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ABSTRACT

In Australia, the two principal streams of emancipatory adult education have been focused on the liberal tradition of freedom from traditional social and religious constraints through learning and on having suppressed groups understand and overthrow the conditions of their oppression. Australians appear to be having difficulty coping with the 1990s--a period of radical social, cultural, political, economic, and technological change. The movement of adult education toward an ethos of personal growth has been hindered by a strong developing governmental view that education should meet government priorities for an educated work force and reduced unemployment figures. The view that suggests that education for disadvantaged people should be the only priority for spending in adult education ignores some important elements that are becoming apparent in the postmodern world. Two of those are that this is a high risk society and that the essential means of understanding the self are now changing dramatically. The vocational world is becoming inherently unstable and not only new skills but new attitudes are required to sustain coherence and stability. To price adults out of education is shortsighted and risks being highly discriminatory. Social life is also inherently unstable. Adult education gives people opportunities through which they can create and recreate their futures. Life planning is a good example of the construction of meaning through adult education. It suggests that life is about options and choices; it is about providing one's own anchors. (YLB)

Adult Education, Postmodernity and a Future? An Australian Experience

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Introduction

Not long before he startled America by choosing to retire from the Chicago Bulls, Michael Jordan was given a unique accolade. He was acknowledged in the Australian media as the best known sports figure in Australia. This might not surprise Americans given the massive hype that surrounded Jordan in North America. It certainly surprised a lot of Australians, many of whom had never heard of Jordan prior to this distinction. It is an unusual world we are living in when an American playing a sport that has essentially been a minor one in my country, and playing outside Australia at that, should be better known than home grown athletes playing more familiar and traditional sports such as cricket, tennis, rugby and Australian rules football.

My point in introducing this story about Michael Jordan is not to dwell on sport. It is to remind us yet again of the globalisation of world culture brought about essentially through two factors: the impact of mediated experience, the increasing reliance we as human beings have on indirect experience to form who we are and what we believe, and the ever-increasing impact of the international media in doing that. For Michael Jordan is really only known in Australia through television commercials, replays of American basketball games, including the Barcelona Olympics, and a myriad of commercial paraphernalia, including swap cards, stickers, breakfast cereal box giveaways, wall posters and sports gear that are part of the commodification of capitalism worldwide. To my knowledge he has never been to Australia. This is indeed an unusual world we are living in and some of its features and their relevance to adult education in Australia is what I want to talk about today.

Adult Education in Australia

But first I would like to give you a background to adult education in Australia with which many of you will not be familiar. As with several of its other social and cultural institutions, Australia imported much of its early adult education structure and functions from Great Britain. Mechanics institutes in Australia in the 19th century were similar to their British progenitors; the university extension system and the connection with workers' education in the early 20th century were essentially taken from British models. This is not surprising. Australia was a British colony and its destiny until relatively recently was bound up with that of Britain. Australians are only now in the 1990s beginning to have our own war of independence as we consider the possibility of becoming a republic. It has more the appearance of a civil war, however, as Britain shows little or no real interest in the issue whereas Australians are becoming very excited and tending to fall into two very opposed camps

Adult education in Australia early on adopted a quite emancipatory tone. This was also consistent with its origins in Britain which were synonymous with the rise of the labour

movement and socialism. The emancipatory flow of adult education tended to follow two main streams. The first was emancipation from the control of myth, magic and prejudice, the freedom from traditional social and religious controls thus encouraging personal and societal transformation to take place. The second stream concerned itself with issues of justice, equity and participation, the attempt to free suppressed groups through learning that would enable them to understand and break whatever shackles bound them. Much of this approach was based on a marxist analysis and usually emphasised class distinctions, although this stream of thought has never been as strong in Australia as it was in Britain. Latterly this form of work has come to incorporate concerns for other repressed groups as well, particularly women. These streams promoting the emancipation of the individual and the emancipation of the social group, although I have identified them separately, were not, however, that exclusive in operation.

The liberal tradition of adult education certainly provided the theoretical underpinning to much of adult education in Australia. The postwar development of adult education, including that of my own organisation, the Council of Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne which was established in 1947, broadly followed the first stream of the initial distinction that I made earlier. Adult education was about the liberation of people from myth, magic and prejudice, and the promotion of personal growth. The second stream, the emancipation of the working class, tended to fade into the background with the economic success of postwar Australia, a period in which national wealth increased, jobs were easy to find, the level of affluence raised and very few Anglo Celtic people were recognised as disadvantaged. Aboriginal people were not considered in this context at all.

It is interesting to reflect, with hindsight, that this process of freeing individuals from traditional thought and constraints was rarely reflected in course content. The educational curriculum did not suggest that certain things had to be learned in order for liberation to occur. Educators made what could be seen to be fairly optimistic and nebulous assumptions about the emancipatory power of generally traditional subjects such as literature, language, history, philosophy and the other humanist disciplines. The educators' optimism extended to assuming that people wanted to learn about emancipation. Generally from the numbers of enrolments in the 1940s-60s and the changes in content of the programs, it appears that people did not want to know much about emancipation. So as it had done in the past in response to demand, adult education began the drift away from understanding traditional constraints towards a learning that emphasised personal expression and human development as a means to individual growth, which was very much the adult education of the 1970s. Individual growth is still an important factor in the provision of general adult education in Australia in the 1990s although provision has now broadened enormously to cover such things as literacy, basic education and supplementary vocational education as well.

It needs to be said, however, that by the immediate postwar period there was not much in Australian society that had not been subjected to the scrutiny of rational thought and objectivity. We were not a particularly godly or reverent society in the first place. Scepticism, even cynicism about traditional forms of social knowledge and hierarchies are fairly commonplace in Australia. Rough egalitarianism has always been a part of the collective Australian psyche. So the move away from emancipatory learning in that broad sense of challenging the meta-narratives of religion and class was easy to understand.

Yet it was in the 1970s that the other stream of adult education, that one that suggests that it is about justice, equity and participation, began to remerge. Not in the form that it had taken previously, however. This time concerns for justice, equity and participation began to surface

as part of the incipient women's movement, a tendency synonymous with the worldwide concern to reverse the worst features of patriarchy. In adult education this manifested itself particularly through the development of neighbourhood houses, small community drop-in centres, initially in the suburbs of larger Australian cities, that gave form and expression to the needs of women to take control of their lives and develop forms of learning appropriate to their own needs. Adult education in Australia has always had a largely female client base. Neighbourhood houses were just a little different in that they could be considered political as well as educational expressions of 1970's realities for women.

Summary

To summarise so far; there have been two principal streams of emancipatory adult education, one focused on the liberal tradition of freedom from traditional social and religious constraints through learning, the second concentrated on having subjected or repressed groups understand and overthrow the conditions of their oppression. By the 1970s the first of these had adopted a very strong personal development motif and saw adult education as a means to individual growth, the other was strongly concerned with the conscientisation of women. This is not to say that adult education did not have other concerns, it did; neither does this cursory analysis consider the particular structures through which both these strands were developed, which are not as important as the general intention of adult education at the time.

I have taken some time to sketch a fairly rough outline of Australian adult education to the 1970s, derived largely from my understanding of the development of adult education in my home state of Victoria. This overview ignores aspects of the education of adults such as training and vocational preparation and higher education. They were the prerogatives of other sectors of education. The adult education I have covered is largely that of the community-based sector which originated in volunteer community groups which were able to attract some government funds in order to organise learning programs for and on behalf of their communities. The justification for community-based education until quite recently has followed the emancipatory streams outlined. More recently they have also included supplementary education for things such as job skills, self-sufficiency, role education and community development.

I have chosen the 1970s deliberately. It was a watershed decade for Australia. A new federal government was elected replacing the conservative government that had been in power for two decades. It was the decade of the first oil shock. This was the time when inflation went into double digits, when the unemployment figures shifted from their rock bottom stability and began to spiral rapidly upwards. In retrospect, the 1970s was the transition decade from an older Australia, a national community based on a consensus built around cooperative values, to an Australia struggling to find a place within a new world economic order in which competition, not cooperation, was the watchword.

Characteristics of the 1990s

So where is Australia now? Australians appear to be having difficulty coping with the 1990s. And we are not alone. It is a period of radical social, cultural, political, economic and technological change. It is a very unstable period in a personal sense. It is difficult to come to grips with all the changes taking place in the western world, including Australia, changes which include:

- lessening commitment to the postwar communal consensus that sustained Australia through a generation;
- decline of traditional sources of morality and ethics such as the church and family;
- reworking of the concept of family into its many current variants;
- reinterpretation of Australian culture to incorporate multiculturalism;
- the integration of our economy into the global web;
- declining success of Australia's traditional agricultural export base and the exposure of its manufacturing industries to severe overseas competitior
- record unemployment and a high level of internal migratio. .1 search of work and lifestyle opportunities;
- reorientation to being an Asian Pacific nation rather than a Eurocentric country;
- rapid absorption of technological change and takeup of new communications tools;
- changing gender roles, particularly associated with mothers working outside the home; and
- greater recognition of the rights of indigenous people.

There has been very little that has remained untouched in the last 25 years. One pundit went so far as to describe this as the Age of Redefinition (Mackay, 1993)

Adult Education in the Age of Redefinition

What has this meant for adult education in Australia? I would now like to return to the distinction I made beforehand and suggest that the movement of adult education towards an ethos of personal growth has not been an unmixed blessing. If I can sum up the principal difficulty quite quickly it is to say that in moving towards an ethos of personal growth we have begun to detach adult education from its long association with social change. The liberal tradition might have been hard to justify but at least it linked adult education in some way to the improvement of the community. Adult educators could say that their role was to bring about social improvement, the justification for adult education that has been used to pry funds from reluctant governments for years—a matter of ongoing preoccupation to adult educators in Australia.

Personal growth, on the other hand, is harder to relate to social improvement. Certainly education for individual growth can be considered to be a process which moves the individual towards some ideal. This is depicted in Maslow's hierarchy, for instance, where the model has it that we move upward toward self-actualisation or personal perfectibility, a model quite consistent with the overarching narratives of modernity. The last two decades have been a period very much concerned with progress towards some form of ideal whether it be community or individual, although there is now considerable doubt bout the truth and wisdom of such an approach. Yet decision makers are able to say that individual perfectibility is an idiosyncratic venture for people to undertake on their own behalf, that it has more personal than community benefit and, therefore, should not be funded from the public purse. I suspect that this attitude is partly motivated by the belief that this form of personal growth, this pursuit of the self is really seen as an unnecessary add-on, a piece of indulgence, a feature of existence that only comes after the very important issues of shelter, security, work and family are attained and is not really essential. I take exception to this view, which appears to be a misreading of the times and I will return to it later.

Yet connecting social improvement to improving the role and status of women through adult education has been possible, at least for a short time and with those governments for whom such matters were a priority. This in itself is indicative of a major change in political processes

in Australia. The communal consensus that supported Australia through almost a generation after World War Two, one that was by and large supported by all political parties, has broken down. There is no longer quite the depth of commitment to an Australian community as there once was. We no longer appear to believe that our collective and individual futures are interdependent and that what hurts you also discomforts me. Politics is now a far more savage and competitive business in which it is obvious that prosperity for some might well mean poverty for others. But that no longer appears to matter deeply although political rhetoric, as ever, would have it that nothing has changed and everyone will benefit. It does seem, however, that policies are now really developed in order to appeal to short-term outcomes and particular interest groups, not the polity as a whole.

In Australia it has been typically the social democratic governments of the Labor Party at state and federal levels that have supported programs for women. Unfortunately this support for women's education in the conscientisation sense did not last long. It tended to go the same way as literacy education which, while having its modern reemergence in Australia in the emancipatory politics of people such as Freire, soon began to be absorbed into the sphere of vocational education and training. For vocational education and training and the more general reorientation of education towards economic ends has begun to dominate Australian educational thinking, particularly since the relative collapse of our traditional industries and the globalisation and competitiveness of the world economy over the last couple of decades. Moreover governments have recognised the capacity of adult education to deliver on a range of social priorities from literacy, to health, to language acquisition and the acculturation and training of recent settlers in Australia, often but not exclusively women. There is a strong governmental view developing, that education, in a time of high unemployment, economic difficulty and limited resources, should be targeted to special groups and particular outcomes.

A Crisis of Legitimacy?

The end result of these processes is that a wedge has been driven between adult education for personal growth and adult education that meets government priorities; the former is to be paid for by students, the latter predominantly by government. Governments are willing to support adult education that they believe matches their own priorities for training and education, a smart and educated workforce and, hopefully, reduced unemployment figures. They are not so willing to support general adult education as much, for the reasons given previously, thus forcing organisations such as my own to elevate fee levels for such education and make it inaccessible for many people. The future for general liberal adult education in this climate is problematic. The prognosis for it in many countries has been so acute as to provoke adult educators into calling it a crisis of legitimacy.

I believe that this attitude towards general adult education is dangerous. I have no difficulty whatsoever with the notion that disadvantaged people, the unemployed, those on welfare benefits, should be a targeted priority of government. What concerns me is the restricted access of more general adult education to a declining percentage of the population— and quite possibly a particular class of people, those with discretionary money to spend. For I believe that the view that suggests that education for disadvantaged people should be the only priority for spending in adult education ignores some important elements that are becoming apparent in this postmodern world. Two of those are that:

1 this is a high risk society and
2 the essential means of understanding the self are now changing dramatically.

The High Risk Society

Despite claims to the contrary, the modern world, at least in the West, appears to be less physically risky than in other eras and in other places. Nevertheless, life is still a risky business, and the nature of the risks is changing. When many of us here left school, whatever the path we chose probably appeared to stretch towards some golden future, stable, achievable and rewarding, both in a financial and a personal sense. Now that is no longer the case at either a personal or vocational level. The work world is indeed extremely risky when a factory can close down in Germany one day and the very next day open up in what was Czechoslovakia with a smaller number of poorer paid employees. Robert Reich in his book, **The Work of Nations** (Reich, 1993), suggests that any business that is involved in routine production tasks is always at risk from other areas of the world where such work can be done more cheaply. Australia found that out when we lost much of our traditional clothing, textile and footwear industries to overseas' competition after tariff barriers were dropped. But it is not just manufacturing that has been affected. Significant amounts of repetitious insurance work previously done by Americans are now done in Ireland where the wages bill is less. Shannon airport is not far away from the eastern seaboard of the United States of America. Modern telecommunications places Ireland as close as a computer terminal or telephone.

The notion of a career that is ongoing and stable is an anachronism. Jobs, careers, whole industries can disappear almost overnight. New technologies, new ideas, new markets create new demands on workers. People either shape up or ship out. The vocational world is becoming inherently unstable and not only new skills but new attitudes are required in order to sustain coherence and stability. This is as much a problem if you are male or female, a middle-aged account executive, a young futures trader, a building custodian or, indeed, out of work. To continue to claim a place in the paid workforce or sustain an independent income implies continuing watchfulness and an ongoing commitment to learning and relearning; in effect, the continuous reconstruction of the working self.

The working self has to be created and recreated almost on a daily basis in responding to both local and global change. Education is critical to such a process, for this creation of a workstyle can be accomplished as readily through general adult education with its emphasis on short-term programs, flexibility and speed of response as it can be through long term attendance at a two year or four year tertiary institution. By the time one has finished the latter program the career opportunities aspired to might well have vanished. The world is that unstable. Although it is proven that a university degree is a better way to a more secure future than just a high school diploma.

Moreover adult education offers a breadth of learning opportunity not just job-specific skills. This appears to be very important given the fact that Robert Reich, whom I referred to earlier, suggests that there will be new educational qualities prized in the future. These will be such things as abstraction, system thinking, experimentation and collaboration (Reich, 1993: p. 229); qualities that certainly can be taught in schools but also qualities that can and are being pursued in the general adult education courses of today. To suggest that adults will be priced out of such education, the principal means by which the hazards of the working world will be confronted, or indeed that unemployed people will have access only to certain types of learning, and in Australia this usually means basic or introductory skills of particular industries not always stable themselves, is fundamentally shortsighted. It also risks being highly discriminatory if such education is only left to those who can afford it.

But it is not just a matter of work, important as that may be. Social life is inherently unstable as well. Now that the enlightenment project of freeing people from traditional constraints has freed them from just about all other forms of meaning there are no longer any guarantees about the future of such things as interpersonal relationships. Even the presence of children does not appear to be the impediment to marital breakup that it once was. Research evidence in Australia suggests that women are now taking more responsibility for the breakup of intimate relationships than they have in the past and this despite the fact that women still generally have more to lose from such decisions. Taken from the net of the extended family, removed from most social and economic contexts, interpersonal relationships including marriage have to be of direct and immediate value to the parties. This puts a premium on care, communication and constant work if the relationship is to survive—and much of this knowledge and skill can be provided through adult education. Adult educators know that life crises are frequently the stimulus to learning and my own organisation's work in this area has expanded rapidly. I must admit to a rueful smile when I contrasted program guide entries for 1975 and 1993. The early guide included only one relationships course entitled 'Couples in Relationships: Preparing for Marriage' whereas the current guide had many courses under the general heading of interpersonal relationships, three of which were entitled 'Rebuilding Life after Separation or Divorce', 'Single Again' and 'Successfully Single'. That in itself seemed to sum up something significant for me.

Anthony Giddens in his book, **Modernity and Self-Identity** (Giddens, 1991), uses the word 'disembedded' to describe what has happened to traditional institutions and processes in the time of high modernity. (Giddens does not choose to use the word 'postmodern'.) Disembedding is an interesting word which also seems to sum up a lot of what has happened. In disembedding people, in wrenching them away from those concepts that traditionally gave them meaning; class, religion, politics, family, community, nationality, the traditional processes through which the concept of the self is formulated have been taken away.

This is obviously not a process that is absolute and it affects people differently. Many people will continue to operate through the traditional means by which they have always structured and understood their lives. Some may not find that so easy. It is a truism in Australia to say that we now have raised the first generation of young people who may not aspire to the material standards of their parents. More importantly for my argument here they cannot aspire to much at all that made sense to their parents, nor should they want to. Hence the confusion about Michael Jordan that I referred to earlier. The accolade given to Jordan was media inspired and mediated and was principally a response of the young. Older adults with their adherence to nationality and local loyalty could not understand how this could happen. Yet I do not believe that this is simply a generational issue. What seems to be occurring is that the concept of self can no longer be understood as a collection of distinctive traits bestowed by accident of birth and upbringing; it is something that has to be shaped, reshaped and understood in response to individual biographies, unique individual experiences. This is a continuing process. Today's beliefs are tomorrow's jokes. Social structures and institutions are now permanently impermanent, knowledge is only as valid as the next new theory and individuals are very much on their own in responding to such rapid and all-encompassing change.

Again adult education can help people understand and deal with this situation. It not only provides people with information and skills to understand the world but also gives them opportunities through which they can create and recreate their futures. Life planning programs were not a part of the CAE program guide offering ten years ago. Now they take up almost a whole page. In this world, when the construction of the self is much more an individual and daily responsibility, skills such as life planning take on greater meaning and importance. To imply that this form of personal growth education is somehow an indulgent matter, an add-on for the terminally bored, as I have suggested has been the case in the past, is to misunderstand the very different world we are beginning to inhabit and the critical importance of such planning in the development of human beings. To deny people access to such education because they cannot afford the fees is to restrict the capacity of people to create satisfactory lives for themselves. Giddens makes the point in his book that the creation of certain lifestyles in itself is a creation of difference and can mean the reestablishment of new class distinctions. He also makes the point strongly that the creation of lifestyles is not just an opportunity for the well-to-do but is indeed a requirement of all people in this age of high modernity if we are to lead full, meaningful and productive lives.

Life planning is a good example of what I mean by the construction of meaning through adult education. Earlier on I commented that for those of us here who graduated from high school in the 1950s or 60s the future seemed to stretch forward in an inexorable and unwavering fashion. What we did, where we went was largely determined by the gender, class, religion, family or economic system into which we were born. Our future appeared stable at least. That is no longer the case. Young men and women born on farms in Australia grew up expecting that one or more of them could stay on the land. The land itself might be stable these days; nothing else in farming is, and even the land itself is at risk with increased salinity. The number of farmers is dramatically dwindling and offers little hope for the many young people who might have once seen it as an option. And that is but one example. There are many others.

Life planning suggests that life is about options and choices; it is about providing our own anchors, temporary as they might be, in a world in which many of the traditional anchors have been thrown over the side, without the ropes attached. We have to create our worlds anew all the time; we have to maximise our opportunities at any given moment because the stability and predicability that might have been there, no longer exist. Adult learning helps construct meaning through the interests and knowledge it develops as well as through the methods it offers people to explore and create their future. I have a suspicion that the keen interest in genealogy, for instance, a very popular learning program in my own organisation's course guide, is a product of people wanting to find personal grounding in a world in which existing family ties are often tenuous. It is not, as I suspect people often believe, a dilettantish process for older people who have a lot of time on their hands and are interested in exploring their family trees. Learning of this type, learning that helps people find, understand and construct meaning has been a growth area. During the 1970s, course programs in the expressive and creative arts boomed, in the 1980s and the 1990s the growth has been in those sort of courses that can answer questions, provide directions, create understanding and supply meaning.

Conclusion

Australian education is in a period of massive change. The secondary school system in Victoria is adapting to new curriculum designed to prepare people for a new century and a new millennium. The universities and technical training systems are being restructured (or resisting being restructured) into systems closer to the expressed needs of business, industry and the national purpose as determined by government. Adult education is moving from the periphery into the spotlight. It is doing so in what I believe to be a modernist approach to the problems of the late capitalist era; essentially emancipatory programs for disadvantaged people to ease the problems of high unemployment and dwindling business opportunity caused by globalising and internationalising economic systems.

My belief is that we will have to continue with these programs but I am also convinced that adult education is a key to understanding and working with these problems in ways that reflect the current post-modern reality. This is now a high risk world for human beings at a very personal level; it is a world in which traditional anchors and restraints, older defences that protected us against anxiety and despair, are no longer there. Adult education can provide answers. I am not sure yet whether such understanding will secure the funding base for this work in Australia. I am sure that our failure to try to maintain such programs at an affordable level alongside vocational and instrumental education will condemn many people to increasingly barren and meaningless lives. Adult and community education is essential to a productive future.

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