

# **Is adult & community education for active citizenship important for community engagement by government?<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article builds on a previous submission to the government's Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector. It reviews the very long history of adult and community education (ACE) for active citizenship. It illustrates some ways in which ACE organizations and groups have contributed to attempts by the state and its agencies to engage with the citizens, communities, groups and organizations of civil society. It also identifies some factors which affect these projects and highlights the important role played by ACE organizations and groups in many past engagements.

The article points to benefits of ACE for active citizenship and argues that the involvement of ACE organizations and groups should be extended. For this to happen the nature of these contributions need to be better understood, more widely recognised and more adequately resourced. ACE for active citizenship could make an even greater contribution to democracy in the future than it has made in the past.

**Key Words:** Adult Education; Community Education; Active citizenship; Democracy; The State and Civil Society; Community Engagement by Government; Adult Education for Active Citizenship.

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# **Is adult & community education for active citizenship important for community engagement by government?**

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## **Background**

In December 2008 a discussion paper entitled 'It's more than Talk' was published by the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector (OCVS) in the Ministry of Social Development. It set out 'options for building knowledge, skills and values about effective community engagement within the public service', and invited community organizations and citizens to give their views on how government agencies could better involve them in policy and social development. With this in mind people were invited to join an online discussion on [www.bangthetable.com/BBGE](http://www.bangthetable.com/BBGE) and/or participate in a series of regional seminars and/or make a formal submission.

The paper was the work a group entitled the Building Better Government Engagement (BBGE) Reference Group established by the OCVS in March 2008 to report to that agency on priorities for government action to strengthen engagement with citizens and community organizations in policy and service development. The group comprised ten people drawn from local and central government, NGOs and community organizations. It included some members who have been active in adult and community education (ACE) over the years.

The OCVS itself had been established in 2003 as one step in the government's 'move towards a more respectful community-government relationship' in which

'the state performs its role as a facilitator of a strong civil society based on respectful relationships between government and community, voluntary and iwi/Māori organizations.' (Statement of Government Intentions for an Improved Community-Government Relationship, 2001).

## **Introduction**

This article is based on a submission which I made on 31 March 2009 to the BBGE Reference Group referred to above. It came as some surprise to me that the discussion paper contained no reference to ACE. The main purpose of my submission and hence of this article, therefore, is to draw attention to the important role which can and

should be played by a range of adult and community education (ACE) organizations and groups in building on the processes of community engagement advocated by the reference group. I argue that this could be achieved through the more widespread provision of adult and community education for active citizenship and the allocation of more resources to ACE organizations and groups for this purpose.

For the purpose of my submission and for this article adult & community education for active citizenship is defined as those ACE programmes which are ‘intended to promote, inform, analyse, critique, challenge, or raise public consciousness about public policies or issues’ (Tobias, 2000). ACE organizations and groups include schools, polytechnics, universities, WEAs, community centres and a very wide range of community groups. Many but not all of these organizations and groups currently receive some state funding for their ACE contributions. However adult and community education for active citizenship is not specifically funded by the state and only a limited number of organizations and groups contribute to ACE for active citizenship.

### **Summary of the discussion paper**

As mentioned previously, the discussion paper sets out to provide ‘options for building knowledge, skills and values about effective community engagement within the public service’. It invites community organizations and citizens to give their views on how government agencies could better involve them in policy and social development. The discussion paper aims to develop a plan of action and priorities for building skills, knowledge and values in the public service leading to effective engagement with citizens and communities. does make a number of statements which point the way. It seeks to identify steps towards a vision where:

‘Central government engages effectively with citizens and communities, recognising the interdependence of government and communities in achieving the best outcomes for society.’ (Building Better Government Engagement Reference Group, 2008: 7)

Underpinning the discussion paper is the assumption that citizens, communities and the organizations they set up, have a right to contribute to defining the problems and decisions that affect them. It states:

‘Citizens and community organisations are aware of issues that impact on their communities, such as economic downturn and violence, and contemporary concerns like climate change and peak oil. Localised initiatives .. indicate a desire by citizens to work together to directly influence and shape their

communities.’ (Building Better Government Engagement Reference Group, 2008: 8)

The focus of the reference group is on identifying ways and means of increasing the commitment and capacity of government agencies to engage with communities. It states that the core issue is that:

‘Central government agencies are not yet sufficiently committed to, and skilled at, collaborating with citizens and community organisations in order to jointly tackle societal problems. (Building Better Government Engagement Reference Group, 2008: 11)

The group suggests that this core concern manifests itself in relation to a number of issues. These include the culture of government and the low level of organisational commitment to community engagement within many government agencies; pressures and constraints on public servants including gaps in their knowledge of engagement processes; limited training opportunities to enable public servants to develop their knowledge and skills in community engagement; and a lack of monitoring and evaluation.

The group states that there are many different forms of engagement by government and its agencies, and that not all of them require the same level of public involvement. These levels of engagement range from gathering information and one-off consultations on specific issues to setting up broader collaborative procedures, partnerships and mechanisms for community decision-making. It points out that at the most devolved level of engagement, ‘government takes a backseat role and supports community-based decision-making.’

‘The future challenge for government is to know when and how to work in the space of collaboration, partnering and support for community decision-making, to achieve joint decisions and community empowerment’ (p 11).

The group highlights a number of current projects and practices to illustrate some possibilities and then proceeds to suggest a number of steps that could be taken to reinforce government and organisational commitment within the public service. These include the development of more effective training and the provision of other resources and forms of encouragement and support for staff in this area. Finally a brief note is made that attention may need to be given to ‘building community capacity’.

### **Commentary, critique and an historical perspective on ACE**

From the point of view of someone who is committed to the promotion of education

for active citizenship there is much to commend and support in the discussion paper. For example, in expressing its hopes for greater government commitment to community engagement, the paper proclaims

‘... the value of participatory democracy on the basis that effective government engagement with civil society will result in improved outcomes for society’ (Building Better Government Engagement Reference Group, 2008: 11).

Moreover the paper includes references to a number of activities, resources, websites, case studies and other ideas which could encourage and help government agencies to engage more effectively with their communities.

In spite of this the paper does have some important gaps and limitations. This is of course entirely appropriate since, as we have seen, it was intended to promote and stimulate discussion and debate.

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of this article is to draw attention to the important role which can and should be played by a range of adult and community education (ACE) organizations and groups in building on the processes of community engagement advocated by the reference group. The discussion paper pays little if any attention to this and there is no reference to adult and community education for active citizenship. My main aims here therefore are (1) to highlight some of the ways in which ACE organizations and groups in the past have made such contributions and (2) to suggest some ways in which ACE for active citizenship could be promoted more effectively in the future.

There is a long history of involvement by ACE organizations and groups in adult and community education for active citizenship (Tobias, 1999). Some of this involvement has taken place as part of a community engagement process initiated by government or an agency of government, while some has been initiated by community or ACE organizations and groups. A distinction has been drawn between popular and partnership forms or modes of ACE (Groombridge, 1983). Popular forms are those in which all key decisions are in the hands of the participants and partnership forms are those in which the key decisions are made by negotiation between the learners and the organisers or teachers

At a popular level this history goes back to pre-colonial times as well as the early colonial period (Dakin, 1978; , 1980). In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century popular forms of ACE for active citizenship were

associated with the fight for survival of the Tangata Whenua and the revival of Maoritanga following its near-destruction by the forces of colonisation over the previous fifty years (Walker, 2004). They were also closely associated with the temperance movement and the rise of the women's movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and in particular the achievement of women's franchise in 1893 (Bunkle, 1980). They were also closely associated with the rise of labour movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The depression years of the 1930s also saw the widespread emergence of popular forms of ACE for active citizenship. These included study-groups, discussion groups and debates on economic and political issues. Keith Sinclair notes that, 'Marx, Keynes, the Russian Revolution, the 'New Deal', were scrutinised from every angle, not merely in academic institutions, but at trade union and farmers' meetings, and in the clubs and pubs'(Sinclair, 1980: 264). In addition, from the 1920s such organizations as the National Council of Women, the Country Women's Institute and the Women's Division of Federated Farmers were also involved in ACE for active citizenship.

At the partnership level there is also a long history of ACE for active citizenship dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Early forms included debating societies associated with various organizations including Mutual Improvement Societies (Dakin, 1986). The First WEAs were formed in New Zealand in 1915 and from the outset part of their mandate was to engage in adult education for active citizenship. In addition ACE work for active citizenship also undertaken by the community school in Oxford from the late-1920s and in the 1930s through the community centre in Fielding. A special focus of these initiatives was on community development.

From the 1940s to the 1970s a number of Maori and Pakeha organizations were involved in ACE for active citizenship. Between 1939 and the 1960s a succession of Young Maori Leaders' Conferences as well as such organizations as the Maori Women's Welfare League had a clear focus on ACE for active citizenship with a particular focus on community development and public issues and policies faced by Maori at the time (Walker, 2004). The WEAs also maintained their involvement and the Regional Councils for Adult Education established in 1948 and based on the university colleges contributed to a wide range of adult education provision including ACE for active citizenship.

From the late-1960s, and on into the 1970s and 1980s a number of new social movements emerged and some older ones re-emerged to engage in various forms of ACE for active citizenship. These included the peace movement, the anti-apartheid movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement, some sections of the labour movement, the renewal of the struggles of the Maori people for the recognition of their rights, charismatic religious movements, parent and pre-school education movements, cultural groups and beneficiaries rights groups. Many of these groups and movements became closely engaged with government agencies and had a significant influence on government. On occasions they made links with or were sponsored or supported by educational institutions or were funded for educational projects by state departments other than education, such as Maori Affairs, Internal Affairs and the Health Department, as well as by local authorities.

Much of this engagement with government and its agencies was initiated by community groups and voluntary organizations. However, as indicated earlier, there is also a long history of government and its agencies taking the initiative and seeking to engage with citizens and communities by working alongside or drawing on the strengths of ACE organizations. One of the most often cited examples of this kind of engagement took place as far back as 1974. Internationally the early 1970s was a period of ferment in thinking about educational policy, and a number of international agencies produced reports promoting new ideas about lifelong learning (Council for Cultural Co-operation, 1971; Faure, 1972; OECD, 1973). In New Zealand a Committee of the NZ National Commission for UNESCO had presented a report promoting its own version of lifelong education (Simmonds, 1972).

This was followed up in 1974 when the government, acting through its Advisory Council on Educational Planning (ACEP), set up an Educational Development Conference (EDC). The aim of the EDC was to engage the widest possible level of public participation in an examination of (1) the aims and objectives of education in New Zealand, (2) its organization and administration, and (3) issues of teaching and learning. Thousands of copies of reports, summaries of reports and other materials were made available for distribution to hundreds of discussion groups around the country, and in each region university extension or adult education departments or regional sub-committees were appointed as organisers. These regional organisers were responsible for organising and servicing the discussion groups, forums, public

lectures, seminars, radio talks and newspaper articles in each region. The views of the groups and seminars were sought, and thousands of submissions were collated in regional reports and then channelled to Wellington for collation into a national report. It seems that some 60,000 people took part in the exercise (Boshier, 1979; Williams, 1978). This constituted about 1 in every 15 adults or something over 7% of the entire adult population at the time.

I have not been able to identify any similar forms of engagement in which ACE organizations have been recruited by government agencies facilitate or organise consultation processes and procedures since that time. Nevertheless some ACE organizations have continued to contribute in various ways to adult education for active citizenship and the formation of state policies. My own research on adult education for active citizenship in Christchurch in the 1980s and early 1990s (Tobias & Henderson, 1996; Tobias, 2000) highlighted, among other things, the substantial roles played by the University of Canterbury and the Canterbury WEA as well as the smaller roles played by secondary schools, other tertiary institutions and other voluntary organizations and community groups. It also drew attention to the different roles played by educational institutions, ACE voluntary organizations and special interest organizations, and it found that the overall number of programmes had increased over the period from 1983 to 1991. Finally it found that overall the most programmes dealt with social policy issues, followed by health and disabilities, economics, employment and trade unions, gender, peace and violence, and biculturalism and racism. Fewer programmes in that period dealt with the environment, education, the media, party political issues, local and regional issues and international affairs.

Despite the significant contributions especially of the University of Canterbury and the Canterbury WEA the research also identified important constraints on both organizations. The success of programmes of adult education for active citizenship cannot be taken for granted. The mounting of most such programmes is labour-intensive and requires considerable knowledge and skill on the part of educators as well as the confidence, resources and support necessary to allow for co-operation between various groups and organizations. The WEA had very little funding during most of the period covered by this research, and the study found little evidence of systematic planning of such programmes in the University with the offering of such

programmes dependent 'largely on the interests and commitments of individual staff members'(Tobias, 2000: 427).

## **Reflections**

In this article I have drawn attention to the important role which has been played by ACE organizations and groups in the processes of engagement between the state and its agencies and the citizens, communities, groups and organizations of civil society.

Drawing on historical data I have pointed out that ACE organizations and groups have had a very **long history** of involvement in adult and community education for active citizenship. I have illustrated some of the ways in which these organizations and groups have contributed in the past to engagement processes and to the development of policy through adult and community education for active citizenship. This engagement has taken place with a wide range of agencies of central, regional and local government.

Attention has been drawn to two distinctions which characterise consultation or engagement projects. These distinctions concern:: (1) the **initiation** of projects (with some being government initiated and others being initiated by community or citizen groups ), and (2) the locus of **control** of the agenda or 'curriculum' (with the agenda in 'popular' projects being controlled primarily by groups and voluntary organizations and in other 'partnership' projects).

Reflections on the historical data suggest a third set of important factors which have a significant effect on engagement projects and programmes but which have not been addressed adequately in this article. These are the wide range of **contextual factors**, and in particular issues such as those of class, gender and race and those which concern the power of the group/s and participant/s involved in any particular project or programme. Further research and action is needed to address these issues if the aims of the reference group are to be achieved.

In this article I have described briefly a number of projects of engagement initiated by community or ACE organizations and group; secondly, as an example of a government initiated project I described the Educational Development Conference of the mid-1970s - one of the largest consultative/ACE initiatives ever undertaken in Aotearoa. It would seem that a very wide range of special interest groups, voluntary organizations and social movements have been involved in popular forms of ACE for

active citizenship over the years. With regard to partnership forms of ACE, it seems that the most significant contributions at least in Christchurch in the 1980s and early 1990s were made by the Canterbury WEA and the University of Canterbury. My impression is that these two organizations continue to dominate the partnership forms of ACE for active citizenship. However it seems that other organizations also continue to make significant contributions from time to time.

This article has not addressed in detail the constraints and limitations which have inhibited the development of ACE for active citizenship in the past. Nevertheless some issues have been identified. Currently it seems that the state has very limited understanding of ACE for active citizenship and the potential contributions of ACE organizations and community groups to active citizenship and community engagement on policy issues. For this and other reasons the resources available for ACE for active citizenship are limited. Every effort should therefore be made by ACE practitioners to promote this greater understanding as well as wider recognition of the importance of ACE for active citizenship and its legitimation.

For this to happen, however, ACE practitioners themselves need to become more aware and more skilled in ACE for active citizenship. More should be done to support those who are currently involved in active citizenship programmes as well as encouraging and offering incentives to those groups and organizations which are not currently involved. In addition, more professional development opportunities be made available not only for ACE practitioners but also for government officers with responsibilities for community engagement to enable them to increase their knowledge and skills in relation to adult and community education for active citizenship.

Finally more research is needed. At an empirical level a wide range of investigations is needed. These include investigations of the extent and nature of various forms of engagement, the characteristics of participants in various kinds of projects and programmes and their successes and failures. In addition, more attention also needs to be given to theoretical issues including theorising the nature of ACE for active citizenship and its role and position in relation to the state and its agencies under various political and economic conditions and its place in civil society.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have drawn attention to the important role which can and should be played by ACE organizations and groups in the processes of engagement between the state and its agencies and the citizens, communities, groups and organizations of civil society. This role needs to be very much more widely recognised and legitimated, and its benefits more clearly understood. These benefits include a better informed citizenry with increasing numbers of people being likely to take part in and contribute to the processes of engagement.

The article reviews the very long history of ACE for active citizenship. It illustrates some ways in which ACE organizations and groups have contributed to attempts by the state and its agencies to engage with the citizens, communities, groups and organizations of civil society. It also highlights the important role played by ACE organizations and groups in many past engagements.

Drawing on this history the article identifies four sets of factors which may affect community engagement and active citizenship projects: (1) the level of government involved (central, regional and local); (2) the source of initiation of the project (initiated by government or by community or citizen groups); (3) the locus of control of the agenda or 'curriculum' (with the agenda in 'popular' projects being controlled primarily by groups and voluntary organizations and in other 'partnership' projects); and (4) contextual factors (including issues arising out of class, gender, race and the power of the group/s and participant/s involved in any particular project or programme).

In the article I have argued that more resources need to be made available for ACE programmes for active citizenship both by government and its agencies and by ACE organizations some of which do not recognise the importance of the field. I have also argued that further research is needed. Adult and community education for active citizenship could make an even greater contribution to democracy in the future than it has made in the past.

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