
LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CATALYST FOR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

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INTRODUCTION

This conference asks us to consider the question, who should be responsible for lifelong learning? It is a question I wish we did not have to ask. In an intelligent country, one would expect the answer to be self-evident and unnecessary. Why? Because the very process of lifelong learning would make it obsolete. The learning itself would trigger the assumption of responsibility. But we do have to ask the question. I will ponder why and then consider some ways of moving closer to a learning society.

First some definitions.

I've adopted the Campaign for Learning's definition of lifelong learning because it determinedly avoids notions of education and training. Rather, it stresses the intangible benefits of learning: deepening values, the capacity to reflect, and a love of learning.

What is meant by an intelligent country? Ian Chubb, Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, told the National Press Club in 2001 what he thought its features were:

... prosperous, civilized, culturally rich and socially just. It is one that is wisely governed and led; and one that will not let the circumstance of birth be a major obstacle to personal advancement because it will be understood that progress will come from the development and application of the talents of all the citizens. It is a nation with a focus on quality, and it will encourage and support high aspirations. (p. 2)

That is the country I thought I was representing during my years as an Australian diplomat serving in Indonesia, Russia, and Germany. A country which, because it was intelligent, "punched above its weight" as the then Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, was fond of saying.

Where has that Australia gone? We are now the country that locks children behind barbed wire;

leaves Australian citizens in solitary confinement on Cuba; passes laws that defy habeas corpus; votes for the retention of the monarchy, against the stated wishes of the majority; accumulates its profits into vast household debt; idolises sporting achievement; watches reality TV; and loves radio shock jocks. That hardly adds up to a good international citizen able to enrich its own people and those around it.

Ian Chubb goes on:

The intelligent country will generate new discoveries, develop its people and support all fields of learning. Some of these fields will, of course, give rise to invention, innovation and economic wealth. Other fields will lead to yet better understanding of civilizations past and the generation of new literary, artistic and spiritual wealth. Together, they lead to intellectual wealth. (p. 2)

This idea of learning is the one I embraced when I entered the labyrinth of the Australian education sector in 2002, the year I was appointed executive director of Adult Learning Australia. I saw my mission as, to foster a culture of learning in Australia which would be the mainstay for a vibrant democracy, an innovative economy, and a tolerant society. Adult Learning Australia continues to strive for that mission. I am seeking new ways to advance that cause but often do so with a heavy heart. For it is an almighty task to fight the mediocrity which is now pervasive in the Australian education sector.

Again, I agree with Ian Chubb. Later in his speech, concerned primarily with universities and the higher education review, he said,

We are slowly being made average. All Australians will suffer if that continues. Enrolling an average number of students into universities of average quality, supported by government at average levels, would be an appalling outcome [from the review]. Being in the middle of

the OECD expenditure tables on education, on research and on development, on information and communications output, is simply to fail. (p. 2)

And that is where we are. Doing a bit better than the old “mother country” – though the United Kingdom is thinking much more creatively about adult education than is Australia – but not as well as our great ally, “the US of A.” And not nearly as well as Sweden. That’s a sign of the times. A few years ago Australia was often closely identified with the Scandinavian countries with whom we shared a belief in social democracy, a principled international order, and so on. We have parted ways.

Nevertheless, we are not doing badly on expenditure. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures (December 2002) say that AUD40 billion per year is spent on education and training in Australia. Of this, government spends AUD29.6 billion (74 percent) and the private sector AUD10.3 billion (26 percent).

On another measure – learning for work – we do well. Australia has the fourth largest coverage of workforce trainees in the world (Australian National Training Authority [ANTA], 2001-2002, p.8). 1997 figures show that this equates to 72.4 percent of the working-age population participating in lifelong learning (primarily in work-related training). Unfortunately, however, the healthy numbers participating in vocational training are not embedded in a culture which values learning for its own sake, for its contribution to the maintenance of our civilisation and the proper functioning of our democracy, as well as to the nation’s economic performance. We live in a country whose prime minister cherishes cricket as a symbol of the nation’s achievement. Until we translate the rigorous learning and coaching involved in elite sport into other endeavours, Australia’s overall educational levels will remain mediocre. We will have an elite of high achievers, with many others coping, but with significant numbers not coping. And, as Ian Chubb said, being average in today’s world threatens failure.

On a much more basic measure, literacy and numeracy, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) ranks Australia poorly, with around 45 percent of Australian adults not having sufficient levels of

literacy required by the everyday demands of life and work in a complex, advanced society (OECD, 2002b). Dissect that figure further and you find, alarmingly, that one in five Australian adults is not functionally literate. That means they would experience considerable difficulties in using many of the texts and documents printed in English that they encounter in daily life. A further 28 percent, those at Level 2, the second-lowest of the five levels of proficiency, would also experience some difficulties. About one in three people are at Level 3, with skills that enable them to cope with many of the literacy demands of daily life and work, but not always at a high level of proficiency. Only one in six – about 16 percent of Australians – have good to very good literacy skills. That study was done in 1996. It is due to be undertaken again in the near future. Let’s hope the results are improved.

Recently, the OECD (2002b) judged that we are making headway in literacy among our fifteen-year olds, thanks to some concerted national leadership. But don’t get too excited. The PISA test, which determines literacy levels, does so without regard to spelling and grammar!

No wonder then that the next generation is having some problems. Australia has also stalled on retention rates for school leavers. Each year, one in three teenagers leaves school without completing Year 12 education. This is a high non-completion rate compared with most OECD countries. Although some students later complete a Year 12 equivalent qualification, one in five young Australians never do. Unemployment is also high among young people. The fact that many young people do not finish school and don’t find jobs is not just their problem. It affects the country’s bottom line and creates unhealthy social divisions in society.

The benefits of learning

The nation must rally to do something about this. For the evidence – collected by the OECD and organizations like the UK Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning – shows that education contributes to social capital and that this in turn has many positive social, as well as direct, economic impacts. For example, an increase in schooling achievements,

- raises the schooling received by one’s children,

- improves one's own health status and that of one's family members,
- raises the efficiency of one's consumer choices,
- reduces crime,
- generally increases social interactions and contributions to the community,
- increases the likelihood of pursuing further learning throughout life.

We know this from our own experience. We also know it from the statistics about income, health status, and about where the 1.3 million Australians participating in adult-education courses are drawn: people with university degrees are twice as likely to participate in adult education and training as people with a high-school qualification.

The numbers game has become an evil necessity for those seeking funding to quantify the rates of return on the education dollar. But learning should not be seen as a commodity in this way. It should not have to translate into higher incomes or more taxes or "bums on seats" to be valued by the state and the consumer. Nor, might I add, should they be consumers – they are learners, people who often do not yet know what choices are on offer or what their preferences might be.

I'm not an economist; rather, I probably fit into the ranks of those Australians with inadequate numeracy skills. But as Executive Director of Adult Learning Australia, I became adept at arguing the case for learning by using terms such as "social capital", "return on investment", "concrete outcomes", and "skills development". What I knew in my heart, though, was that learning was important because it was the key to maintaining a civilized world. To quote Alistair Rylatt (2004), "learning is at the core of life. It is the means and ends to everything we do. It helps provide choice, well being and meaning to our lives."

In speaking like this, I do not want to be thought of as a wishy-washy idealist. I fully recognise the constraints that exist for funding agencies. That's not to ignore the areas where there are critical shortages of money – which ought to be supplied by the state. My argument is that we can do much better with the current resources by thinking of learning in a new way as a key to the sustainability of 21st century communities and more immediately, as the chain which can link various funding buckets so that money is

allocated in accordance with local need rather than abstract policy or program priorities.

It is commonsense, and acknowledged from the top to the bottom, that we must find ways,

- to better use existing resources: financial, physical, and human;
- to foster an appreciation of the importance of learning for peace, democracy, and prosperity which translates into the diversion of funds from other pursuits (dare I say fridge magnet campaigns and defence spending);
- to encourage constructive partnerships which bring government, enterprises, and individuals together to act, not just to consult.

The other element in acting differently is to put the rhetoric about learner-centred approaches into action. That means a switch from the focus on institutions to a realisation of the importance and – yes, cost-effectiveness – of self-directed learning. It must not, however, mean a shying away from a strict adherence to quality and to merit-based principles, just because they will be difficult to measure in a more dispersed learning environment.

It also means reviewing the hierarchy of post-compulsory education. Is the trend towards mass university education really the best way forward? Or should universities concentrate more on fostering a culture of learning and on research rather than competing to become vocational training institutes? It is not necessarily what they do best – as is shown by the flow of university graduates into VET (Vocational Education and Training). And in the process of trying to offer job-related training and to earn the dollars needed to stay afloat, they are in danger of heading towards the mediocre. Worse still, from my point of view, they are diluting the appetite for learning among students. Students – unless they hail from the ranks of the really wealthy, as we must fear many will, again – have to earn money to pay the fees or at least their living expenses (expensive in our materialist world), and they have to think about the jobs they will secure to pay back the debts. Not much time anymore for an exploration of the "wrong" aisle of bookshelves at the library, because something seems interesting. Not even much time to get involved in student politics to lobby against higher fees, or in the film club or the hockey team. Such is life in the era of affluenza.

In my idea of a learning society, undergraduates would be those wishing to complete a general education (at any stage of their lives) and perhaps to begin to find a specialization which might be developed at the post-graduate level, in a job or in further formal training.

At the same time, no-one would consider that the VET system merely offered a second-class option for post-school learning. It would offer high-quality training aimed at vocational outcomes for an increasingly highly-skilled workforce.

For students in both universities and the VET system, the learning experience would impart the skills and the desire for learning throughout life.

And having created that demand for lifelong learning, we would embrace a broad definition of learning which recognises the learning that takes place in teaching institutions (schools, technical and further education [TAFE] colleges, universities, private courses, evening colleges) but also in libraries, museums, clubs, and so on, as well as formally and informally in the workplace. Also important would be acknowledgement of the life-wide learning (formal and informal) which all adults undertake, particularly as they move through career and life transitions.

Such a broad definition, one not informed by the universal experience of a school building and exam room, would also serve in one of our most crucial tasks – attracting back those who think they have done with learning.

Learning communities

For these people in particular – not just the disadvantaged in society but also many people involved in small businesses, and significant numbers of older people – living in a learning community might be a trigger to re-engagement. Peter Kearns (2004), who has done extensive work on learning communities in Australia, offers the following definition.

A learning community is any group of people, whether linked by geography or by some other shared interest, which addresses the learning needs of its members through pro-active partnerships. It explicitly uses learning as a way of

promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development. (p. 18)

That is a useful start but I caution against being too prescriptive when describing, defining, or badging a learning community. Often the community will not carry any label or be aware that it does so (as is the case in Glasgow, a vibrant learning city whose residents don't know it), or will prefer some other name. Creative communities are quite vogueish at present.

Where the label is useful is when people are making a conscious effort to identify and use learning as the common element in community-wide endeavours to develop skills, expand business, and build social cohesion. They usually do so when faced with a crisis – the drift of young people to the cities; the closure of an industry; heightened levels of crime; funding crises. For those dealing with these problems, the notion of collaboration around learning offers a chance to break down the traditional power relations and funding silos which so often impede productive talk and action.

The most successful learning communities are organic – they arise out of local energy and in response to local concerns. That is not, however, an argument to leave them be to make their own way in the world. Most will need support once there is agreement to take an initiative forward. Local government should be in a good position to harness the enthusiasm. But this sector is usually strapped for funds and, for most councils, learning is not...yet... seen as core business.

Moreover, there is a strong argument for all three tiers of government in Australia to contribute to building capacity in local communities so that these communities are better able to articulate their needs and identify workable solutions to problems. Adult Learning Australia is recommending this be done by offering to fund facilitators to bring the networks together and help realize initial demonstration projects that might attract other sponsors to take a joined-up approach to learning and community building.

There are precedents for this. In Germany, around EUR 118 million (or AUD193 million) – from the German federal budget and the European Social Fund – has been made available over about five years to support the development and expansion networks to create “learning

regions” which are close enough to people’s lives and their work that the results of any lifelong learning initiatives are tangible (OECD, 2002a). The primary aims of the projects are to,

- increase motivation and participation in education, especially on the part of disadvantaged or hard-to-reach persons, and enhance their ability to learn on their own;
- bring about qualitative (and quantitative) improvements to make providers significantly more user-oriented;
- encourage self-directed learning and the establishment of community learning centres (OECD, 2002a).

The funding model requires that the regions develop feasible solutions to the problem of long-term funding. Projects are fully funded during the planning phase, after which they must mobilise funds of their own for the implementation phase: 20 percent for each of the first two years and 40 percent for each of the two following years. The rationale here is that once enterprises and learners are engaged they see the benefits of contributing to their ongoing learning.

In quoting the German experience I am not deliberately ignoring what is happening in Australia. There are exciting projects underway here, but in our dispersed system and – without an overarching policy approach – not enough is being done to disseminate best practice, ensure replication, and achieve sustainability for good ideas.

But let me quickly tell those of you not from Central Queensland about a project which has achieved success right here in Rockhampton. It demonstrates what I’ve been talking about in terms of partnerships, non-accredited learning, and so on. The Communities on the Internet (COIN) project was part of the Family Community Network Initiative of the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FACS). It saw the establishment of the COIN Academy jointly managed by the Rockhampton City Council, which received the FACS grant, and Central Queensland University, which leveraged further money from other sources such as the “Networking the Nation”.

The COIN Academy is located in a university-owned building in the Rockhampton central

business district. It offers information-technology training to community-based, not-for-profit organizations such as the University of the Third Age, 60s and Better, and the Vietnam Veterans’ Association. Members can also use the computer laboratory and get an email account. To become sustainable and maintain the no-cost service to not-for-profit organizations, the COIN Academy is now able to seek fee-paying clients.

This example illustrates the argument that local partnerships defined by learning (in school, in TAFE, at adult education centres, at work, in the library, on the bowling green, in the garden centre, or at the pub) should be the determinant of funding allocations from various existing buckets; and not just the education budget, but the health promotion fund, the community services money, and business development grants, not to mention funds from businesses and learners themselves.

But this needs more than the tireless efforts of local people. It demands policy leadership and a major change of attitude about education and training, recognising that,

- it is not just about either work or recreation, but an integral part of life;
- it does not always have to result in a piece of paper and measurable outcomes;
- “soft options” such as learning without grades and, learning at the pub instead of the TAFE, are effective strategies, particularly for encouraging the reluctant learner.

Passionate learners – you in the audience – don’t need to be encouraged. The research shows that you can’t stop them learning. They will seek out opportunities, and are prepared to invest in the learning endeavours. They represent about 20 percent of Australia’s adult population. There is another 20 percent, though, who are not interested and say they cannot be tempted. They are too old, they say, or too dumb, or too poor.

The current system in Australia, driven by industry demand and individual choice, does little to entice these people back to learning. They are often in situations where training is either not on offer or is inappropriate (e.g., the training does not take account of learning barriers or is intimidating or expensive). This must be rectified because not to have the capacity to learn throughout life is a recipe for

individual disadvantage and societal dysfunction.

Whose responsibility?

I see providing incentives to disengaged learners as, fundamentally, a government responsibility. Indeed, so far in this presentation, it is the state which seems to be shouldering most of the responsibility for financing lifelong learning. I do believe it is a core government responsibility to create the enabling environment for a learning society, in terms of both policy and funding. But where in government? I have already argued for a joint effort by all three levels of government. In the present climate at national and state levels I do not think it would be wise to place the responsibility on departments of education. That runs the risk of reinforcing a narrow definition of learning, as that which takes place within educational institutions and on the job, rather than also in doctor's surgeries, on television, in our cultural institutions, and so on. It will also do nothing to abate the rivalry for the education dollar.

And that's where all those in the educational sector have a responsibility to make a greater effort to collaborate rather than compete. Some schools are now opening up their premises for others to use in the evening. Universities and TAFE colleges have a long way to go in establishing more trust in each other. The adult and community-education sector needs to talk better within itself and to be more active in establishing partnerships with other parts of the education and learning world. Learning providers and industry also need to do more talking. At the moment, it seems to me they complain that neither speaks the other's language and leave it at that. More businesspeople need to stop thinking that money spent on learning is a luxury. As for individuals, if the passionate learners are any indication, once all these other players have worked together to create an appetite for learning, there'll be no stopping them!

More specifically, I would encourage the researchers among you to tackle the most difficult of tasks: the mapping of informal learning and the capturing of the less tangible results from learning. These data are sorely needed to convince governments to fund incentive payments to disengaged learners and to recognise that learning pathways are not always linear; that people change direction, and

that some need both time to readjust to learning and help in putting together their life and learning plans.

We also need to work harder at getting the private sector to embrace innovative learning models which will tackle their own skill-development requirements and those of their workers – particularly as we face the challenges of an ageing population. We need to convince the private sector that a wider contribution to a learning society is not a gesture of altruism but – to return to the language of business – an urgent and necessary investment in Australia's future.

At this juncture in Australia, there is an immediate role for government to play in creating the enabling environment for a learning society to flourish. This role could be fulfilled through creating a policy framework with the aim of adopting whole-of-government approaches to meeting community and individual demands for learning. To be effective both in terms of efficient use of funds and in stimulating the appetite, the framework must recognise that learning brings much broader benefits to society than just vocational outcomes.

To support such a framework will require a more streamlined funding system and, in some areas, seed money to help learning communities get established, and an injection of funds as incentives to those not able to access a market-driven education sector. A new approach to funding must also consciously address the counterproductive effects of the competitive models currently in place. An investment of national government funds in lifewide learning, which encourages a collaborative effort to build a learning society will bear dividends and will see the responsibility for learning more evenly spread in the future. And while this may not be considered popular in an election year, it would demonstrate a sincere commitment to bolstering Australian democracy and fostering a society comfortable also in its celebration of achievements away from the stadium – for instance, in theatres or in science laboratories, or even in libraries. Australia could become a nation that is as proud of its teachers as it is of its cricketers.

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