The paper advocates for adult and non-formal education and counselling programs. The authors conclude that it is long overdue for government to invest seriously in functional literacy and adult education counselling programs as tools for women empowerment.

This issue also furnishes three research reports from higher degree candidates, two of the doctorates recently completed. Collectively, they portray the journey of higher degree study, and provide a picture of adult learning in very different contexts. There are also four book reviews, tackling various topics from leadership and sustainability to phenomenological psychology, and from re-enchantment and getting of wisdom to communication theory.

Enjoy this issue! And a reminder to keep in mind the 46th National Annual Conference in Melbourne on 23–25 November — with the theme of *Social capital: learning for living (Learning in communities)*.

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Editor

Learning in and through social partnerships

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This paper explores participation in social partnerships as a space for learning. It analyses interview data about participation in social partnership from partnerships involved in vocational education and training (VET) to argue that social partnerships constitute a form of learning space. Partnership participants engage in new learning through the interactions and activities inherent in partnership work, and relational learning is the kind of learning most supported in these learning spaces. By fostering learning about the self and its relationship to others, social partnerships have potential to enhance capacity for action and responsibility, which underpins citizenship as a learning process. In this way, social partnerships are learning spaces that potentially build collective, even democratic, understanding by enhancing the individual's cognitive and affective competencies. This cultural learning is embodied in the social partnership through engagement in effective partnership work.

Introduction

Within the context of a globalising world, a time of rapid technological advance, economic restructuring, and social and cultural change, multi-agency social partnerships have proliferated (Green 2002; Green, Wolf & Leney 1999). As an institutionalised relationship within and between the state, market and civil society, partnerships are now integral to most local governance systems, and the pervasive vehicle through which these three sectors work towards an inclusive society (Geddes 2005: 18). By linking local community groups with external organisations, social partnerships form decentralised and potentially powerful networks for tackling social issues. Recent Australian studies indicate they can be effective means of 'joining-up' government, and social and civic agencies, with communities to address local and regional concerns, and to build social capital at the local level. The complex and sometimes challenging task of learning to work together is the process that draws partners into realising shared goals (Billett, Clemans & Seddon 2005; Seddon, Billett & Clemans 2004; Seddon & Billett 2004; Smyth, Reddel & Jones 2005).

This paper analyses interview data from a research project on social partnerships involved in vocational education and training (VET) to argue that social partnerships constitute new learning spaces. The project investigated ten partnerships in Queensland and Victoria to identify principles and practices that guide and sustain social partnerships over time and through changing circumstances. The Queensland partnerships investigated included: Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council (QCS&H ITC), Wide Bay Coalition of the Disability Services Training Fund (WBC), Mount Isa Regional Skill Capability Project (MI), Deception Bay Community Youth Program (DBCYP) and St. James College School to Work Project (SJC). In Victoria, the partnerships investigated included: the Upper Yarra Adult and Community Education (UYACE) partnership, and Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) in Banyule Nillumbik (BNLLEN), Wodonga (WLLEN), Frankston (FLLEN) and Maribrynong and Moonee Valley (M&MVLLEN). In each partnership, interviews with three key informants provided data about partnership development and how participants experienced learning within the partnership. In the first instance, analysis of this grounded data identified the processes involved in effective partnership work (Billett *et al.* 2005; Seddon, Clemans, Billett & Fennessy 2005).

The paper uses these interview data on learning to discuss social partnerships as sites for learning. It proposes that participants engage in new learning through the interactions and activities inherent in partnership work, and that relational learning is the kind of learning most supported in these learning spaces.

Social partnerships as relational learning spaces

Unlike traditional learning spaces such as education institutions, which emphasise the individual's self-advancement by acquiring specific knowledge and skills, the processes within social partnerships focus on learning through relationships directed towards, and defined by, a limited group purpose. Within these learning spaces, participants report:
- developing self knowledge, self awareness and self management
- nurturing democratic values: trust, respect for others, civic and personal ethics, intimacy, care, empathy and tolerance
- improving interpersonal and social skills: observing, listening, interacting, planning, experimenting, problem-solving, negotiating and appraising
- understanding personal/local needs in the context of broader social/political/economic processes and systems
- adapting and using social and political procedures/processes for local benefit, and

- developing resilience: the capacity to remain committed and to adapt to changing circumstances.

These kinds of learning are directed towards securing important procedural goals for social partnerships, but they are distinct in a number of other ways. Firstly, they represent learning outcomes that educational institutions have not privileged, not explicitly focused upon, or had difficulty securing within institutional constraints. Secondly, unlike traditional educational settings, social partnerships emphasise localised and applied outcomes that, while general in description, are likely to be highly situated. Thirdly, by fostering learning about the self and the self in relationship to others, social partnerships have potential to enlarge capacity for action and responsibility, which underpins citizenship as a learning process.

These spaces permit a focus on contextual and embedded learning, which not only enhances individual competence and agency but also brings about collective learning. The relationship between individual and collective learning is complex, for collective learning is not simply the aggregate of individual learning processes. Learning, Delanty (2003: 601) suggests, occurs firstly at the level of the individual's biography, which includes self-knowledge and interpersonal learning; secondly, at the cultural level of collective learning – individual cognitive learning is translated into cultural forms; and thirdly, at the social level – cultural learning is embodied in an institutional form – and at this level, social change occurs. Others (for example, Vygotsky 1978) claim that knowledge emanates from the cultural level first, inter-psychologically between the social source and individuals, and is engaged with, and appropriated by, individuals as inter-psychological outcomes and as social legacies. Here, we propose that there is a relational interdependence between the social and individual sources of this knowledge (Billett 2006).

The unrelenting processes of globalisation and individuation, Beck (2000: 170) and Glastra, Hake and Schedler (2004: 293) observe, compel individuals to conduct their 'own life' within a 'context of conflicting demands and a space of global uncertainty'. Learning is a permanent feature of social life. Knowing how to position oneself at the centre of ever expanding and intersecting networks, requires individuals to learn 'how to be' rather than to know 'how to do', to cultivate *savoire-être* rather than *savoire-faire* (Bauman 2002: 40). In this context of individual learning through participation in the social world, social partnerships can also encourage collective, cultural learning. By facilitating active participation, they have the potential to encourage citizenry and thereby strengthen civil society.

Within and through a partnership's intersecting contexts, participants struggle to construct meaning through their relationships with others. This process of learning through partnership work engages participants in developing attitudes, values and skills that can build social capital and democratic citizenry. The pursuit of shared goals, Putnam (2000) explains, may develop reciprocity between strangers, which in turn can create a web of networks founded on shared values that can build social trust (Field 2003). Through partnership work, participants can learn 'how to be' with strangers, by learning how to exchange views and tolerate diversity, and to respect the sameness and difference in others. This process of learning has the potential to enrich the individual as well as the collective capacity for civic commitment and action. Like more deliberate forms of adult civic education (Gastil 2004; Martin 2003; Delanty 2003), social partnerships may encourage future civic engagement by reinforcing respectful egalitarianism, and by shaping skills in cooperation, negotiation and dissent. Conversely, democratic behaviours and values may be discouraged, rather than fostered, if participants fail to build relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Or, the learning outcomes may be some mixture of these two positions, because of the context of individuals' relational engagement with, and learning from, the social world (Billett 2006).

By offering individuals the opportunity to learn about themselves through purposeful engagement with others, social partnerships can become transformative learning spaces. This relational learning entails personal and cognitive dimensions that extend beyond the individual or personal to wider cultural and social levels. It is a 'cultural citizenship' (Delanty 2003: 602) learning process, whereby individuals learn capacity for action and responsibility through active participation in partnership work, and develop a perception of self as a social actor shaped through, and by, their relations with others.

To examine these ideas further, the following sections discuss findings drawn from interviews with the ten social partnerships concerning participants' expectations for learning, the role of prior knowledge, and the process of learning through partnership work.

Learning through social partnership work

Expectations

The partnerships investigated were commonly formed to address local concerns and capacity building, but were diverse in their processes of formation and in the goals that sustained them. Some, for example the Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) in Victoria, were initiated and sponsored by agencies from outside the community. In these partnerships, the goals of the external agencies were of relevance to, or were shared by, the community. Others, such as the Deception Bay and Wide Bay partnerships, were local initiatives that involved community groups joining up with external agencies to tackle local concerns. Some, like the Mount Isa project, were the outcome of negotiation between local and external interests with reciprocal goals. While partnerships such as the LLENs, Upper Yarra ACE, St. James College and Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council had explicit vocational education and training objectives, others, for example the Wide Bay and Deception Bay partnerships, were concerned with redressing

social disadvantage or, like the Mount Isa project, with providing industry specific skills (Billett *et al.* 2005).

Even though partnerships differed in their formation and goals, participants shared the expectation that partnership would engage them in learning. By taking on new roles in developing the partnership, participants anticipated they would gain skills and the ability to deal with issues of concern in the community. Through partnership work, they would learn to build capacity, both for the individual and for society.

One informant idealistically anticipated that, by providing 'access to education and knowledge', the Queensland Community Services and Health Industries Training Council partnership would support a 'more equitable and open society'. A Deception Bay informant was committed to 'allowing all voices to be heard' and wanted to assist those 'who do not speak up so readily'. Participants in some partnerships were more concerned with improving the lives of local people by providing access to specific knowledge and skills. For example, a Mount Isa informant hoped the partnership would assist older workers to continue working and enable young people to remain in the town while acquiring skills related to the mining industry. In this way, younger and older workers could contribute to the regional economy while undertaking training that would also permit them to 'work nationally and internationally in skilled jobs'. Participants in the LLENs and other VET-related partnerships were interested in providing 'pathways' and 'entry points' for youth at risk, who, they claimed, were excluded by the conventional school curriculum. Aiming to improve disability services, one Wide Bay participant was eager to 'learn and needed to for the students and the quality of their training'.

It would be naive to assume that participants' expectations for learning were necessarily associated with achieving the partnerships' strategic goals. For some participants, the primary objective was

furthering the interests of their host organisation or workplace, rather than the collaborative or common goal of partnership continuity.

To some extent, this expectation was present for all participants. Participants' expectations were partly derived from the environment in which the partnership was located, which in turn influenced the way individuals engaged in partnership work. For instance, in one LLEN, school representatives acknowledged that their initial motive for participating was to marginalise the local technical and further education (TAFE) institute. Once achieved, they focused on realising the schools' institutional goals.

Prior learning

Participants recognised that prior learning shaped their engagement in, and learning about, partnership work. Existing procedural and declarative knowledge, such as formal education in teaching or welfare and experience in the school and VET systems, was useful for those involved in leading or managing partnerships like the LLENs. Knowing how to learn and how to acquire information prepared some participants for their partnership role. A Wide Bay informant, for example, 'went to all the road shows about courses', while a LLEN manager 'read everything documented by the LLEN before she began her role'.

Understanding the local context and preparedness for the partnership role gave participants confidence in adapting their prior knowledge and skills to the challenges of partnership work. Participants in the Mount Isa, Deception Bay and LLEN partnerships drew on their experience and knowledge of local networks to involve 'influential people' in delivering or supporting their programs. In these instances, partnership work relied on well-chosen, even exceptional individuals. Such strategies are probably neither unusual nor confined to social partnerships. Acknowledging and attempting to reconcile disparate voices and views is an outcome of socially engaged activities. Such

engagement leads to inter-subjectivity or shared meaning, an implicit goal for social partnerships, regardless of their differences.

Across all the partnerships, informants reflected that they needed well-developed relational knowledge – the attitudes and skills that would enable them to engage and interact positively with others. In particular, they needed the capacity to collaborate and cooperate, and the ability to be tolerant, empathetic and committed. One informant considered negotiation and interpersonal skills the 'essential ingredient' (QCS&H ITC). Learning 'how to do group work in the 60s', a Deception Bay participant commented, gave 'life skills' that 'fostered patience'. 'Political skills' enabled a Wide Bay informant to 'get participation, get consultation, get a common goal, choose champions, and keep the ball rolling'. The capacity to trust others, accept difference and be tolerant, which meant being able to 'let go of your own long-held judgements' (M&MVLLEN), was emphasised by many informants. Needing to communicate trust and acceptance of others enhanced an individual's self-awareness and consolidated their relationship-building skills. Yet participants' prior experience and knowledge indicate that individuals bring varied perspectives and levels of readiness to partnership work. This diversity underpins social partnerships as learning spaces.

Learning partnership work

Some participants learned to undertake partnership work by applying knowledge 'from previous experience' (MI) or by acquiring 'PD from multiple sources' (SJC). However, most informants learned incrementally 'through experience' (QCS&H ITC), by 'talking, listening and reflecting' (BNLLEN) and by seeing 'how it works out' (DBCYP). These learning processes, which emerged through engagement in goal related activities and through interactions with others, are essentially constructivist learning processes entailing personal as well as cognitive learning.

Participants claimed they learned through 'real relationships' (QCS&H ITC), 'through meetings, talking things through' (UYACE), and realised that 'you could do it if you worked together' (WBC). In some partnerships, this interaction involved a small group, for example 'a group of women would meet regularly and talk strategy' (BNLLEN). No doubt, these proximal encounters nurtured inter-subjectivity and shaped shared meanings amongst partners (e.g. Rogoff 1990). Partnerships such as the Mount Isa project, where there was 'interaction with mines, operators, suppliers, schools, DEST [Department of Education, Science and Training], youth pathways, TAFE', involved a wide network of people. Although this web of interactions exposed a broad range of perspectives, relations between partnership participants were more distal; and it is likely that meanings were not always shared or understood.

The process of working closely together helped to build relational knowledge and fostered democratic values. Where partnership work permitted, participants learned collaboratively and from each other. As they observed, listened and explored ideas with others, they learned 'to be open to suggestions' (FLLEN) and to change their opinions and perspectives. For some participants, the partnership constituted a learning space in which people were respected, and where individuals 'persevered until they could understand where each other was coming from' (QCS&H ITC). These circumstances built active listening skills, respect for the opinions of others, the 'confidence to challenge' (DBYCP) others' perspectives and to articulate an alternative view. For one participant, learning through partnership work was a process of understanding that people brought 'a whole lot of knowledge' (M&MVLLEN) to meetings and that there was more than one perspective on the same issue. For this participant, and no doubt for others, this knowledge generated good will and facilitated the 'relationships of trust' (FLLEN) that sustain effective partnerships (Billett *et al.* 2005).

Through doing partnership work, participants had the opportunity to develop commitment to their partners and the local project. A Wide Bay informant represented this as a process of learning not to 'whinge' or 'separate out', but of maintaining personal contact with individuals and the group as a whole. This provided a buttress against disappointment and frustration with the pace of progress. It meant learning to focus on the partnership's goals, so 'you don't get put off' (MI) and could show 'the people that they mattered' (DBCYP). Such commitment generated further learning as participants at the local level 'grew confident' (WBC) and gained understanding of the network of systems and processes through which the partnership worked. This knowledge was empowering, for it allowed participants to consider local issues within wider contexts and to evaluate the role of external agencies in addressing local concerns. In the Deception Bay partnership, for example, understanding the role of government, community, agencies and services required 'huge learning' but also gave local people the 'opportunity for influence, broader sharing, innovation and advocacy'.

Understanding a partnership's broader context encouraged participants to adapt processes and procedures to local circumstances, and gave them means to evaluate the partnership. Thus, recognising that VET partnerships were 'dynamic', one St. James College informant learned to 'balance costs and benefits'. The intricate personal interactions that form the basis of partnership work challenged many participants. Some learned how to nurture relationships by adapting 'procedures' to avoid conflict (BNLLEN), whereas others concluded that 'the system', in particular the provision of VET, was actually 'set up to prevent collaboration' (FLLEN). In evaluating the partnership and its context, participants in varying degrees learned to criticise the external forces that shaped its work. Judging that the costs of partnership outweighed the benefits, a Wide Bay informant learned 'never do it again' but to 'walk in and get what I want from TAFE'. If St. James College participants regretted

'burnout from workload and buck shoving', and were 'tired of the VET changes', a LLEN informant was certain that 'we have a long way to go' for schools were not yet able to 'incorporate VET' (BNLLEN).

No doubt, partnership work is challenging and frequently frustrating (Billett & Seddon 2004; Billett *et al.* 2005; Seddon *et al.* 2005). One informant (QCS&H ITC) commented that 'success' could not be measured quantitatively. Since people learned partnership work experientially, 'by having to do it' (UYACE), learning was incremental and most evident in the 'intimate changes for those people' (QCS&H ITC) in their understanding and relationships. A Deception Bay informant observed that for the individual, learning occurred through interaction with others, by 'modifying their reactions to what they heard' and 'becoming aware of other people's needs'. For LLEN participants, informal talk, group discussions and collective work, such as writing submissions, taught them that 'if we do it together there is safety' (FLLEN).

Social partnerships as learning spaces

The social partnerships investigated constituted cohesive and inclusive learning spaces in which collective, rather than individual, performance was valued. Providing for some a 'supportive, respectful setting' and a 'non-judgemental learning area' (QCS&H ITC), partnership seemed to one informant like 'a learning circle table in a central place, not a void' (M&MVLLEN). Espousing the '"we"…as opposed to "I"' (QCS&H ITC), partnership work for many participants created a 'welcoming' (DBYCP) learning environment, in which 'equity and democracy' (M&MVLLEN) were often espoused, and through which it was possible for people to 'find a sense of belonging' (QCS&H ITC).

Although 'safe in most instances', these learning spaces have the potential to be exclusionary and insular; by valuing 'we' so highly, they can establish a strong sense of 'us' as opposed to 'them' outside the partnership's boundaries or networks. Consequently, a social partnership does not necessarily form a 'pleasant' or welcoming environment for 'new members' (QCS&H ITC). Participants need to develop self-awareness and empathy to 'guard against elitism' (QCS&H ITC) and to nurture the partnership as an inclusive learning space. A Deception Bay informant expressed this as the need to 'walk the talk', to create an environment in which participants 'displayed' 'profound grace' towards one another as they participated in meetings and learned partnership work. As one participant reflected, it took time, patience and a 'non-threatening environment' to foster the 'mutual respect' implicit in the 'willingness to listen' and 'tolerate opposing views' (BNLLEN). Relational learning underpins the 'shared vision' and 'pact' of 'trust' (FLLEN) required for effective social partnership work. It is the basis upon which individual and collective identities are negotiated.

This 'shared process' of learning about relationship shapes social partnerships as collaborative and cooperative learning spaces. For one Wide Bay participant, it was an energetic, empowering process of working with 'cooperative key people' to 'workshop the issues, list our concerns, decide what you want to be'. A Mount Isa informant saw it as the 'practical processes' and 'activities' of a 'bunch of people working together…building trust by doing things'. Having a shared purpose allowed participants to understand 'the capabilities and limitations of each partner' (WLLEN). In these collaborative learning spaces, learning was not 'didactic' (M&MVLLEN), not 'incidental' (WLLEN), but instead it was embedded in the process of 'coming to a common view' or intersubjectivity. Paradoxically, the process of learning to come to a 'common view', which, Delanty (2003: 604) and others such as Field (2003: 143) and Martin (2003: 568) point out, is a citizenship learning process, builds the individual's self-esteem, self-respect and autonomy.

In these learning spaces, the collaborative process of working together serves to encourage flexibility, helping participants to become more pragmatic and capable of adapting external policies to local needs. Informants commented that it allowed partners to develop a 'model that works' (WBC) and to realise that there was 'no set way to solve problems' (SJC). For an Upper Yarra ACE informant, the partnership was an 'opportunistic' learning space in which partners learned 'how to "use" the system to make things work better'. Although this learning is situated and in its specific application may not be readily transferable to other situations, the relational learning embedded in partnership work is transferable. As in other areas of civic engagement, social partnerships as learning domains endow individuals with 'affective capacities', which Field observes (2003: 145) can 'increase the prospect of seeking transformation through education'. By building self-awareness, a sense of belonging and identity, partnership work can empower the individual and strengthen personal agency. By building a sense of community, it can generate collective learning, which may then transfer into a process of social or cultural change.

For many participants, social partnerships were unpredictable, even 'chaotic' learning spaces, where learning occurred 'by the seat of our pants', in the 'cut and thrust, informal, undisciplined way' (QCS&H ITC; WBC). In one inner city LLEN, participants experienced in local government were able to apply their knowledge and skill in consensual decision-making to partnership activities. By contrast, in most other social partnerships, these capacities developed haphazardly as part of the learning process. In this way, individual learning and localised capacity building proceeded in tandem. Amongst participants, there appeared to be general agreement that social partnerships were experiential learning spaces, in which people learned incrementally by doing and by reflecting upon what they had done or achieved. The challenging process of learning together, in a space where 'nobody knew it all' (WBC), stimulated participants to

'think about how far we can take things' (UYACE) and sustained their commitment when they became 'bogged down' (BNLLEN).

If social partnerships are learning spaces that encouraged autonomy, self-management and resilience, participants also learned that clear goals and 'good boundaries' (DBYCP) were necessary. While exposing participants to new ideas and perspectives, partnerships also have the potential to be conservative and inefficient learning spaces. For example, one informant commented that 'each LLEN reinvented the same wheel' and became entwined in the 'paperwork and corporatism of the government' (BLLEN). Yet, the processes of learning to negotiate individual and collective expectations and to wend a purposeful way through procedural intricacies seem to be necessary steps in partnership learning work. While tedious for some, reinvention leads to incremental change and may result in innovative and new practices. If tedium alienated some participants, it empowered others. Strategic goals and ground rules helped participants find a balance between individual expectations and the corporate expectations of their partners. They shaped effective partnerships as democratic and purposeful learning spaces in which people learned respect for others and, through working with others, developed the capacity to adapt and change.

Conclusion

The relational learning that partnership work accentuates enhances the prospect of an individual becoming deeply committed to a group and its cause while the partnership functions. By its very nature, learning in and through partnership work is likely to be incremental and challenging for the individual. At its best, the affective, relational learning that individuals experience develops understanding of self and other, and fosters a sense of belonging and community. At its worst, this sense of belonging may endorse exclusionary attitudes and behaviours, if partnership work is not guided by democratic

procedures, if participants lack respect for difference, and if trust is absent or remains undeveloped. This tension between inclusion and exclusion is problematic for participants, but learning how 'to be' in a network of relationships and within shifting boundaries is an inherent part of partnership learning. As an educative process, partnership work has the potential to enlarge the individual's capacity for civic engagement and active citizenship (Delanty 2003: 601). By enhancing the individual's cognitive and affective competencies, social partnerships are learning spaces that can build collective learning, particularly democratic understandings. This cultural learning is embodied in the social partnership through effective partnership work. At this social level, partnerships as institutions have capacity to strengthen civil society, and it is this potential that shapes them as new learning spaces.

Relational learning developed through partnership work is transferable to other group-learning contexts. It is a fundamental asset for the transitory volunteer workforce that many social partnerships rely upon. It is this kind of learning, rather than the procedural or declarative learning associated with the designated outcome of a partnership arrangement, such as vocational education and training, that further distinguishes social partnerships as new learning spaces. In effect, these spaces reformulate and challenge the specific, situated learning goals of traditional learning spaces. Social partnerships stand as pragmatic, experiential learning spaces. Through the experience of 'being part of the group', by 'talking, reflecting, coaching, responding', participants are engaged in the process of building shared meaning. Partnership work stimulates and encourages individuals to 'take a chance learning' (WBC; BNLLEN) and, by engaging them in novel tasks, it enables new learning to occur. As one LLEN participant explained, 'I see partnership as essential for learning'. At its best, the experience of learning through working together was 'fantastic'; as a learning space, the partnership was 'the best place to learn' (FLLEN). It is the potential for relational learning, which partnership work facilitates and endorses, that defines social partnerships as new learning spaces.

Acknowledgements

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