

Social partnerships in learning: Negotiating disenfranchised learner identities

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Abstract: A study of disenfranchised learners in a regional area found that their engagement in formal education was influenced by their learner identities, their perceptions of themselves as learners, and the identity resources on which they draw. Understanding the disconnects between individuals', communities' and educational institutions' assumptions about learning engagement impacted on the types of identities on which learners drew and the efficacy of those identities in negotiating new learning experiences. Developing innovative and successful approaches to engage disenfranchised regional learners in training necessitates effective partnership and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning. Social partnerships in learning frameworks were the key in describing the interactions between agents, they are the interagency and interdisciplinary relationships that enable effective learning in different disciplines, workplaces and training sites. Social partnerships in learning frameworks are used to examine diverse knowledge systems, develop capacity building processes and understand the underlying relationships that facilitate connections, engagement and decision-making between government, non-government, enterprise, community, stakeholders and individuals. This paper will examine disenfranchised learners' identities and the role of learning partnerships in developing strong learner identities and re-engaging regional learners.

Key words: learner (dis)engagement; learner identity; knowledge systems

1. Introduction

Engagement in formal education across the life span is positively associated with better overall health, mental health, income and employment opportunities (Vinson, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2005; Karmel, 2007; Schwab, 1996). Why then do so many people actively reject formal education and the associated benefits? This research asked a number of disenfranchised regional learners this question and particularly focused on the issue of learner identity. The ability to develop and maintain a strong learner identity repeatedly over a lifetime had a direct impact on learning engagement.

Learning identity was described in terms of sense of self as learner, the ability to articulate that identity, the link to the learners' contexts and balance the nexus of identity memberships. Understanding the relationships that are engaged in developing and maintaining an empowered learner identity would benefit learners, teachers and learning partners who are described here as social partnerships in learning. Social partnerships in learning are the relationships that operate across levels, knowledge systems and disciplines that enable effective learning in different disciplines, workplaces and training sites. These frameworks operate at and across all levels, i.e.

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involving individuals, organizations and learning systems, they can be used to redefine learning relationships and develop models of learning that support the re-engagement of disenfranchised learners.

2. Significance

The link between engagement in formal education and long term benefits for health, including mental health, wellbeing, employment and income, has been well established (Vinson, 2007; Karmel, 2007; Schwab, 1996). The alienation and disconnection from formal education have been reasons for disengagement from formal education has been explored by Smyth and Hattam (2005) and Te Riele (2003, pp. 148-150), who note the rigidity of schools systems, negative relationships with teachers, lack of feeling accepted and supported or connection to the curriculum and their own lives impacts on students withdrawing from schools.

It is well recognized that some groups in Western societies do not access the systems that will provide these purported benefits. In the Northern Territory, Australia, there are high levels of disenfranchisement for formal education and training especially for lower socioeconomic including Indigenous and regional groups (ABS, 1998, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; FaCS, 2004). In regional areas, the need for partnerships that incorporate local communities as stakeholders and learning that focus on the identities and workplaces that exist or are developing is essential to share limited resources and embed learning in socially relevant contexts. Billett (2003, p. 66) notes to a limited degree, Australian curriculum development practices in vocational education and training have acknowledged the interests of trainers, assessors, supervisors and students. The key participants of vocational education, their knowledge and expectations are routinely ignored, although their interests and goals have an important role in determining their engagement and success.

Learning transcends classrooms and workplaces, it is “a continuous, cultural process-not simply a series of events...organizational learning is as much about what happens outside formal learning programs as it is about the programs themselves” (Rosenburg, 2001). Developing innovative and successful approaches to training in remote, regional and urban contexts with indigenous and non-indigenous people necessitates effective partnership and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems and identities as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning. Learning sites are not value-free, for example as Billett (2001) notes workplaces as learning sites “are contested terrain” (p. 7) evident in employees and management relationships and bonds based on age, gender, ethnicity, affiliation and bases for employment. It is recognized that the learning context and content references inform individual’s participation in formal learning. In order to look closely at the reasons for this disenfranchisement and to look at possible strategies to overcome it, it is necessary to develop learning profiles of adults with particular emphasis on understanding the collective work of realizing shared goal(s) (Seddon & Billett, 2004). Educational systems that work in partnerships with different knowledge systems and identities have the potential to re-imagine adult education so that it is able to align with workforce and regional community aspirations and understand their informing frameworks.

3. Literature review

By adopting a particular way of working, a particular understanding of knowledge the learner is rejecting or turning aside from other frameworks and this itself is an act of power (Scott, 2001, p. 39).

Learners and their contexts are socially situated. Social aspects of learning include an understanding of the students’ learning community, community membership (as described by Wenger, 1998, p. 149), multiple ways of knowing (e.g. multiliteracies as described by New London Group, 2000), and community priorities. These may challenge the educational institution’s curriculum and the accepted knowledge base. The New London Group (2000,

pp. 10-18) have explored pedagogical approaches that recognize issues related to language, culture and gender to minimize their negative impact on educational success. An important aspect of understanding the contexts in which learners operate, the role and implications of literate practices, means understanding the role of identity in learning.

Mendieta (2003, p. 407) describes identities as continually “constituted, constructed, invented, imagined, imposed, projected, suffered, and celebrated. Identities are never univocal, stable, or innocent. They are always an accomplishment and an endless project and empowering forms of ownership of meaning...”. For Crenshaw (2003), identities as socially constructed, with particular reference to socially constructed notions of gender, race and their impact on identities. Their identities, their knowledge and view of themselves or the way they are identified by others impacts on the way they interact with the literacy domains. In terms of its relationship to learning, Gee (1999) notes “socially situated identity” is to describe the multiple identities that people take on in different practices and contexts while the term core identity is used to describe the continuous and relatively fixed that underlies the contextually shifting multiple identities, “the concept of socially situated identities are mutually constructed and are concerned with situated means, social languages, cultural models and discourses. Discourses cover what has been described as communities of practice, cultural communities, distributed knowledge or distributed systems...” (Gee, 1999, p. 38).

Wenger (1998) discusses identity in practice as a “negotiated experience”, where people are identified by their participation, or lack thereof, in a group, as “community membership”, where people understand what is familiar, or not, as a “learning trajectory”, defined in terms of historical influences. Wenger describes identity in terms of a nexus of membership and is defined by the reconciliation of different types of membership of communities that people have. These communities can be at a local and a global level. The tensions and decisions made about learning and literacy based on identities and identification with social agendas or communities can affect on educational experiences, decisions about involvement in learning and definition as a learner. A range of different practices and contexts are taken up by learners while “identity is used to describe the continuous and relatively fixed that underlies the contextually shifting multiple identities... situated identities are mutually constructed and are concerned with situated means, social languages, cultural models and discourses. Discourses cover what has been described as communities of practice, cultural communities, distributed knowledge or distributed systems, etc” (Gee, 1999, p. 38). Falk and Balatti (2003) observe the link that exists between education and identity, that learners are affected by the ways they understand themselves and understand their identities as learners in relation to education both formal and informal.

Developing innovative and successful approaches to learning in remote and regional contexts with disenfranchised learners necessitates effective partnership and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems as they relate to the worlds of work, community engagement and learning. Social partnerships catalyse and enable change in human or social policy (EU guideline principles, 2004). Social partnerships in learning, then, are the interagency and interdisciplinary relationships that enable effective learning in different disciplines, workplaces and training sites. Social partnerships in learning frameworks are used to; examine diverse knowledge systems, develop capacity building processes and understand the underlying relationships that facilitate connections, engagement and decision-making between government, non-government, enterprise, community, stakeholders and individuals (Wallace, 2008, p. 7).

Seddon and Billett (2004) have described social partnerships as “the localized networks that engage stakeholders in a local area in a network that works on issues and activities of local importance. Effective partnership work embraces and harnesses the contributions of local partners and external agencies, their interactions and the changes

they make in the collective work of realizing shared goals. The processes of working together allow... (c) communities to identify and represent their needs and secure quality partners and partnership arrangements that will enable them to achieve their objectives” and for government and other agencies to support those goals.

By understanding learning as a social activity framed through relationships or partnership, organizational barriers can be addressed. By incorporating learning partnerships into the workplace or classroom through active involvement in learning communities, the possibility of improving learning engagement is increased. This could be by providing catalysts, support for action and effective feedback about outcomes. Effective processes need to group individuals’ areas of interest, ensuring sufficient access to resources, change management, evidence based practice and celebration of success. Learning partnerships concentrate on providing valuable and transformative learning opportunities to create new knowledge, understandings and solutions to problems in the group, rather than the transmission of knowledge and skills (Smith & Blake, 2005).

4. Methodology

The research project undertook a critical ethnographical approach to research. Critical ethnography intends to use knowledge “to speak to an audience on behalf of the subjects as a means of empowering them” rather than speaking for the subjects (Thomas, 1993, p. 4). Freebody (2003) describes critical ethnography as a methodology that aims to make the underlying political impetus and outcomes of educational practice explicit and understand the activities that educational communities and participants might undertake to address these issues. As the researcher is a member of the community participating in the research and articulating the social and cultural influences on the researcher as participant, the notion of reflexivity has been incorporated into ethnographic methodologies. A reflexive approach intends to develop the researcher’s understanding of the objective and subjective interpretations of an event or practice, the social, cultural and historical constructions and educational implications (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003).

The research project was conducted in a regional area of Northern Australia and explored the role of identities in learner engagement in education and training. The study focused on adults in a regional area who are proportionally underrepresented in adult education enrolments and included people from social groups historically disenfranchised from educational institutions. Specifically the research sought to understand for regional learners:

- (1) The ways issues of identity relate to learning engagement;
- (2) Barriers and enablers related to identity that impact active engagement in formal education and training;
- (3) Constructs of identity that support active involvement in formal education and training;
- (4) The ways some adults develop the skills, knowledge and identity resources to effectively engage with and affect change educational institutions;
- (5) Issues that impact on learning and engagement in the workplace and community.

The data was gathered from three representative groups from the region, the participants have varying degrees of formal education engagement across their lives and may not have continued to complete secondary school or post compulsory education or training. Detailed portraits have been developed of fifteen adults’ lifetime learning experiences. The portraits were constructed from interviews with participants about their experiences of learning, learning practices and their relationship to identity resources; both those that are brought to learning and their interpretation through involvement in formal and informal learning. The participants reflect the people who live and operate in the Northern Territory and include men and women are employed or unemployed in professional and

manual work and live in a regional area of the Northern Territory. Participants originate from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Indigenous people, the sample size and construction reflects the demography of the region.

The interview transcripts were used to develop a portrait (Smyth & Hattam, 2004) that profiled each learners' trajectory through formal and informal engagement in learning. This included the learners' context, individual context, community context, educational context, formal and informal educational history in professional learning, and multiliteracies profile. Critical incidents that inform practice: milestones in learning, attitudes to learning, attitudes to self as a learner, preferred ways of learning, relationship to milestones and community, ages, stages and purpose of learning events, and personal reflections.

The completed portraits were used to draw out the common themes and relationships and are described in a mud map based on the notion of a mental map. Ryan and Bernard (2003, p. 266) describe a mental map as a visual display of items that have similarities, these may be organized to demonstrate their links or relationships. The portraits were analyzed thematically through two specific lenses, identity informed by Wenger (1998) and Gee's (2003) identity principles and a social capital analytic framework based on the work of Woolcock (2001) to provide an evaluation of the role of horizontal and vertical linkages as facilitators of learning engagement.

5. Findings

The findings are discussed in terms of the features of Wenger's (1998) understanding of identity in practice as a "negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory", how the conflicts involved are resolved or not through a "nexus of membership" in different communities and in relationship to the "local and global ways of belonging". Identity is being continuously renegotiating through participants' interpretation of themselves in terms of learning events and contexts and their membership with relevant communities. This practice involves negotiating diverse ways of engaging in practice that reflect the participants' individuality, accountability to significant communities, and performance elements that are recognized or not as valid by the relevant communities (p. 155). Participants explored the connection between identity and community membership as an essential part of learners' behavior and practice with the researcher in a number of discussions.

5.1 Learner identity as negotiated experience

Learner identity as negotiated experience, the way people understand themselves through participation and through the perceptions of others. Regional learners described their educational experiences in childhood as an accepted activity that was taken for granted while the activities were not necessarily understood, support for homework and other activities varied considerably. One participant described seeking out an extended family member who showed interest and made space for her interest in learning. As participants moved to secondary education, the content was perceived to be irrelevant and the individuals' realities at home, imagined futures and in their peer groups were not recognized or reflected in the curriculum. Participants described the conflict between the membership of school and family and peer communities increasing over time, although each of the participants saw themselves as a learner and participation in schools became more difficult, most left before completing high school. All participants had a long break from formal education and undertook learning through participation in working and peer communities, including working for the public service, as a ringer (stationhand), as a caregiver and housekeeper, factory worker, labourer, fruitpicker, etc. These roles had an informal apprenticeship system where people developed expertise as a member of a group. The community defined and refined their roles as beginning workers and developing expertise. This was recognized as acceptable by the participants and their families and peer groups, and

the continued involvement was supported in actions and attitudes. Participants describe developing a view of themselves and their capacities in terms of work, learning and family life in relation to these systems.

5.2 Identity as community membership

Identity as community membership, the practices, domains, community and meaning (the social components of learning, Wenger, 1998), that are recognized and affirmed by the participants or not. The practices described positively were strongly influenced by learning from those that are recognized as experts in the community, learning on the job, in the regional area, and through shared activities with others in the community and with increasing complexity as one develops expertise. This expertise is tested through observation by others in the community i.e. laying concrete, driving in difficult conditions or contributing to a shared community event. This is possible in a small community where the lines between social and working relationships are blurred and there a high level of transience between working locations. This is due to seasonal work, casual work, work requiring particular skills, an abundance of work at particular times and employment based on strong community networks. Some of the valued roles included non-participation in reading and writing activities beyond those absolutely necessary for managing everyday life i.e. not participating in reading books, writing letters, using computers, or learning through attending courses. Recognition as having poor literacy was described as an advantage by one participant as it reduced the frequency and kind of requirements of the Department of Social Security. The valued work in the communities in which he participated assumed most people with the required skills may have poor literacy and had systems to manage it in all interactions. Participants who had undertaken literate and formal learning based activities, had developed ways to minimize the perception of their involvement and expertise. Their expertise did not generally increase their community membership as these skills are not valued. This did involve some conflict in identity for participants which was managed in different ways.

5.3 Identity as a learning trajectory

Identity as a learning trajectory, influenced by the past and future of an individual's experiences. Participants described their experiences of completing and leaving schooling, no matter the level in negative terms. Those who completed year 12 ascribed this achievement to the impact and support of their families, or their extended families who valued the activity. One participant described her experiences as very negative as her family/community values were not recognized by the educational system and her family/community did not support her to manage these conflicting perceptions of her as a learner and future community member. As an adult she chose to participate significantly in her children's education to ensure they were supported to be effective learners. A result has been considerable conflict with the education system. As processes of communities that maintain roles and relationships are difficult to challenge and more complex than they initially appear, the impact can be far reaching. Participants valued the qualifications that formal education offered as they related to their role on the community i.e. forklift driving or teacher education. Despite this, although many have shown interest, enrolled or commenced a formal education course, few have fully participated and even fewer completed their studies. Some of the issues included not wanting to attend the educational site as it is confronting, there is no local post compulsory education site. Participants identified marginalizing practices as being tested by people who are not known, trusted or recognised as expert, lack of support to take time and energy to study, lack of understanding in the community about the expectations and content of study, active intervention by community members to impede study. These issues are related to negative experiences of education in the past, the community's negative perception of those involved in formal education and the normative behavior of groups.

5.4 Identity as a nexus of membership

Identity as a nexus of membership, the ways people reconcile the different types of membership as they relate to an individual. Some participants had successfully negotiated their involvement in formal educational opportunities. One described the formal educational institution as irrelevant and had developed a duplicate support system including human and physical resources in their local social community using the local institutions and expertise. For example, she has access to a library by identifying all of the professionals and organizations that have relevant books and journals and negotiating their support for her study. She has strong relationships and standing in the community as a lifetime and valued member and has the efficacy to negotiate this support and deviation to the accepted behavior. Participants described facing a crisis in their identity as a reason for participating in study; needing a change of lifestyle as the norm is perceived as destructive; needing a change of occupation as physical work relies on physical health while jeopardizing it and needing to support extended family members. Only when the desire to participate in formal learning becomes, and can be articulated, as a need did participants develop ways to reconcile their identities as learners. This was true even when there is a desire to get a qualification to improve pay and to have skills recognized. When this is a desire, not a need, participants were reluctant to challenge their identities and be involved in the associated learning opportunities. The participants who had managed this had developed a discourse about their learning practices that is gender, cultural and age-specific in relation to the community, they also articulated the ways they were applying the knowledge to the community context in approved roles and practices.

5.5 Identity in relation to the local and global

Identity in relation to the local and global, ways of having local membership in a community through relating to the global practices and profile of the broader group. The community groups in which participants had membership, generally accepted stereotyped views about people who learn through formal as opposed to informal education processes, i.e. those that learn through books from teachers as opposed to those who learn through activity and from recognized local experts. People who learn through formal education were perceived to have inferior knowledge as their learning was perceived to be theoretical and to give them the authority over others. People who learn locally are perceived to have a deep practical understanding that can be applied to a variety of settings, the types of contexts that currently exist and assessed by those with the appropriate knowledge. These people know and have earned their place in the community and workplace, even if granted a place of authority as a result of the learning. Participants identify their involvement in learning as similar to that of people who live in other regional farming areas and in opposition to urban based communities. This is evident in a focus on family and community participation and maintenance over individual or career focuses goals.

6. Discussion

Deep learning requires the learner being willing and able to take on a new identity in the world, to see the world and act on it in new ways (Gee, 2007, p. 172).

It is not enough to be able to talk about an idea, as Gee (2004, 2007) has noted, situated understanding implies a word or concepts being in relation to a specific context or situation, while verbal understanding of words implies an ability to explicate one's understanding in terms of other words or general principles, but not necessarily an ability to apply this knowledge to actual situations (Gee, 2007, p. 113). So how do learners take their feeling and description of their learner identity and enact it. Learners' identities are informed and impacted on by a range of identities and the community memberships. The ways that participants responded to, managed, and resolved the inherent tensions in the nexus of membership, in their own learner identity, had an impact on the

outcomes from engagement or disengagement in education.

The findings have shown that the participants who had achieved their learning goals, had clearly identified outcomes expected from involvement in formal education, a strong sense of self as learners, were able to articulate that identity to themselves and others had a range of resources on which to draw to manage their learning engagement when things were difficult. They were able to manage the range of identities within which they had or rejected membership. This nexus of membership was defined through the creation and negotiation of their learner identities. This alignment of membership was complex and difficult, students who achieved their learning goals were able to manage this alignment of members in order to face challenges, deal with complexity and take risks.

Learner engagement challenged learners' to assess and draw on their own learner identities. When those learner engagement events, and everything that was experienced within them, was closely aligned to and were reflected by their current learner identity, their understanding of themselves as learners in relation to that experience, it reflected the consistency of their networks, learners were able to manage challenges and maintain the equilibrium of their learner identities without drawing on a range of resources. When the learner event challenged the learner's current learner identity and its informing frameworks, they experienced discomfort and referred to their identities for support.

Those who had been unsuccessful in achieving their formal learning goals or had chosen to reject formal education did not have a strong sense of themselves as learners. They did not demonstrate strong self talk to manage difficulty, and when faced with the choice of succeeding by conforming with the educational institution opposition to their own community affiliations, they chose to remain a member of their existing communities. They did not have the resources to draw on, the language to describe their conflict, the networks to help inform that change or understand the processes with learning identities and their relationships with a range of institutional and community identities. Learners had persisted until the stress of managing the alignment of their identity membership was greater than the need for the achieving the educational goal. Learners actively made the choice to withdraw from formal learning as the risk to their identity was too great and the potential reward too small.

When people made the transition from one sort of identity to another, they could manage the risk taking and the difficulties that had previously presented their learning engagement. In this way, they had developed the capacity to manage their learner and other identities. Participants' sense of self as learners, their learner identities as defined by themselves and others, i.e. their networks were described in relation to their engagement in learning. Learners described their identity in terms of their informing networks, their experiences and self efficacy. Learners who were empowered, are able to sustain their engagement in learning through challenges to their learning experiences were able to describe the learner identities on which they drew to address those challenges.

Social partnerships in learning frameworks can help build an understanding of ways to develop flexible and porous boundaries that increase inclusion, recognize the diverse knowledge systems that operate and more importantly understand their interaction to make powerful connections and alliances between groups and knowledge. This does not mean everyone agrees but that stakeholders understand and are able to work in complex environments. Importantly while educational institutions are good at acquiring and developing new knowledge, there is a need to do better at connecting this to lifelong approaches to learning and local contexts. A connected approach to learning assists in understanding and negotiating ways to work through difficulty, take advantage of opportunities, manage change in capacity poor environments and build sustainability and formalize flexible partnerships.

Social partnerships in learning provide a framework to establish and explore learner identities, coproduction of knowledge, representations of ideas, the contexts within which they exist and the rules that govern their use.

This does not mean that all parties agree but rather there is framework within which to discuss ideas from a range of perspectives and appreciate others' view as valid. The institutional view is not necessarily the only valid one and a range of perspectives can coexist to be examined and understood, rather than reinforcing the dominant view. This allows a space for learners to resolve the nexus of their membership in different learner identities as a student in an unknown field, a mentor in the workplace, a member of a regional community and a global professional body. A framework then provides a series of threads to move between ideas and their connections, as the learner deems important, rather than following the preset and approved learning acquisition route.

7. Conclusion

What could this mean for learners, particularly disenfranchised learners? Learning concepts and pedagogies are linked to the students perceptual frameworks, there is a space in which to explore ideas and their connections to learners' identities, the learners previous experience is not only valued it informs the learning process formally. It may be more appropriate to start learning from experience and link to a range of other experiences before considering the theoretical frameworks that help in articulating and discussing this experience. A range of learner identities are recognized as valid, individuals may adopt, explore and reject these at any time and repeatedly. This is part of the learning process and classes may have to change direction, stop for a time or provide a range of options which are more different from each other than just to topic or context. The inter-agency, institutional, personal, community relationships are overtly recognized and discussed as part of growing understanding about the world. These are complex and difficult and rather than seeking resolution, provide a rich source of understanding what is happening, why and how it may evolve.

In this model, learners, particularly disenfranchised learners, have a chance to explore ideas, practice articulating their ideas and have the space to change their position completely and regularly. By developing a sense of self as a competent learner who has agency and has an impact on the learning context and content, learners have the chance to become the centre of their learning experience and be able to negotiate a range of learning institutions. Learning is based in generation of the performative before competence, it starts from learners and encourages formal customization of the curriculum—as a way to include and represent diversity, multiple identities, continually negotiated nexus of membership and multiliteracies. Activities have strong elements that reflect students' strengths such as oracy, spatial relations, visual representations, regional contexts and communities.

Teachers participate as active participants in learning and guides to support learners to make connections and practise articulating their own ideas in relation to others. Teachers facilitate and support disenfranchised learners to develop an empowered identity as a learner. Co-trainers and assessors could be based in the communities in which learners identify. Their expert knowledge of context and content can assist in deepening knowledge a particular practice and support rigorous assessment of outcomes in situ.

This approach might best be exemplified in video gaming where as Gee (2003) notes, learners direct their learning, are able to repeat parts as often as they choose, learning has consequences that are personal to the learner, learning is linked to a range of global and local communities, experimentation is encouraged, learning is highly customized and responsive and has inherent rewards. In this way learners are engaged in their own learning, act as co-producers of knowledge and building connections to their own and others' knowledge and skills as they see fit and when they are ready.

The learners identities of disenfranchised regional learners impacts on their ongoing engagement in formal

education, despite the long term advantages. Their decision to reject formal education is linked to the gap between their communities' memberships and those of educational institutions. Social partnerships in learning frameworks provide a model for understanding the gap between multiscalar, multi disciplinary and multicultural knowledge systems. Utilizing a social partnerships in learning model in education that explicitly promotes understanding the links across systems and provides ways to explore and experiment with different learner identities and knowledge systems with safety. In this model, different forms of knowledge are part of a rich tapestry where knowledge is valued within its context and for a purpose. Learners and teachers are involved in co-production of knowledge that references their experience and makes links to other forms of knowledge. Social partnership in learning then have a role in developing strong learner identity and re-engaging regional learners in formal education that meets their purposes.

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