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An age of endarkenment? Can adult education still make a difference?[1]

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Adult education has the power to change lives, and in Australia has always been made up of educators and providers capable of adapting to the changing environments around them. Today, however, there is declining support for adult education at a time when there is growing public disenchantment with the political system, an uncivil public discourse, technological disruption and well-grounded fear for our environmental sustainability. This makes the challenge for adult education to meet the varying needs of adult learners more difficult. How might we think of adult education and learning for today's challenging times?

To begin I want to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the Indigenous owners of the land where we meet and pay my respects. I learnt from listening to Welcomes to Country about personal connection to the land, about how integral the acknowledgement of forebears and country is to identity. Those who welcome acknowledge their past in order to locate themselves in the present. It is such an important lesson for all of us.

[1] This paper is based on an address presented as the George Shipp Memorial Lecture WEA – Sydney in November 2019.

I have been working in adult education for over 25 years now. I've worked in policy and administration in the public service; as the Director of Adult Learning Australia in an advocacy role; and then in two Universities teaching adult educators and researching in the broad field of adult learning. For a decade during that period I was also a Board member of my local Community College. I recently retired from full-time work but continue to write and do some casual teaching, but also, I am now a regular participant in short courses in areas including film making, photography, history, needlework, and travel writing.

I was asked to speak tonight about adult education today and to consider where it stands and whether it is positioned to continue to make a difference. To do so is to tell a mixed story.

I want to say three things:

1. These are difficult times for adult education. But simultaneously there are inspiring examples of the power of community education – as there always have been in Australian adult education.
2. Is government policy, and our own thinking about what adult education is today, fit to meet the needs and challenges of our world?
3. And finally to consider the above in the context of some history.

Looking back

In 2019, there were two significant centenary anniversaries that are important in the history of adult education. They both emerged in the aftermath of World War I and the need to rebuild societies devastated by war.

a) In 1919 the UK Ministry of Reconstruction was given the task to report on what would be needed for Britain's future. We face some crises today but the challenge confronting Britain then was immense. Yesterday's 101st anniversary of the Armistice could have reminded us that in Britain 14 per cent of the entire population had been mobilised; 6 per cent of the population had been killed or wounded; 2.2 per cent of the population (mostly the young men of the land) had been killed.

   The Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee published its report titled *The 1919 Report* (UK Ministry of Reconstruction, 1919, see also Stanistreet, 1919, and Centenary

Commission on Adult Education, 2020). It was hugely important. It lifted its gaze above the immediate to consider how education could contribute to 'national life with a more durable foundation'. It could easily have adopted the view that skill development and physical infrastructure were the immediate and sole need. Yet it saw the goal of education as being 'citizenship' – 'the rights and duties of each individual as a member of the community; and the whole process must be the development of the individual in relation to the community'. It advocated that 'every assistance should be given to voluntary organisations, so that their work ... may be developed and find its proper place in the national education system'. Technical education while 'necessary and beneficial' and an integral part of the educational system' was not to be thought of as 'an alternative to non-vocational education', which it considered a 'universal need'. It made many other arguments but of particular importance was the view that adult education was 'an activity indispensable to the health of democratic societies'.

b) In Europe, the Weimar Republic, the short-lived attempt at democracy in Germany between the end of World War I and the ascent of Hitler's Nazis in 1933, was born. The 1919 Weimar Constitution made adult education a key component of a comprehensive education system, alongside formal school and higher education. The German adult education centres that emerged, the Volkshochschulen, were 'open to all citizens' and seen as places crucial to democracy, where 'people with different and conflicting interests, values and attitudes can deal with important social developments, negotiate compromises and find solutions for their coexistence.'

In both cases they were looking to create societies that could deal with the dislocation of the war but on the foundations of strong civil societies and a deeper democracy. And both occurred just five years after the WEA was founded in Sydney by Albert Mansbridge, who had been one of the key committee members of the 1919 UK Report.

A short detour – a story

I live in inner-west Sydney, and for 10 years I was on the Board of the Sydney Community College (SCC). Its local area includes the suburb of Balmain. Back in 1865 the Balmain Workingmen's Institute was founded

– for the *moral, social, and intellectual improvement of its members*. It took another twenty years for the Institute to obtain a site and accumulate the necessary funds to construct a purpose-built building. But by the end of the century it had grown to include a 400-seat auditorium; a reading room and large lending library; a number of meeting and classrooms – and a six-table billiard room (Balmain Municipal Council, 1910, 47, see also Morris, nd). At that time billiards tables were both popular and uncommon, and the Institute could charge 1 shilling to play, which proved to be a valuable source of revenue – and a means of subsidising other courses.

Fast forward and in 2010 SCC took over the lease of a mid-sized outdoor Tennis Centre. It had been run by the local Council but was run down and in need of refurbishment. You might ask what has operating a Tennis Centre got to do with providing adult education? Well at one level it established new fitness programs, after-school and vacation tennis camps and contributed to the community's general health and sociability.

But in reality it was doing what the billiards tables had done one hundred years earlier. The money raised from the Centre helped the College, which was financially struggling after having had almost all government funds cut, to cross-subsidise the general program and stay afloat.

As adult educators what can we take from these two anecdotes? We can pat ourselves on the back and feel proud of our historic ability to adapt, be resilient and survive, or alternatively we can feel some discontent and question why? We could argue that this is no way for governments to support such an important element of our educational provision, or provide the opportunities required in a modern 'learning' society of multiple and diverse needs.

A recurring story

Yet this has been the recurring history of adult education in Australia, which has been primarily one of self-organisation and financing through community groups, voluntary and membership bodies.

State support has been inconsistent and sporadic, at times rising and then falling away again. Provision has therefore needed to be self-sustaining, and, in the absence of government support, providers have found ways to be flexible, innovative and responsive to local need. In the main, governments have left the education of adults to local providers.

This changes from time to time. Governments at different levels have different problems to address at different times. So, we see opportunistic funding aimed to meet that specific problem – creating a market for VET in the 1990s was the spur for ACE receiving increased support in the late 1990s and early 2000s, supporting the introduction of GST in 2000 was another example.

Yet a decade later and the NSW government had all but stopped providing any funds for community-based adult education. Today funding is increasingly tied to specific needs associated with issues such as disability and/or mental health issues; young people who have left the school system; or as an entry level to accredited VET.

ACE's value is seen as a *residual provider* of emergency education, or for those unlikely to fit in the system. Should the adult education sector be satisfied with becoming a residual sector? Or is it more than that?

There remains hesitancy to promote or celebrate the full breadth of adults' learning interests because providers have absorbed the need to promote bottom-line thinking, to frame funding submissions and promotions around the vocational outcomes courses deliver. This shouldn't come as a surprise after years of grooming, but it does mean that the less-quantifiable benefits associated with adult education which also includes learning crafts, languages, literature, technologies – those activities that engage our imaginations and where the hands and senses experience pleasure are minimised.

Internationally the story is similarly mixed. In the UK, funding for adult education has been cut by 45 per cent since 2010. The number of part-time students in higher education, who are typically mature-age learners and often juggling work and family pressures, is down 56 per cent over the same period.

2018 UK Department of Education figures revealed the drop in adult education participation corresponds to cuts in government funding. The decline in participation has been *dramatic and rapid* with a 15 per cent fall in community learning in one year between 2017–2018, and 33 per cent fall in Level 2 courses over the same period (Belgutay, 2018).

In Germany of the three major educational sectors – universities, vocational and adult – only in adult learning has public funding fallen since 1995, dropping by 43 per cent. Yet the reduction in public

funding for adult learning has occurred at the same time as public policy announcements are made on the increasing necessity of learning through life (cited in Field, 2019).

Germany does, however, provide a glimpse of what is possible in providing relatively generous (compared with other European nations) adult education opportunities for migrants wanting to develop their language skills and integration prospects. A 2018 survey of over 600 people showed participants came from 19 different countries with 71 per cent from war-torn Syria. Around a quarter had spent less than 10 years at school; three-quarters had some English proficiency and a quarter French. There was a clear sub-group of disadvantaged learners who had relatively short schooling, limited occupational experience, and little foreign language competence. We should ask whether the restrictions of Australia's AMEP could be relaxed and the program expanded so that rather than criticise migrants and refugees, or question their preparedness to adapt to Australian life, governments gave a helping hand to assist new arrivals with language skills and other skills to integrate in their new society?

Recognising the benefits of learning

There is powerful evidence that adult learning has positive health effects, prolongs active life, strengthens civil society and democracy, and fosters inter-generational learning and more.

A 2012 report identified 5 beneficial areas – mental health and wellbeing; physical health; family and parenting; civic participation; and attitudes and behaviours. It found *personal benefits* such as improvements in life satisfaction and self-worth and reductions in self-reported depression, as well as *economic benefits* such as a reduction in the number of GP visits, the desire to find a better job, and improved financial expectations (BIS, 2012).

Other research reported *unanticipated benefits of learning*, ranging from reductions in medication use and overcoming isolation and loneliness, to improving racial tolerance and increased involvement in voluntary work (Feinstein et al 2013).

Adult education offers *second* chances to people who missed out in their earlier education, and *first* chances to people who never had the

chance to go to school. Adults who learn have a positive impact on their families, too. Sticht (2001) referred to this as *'double duty dollars'* meaning that 'when we invest in the education of adults we may get multiple returns – in other words, teach an adult, especially a mother, and children will also learn better.

These and similar reports have been around for many years.

I don't want to spend too much time on repeating these findings. They are not hidden, they are in plain sight and policy advisers and governments know of them because they have most often commissioned them. So, it's not a matter of making the case but asking the more pressing question – why don't they act?

There is a longer answer to this, which there isn't time for just now. But we can say that since the late 1990s Australian governments have adopted a hands-off approach, and a conscious policy of not developing an integrated policy framework for education and learning. It's not confined to adult education but it's very clear in this area. There is a literature explaining this policy freeze but I thought Mike Cannon-Brookes from Atlassian put the problem with such an approach very succinctly when referring to Australia's lack of a climate policy framework – he said 'Having no policy framework is like having no compass in the desert – you've got Buckley's chance of finding your way out' (Boucher, 2019).

I think we should expect more from governments. But we should also ask the question of ourselves, are educational organisations well placed to respond, or adapt to, the complex changes taking place around us. Is our education system fit for purpose for today's world, for the society we live in?

An ecology of providers – and learners

Maybe we need to re-think the way we understand education. If we stop thinking of education, and an individual's learning history, as a simple, one-directional 'pathway' and instead recognise that we each follow different, often complicated routes, sometimes circuitous, moving in and out, and back and forth we can start to see things differently.

A better way, I think, to conceive of education and learning after age 17 is as an ecology or an ecosystem. This is pertinent to the broad educational

environment that now ranges from early childhood, to school-age, vocational and tertiary provision, community-based, professional, work-based, as well as formal, non-formal and informal delivery.

In this educational environment, an inter-connected and inter-dependent array of providers and opportunities co-exist – where the health and sustainability of one element is strengthened by the mutual health of the others.

Thought of this way, it is easier to appreciate the link between pre-school learning and higher education; between professional development, craft courses & community health programs; between community adult literacy and job programs, and so on.

It not only applies to institutions, but to individuals as well as they move in and out of learning. They move between different educational settings and are equally reliant on the availability of quality and relevant learning opportunities. It accords more closely with how adults go about organising their own learning, which is arranged through communities of interest; through local organisations and networks and is often place-based; via self-help and special interest groups; or by individually motivated learning.

Challenges for education and ACE

There are many challenges – climate and the environment; mental health, and physical health (modern diseases); the organisation of work today and the future of work; increasing inequality; reconciliation of outstanding issues between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, rapid changes in technology and their impact on ways learning will be undertaken, and so on.

And undoubtedly there continues to be many examples of innovative and responsive programs serving local and social needs. The refugee Learn to Swim at Leichhardt Municipal Pool, Corryong's social enterprise bakery, individualised disability learning plans, men's sheds and health, community gardening in Hobart and social re-integration, and more recently short courses on how to better understand and respond to the climate emergency triggered bushfire disaster of the 2019–2020 summer.

These one-off initiatives are important, but they can also distract us from better appreciating the larger underlying changes taking place, changes that require shifts in policy thinking.

Let me look at two areas, firstly ageing and demographics, and secondly trust and disillusionment, the challenge to the democracy we live in.

Ageing

Participation in education is sharply differentiated by age group, falling with each decade's demographic group. In *Learning through life*, Schuller and Watson (2009) highlight four distinct, if overlapping phases of lifelong learning. Looking at learning through this prism poses questions about education provision and support. They describe the four stages as:

1. up to age 25, where people are undertaking more and more complex routes to labour market participation;
2. between 25–50, where a combination of job, family and social obligations make time for learning hard to find for many;
3. between 50–75, where adults begin disengagement from their main working lives, and take on many of the responsibilities for maintaining civil society, and often have caring responsibilities for younger and older family members; and
4. at age 75 plus, where later life brings its own distinct learning challenges – and disrupts the previous orthodoxy of third age learning.

One in four Australians are in formal education (pre-school to school to higher education) and this is the overwhelming focus of governments. Yet almost five million, *or one in every five*, Australians are over the age of 60 and not focussed on formal education provision.

It is striking how little current provision differentiates between the different aspirations and interests of these cohorts, and how a growing proportion of the population are not being included in the nation's education attention.

Trust and disillusionment

But there is something else swirling around all of us that has been disorientating and confusing as it has shaken expectations of what were commonly held norms and beliefs. The reports of 1919 were acutely aware how important education for citizenship and democracy were in a damaged

world, and in the years that followed there was a shared belief that education was the way to improve individual lives and to progress society.

Emblematic of this belief is the large sculpture erected in 1933 overlooking Rockefeller Plaza in New York, which confidently asserted that:

Wisdom and knowledge
Shall be the stability of thy times.

It's something that needs to be put at the forefront again because today across the Western world, there is a rising anger at 'the system'.

This anger is implacable and spectacular. It is causing long-established party systems to dissolve; trust in elites, experts and even basic science to collapse; and overt racism, notably anti-Semitism, to rear its ugly head again. Democratic norms and institutions are openly disdained; illiberal and authoritarian ideas from the alt-right and far left are moving from the fringe; and everywhere, truth and civility are squeezed out amid rancor and conspiracism. Rather than enlightenment it has led some to suggest we have entered a 'new age of endarkenment' (see Gray, 1995, Morarjee, 2016, Pinker, 2018).

Many people despair that the promises made to them by those in authority and power will ever come true, they now seek to turn the whole thing upside down, however they may. The relentless waves of change that have crashed over people's heads have made some into winners – most spectacularly, the gilded one per cent. But many others have experienced change as a profound and traumatic loss.

The many left behind have seen inequality explode. In their study '*The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*', Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett demonstrated that extreme inequality is associated with rising illness, family breakdown and crime, mental distress and increased drug use – as well as a general fraying of what policy makers call 'social cohesion'.

This reversal of the traditional trajectory is acutely painful because so many know they are unlikely to ever be able to break into the ranks of the winners. They are in a situation where

- growth doesn't grow;
- prosperity doesn't prosper, and

- the country is no longer arranged in a way so as to make its citizens economically secure.

And it is this nasty mix that has the potential to fester, and which our forebears in 1919 were acutely aware that adult education had a vital role to play in creating an environment to learn, discuss and help build informed and engaged citizens.

A paradox

As adult educators we live in a paradox. Adult education is everywhere around us – in formal education; in community colleges and centres; but also through government departments in the environment, health, ageing, transport; in Indigenous programs, book discussion groups, film groups, political parties, unions, faith-based organisations, men's groups / women's groups, in workplaces, professional and employer associations, seniors groups, friends of galleries, the zoo, museums, libraries; gyms and fitness centres; meditation and yoga groups, sporting bodies, national parks , on the net, on the net, on the net.

Yet this proliferation coincides with a serious decline in support for those community organisations that are dedicated to adult learning as a specific activity. Many colleges and centres have fallen on hard times and a number have ceased to exist or merged with other providers.

And in higher education those departments that were dedicated to teaching and researching the practice of adult education have in the main been cut back to barely exist. One important result of the cuts to support community adult learning programs is that there are far fewer experienced professionals (teachers and program planners) in the system, who have acquired the pedagogic skills to be able to teach/ work in these changing times and also therefore fewer people with the knowledge, connections and passion to lobby on adult learning's behalf.

Conclusion

The power of adult education to transform lives is well known, and it is especially powerful for those who missed out on educational opportunities early in their life (James & Boreen, 2019).

There are so many inspiring programs and initiatives within ACE – including re-engaging young people, asylum seeker and refugee programs; devising individual-focussed disability education, providing a welcoming environment to adults returning to education – alongside the regular activities in languages, technology, crafts, arts, and practically based skills.

Humans are multi-dimensional beings. Getting going in systematic learning means responding to our many different interests and needs. Too much education thinking and policy however is designed for a system that hasn't kept up. Our policy thinkers are overwhelmingly focussed on initial education – the model that starts with early years and ends with labour market entry – at the expense of learning through the life course.

To put all our educational eggs in the one basket of skills and training is to set our sights too low and too narrow. It should be clear that we can't build a skilful nation on skills training alone. There are challenges here especially for governments, but also for educational organisations and educators.

The costs of ignoring the challenges around us and the need for a more sophisticated and agile lifelong learning policy framework are great.

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