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EDITORIAL



Adult education, vocational education and economic policy: theory illuminates understanding

Adult education and vocational education have a long and complex relationship. At many levels, they remain distinct ideas and each is the focus of a dedicated body of research and theory. At the same time, overlaps have always been acknowledged. This relationship and how it plays out in economic policy settings is the focus of this editorial. The Australian case is taken up as illuminating especially when viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's analysis of fields.

Classic adult education theory, such as Lindeman's manifesto of 1926/1961, explains that the learning of adults has, in part, vocational utility although the enterprise as a whole goes beyond the needs of employment to the actualisation of the interests of the whole person. For its part, vocational education theory has consistently recognised the fact that adult learning is central to conceptualisation of the field. It is not uncommon to find, for example, Knowles (1980) principles of 'andragogy' featuring in curriculum for the preparation of vocational educators on the understanding that vocational education can be regarded as a special deployment of adult learning. The practical proximity of the fields of adult education and vocational education prompted policy-makers to advance the notion of 'lifelong learning' as a perspective that allows governments to engage with a broad post-schooling sector (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1996). Researchers, too, recognise the value of a more synthetic perspective on learning and education in the adult years (e.g. Jarvis, 2010), an appreciation that is reflected in the scope of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. Yet it remains an important theoretical task for researchers with an interest in lifelong education to keep alive the question of the relationship of adult education and vocational education. In part, this question is justified by the fact that they are really distinct fields, that they assume different things about people, and these perspectives are matched with quite different conceptualisations. Adult education has revolved around an ethical concern with the social and existential dimensions of our lives, a concern characterised by an openness to human possibilities. Vocational education engages with what appears to be a more concrete concern: the significance of work for our lives and how we go about developing relevant abilities by which to participate and contribute. Vocational education thinkers – Dewey for example, – realise, however, that the vocational is a stubborn question in its own right. It is more than the skills and knowledge and techniques of the day, but lies somewhere in the relationship between such ephemera and the project of a productive and fulfilling life in and for society. Both in the everyday practices and deeper questions irritating them, then, adult education and vocational education remain distinct.

Questioning the relationship between adult education and vocational education offers a discursive lens through which to view certain socio-political developments that in turn may be portentous for those who value these fields. Developments that researchers and commentators have variously dubbed 'economic rationalism' and 'neoliberalism' and which have received a good deal of critical attention from education theorists (e.g. Tett & Hamilton, 2019), work in ways that go well beyond deliberate policy (questionable though some of these deliberations may be). The nature and extent of this influence is itself subject to debate, but the effects are undoubtedly a concern in fields as permeable to social evaluation as are adult education and vocational education. An example of such influence can be seen when the question of the relationship of the two fields is raised in a societal context – Australia in this editorial for illustrative purposes – distinctive for ambivalence

about lifelong learning at the level of policy. This example will be approached using tools forged by Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and applied in a study of the field of journalism. In the ‘Power of Journalism’ the opening remarks indicate a mode of analysis which may be recalibrated to the question of how adult and vocational education relate. He writes,

My objective here is not “the power of journalists” . . . but, rather, the hold that the *mechanisms* of a journalistic field increasingly subject to market demands (through readers and advertisers) and then, in part through them, on the various field of cultural production – the juridical field, the literary field, the artistic field, and the scientific fields. Accordingly, we must examine how the structural pressure exerted by the journalistic field, itself dominated by market pressures, more or less profoundly modifies power relationships within other fields. This pressure affects what is done and produced in given fields, with very similar results within these otherwise very different worlds. (1998, p. 68)

Bourdieu clarifies that such pressure affects particular actors in adjacent fields, actors who for various reasons are at the margins of their field or happen to operate in a way consistent with the modus operandi of the influencing field. His statement indicates ‘market demands’ are central to such cascading influences. In broad terms, what takes place is the ‘logic of practice’ of one field blends with the logic constitutive of another, producing what Bourdieu terms ‘allodoxia’ (mixed teachings). Thus, the influence of the journalistic field on academia, for instance, engenders new forms of cultural production (academics begin to produce a kind of journalism alongside traditional types of output) and new ways of evaluating academic work (research needs to have ‘impact’ as well as or even instead of scientific discovery and critical insight).

In Australia, the question of the relationship between adult education and vocational education is as complex as it is anywhere else. Historically, UK models were imported wholesale, with the Mechanics’ Institute movement, university extension programmes and Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) each taking root in the former colony (Whitelock, 1970). By the 1990s, Evening (now ‘Community’) Colleges and ‘Neighbourhood Houses’ joined the loose grouping of adult education institutions in Australia. A Commonwealth Government Senate Committee called for policymakers to recognise a ‘fourth sector’ to stand along with schooling, vocational and higher education sectors, effectively constructing the ‘Adult and Community Education’ (ACE) sector as a visible mode of provision. In their report *Come in Cinderella*, the committee declared that,

From the Mechanics Institutes to the present, adult and community education has embodied a concern for a fair go, for access to the power that comes with the acquisition of knowledge and skills and for the equitable distribution of educational opportunity. Adult and community education, in its modern guise, remains within that tradition of social and economic justice, broadly conceived. It is a sector that has consistently acknowledged the potential of eighty percent of the population who are adults and promoted their rights to education and training which was previously unavailable or inaccessible. (1991, p. 8)

At the same time as the ‘Cinderella Sector’ was debuting in the world of policy, vocational education was in the throes of a major transformation. A diverse array of the occupational provision was first organised under the sectorial designation ‘Technical and Further Education’, and given clear policy identity in the 1970s through the work of the government-appointed Kangan Committee (1974). This work defined the sector against the diverse forms of provision proceeding it, but also positioned it as serving not only the needs of employers, but those of communities and individuals. That expansive vision of the Kangan era was short-lived, however, with calls for significant reform gathering force through the 1980s. The reforms of the 1990s replaced the notion of technical and further education (the ‘TAFE’ moniker henceforth applying only to public vocational education providers) with that of ‘Vocational Education and Training’ (VET). A distinctive set of ideas underpinned these reforms, including the economic significance of VET, human capital theory, ‘skills formation’, competency-based training, and ‘training markets’. As the national ‘Skills for Australia’ policy announced,

The Government is determined that our education and training systems should play an active role in responding to the major economic challenges now facing Australia. The adjustments required in the in the

structure of the economy, and improvements in Australia's national competitiveness, will make heavy demands on our human resources and labour force skills. Our skills formation and training arrangements are not yet adequate to meet those demands. The world's most successful economies over the past two decades have given high priority to education, skills and competence at work as vital factors in economic performance, and have supported their skills development policies accordingly. Now we must do likewise. (1987, p. iii)

While the Cinderella Sector was attuned to the needs of individuals and communities, needs that could be but were not essentially vocational, the new VET sector was rushed through a series of reforms that established competency-based training and assessment as the cornerstone of the system – with industry given a leading role in formulating curriculum through setting competency 'standards' – and laid the groundwork for marketisation of the system.

Australia is still picking its way through the aftermath of the VET reforms of the 1990s, but for its part, ACE languished as the fourth sector as the roles of the other three – schooling, VET and higher education – were more and more clearly differentiated and their contributions to national 'social and economic' policy goals were distinguished and with ideas such as the development of 'human capital investment' working like a unifying paradigm of all learning. In short, the economic contributions of ACE were difficult to discern, quantify and deploy, although its social value was never disputed.

The point of raising Bourdieu's analysis of the influence of journalism on other fields of cultural production, begins to come clear as we trace the next part of the story. The 'goods' of the field of ACE – developing human potential, promoting social justice, responding to the local – that happened to lack obvious currency in the discourse of economic rationality, were pursued by a set of institutions that remained chronically under-resourced. To labour the analogy, this Cinderella didn't seem to make it to the ball. The work of the Senate committee in calling for recognition of the fourth sector did not elicit a proportionate policy response. At the same time, the VET sector was expanding, in part through the opening of 'training markets' in which the public providers or TAFEs were progressively obliged to compete for public funds against private concerns. These latter included for-profit firms and also a range of not-for-profit organisations including those run by religious groups. The expansion of VET meant more resources in the sector but also a greater level of commercial decision-making which increasingly made socially valuable provision, such as second-chance learning and running relatively poorly-funded lower-level qualifications, more difficult to justify.

It is in this climate that there appeared an interest in opportunities VET reform could offer ACE, and what ACE might offer VET. Researchers funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) who investigated the capacity of ACE providers to 'deliver' VET found that adults who lacked the resources to participate in a more profit-oriented VET could afford to study at ACE providers. The report of this research entitled *The Vocational Essence of ACE* (Volkoff & Jenkins, 1999) concluded in part that the sector had the capacity to 'address learning environment and access issues while effectively delivering vocational outcomes' and 'attract and cater for a diverse range of learners seeking quality VET outcomes'. Policymakers started to take notice of these capacities, too. Under the *Securing Jobs for Your Future* policy of 2008, for example, Victorian government representatives briefed ACE leaders on opportunities presented by the initiative. It is noteworthy that Victoria, the only state in Australia to systematically fund adult education, has a reputation for education policy experimentation, and at the time was leading the nation in marketing VET by making public funds for training 'fully contestable' – effectively placing TAFEs and private concerns on the same footing. The ACE briefings information kit for government representatives included statements such as the following:

- *Securing Jobs for Your Future* offers the ACE sector the most significant injection of new investment ever.
- ACE providers are recognised for their efficiency and their ability to respond quickly and effectively to a specific community and learner skill needs.

- The introduction of contestable funding will allow you to capitalise on this strength. If you attract more eligible students, you will attract more government funding.
- Given the connectedness of ACE providers to their communities and your record of responding quickly and efficiently to local needs, you are well-placed to begin operating in the new competitive, client-driven environment. (2008)

Through messaging like this, governments galvanised ACE decision-makers, tapping the ‘vocational essence’ of the sector with highly tangible results. The business opportunities opened by governments were taken up, with major consequences for the kind of learning undertaken in the Victorian ACE providers. According to reporting by the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board – the body responsible for administering the distribution of public funds to Victorian ACE providers – between 2008 and 2010, there was an 18% growth in enrolments (ACFE Board Report 2010–2011). Across ACE there was a shift to accredited and pre-accredited VET programme provision. Subsequent ACFE Board reports reveal a steady transformation of the sector, revealed through statements of strategic goals, identification of ‘priority learners’ and mix of courses on offer. In the most recent Board Annual Report, ‘flagship initiatives’ were identified as:

- leading literacy, numeracy and employability skills in Victoria
- reviewing pre-accredited training
- strengthening partnerships with TAFE to improve outcomes for learners
- creating a meaningful brand and value proposition to champion the Learn Local sector with industry and learners, and to position it for place-based responses that best meet local needs. (2019, p. 5)

The report highlights improved participation of ‘priority learners’ who included early school leavers, low-skilled and vulnerable workers, Indigenous Australians and unemployed people.

The mix of courses offered by ACE providers in Victoria has gradually become dominated by formal VET programmes. In 2011, around 90% of provision was VET, with ‘Enrichment’ and ‘Other’ types of course making up the remainder (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012). In ACFE’s latest report (2019), only VET sector provision is mentioned. Interestingly, ‘student satisfaction survey’ results have become prominent in these documents along with tables showing expenditure on consultancies such as those provided by KPMG. It is through input by consultants that flagship initiatives and priority learners’ frameworks have been refined.

Adult and community education in the rest of Australia is in a more precarious position than counterparts in Victoria, but the example set in that state has been influential. The long-established, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) which represents ACE nationally espouses ‘lifelong and lifewide learning for all Australians’. At the same time, the move towards the provision of VET programmes and engagement with VET agendas is evident. In a recent submission to the Skills and Workforce Development Agreement national consultations, ALA explained that ‘ACE organisations offer all or some of the following services: personal enrichment learning and pathway programmes; adult basic education in language, literacy, numeracy (LLN) and other foundation skills (both accredited and non-accredited); foundation skills in computers and the new technologies; formal vocational education and training (VET)’. This account positions traditional adult education as ‘personal enrichment’ – a self-interested reading that little reflects the democracy- and emancipation-oriented visions of people like Freire, Jarvis and Mezirow. Other components of ALA’s tabling of provision are aligned with the kind of vocational education dominant in Australia.

Of particular interest in the ALA, statement is the explicit positioning of adult and community learning as concerned with pathway and foundation skills programmes. This positioning indicates a distinctive realm for ACE within the broader canvas of Australian VET. With mainstream VET providers shying away from the more poorly subsidised foundation and lower-level of qualifications, ACE seems to have carved out a niche, a specialisation within VET provision that supplies

a more stable income and perhaps a rationale. This strategy is reflected in ALA ‘webinars’ devoted to developing an understanding of the ‘Core Skills Framework’ used in VET to articulate entry-level abilities. ACE providers are becoming expert in a detailed VET instrument of which many VET providers have little experience.

In terms of adult and community education policy, the national government has ceased to venture a position. The last Australian government policy addressing the fourth sector, the *Ministerial Declaration on Adult and Community Education*, was released in 2008 and it was couched in terms of the need for adults to ‘continually update their skills and knowledge to ensure these remain relevant to the changing needs of the workplace’ (DEEWR, 2008). The Victorian government has, however, continue to articulate ACE policy. In the *Future of Adult Community Education in Victoria 2020–2025*, the Minister responsible for education and training struck a positive note about the contribution of ACE to the state. In the statement, the Minister describes three core roles of the sector:

- (1) To engage and support adult learners who need to develop their core foundation skills for work, further study, and to participate in society as valued citizens.
- (2) To play a lead role in adult literacy, numeracy, employability and digital skills education and training for Victorians.
- (3) To support workers who may be vulnerable to becoming unemployed to develop the skills necessary to remain and thrive in employment as work changes. (Department of Education and Training, 2019)

In this policy picture, ‘adult education’ is positioned as playing roles in support of vocational, social and wider economic goals. Although the distinctiveness of ACE is maintained in the statement, it is a distinctiveness inscribed within an economic paradigm of post-compulsory provision that has long since subsumed vocational education. Bourdieu’s notion of fields disrupting each other, generating ‘mixed teachings’, and of market forces being transmitted through the enlistment of sympathetic agents in new fields serves as an evocative analysis for the fields of adult and vocational education in Australia. An important task is thus foregrounded for lifelong education researchers concerned to explore the nature of these forms of provision and comprehend the way societies interpret and deploy them.

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