (Kimberley, 1998), though these origins have now become somewhat obscured by funding accountabilities and the need or desire to accredit (Buckingham & Clark, 2002). For Freire (1972) the education process required a levelling of the ground between teacher and taught, a recognition that each is teaching the other and of grounding the learning in the world of the oppressed. That is, it necessitated a community development approach.

Community development has been variously defined, but key words emerge: empowerment, change, participation, process (Gilchrist, 2003; Ife, 2002; Kenny, 1994; McArdle, 1989; Thorpe, 1985). Community development, as an operating system, emphasises the role of process and the capacity of the community to participate. One of the cornerstones of community-based education is community participation at every level, including decision making and governance (Humpage, 2005).

The research process

This paper is based on a larger study in which 25 people involved with people with an intellectual disability, including teachers and adult education coordinators, were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with managers and coordinators from 10 organisations, including three community education centres: Acacia House, Banksia Learning and the Casuarina Centre (these centres are described in more detail below) in which people with an intellectual disability were participating. Observations and further interviews took place with 13 partnerships (such as, co-learners) of people with and without an intellectual disability. Data was qualitatively analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) with the assistance of NVivo software.

Participant organisations

In addition to interviews with a range of adult learners, educators and coordinators, a more detailed study was made of three adult education providers: Acacia House (a neighbourhood house); Banksia Learning (an adult education centre); and the

Casuarina Centre (an adult education provider and disability agency). Acacia House provided adult education and recreational activities for 900 people a week. Of these, 100 people with an intellectual disability attended segregated life skills and literacy classes. There was one volunteer with a mild intellectual disability in the child care area and one person with an intellectual disability in a mainstream class. Invitations to social events were made to people with a disability, but they rarely attended these. Banksia Learning ran two segregated literacy classes and one segregated computer class for people with an intellectual disability. It also provided mainstream adult education classes attended by some people with an intellectual disability, but did not run generalist classes. It did offer social events to which all participants were invited; again, people with a disability did not usually attend. The Casuarina Centre provided three literacy/numeracy classes in which each student was paired with a volunteer tutor. They did not run integrated generalist classes.

On a day-to-day level, social interaction with other people at all three venues was limited. At Acacia House, people with an intellectual disability were confronted with a spatial barrier, in that they had a separate kitchen in which to make tea and coffee. Banksia Learning had no social spaces where people might interact (and most classes for people with an intellectual disability were held on a Thursday when few other people attend). The manager was hoping to introduce a centre-wide excursion later in the year. Although Casuarina Centre students attended the canteen with other students from the university in which their class was located, they did not interact in anything more than a superficial way. Similarly, the Acacia House manager conceded that the majority of the participants with a disability usually related to others through polite greeting rather than anything more meaningful.

In regard to other forms of participation such as decision making and governance, only the Casuarina Centre had a person with an intellectual disability on its Management Committee. Banksia Learning had invited participants with a disability to a planning forum, but again, no-one attended.

Beyond participation in the social and governance aspects of these organisations, it was even more pertinent to ask whether adults with an intellectual disability were participating as learners. The most obvious measure of such participation was that

they were recognised as learners by themselves, in terms of their own self confidence, as well as by the rest of the world, in terms of recognised qualifications.

The following discussion considers these two ways of measuring learning further, that is, through self identification and recognition by others. It then addresses the main barriers to learning identified by interviewees: poor curriculum choice and lack of time for learning. In doing so, the discussion draws upon observations and interviews with three specific participants with a disability – Stan, Yvonne and Lucy.

Measuring learning in ACE

Self-identification as learners

Some participants with an intellectual disability did not think of themselves as learners. Lucy, for instance, said she did not think she should be in her literacy class because she could not learn.

Six teachers and five adult education coordinators considered that some people with an intellectual disability did not think they were able to learn and that this lack of self esteem was considered a significant barrier to learning. The connection between self esteem and learning is equally confirmed by commentators (such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Freire, 1972; Thompson, 1997; Vogel & Reder, 1998). This applies to all learners but it would plainly be more difficult for someone whose learning is slower and more incremental to gain self confidence.

The blame for lack of self-esteem was sometimes placed on the family or on previous schooling. The following quotes from interviews illustrate this point:

Their own families can hinder their learning. I've heard many saying: "Oh I don't tell some relatives that I'm learning English, because they'll just try and put me off it saying: why do you want to learn that for, you know. It's wasting my time. That I'm not capable of doing anything (Interview transcript)

I taught mainly in secondary school and they had failed so long that they didn't think they were any good (Interview transcript).

During observations it was noted that sometimes volunteers acting as teaching aides made remarks which suggested that they too lacked confidence in the ability of people with a disability to learn. One volunteer, for instance, said of his students: "They're all way out left field – I'd say...They just cannot hold information in their minds. That's the main thing" (Interview transcript). Another told a student: "You probably don't remember what that word was" (Interview transcript) implying lack of ability. In contrast, Yvonne's volunteer tutor worked to rebuild confidence:

Really it was that total acceptance: "You're good, you can do it". She says: "No" - "Yes you can Yvonne – look, look" Turning the book back showing her what she's done; building, constantly building on that self image, "Look how great this is, look – oh remember when you did it here? Yes you can do it." (Interview transcript).

Yvonne had also had negative parental judgement made about her ability to learn, yet in the two years she was observed, despite an impairment more severe than either Lucy, or Stan (who is described later), she learned to read and write simple words and regard herself as a learner. What is illustrated here is the value of the agency of another person being able to reflect an alternate or confirmatory identity ("how I think of myself " being checked against "how I think about you "). This creates a shift or a deeper entrenchment of self value.

The concept of self reflection as a factor in learning for people with an intellectual disability can be extended further. Jenkins (1996) posits selfhood as being initially that which is reflected by others, but which then changes through a process of reflexivity. Because of the nature of their impairment and the difficulties posed by reflexivity for people with an intellectual disability, it would be reasonable to suppose that, for people with a conceptual impairment, they would be more reliant on the reflection of others in establishing their concepts of self identity. Although the role of the instructor (voluntary or otherwise) in encouraging a positive identity as a learner is so important, this was not always evident, as indicated above, in practice.

It seems evident that people's self identification as a learner might also be encouraged if they possessed a nationally recognised certificate which said that they had learned certain competencies. Certificates, such as those issued for the Certificate of General Education for Adults, would also be proof to the rest of the world that they have learned. For some people this too was something they were unlikely to achieve.

Learning recognised by others

The common understanding of learning is that which can be measured by formal qualifications. For participants in this study this meant gaining certification in the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA) (Acacia House and Banksia Learning), Certificate in Initial Literacy and Numeracy (CIALN) (Casuarina Centre) or the Certificate I in Transition Education (Acacia House).

The coordinator at Acacia House acknowledged that some students in Certificate I classes would never get their certificate. Stan at Banksia Learning had been in a class for seven years without achieving any formal recognition of learning. He was not alone: other interviewees reported students being in classes for five, six and seven years without formal certification. This has even become somewhat of a joke: "So you don't want them to waste their time and be in a neighbourhood house for 99 years learning to write their name" (Interview transcript).

The manager at Banksia Learning had concerns that some students were not achieving. The response of Acacia House staff had been to devise, within their nominally accredited classes, some more generalised activities, such as art and craft for students considered at a lower level of learning. These activities did not attract recognised certification but those doing them were still counted on statistical returns as Certificate students, even if whatever they did learn would not be formally recognised. The manager of another agency considered that this practice was widespread: "Literacy is being used as a cover to run living skills; it might be better to use other money for this" (Interview transcript). Her opinion was that literacy and certificate courses attract valuable funding, whereas more general education does not: "People with intellectual disability are forced into the wrong courses to follow the funding," (Interview transcript).

Barriers to learning

Interviewees were asked what they considered to be the major barriers to learning for students with an intellectual disability. Besides a lack of belief in themselves as learners, which has already been discussed as it can be viewed as a measure of learning, two other major barriers were identified. These were poor curriculum choices and lack of time allowed for learning.

Poor curriculum choice

Teachers who were teaching the Certificate of General Education or a Certificate I course and other education coordinators commented that it was unlikely that some of their students ever would reach accreditation:

The inadequacy (of the CGEA) is in the competency framework at Level 1 and around the modules linked to the competency framework – the modular structure is inadequate. The competencies are not articulated in small increments, such as those that define movements. We need to be able to demonstrate that people know they are making progress (Interview transcript).

If some people never achieved recognition through a certificate that would demonstrate their competency, this reinforced a self perception of inability to learn.

As one teacher pointed out:

I think it's a sad thing, but with the CGEA a lot of them aren't able to achieve the required criteria....I think that the CGEA really doesn't assist people who have got disabilities, because it just makes them feel like they've failed if they don't get... the certificates they're there to complete (Interview transcript).

Yet, low level literacy students at Casuarina had already achieved nationally accredited certificates for quite small increments of learning. Had they used the CGEA, as did Banksia Learning and Acacia House, they would not have achieved accreditation until they could read and write a complete sentence, whereas, in the framework they used, the first module expectation is to “Demonstrate the capacity to recognise simple words with matching items” (McGlynn, 2002). A smaller step such

as that just quoted is more likely to be achievable and if it attracts recognised certification acts a motivator to learning. Yvonne, for instance, has now several such certificates and approaches learning with enthusiasm. However, ACFE confirmed that very few providers across Victoria work with the framework Casuarina use as opposed to the CGEA which is the recognised preparatory package of ACFE.

There are cost factors which may dictate curriculum choice for ACE providers. These include the choice of the CGEA as a recognised ACFE package and the scope. Because the CGEA is the recognised preparatory package of ACFE, the associated costs to the provider are negligible. Although it is also accredited, the curriculum framework Casuarina uses incurs a cost (about \$50 a year for each participant). This amount was considered too high by most adult education interviewees, since providers may not, under the provisions of being funded as a Registered Training Organisation, recoup costs from participants. The Casuarina Centre, as a disability agency, is funded by the Victorian Department of Human Services to provide activities under another program, and can, therefore, use ACFE funds to top up. This means that they have adequate funding to buy the curriculum they feel is most appropriate.

Another cost involved is the scope, a complete list of intended courses in a provider's program. To be eligible as a Registered Training Organisation, each provider must declare its scope and be prepared to pay a one-off fee of \$600 - \$700, for changing it. This is not feasible for many ACE providers. Thus, even when they do see the benefits of using a curriculum with more incremental stages, providers are, in effect, punished for reviewing and revising curriculum to ensure it meets community needs.

Lack of time for learning

A person with an intellectual disability may take longer to learn. This slower learning capacity may also be accompanied by short-term memory problems. These two factors alone would suggest that, in order for learning to take place, a primary consideration should be that they are given plenty of time in which to learn, limited time between teaching sessions and constant reinforcement.

In the three adult education organisations investigated the learning times allocated were as follows:

- Banksia Learning runs one class for two hours a week and another for different group for four hours over one day, once a week;
- The Casuarina Centre also provides four hours class time on one day a week;
- Acacia House runs a four hour class, too. They have also just introduced an additional nine hour class, spread over two days, but this is only for the upper levels of students who can be expected to complete a Certificate of Transition Education within two years.

As a comparison, those being educated in literacy as children in a mainstream primary school would expect to receive 4 hours a day or 20 hours per week direct literacy and numeracy support/access (McGlynn, 2002). Adults with an intellectual disability and short term memory problems need more, not less, time than those without this impairment and, as adults, have additional issues to do with the responsibilities they have for other things in their lives: “They've had a whole life experience happen through that week” (Interview transcript).

ACE providers apply for funding based on student contact hours. Yet four education coordinators and three teachers identified that time limitations created a barrier to learning, and considerable frustration was expressed at the lack of time available, especially in for literacy:

I find it frustrating that we only have this two and a half hours a week because I feel like it's hard for them to make progress or because they're so low a level they really need more... They should be doing it everyday – we should be doing it full time (Interview transcript).

One person considered three times a week to be adequate, with three practitioners considering that full time, or at least some time spent on the subject every day of the week, would be ideal. Homework is not always appropriate unless there is someone at home or at the hostel or residential unit who can oversee it. There are home-based aids available, but, in the end, almost all teachers who had tried homework had given up the practice.

Attending a class for a length of time is not in itself a bad thing – people with an intellectual disability do take time to learn. There are other benefits: Stan and others said that they enjoyed the social contact. But seven years with no recognition that learning has occurred may lead to lack of motivation. Banksia Learning teachers claimed that lack of motivation for their students was another barrier to teaching they had to face. It might be asked: why do they turn up? Stan and some of his peers who were not attached to disability agencies, said that it gave them something to do, since the alternative was to watch TV or hang around the shopping mall. For those who were attached to agencies, literacy or any other learning is something that has been included in their Individual Program Plan. As the CEO of Casuarina said:

There is a conflict between support and education. In essence, DHS (Department of Human Services) is funding support, not further education. The compromise is that it is activity support... For DHS and some organisations, this means it's bums on seats and, as long as people are out of sight, they are out of mind and most of the time, they don't care. The culture of (disability agencies) is for day activities and it's not always what people want to do, it's what they have to do."

This implies that, for some day services, the emphasis and the value is on finding something for people to do, irrespective of whether that is what people need or want to do. Adult education is something that fills in a couple of hours in the timetable very cheaply, since, under the funding provisions, providers may only charge students \$1.68 an hour. That this is how some agencies think is given further weight by a story from one adult educator, who told of a student with a disability who was offered Recognition of Prior Learning instead of a course. The staff of the residential agency where the student lived were horrified, since they hoped for the day placement the course would provide, the value of the class for the agency being in the time it filled for their resident.

In spite of the claim by some adult educators that students were not motivated, it was noted that every person with an intellectual disability interviewed throughout the entire study wanted to be able to read and write. As Stan said: "You get Christmas

cards with writing, you can't read the name, you can't write – got to get someone else to do it for you. Like to do it yourself – you can't” (Interview transcript).

Implications and policy issues

There are implications in all of this for people with an intellectual disability, and policy issues for the ACE providers and for ACFE. What are people with an intellectual disability gaining from community education? The answer provided by teachers and coordinators was ‘social skills’. Even if this is true, if these skills are not recognised as learning, if they do not fit within the funding body’s paradigm of learning and if people are in a course which is nominally intended to give them another outcome altogether, then they are unlikely to regard themselves as learners. Further the value of any socialisation that does take place is plainly limited if (as indicated above) it is restricted to superficial and marginal interaction with community members who share the learning facilities with them. The implication here is that socialisation is not so much an anticipated learning outcome as something used to counter or compensate for the lack of progress in other areas. People with an intellectual disability cannot be counted as participants within a community development model if they do not participate in the decision making, in other activities or the social life of the organisation, nor can they be valued as learners (by themselves or others) if they are not participating in learning in either their own or the world’s eyes.

The question for ACE providers is: if the funded time allotted for a subject such as literacy is insufficient for some students, why are providers still applying for these limited student contact hours? The provision of time allotments which are too small for some people with an intellectual disability to learn in seems to be simply making a gesture towards equity. Although ACFE funding policy is towards stability of provision (that is, no organisation is to receive less than the year before (ACFEB, 2003)) the responsibility does not lie solely with ACFE. Even where small time allotments have been granted this does not prevent local providers themselves combining their allocated hours to provide more appropriate time.

Does the current application for and acceptance of student contact hours that are inadequate for some students also reflect an attitude towards people with an intellectual disability on the lower levels of learning? Acacia House managed to acquire more for an extended course, but has decided to allocate the longer nine hour option to those who can, in their words, be “fast-tracked” through the course in two years, rather than to those who really need longer time to achieve lower level competencies. This reflects a human capital approach to education in that they are directing funds towards those who might be considered to make a worthwhile investment in terms of the employment market. It also reflects some of their values as to who is worth teaching. This is not intended to make a judgement about the values being portrayed, but to highlight the tensions that exist when choices have to be made. Human capital models which encourage the survival of the fittest in the employment market do not fit easily into a community development model which values learning at every level for its intrinsic worth.

Similarly if some students will not achieve the certification promised by their being in a particular class, why are they enrolled? Does it matter if people are receiving other benefits, such as, for instance, participation in craft? Given that people are, nominally, in accredited classes to achieve certification, the fact that some of them never do can only perpetuate their own and others’ impression that they cannot learn. There is also a dubious morality in having a class designated for one thing and then using it for another. This may, in turn, discredit the community education sector and any learning which does take place in it. Furthermore, where the statistical returns show that there is provision to teach a specified set of skills, but this is not happening, this then masks non-provision. Until the lack of learning for people at the lower levels of competency is identified, it cannot be addressed by more appropriate curricula and longer class times. As a result, some people will continue to sit in neighbourhood houses for 99 years, supposedly learning to write their name, but may be not even doing that.

ACFE is in a difficult position. On the one hand it must distribute DEST funds which expects these to be used to support a human capital model (DEST., 2005). On the other hand it is mandated through the Adult Community and Further Education Act, 1991 to deliver adult education within a community development model. This creates

policy tensions. Funds available are never consistent with demands and juggling acts have to be preformed to meet applications equitably. Nevertheless, this should not prevent them finding funding polices which met the needs of all learners, even those who are unlikely to make a good market place investment: even those who only want to be able to write their own Christmas cards like everyone else.

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