

## **COOPERATIVE COMMUNITIES AND PROBLEM-BASED LIFELONG LEARNING: ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL DELIVERY TO AUSTRALIAN CIRCUS PEOPLE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper uses research into Australian 'traditional' circuses to analyse lifelong learning in terms of its vertical and horizontal dimensions, and as a combination of cooperative community- and problem-based learning. We argue that this analysis reveals challenges and possibilities that have significant implications for developing lifelong-learning communities.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper explores the lifelong learning of Australian circus performers and their families. We aim to use three different but related theoretical takes on the concept of lifelong learning as a basis for analysing particular problems and issues with which circus people are confronted. The first theoretical angle is to situate lifelong learning in terms of what we call for convenience its vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical dimension refers to the individual learning journey that one experiences throughout one's life, creating an autobiography of varied formal and informal learning experiences. By contrast, the horizontal dimension explores the forms of learning that take place within groups situated in many different fields beyond formal education, including family, church, business, and entertainment. The second theoretical angle draws upon Johnson & Johnson's (1998) notion of cooperative communities. The third theoretical angle involves the notion of problem-based learning, focusing on ill-structured and complex scenarios that give rise to evolving strategies to achieve outcomes. After a contextual discussion of the circus community, we move on to relate our conception of lifelong learning to three situations with which circus performers and their families are confronted. The first involves the challenges of learning new performance skills. The second entails managing interactions with local people as the circus moves from community to community. The third scenario explores the way in which the circus community responds to the threat posed from animal liberationists. Through these examples we aim to show how educational institutions can benefit from analysing the lifelong-learning strategies employed in a site such as the circus

that operates as both a business and a community.

One question that might occur to the reader at this point, however, is why we have chosen Australian circuses as a basis for analysing aspects of lifelong learning and then to maintain that circuses have something to teach other communities. We first began to look at circuses because of our interest in Traveller education. During that part of the research, we started to question why circuses had persisted for so long in spite of circumstances that could have seen them disappear.

The strength of the circus appeared to be in its community, the way that the community was held together and sustained, and the ways in which members were committed to the lifestyle and to one another. Clearly, Australian circus communities had something that was worth holding onto and members were able to support one another because they had developed a strong sense of interdependence. Of course, the people whom we did not meet were the ones who were almost conspicuous by their absence. Anyone not prepared to support other people or to work just as hard behind the scenes as in front of an audience would not do very much to help individual circuses continue. It appears that anyone who does not adopt the work ethic found in Australian circuses is also unlikely to find fulfilment in that community.

Members of Australian circuses support and educate one another in myriad ways. There are relatively few opportunities outside the circus in this country where anyone could both learn and fine-tune skills relating to circus performance. There have been people who joined the circus as adults, having studied dance, music, or gymnastics during their childhood. Learning

these skills in the circus context from a young age, however, has the advantage of enabling the performer to learn a range of other skills at the same time, and to adopt the circus as a natural way of life. Learning by immersion also means that members grow into roles: they observe others, they learn from others, others observe them, and they teach others. This cycle refers to learning performance skills as well as learning to do other jobs that must be carried out within the circus, such as sewing costumes, fixing vehicles, caring for animals, selling tickets and other goods, and welding. This last example points to one difficulty that circus people sometimes do have with their education; obtaining relevant trade certificates can be a problem when courses at outside institutions cannot cater for the mobile lifestyle of circus folk. This is all the more reason why learning from one another in the circus is so important, and why we argue that other people can learn from circus-based learning.

#### **VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL DIMENSIONS OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

There are certain possibilities that emerge from configuring two different ways of grasping the concept of 'lifelong learning'. The first, which we call the vertical dimension, conceives lifelong learning as a journey that an individual engages in throughout her or his life, from the cradle to the grave. This learning takes place in formal and informal situations in response to various challenges and needs that the person encounters. It might include taking a pottery class through a local art college, studying a language program at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college, or involving oneself with a reading group that meets monthly to discuss novels and other works.

The second way, which we call the horizontal dimension, considers the way in which learning takes place across different fields of life: family, church, sports, work, as well as formal educational institutions such as schools and universities. Here it is worth noting how different terms are used in various fields to capture the relationship between the instructor and the learner: parent – child, mentor – protégé, master – apprentice, priest – disciple, coach – player, and so forth. From this perspective, it is worth comparing how the techniques of teaching and learning which have developed in formal educational institutions correspond with and differ from those that have emerged in other fields.

So a way of distinguishing between these two dimensions is suggested in the following list of binary oppositions.

VERTICAL	HORIZONTAL
Individual (Biographical)	Group
Temporal	Spatial
Agency	Structure

Of course, the objection can reasonably be made that, in 'reality', such a distinction cannot be made, for these two dimensions work hand in hand. This is certainly true, but the convenience of making this distinction provides a means of mapping the forms of lifelong learning that one encounters throughout one's life in terms of the age at which they occur and the cultural sites in which they take place.

This mapping is important in the context of recent developments in Australian and other societies. On the one hand, there is an increasing focus on the need for people to be 'credentialled' with certification from formal educational institutions to authorise the work that they carry out. For example, while someone may display great natural flair in hairdressing, without certification from an approved training institution she or he won't be permitted to be employed as a hairdresser. This trend towards credentialing has posed challenges for the occupational Travellers we have studied, as they are unlikely to stay in one place long enough, for example, for someone to undertake and complete a certified welding course.

On the other hand, increasingly educational institutions are being informed with the discourses and values of other fields, particularly business. Increasingly, schools and universities are being asked to marry their practices to models of efficiency and best practice, in which terms like quality assurance, benchmarking, and key performance indicators become significant. Many teachers and academics have resisted this encroachment, regarding it as corrupting the traditional values of their institution.

Pierre Bourdieu (1990) uses the term 'cultural field' to map these transformations in sites such as education (and we would add the circus). Bourdieu identifies a tension between the autonomous pole of a field, made up of values that have traditionally characterised the field and made it distinct from others, and the heteronomous pole, where the field is open to values from other fields. Both education and the

circus are increasingly having to juggle these heteronomous values associated with business on the one hand and formal education on the other, with their traditional values and routines.

In this context, exploring sites in which these foreign universes come into contact with one another can be productive. From this perspective, there is much to be gained from studying the types of teaching and learning that take place in a very different world from that of the school. In examining the circus, we can investigate how lifelong skills are welded to particular problems encountered as part of the daily routine. We can also map the way in which an individual 'vertical' lifelong journey intersects with a 'horizontal' investment in the values and routines of a different site.

### **LIFELONG LEARNING AS COOPERATIVE COMMUNITY**

A second conceptual resource deployed in this paper is to consider lifelong learning as a form of cooperative community. It is interesting that the concept of cooperative communities has existed for a long time in practice in non-school settings but it is only quite recently that the idea has been promoted and encouraged very actively in mainstream education within and across sectors. On the one hand, we might ask why the concept took so long to reach the present level of theoretical sophistication. On the other hand, we might ask why educators did not recognise long ago the relevance of the experiences of personnel living and working in cooperative communities, such as circuses, to their own situations.

These two questions might be more closely related than it first appears. Perhaps the idea of a cooperative community could have been theorised much earlier if it had been realised that circuses could be considered examples of best practice, having survived for extended periods, even when external threats to their existence emerged. As to why experiences in the circus may not have been considered relevant to school situations, this might have something to do with the perceived purposes of the two organizations. While current research clearly supports the idea that education occurs within circus communities (Moriarty, 2000), many people would not immediately think of circuses as places of learning. Looking inside circuses to see how they might be relevant to schools and what schools might learn from them appears to be a recent phenomenon (see for example Moriarty & MacDonnell, 1998).

Analysis of data from our research into Australian circuses can be used to illustrate the elements of Johnson & Johnson's (1998) theory of cooperative community, which represents the current status of cooperative learning theory that emerged from research that goes back at least as far as the 1920s. The theory is based on five interrelated principles: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotion of one another's success, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing, or reflection on practice. We contend that these five principles are central to circuses functioning as lifelong-learning communities.

### **LIFELONG LEARNING AS PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING**

The third element of the paper's theoretical framework for engaging with lifelong learning is the concept of 'problem-based learning'. According to Barell (1998), problem-based learning "can be defined as an inquiry process that resolves questions, curiosities, doubts, and uncertainties about complex phenomena in life" (p. 7; see also Schwartz, Mennin, & Webb, 2001). As well as being complex, the problems in problem-based learning are generally ill-structured and have a number of equally valid possible solutions.

During the 1990s (Boud & Feletti, 1991; Chen, Cowdroy, Kingsland & Osterwald, 1994), problem-based learning was taken up across a range of disciplines and at primary, secondary, and tertiary educational levels. One common assumption underpinning these initiatives was the conviction that problem-based learning is a powerful means of making formal learning more 'authentic' by drawing the selected problems from 'real life'. That claimed authenticity is crucial to this paper: we see problem-based learning as a formalisation of the kinds of processes in which circus people have continually engaged as they have addressed the day-to-day and longer term challenges of earning their livelihoods. In other words, formal problem-based learning needs to be continuously directed at 'real life' situations if it is to contribute to the development of circuses as lifelong-learning communities.

### **THE CIRCUS AS A LIFELONG-LEARNING COMMUNITY**

Having outlined the three elements of the paper's theoretical framework, we turn now to apply those elements to an analysis of Australian 'traditional' circuses as lifelong-learning

communities. In this context, 'traditional' refers to the approximately fifteen travelling circuses featuring animals such as lions and tigers, whose itineraries take them to metropolitan, provincial, and rural cities and towns throughout Australia. Our research, conducted between 1998 and 2000, involved semi-structured interviews with representative of four such 'traditional' circuses. As indicated above, our analysis is directed at three key elements of these circuses: learning new performance skills, interactions with local people, and engaging with animal liberationists.

### **Learning new performance skills**

The complementary nature of the roles that people play in the circuses logically points to the importance of each person being individually accountable and completing his or her share of the work. One of the interesting points that we noticed about Australian circus personnel is their willingness to take responsibility for a range of tasks, not just being accountable for the ones that are associated with the more glamorous side of the circus, such as the spectacular high-wire acts. Talking with circus personnel who have spent their lives in the community quickly shows how individuals adopt responsibilities related both to learning new roles as they get older and also to teaching younger members skills. Individual accountability takes on an interdependent aspect in this lifelong approach to learning.

There is also a connection between taking on the individual responsibility for teaching skills to other circus community members and the promotion of one another's success. It is easy to see how the 'teacher' promotes the success of the learner, but it is also true that the learner reciprocates, even if unconsciously. The teacher's ability to continue to contribute to circus life and to enjoy the rewards that it has to offer are enhanced if that person takes on additional roles comparable with age and experience throughout life.

Adopting the role of teacher and contributing to the lifelong-learning opportunities of other members requires interpersonal and small-group skills to be developed. It also shows how circus personnel use all of the interpersonal skills suggested by Johnson & Johnson (1998, p. 5) i.e., "leadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills". Of course, many of these skills need to be refined over a period of time and in different contexts. Learning conflict-management skills in small group situations, for

example, is complex, and several successes do not guarantee that one will always be successful in the future.

The time and place where these interpersonal and small-group skills are often learned through modeling is after performances under the big top. Groups of performers – such as those on the high wire – may reflect on their performance, and practise particular moves involved in the act. This reflection, or group processing, is essential not only for the success of particular acts but also for the continued success of the circus as a whole.

From these few examples of the ways that the roles of circus personnel change as they get older, we can visualise how the vertical and horizontal dimensions of lifelong learning weave in and out of people's lives. Many people spend their lives in circuses, beginning as young children learning skills from their parents and, as they grow older, reciprocating by teaching others. As circumstances arise, they watch and learn from other performers who come their way, perhaps from other circuses, and add to their repertoire of skills. Apart from the particular practical skills being learned, interpersonal skills are also developed, as mentors model not just the practical skills but also how to teach them in a way that is supportive and encouraging. Indeed these interpersonal skills may be needed to solve problems and continue learning in the horizontal dimension. This might involve, for example, dealing with people and groups outside the circus, such as local councils, who ultimately determine whether and under what circumstances the circus can perform in town.

### **Interactions with local people**

There is little doubt that personnel within circus organizations realise the extent to which their collective success is predicated on ways of operating that we have linked to Johnson & Johnson's (1998) principles. Circus personnel share common goals related to the accomplishment of acts that draw audiences large enough to sustain the financial operations of the circus. Far from being based on competition, each person's success depends on the success of others. For example, the acts may be perfect but if the marketing is substandard, then there may not be an audience. There are many examples like this from the circus that show how the different roles that people play, and even different roles played by the same person, are complementary. In working towards

mutual goals, circus personnel share resources as well as an identity and joint rewards, all of which are part of positive interdependence.

We can locate the interactions between the circus communities and local people in relation to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of lifelong learning. In terms of the vertical dimension (that is, lifelong learning as a process occurring throughout one's life), the circus provides a vital resource for the ways in which an individual fashions her or his life. It is possible to mark one's biography or life journey through visits to the circus. Thus a mother who brings her own children to a circus performance would be able to identify the pleasure and excitement of the children's reactions with her own memories of visiting the circus as a child. Just as the circus communities routinely consist of familial connections stretching across generations, the experience of watching the circus provides a web of connections that can link one generation of a family to another. Continuity on the one hand and change on the other would mark such connections. The experience of watching the circus and the learning that derives from it would be likely to be shaped by the individual's age and cultural background. There would be pleasure in the aspects of the circus performance that endure from one period to the next – say, the elephant routine – but also an appreciation of the changes that take place and that might reflect changes within the broader community. For example, previously lion tamers saw their role in terms of mastery over their beasts; now they tend to be more conscious of working harmoniously with the lions to mould the performances.

From the perspective of the horizontal dimension (lifelong learning takes place, and establishes links, among different cultural fields), the circus provides rich opportunities for interactions with local people. For example, on a school visit, teachers could learn just as much about the styles of teaching and learning that pertain in the circus arena as could the students. Certainly, circus performers could benefit also from insights into pedagogical practice gleaned from schools.

It is in terms of this conjuncture of interests between schools and circus communities that we can study how both these sites perform as cooperative communities adopting the principles of problem-based learning. For the circus, of course, the learning is directed precisely towards problems that performers and others encounter on a daily and longer-term basis: erecting the

big top, accessing water and power, learning new tricks and skills. That circus people tend to perform multiple roles (the trapeze artist may also sell popcorn and refreshments during interval) emphasises this as a site

in which a complex array of roles is performed that are each vital in keeping the show on the road. Thus, any tendencies towards personal aggrandisement or 'prima donna' acts of pretension would be quickly countered.

### Engaging with animal liberationists

The circus people's interactions with animal liberationists constitute another element of their development of a lifelong-learning community. Much is at stake. The inclusion of wild animals like lions and tigers marks 'traditional' circuses apart from their more contemporary counterparts, from whom they feel under threat. Engaging with animal liberationists is therefore crucial to the survival of 'traditional' circuses and to the livelihood of their members.

The vertical and horizontal dimensions of lifelong learning might involve circus people and animals in multiple ways. Those members who wish to work with animals, either as performers or as carers or both, need to develop their personal and professional skills to ensure the animals' successful integration into circus acts. This can be considered the vertical dimension, whereby individuals acquire new knowledge *in situ*. The horizontal dimension can be seen with the insertion – some circus people would say 'intrusion' – of animal welfare and broader environmental concerns from the heteronomous pole of other fields into what circus people would probably prefer to think of as the autonomous pole of 'their' field of the circus (Bourdieu, 1990). They therefore need to work hard to ensure that these two dimensions of lifelong learning are complementary rather than in conflict, by engaging with the concerns of the animal liberationists.

The concept of the cooperative community provides another conceptual lens for examining circus people's interactions with animal liberationists. At the core of the five principles underpinning such a community (Johnson & Johnson, 1998) is communication. Circus people need to be vigilant and to take the initiative in communicating to groups such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, local councils and the general public how they care for their animals and how having animals in their acts serves both an educational

and an entertainment function. In doing so, they emphasise such elements of cooperative communities as their positive interdependence with their animals and their individual accountability for the welfare of those animals.

In relation to problem-based learning, there is no doubt that the animal rights lobby's concerns constitute a 'real life' problem to be solved. As we stated above, this is no mere 'academic exercise'; the circus's very survival is at stake. Circus people realise that there is no single solution to the problem, whose nature is ill-structured and not amenable to quick resolution. Instead, circus people's tactic is to engage with the issue as it arises, and to use the problem solving skills at their disposal. For example, some circus people take on the responsibility of demonstrating to local councils that they care responsibly for their animals and so should be granted licences to perform. Others have been interviewed by the media to put 'their side of the story'. Still others use circus performances to reassure individual members of the public that the animals are well cared for, not least because they are fundamental to the circus's economic success and survival.

In all these ways – the vertical and horizontal dimensions, cooperative community principles, and problem solving skills – the circus people have sought to present a counternarrative to the accusation that it is cruel to keep wild animals in circuses. Engaging with this external threat to their livelihoods tends to bring circus people more closely together. This is another way in which the circus people develop and nurture their distinctive lifelong-learning community.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Australian 'traditional' circuses as sites in which the challenges and possibilities of constructing lifelong-learning communities are played out. Through learning new performance skills, interacting with local people and engaging with animal liberationists, circus people encounter and dispose of threats at the same time as they strengthen the bonds that hold them together. This development of a lifelong-learning community is neither automatic nor easy; instead, it requires the ongoing application of appropriate lubricants. The analysis presented here indicates that three of those lubricants are the concepts deployed here: the vertical and horizontal dimensions of lifelong learning, the principles of cooperative community, and problem-based learning. Separately and in combination, these concepts

help to explain how 'traditional' circuses have been able to continue for centuries. These ideas also point to potentially fruitful theoretical links with formal educational settings, to identify whether and in what ways they might also be considered lifelong-learning communities. A further potential corollary is enhanced understanding of the formal educational needs of, and appropriate delivery methods to, Australian circus people.

Elaborating these points, and from a self-reflexive perspective, this paper has sought to identify the way in which academics can gain much from studying the lifelong-learning processes of the circus community. In distinguishing between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of lifelong learning, we sought to map the territorial influences that impinge on both an individual and a group's learning journey. While the principles of cooperative community have begun only recently to have currency within the academy, they appealed as an effective way of charting the shared teaching and learning experiences within the circus. Similarly, the approach associated with problem-based learning that focuses on complex and changing situations provided a perspective for exploring the ways in which the circus community responds to external and internal challenges.

In this sense, the paper offers tentative suggestions for promoting an enabling dialogue between the academy and external lifelong-learning communities such as the circus. In an environment in which academics are being encouraged to pursue industry links and adopt the discourses and practices of businesses, such a dialogue has a certain political imperative. No longer can academics retreat into a worldview from atop an ivory tower and pretend to have a disinterested relationship with the world from which they are sequestered. Yet neither is it possible to posit an external business model as a unified totality that will provide a panacea solving the lifelong-learning challenges of the academy. Rather, a mapping exercise such as the one we have begun emphasises that each cultural site faces its own challenges in sustaining itself and ensuring its future viability. And through the lens offered by theories such as cooperative community and problem-based learning we can begin to see how particular cultural sites such as the circus respond to such ongoing challenges. Through such responses they demonstrate a teaching and learning practice that ensures their endurance long beyond the lives of individual members.

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