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Adult education, social inclusion and cultural diversity in regional communities

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This article presents the outcomes of recent research into adult education programs and experiences in the Shire of Campaspe, a region in northern Victoria. Research data of people from diverse cultural backgrounds reveal how individuals can utilise adult education as a space to explore their own social and cultural isolation in a regional context. The research reveals patterns of migration, internal population mobility, social isolation and cultural identity within the context of this one regional shire. The article discerns the roles that adult education providers play in creating specific kinds of space for people to discover new social networks while interacting with informal and formal structures and processes of adult learning. Adult education programs and practices can play an important role in providing space for the exploration of social, cultural and economic experiences. However, individual adult education organisations manage their spaces and programs in such

a way that excludes some people from social and economic activity crucial to the development of individual and community social capital. Adult learning policies, programs and practices in regional communities need to address the holistic nature of adult learning for people from culturally diverse backgrounds in order to contribute to the development of sustaining social capital for individuals, families and communities in Australian society.

Context

The aim of this article is to explore the themes that have emerged from doctoral research concerning adult and community education (ACE) in regional communities in Australia. The mixed methods research activities (Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003, Creswell 2002) included the surveying and interviewing of fifteen adult learners from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds which resulted in the development of vignettes as snapshots of habitual narratives (Redman 2005, Linde 2001, Arvay 1998, Norum 1998). These research instruments were devised utilising current literature on indicators of social capital development (Cox 2004, Balatti & Falk 2002, ABS 2000, Winter 2000).

There were also focus group meetings with individuals participating in a local cultural diversity support group in the Shire of Campaspe and a focus group with learners in an English as a second language (ESL) program. These focus group meetings evaluated the impact of government funded ACE policies and programs on the individual lives of participants (Feldman, Skoldberg, Brown & Horner 2003). There were interviews with ACE staff working with a range of Campaspe-based adult education providers, allowing for the compilation of a comprehensive profile of adult education activities in this region. Quantitative data of ACE participation in urban and regional areas in

Victoria were also analysed to explore the assumption that targeted ACE delivery could impact on ACE participation (ACFE 2006).

The themes that emerged from the research represent a multiplicity of individual experiences of life in a regional community and the research reveals the connectivity of diversity, adult learning and social inclusion in this one rural shire in Australia. The research took shape in the context of a regional geographic community, the Shire of Campaspe, situated in northern Victoria. The Shire of Campaspe has a population of over 37,000 people that is growing in number and diversity (ABS 2007, Shire of Campaspe 2006). Agricultural production based on intensive irrigation is the largest industry in terms of net worth and revenue, and dairy farming and dry land farming involving cattle, sheep and grain are the main agricultural industries. Employment occurs mostly in the service sectors of retail, finance, hospitality and tourism. In recent times, the Shire has been significantly affected by drought, impacting on collective economic, social and personal circumstances.

The place that is Campaspe is representative of many regions in Australia where the population is diversifying as more people move from large urban areas and as migrants and refugees are 'diverted' into regional areas by Federal and State government policies. Within regional Victoria there are specific patterns of age-specific migration, with different age groups moving out of and into these areas. Older adolescents, for example, show a pattern of movement toward urban centres, mostly for education. These patterns tend to reverse for 25–29 year olds in regional areas such as Campaspe, reflecting the attraction of regional areas for young families and the return mobility of some who have completed their tertiary education (DVC 2006).

Communities in regional Victoria with 16% of the population born overseas are significantly less diverse than Melbourne, with 36% of the population born overseas (DVC 2006). Issues of cultural and social marginalisation motivate many people and especially

newly arrived migrants to choose to reside in the diversity of urban areas. However, in recent years a number of regional municipalities in Victoria, and around Australia, are actively welcoming more diverse groups into their communities for a range of economic and social reasons. Currently there are immigration programs targeting humanitarian entrants to resettle in regional and rural Australia, skilled migrants can fill skill shortages and there are opportunities for guest workers to come to Australia to fulfil specific employment contracts in regional and/or rural communities (Broadbent, Cacciattolo & Carpenter 2006, DoTaRS 2006). To what extent can these new internal and international migrants expect support in their resettlement and in adjusting to life in their new communities, and what support do they need? The context of this paper is research about adult education and training and its role in regional life for internal and international migrants.

Regional population diversity via migration and internal mobility

Individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds interviewed for the research have come to Campaspe via two main means – internal mobility and/or international migration. The mature-age individuals who had resided in Australia for a decade or more, mostly in large urban communities, relocated to Campaspe for personal reasons, the lifestyle, mental health and, for some, financial benefit. This mobility reflects individual life transitions facilitated by a number of factors including relationship breakdowns, the ‘empty nest’ syndrome or physical/mental health issues. These individuals are searching for a sense of ‘place’ and ‘community’, a sense of belonging to somewhere outside of their prior familial and cultural experiences. This appears to be a function of age-related life transitions as much as CALD background or migration experiences. No longer satisfied or dependent on the same social connections that have sustained them in the past, this group are seeking some meaning to their individual lives rather than solely financial gain or familial stability.

This raises the question whether the CALD or migration experience weakens certain ties, making for a ‘rootlessness’ that allows for quite radical relocation from urban to regional community (Giorgas 2000). Does there come a point where and when people do not expect much cultural or familial connectedness, the upheaval of international migration in the past having created new but shallow-rooted and circumscribed connections in a new country?

Different motivations and objectives characterised the younger individuals from CALD backgrounds, all women, who had migrated within the past five years or so. These individuals have come to reside in Campaspe because of a personal relationship. Their stories reflect the economic issues of the countries of origin and the search of individuals (and their families) for a ‘better’ life for themselves in a new country. They are not as a rule prepared for the experience(s) of living in Australian regional or rural communities and have often had little choice in their location. Some believe that ‘fate’ brought them to Campaspe.

The most common theme emerging from the experiences of all these individuals in Campaspe was the belief that their backgrounds made them social outsiders within this regional community. They had all experienced social exclusion and difficulty in developing localised, supportive social networks. Australian regional and rural communities have distinct localised cultures in themselves, often White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant (WASP) and rooted in the colonial history of a specific region. New residents to these communities are required, as newcomers, to adjust to the mores and codes of local life:

I do mix with people from different cultures... It’s important in a place like Echuca where there are lots of Aussie rednecks. (Connie)

[Echuca] looked like a modern and quite trendy town, but it was all looks; the attitudes and behaviour of ‘locals’ about people from different cultures and other differences were rooted in an Anglo, rural, redneck culture. (George)

However, the closer an individual is to the WASP colonial tradition of regional/rural Australia, the quicker and easier one will develop new social networks, often resulting from participation in existing local networks around activities such as sport, business and church (Babacan 2007, Hero 2007). Employment was the one issue that emerged from the research as one way for individuals to connect with localised networks. Indeed, it was assumed by some ACE providers that for most new arrivals, employment would actually exclude them from participation or involvement in adult education. Most of the individuals interviewed for the research, drawn from current ACE programs, were not employed, either because they were full-time carers for partners and/or children, or because they were unemployed. This raises a number of questions regarding involvement in adult education on the part of people from CALD backgrounds. Their unemployment relates to the life transitions mentioned previously and the connectedness they might expect from ACE is limited due to perceptions of the 'working' migrant.

The complexity of this dynamic is underscored by the fact that unemployment across Australia is higher among groups such as newly arrived migrant women, middle-aged men and women returning to work (ABS 6202.0 2007), and these are some of the main target groups of ACE programs in Victoria and in Campaspe. These patterns of social and economic inclusion and/or exclusion are not a specific function of the communities in the Shire of Campaspe but of the whole of Australian society, as this diversity is duplicated throughout many regional and rural areas of Australia and probably many urban communities as well (DoTaRS 2006, Giorgas 2000). An individual can experience being an 'outsider' within a community because of their CALD background, or because they are an assertive young woman, or a gay man or someone with a mental illness.

Many individuals and sub-groups will be perceived as being outside of established local experiences and often 'pegged' by locals as people

who 'won't fit'. All of the individual learners interviewed for the research experienced social exclusion and isolation in the first years of their life in Campaspe because they were outsiders. While their experiences were all different due to individual factors, there were experiences they all had in common; some had developed social capital via mainly employment-based networks and experiences, while others still felt themselves to be 'outsiders' in the Shire of Campaspe. All of the individuals who participated in this research were searching for social connections either as a primary or secondary issue when accessing ACE. Some had been able to use ACE in the development of new social networks, but others found ACE programs and practices excluding, disappointing and unhelpful in this endeavour.

The role of adult and community education in regional communities

The individuals from CALD backgrounds interviewed for this research had all accessed education and/or training programs at ACE providers in Campaspe in recent years. It is clear that for this group ACE has been accessible in the sense that they can access an ACE centre, enquire about programs, enrol in and then attend a group educational activity. These individuals accessed a diversity of education and training programs, from accredited vocational training to personal development courses.

The individuals in this study accessed ACE programs for personal, social and economic reasons, with emphasis on the personal and social. ACE staff for their part understood that ACE is about access to education and that people participate in programs for personal and social reasons. Interviews with providers revealed, however, the extent to which ACE is now increasingly about vocational training for specific groups who traditionally access ACE for social reasons, for example, women returning to work. Recent changes to Australian income security policy via welfare-to-work initiatives have meant

that targeting this group for vocational training is a lucrative funding mechanism via work skills vouchers. ACE now appears to have the unenviable task of having to be many things to many people within geographic communities like Campaspe.

This has led ACE providers in Campaspe into specialising and targeting specific groups instead of diversifying their profiles to suit a broader community. For example, Murray Human Services only targets people with disabilities; Mirrimbeena Aboriginal Education Group targets Indigenous young men; and Campaspe College of Adult Education mostly targets women interested in community services training like child care, aged care, and home and community care. These are recent examples in Campaspe of ACE providers and programs being developed to service specific groups. None of the providers, however, are purposefully targeting people from CALD backgrounds, probably because of a lack of a homogenous and visible population profile and recognised need. Not only is the CALD population significantly smaller (though growing) in Campaspe compared with many urban communities, but there is a broad range of CALD sub-groups reflecting the entire history of migration in Australia: Irish, southern Europeans, Chinese and more recently Asian migration – Vietnamese, Malaysian, Filipino, Indian, Sri Lankan and now Middle-Eastern families.

ACE providers in Campaspe are not connecting to this broad, diverse community but to the individuals, sub-groups and industries that match the targeting of specific State and Federal funding arrangements. Campaspe has eight ACE providers with the most established, smaller ACE centres servicing specific communities. For instance, the two most recently established providers have developed to service specific sub-groups in the Shire, that is, Indigenous people and people with disabilities. These new ACE services have developed and apparently flourished in terms of growth in funding and programs, which reveals that prior to their establishment, these

‘equity’ groups within the Shire were not having their ACE needs met. Exclusion from ‘traditional’ ACE providers for some sub-groups reflects a history of ACE in Campaspe where the main providers have been targeting and servicing mainstream (WASP) groups in the community such as; women returning to work, those seeking leisure programs and/or youth who have ‘dropped out’ or not completed secondary school.

It appears, then, that with this research identifying under-servicing of CALD groups, ACE in Campaspe is exclusionary for a range of ‘equity’ groups. Although ACE is based on an educational pedagogy of inclusion, the WASP culture of Campaspe has inculcated ACE programming and practices with providers and practitioners not being able to recognise the needs of a range of sub-groups in this regional community. Such ‘cultural blindness’ by ACE programming in this regional community appears to result from a range of complex historical, population, social and economic factors.

This regional community is deeply rooted in the colonial history of Australia. The Murray River in this region was the earliest ‘highway’ and all the communities along the river were taken from Indigenous clans and settled to assist in the expansion of Anglo-Saxon communities aiming to claim land and water for their own economic development. Cultural diversity of any kind in these times was limited to the goldfields where Chinese and European immigrants had also settled. The mono-cultural history of regions like Campaspe still lingers to this day with towns like Echuca and Swan Hill celebrating their Anglo-colonial history to the detriment of recognising the emerging diversity within their local communities.

Diversity in population and culture is only a very recent phenomenon for Campaspe with the local population growing and diversifying mostly in the past 15 years (ABS 2007). This situation is unlike adjoining regions such as Moira Shire where towns like Shepparton and Cobram have a 50-year history of encouraging migrants to settle

in that region (City of Greater Shepparton 2005). Campaspe has not been part of recent programs aimed at encouraging migrants to settle in regional communities. It is, then, not surprising that local service providers, including adult education organisations and the local people that work in these services, are not attuned to recognising and managing population diversity. There has been little leadership within local Campaspe communities to acknowledge the growing diversity of local populations.

The establishment of a cultural diversity 'support group', *Echuca Enriched*, in 2006 is one indication that people from different cultural backgrounds in this area have felt the need to support each other because they are (still) not being included in local social networks and processes. This group originated from professionals of various cultural backgrounds who were meeting in nearby Shepparton which has a larger and more diverse cultural and linguistic population profile. Residents from Echuca who were attending this group were offered some funding from the Goulburn Valley Migration Project to establish a group in Echuca, hoping to develop new social contacts for people feeling culturally and socially isolated. The group offered a number of social events in 2006/07 as an attempt to bring people together to share their experiences and resources of living in Campaspe.

ACE funding structures have indirectly influenced patterns of provision of adult education to specific groups. The funding is allocated to providers based on targeted funding for specific sub-groups, such as the long-term unemployed, women returning to work, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from CALD backgrounds and so on (ACFE 2006). This has encouraged significant levels of niche provision. Providers reported in this research that, over time, Campaspe has seen the development of new ACE providers targeting specific groups such as Indigenous groups or people with disabilities, who have been able to attract

a specific 'client group' clearly being excluded by established ACE providers.

It may well be argued that this development in ACE services in the region reflects a diversification of social capital in that population sub-groups are developing their 'own' services and networking opportunities (DoTaRS 2006, Giorgas 2000). It is also clear, however, that these alternative networks are being developed outside or parallel to those of the broader community, and arise because the broader community fails to meet the needs of this target group. CALD groups carving out alternative social and economic networks highlights and reflects a community that is practised in protecting established networks rather than extending and nourishing them by embracing the real growth in diversity of the main communities in this Shire. The result of this for people from a range of cultural backgrounds is the need to lobby specific education providers to take note of their needs and to target CALD individuals exclusively.

What this research has suggested, however, is that targeting people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is not a simplistic exercise and that individuals cannot be grouped effectively into a CALD category which fails to take account of their life circumstances (Bowman 2004). Targeting still requires acknowledgement that this group is not homogenous and that diverse offerings, including English language programs, general education, vocational training and recreation programs are needed to attract this group (Kearns 2006). Often, individuals from CALD backgrounds are searching for cultural and social elements to adult education that are less obvious to providers, activities that are overtly cultural and social such as programs that promote languages, food, religions and other cultural practices. Again, these issues and themes are not unique to the Shire of Campaspe nor to the ACE sector, as they are integral in the historical development of Australian society and can be seen in the recent history of Federal xenophobic politics (Szego 2006, Withers 2006).

The diverse experiences of adult learning at ACE in a regional community

The specific individual experiences of ACE in the Shire of Campaspe revealed some critical factors. Individuals from CALD backgrounds who were interviewed saw their forays into education and training in terms of searching. They 'looked at' ACE as being a way forward for their transitional social and educational needs. They went 'looking for' transitional programs, activities and a 'place' to help sort out 'where to next'. More often than not, they found that what they were looking for was available but did not really suit their individual personal circumstances – taking what was offered but aware that it might not meet their needs, 'filling up' up on the education that was available:

... my experiences at the College and Uni were both good and bad. As I did each year of these courses, I knew I was improving, my writing and study skills were getting better. I started using people who were good with writing to help me; I used the people around me as a resource. (Connie)

... the Liberal Arts course was like a garden, with Chinese seeds and English seed and others. They all need different soils and stuff to grow; it was like everyone might not grow, but the course considered the source and the subject of each person. (George)

Reba is a member of the Neighbourhood House, for the committee, for the meetings. She also attends from time to time the community lunch on Mondays. She comes back to the Neighbourhood House 'to see what to do next and to practise on the computers. I am lonely at home, but stay because it is all I have'.

For Liz:

... it is the need for people to belong... I can get very sick if I sit at home all the time... There are a lot of people, needy people, just like me. And with their help, love and understanding, life need not be so hard.

Individuals valued the connectedness that ACE fostered but their use of ACE was sporadic in terms of the types and content of the ACE programs they were accessing. These individuals were mostly not wanting educational 'pathways', but the spectrum of education programs to be available: general education, vocational education, public education etc. Most of the surveyed 'older' individuals from CALD backgrounds experienced the social connectivity and the development of new social networks that they were looking for; however, there was also recognition that it was only some of the programs that achieved these outcomes:

Marie summed this up in saying: 'in the main, I have found adult education informative; some, however, is so simplified that you don't need a brain to pass the course'. Hanna said 'we need more options of where you can go; you end up doing what's the next best course, rather than what you want to do. Education/courses need to be where we're at, life stage...'.

Apart from being 'older', these individuals were also more established within Australian society and so were more assertive about their needs and more knowledgeable about how to go about locating resources to match their needs. They reported that some ACE programs had successfully blended social and educational activities mostly because of a specific tutor who fostered social activities as part of their educational program, irrespective of that program's content and intended outcome. It was individuals working within ACE, rather than specific ACE providers, programs or practices, who were able to facilitate adult education programs that acknowledged the personal, social and cultural aspects of participants. The integration of experiential learning frameworks appeared very limited within ACE providers in Campaspe, which revealed a disconnection from the pedagogical frameworks that are particularly effective with diverse groups of learners.

There was also a disturbing recognition by some of the individuals that ACE 'didn't set the standards too high' for some of their programs. Here it was argued that individual potential was not being reached because learners were seen as being 'disadvantaged', meaning that they were undemanding and unchallenging. This reflects an 'input focused' approach to the philosophy and practice of adult education, where enrolments and student contact hours weigh strongly in decisions about funding and program provision. Under this model, education provision is about achieving numerical outcomes to suit targets and funding, rather than any practices that suit the local community. Unfortunately, this may also reflect a patronising educational framework that does not expect too much from these groups of learners because 'we shouldn't expect too much' of people accessing adult education via ACE providers and programs.

Most of the younger, migrant women interviewed for the research experienced ACE as an extension of their total social isolation in a new community. Their experiences of ACE programs reflected a range of issues where Australian society 'expects' newly arrived migrants to attend English language classes until they can 'function 'properly', that is, assimilate linguistically. Here, the onus is on each individual to access and participate in these programs rather than on ACE or Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) providers to outreach to this particular group of learners.

The experiences of these women, who have more recently migrated, also reinforced an understanding of Australia as a patriarchal society much like the countries from which they had migrated. For these women, men were the people who had power over them, whether in their personal lives or in their ACE programs. Their experiences as women at ACE reinforced their isolation by mirroring the lack of social intercourse with other ACE participants from CALD backgrounds, meaning they couldn't locate others with similar experiences with whom they could bond and develop networks.

Some saw themselves as being ridiculed by others and/or objectified because they were young(er), migrant (Asian) women. This was a reflection of their experiences as women within the wider community. For them, ACE providers were not really any different in terms of attitudes about race, culture and gender; these were the mores of the Campaspe regional community of which ACE is a part:

There are not many mums in Echuca working regularly part-time or full-time. There is a small town attitude that women who are mothers do certain things, stay at home, playgroup, shopping, not studying or working and juggling different things to do. This attitude is not helping. There is not a problem with my cultural background, but I think it's the attitude to me as a mother. (Arosha)

We go out and see people when husband at home, he say, sit and listen, learn how women do things here. So I sit. I work in supermarket a while... Older men, they smiled at me. One man tried to touch me, I screamed and run. No go back, husband told them, no go back. (Ollie)

This group found it difficult to build their social capital as part of their ACE experience because of the lack of social support in their personal lives that could act as a catalyst to support their venturing into new social network development (Hero 2007). Social isolation acts as a barrier that can feed on itself. Unless individuals find a place that facilitates social inclusion, it can become self-fulfilling where every individual experience leads to social isolation (Baron, Field & Schuller 2000). The marginalisation of these women again reflects a history of race, culture and gender in Australian society that, despite the multicultural agenda of the past three decades, emphasises a view of migrants as an economic resource. The totality of the migrant experience and the resources these women bring with them are not valued highly, and yet they could be a valuable resource to the local community, if only they could be acknowledged for who they were and what they had to offer.

Adult and community education can be more active in developing social capital amongst CALD groups in regional communities only when it starts to recognise the specific groups, families and individuals residing in those communities. This also means actively mingling with people from diverse backgrounds, by engaging in all manner of social and economic networks within communities to locate and involve these groups who are often hidden from the mainstream (Nadarajah 2004). This research found that, much like any other segment of the population, people from CALD backgrounds want and need a range of adult education and training activities: English language programs, professional development programs, vocational training, general education and recreation programs. However, for ACE programs to be genuinely inclusive, they need to incorporate experiential learning philosophies and practices that engage with all learners, their backgrounds and their current knowledge and skills, all as a base for planning and facilitating new adult education programs (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant & Yates 2003, Fenwick 2000).

Conclusion

The link between population diversity, adult education and social capital development is still a tentative and questionable one. Often the link is assumed rather than tested. ACE does have a mandated role in providing access to education and training but this does not necessarily translate into the building of social capital (Volkoff & Walstab 2007). The research outlined in this article suggests that ACE providers, programs and practices can actually contribute to social exclusion, particularly for people more recently arrived in this country and in regional communities. Race and culture as experiences and indicators have been absent from the social capital 'thesis' (Hero 2007) and there is evidence in this research that social capital development via ACE can be a form of social control and social reproduction in regional communities. ACE does nevertheless have

the potential to act as an agent of social networking and therefore social cohesion (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006).

Further research and evidence about social capital development is required from diverse community structures and processes throughout Australian society in both urban and regional settings. Social capital measurement to date has been mainly from WASP, middle class communities and using traditional indicators such as church-going, volunteering and networking via clubs and associations. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds or marginal groups, on the other hand, tend to utilise public services, community services and sport as their main social networking environments, and these connections are not being researched as completely as they could and should be (Hero 2007).

Gender, life-stage and length of time of residence in Australia all influenced the ACE experiences of these individuals from CALD backgrounds interviewed in this research. People from different cultural backgrounds were expected to 'fit in' to regional and rural communities. Based on its stated philosophical and pedagogical background, ACE has a role to play in more actively fostering social interaction for diverse groups, because there is evidence that this is where people from diverse backgrounds do 'search for' access to personal, social and economic network development (Volkoff & Walstab 2007, Kearns 2006).

As a society, there is a need in Australia to examine the ACE sector in all its capacities and locate what it is about ACE that fosters social cohesion, social production or social control. However, it is difficult to imagine an ACE sector that can act as a unifying force when, as a sector of adult education, it is itself fractured with different philosophies and practices in each State and Territory, between regions within States/Territories and between providers within specific regions. While one of the strengths of ACE is its ability to service and resource local communities, its weakness as a sector is

the lack of a unifying philosophy about its role in Australian society (Kearns 2005). Does not the ACE sector have an obligation to act as an educational and social service that meets the diverse needs of communities? If so, which governments and agencies are going to act as the catalyst and facilitator to make this happen?

The data collected and documented in this research on ACE in one Australian regional community outlined very individual experiences based on many factors. So it is difficult to 'lump' these individuals into targeted equity sub-groups such as CALD, women, youth and unemployed because there are always exceptions to the norm. This challenges ACE to move beyond 'target groups' and 'group-based adult learning practice' to develop an experiential and ecological (humanist and interactionist) approach to planning and facilitating ACE programs of diverse types for diverse individuals and communities (Osborne, Sankey & Wilson 2007, Kearns 2006, Fenwick 2000). The challenge is also for ACE providers to develop individual, flexible, responsive, experiential learning programs and processes which recognise the needs of all individuals and the commonalities of these needs within communities via a mix of educational programs, including classroom instruction, social and cultural activities, mentoring, community networking and workplace training (Kearns 2005).

This can only be achieved with ACE not only networking with other ACE providers but with other education and training providers, community service agencies and local governments to ascertain who needs what and how within a social and community development framework rather than a human capital one. A national ACE philosophy could create a shared meaning and purpose to ACE that makes it distinct from other post-compulsory education and with funding frameworks that link funds to individual needs rather than target groups.

This would re-orientate ACE providers and practitioners to listen to and 'see' those individual and groups experiencing cultural and social inequity, those who are still currently missing out on basic access to a range of personal, social and vocational education programs. ACE practitioners also need professional development around managing diversity in a range of community contexts and how to design, develop and facilitate experiential learning programs that honour curriculum frameworks and yet also acknowledge individual adult education motivations and needs.

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About the author

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Negotiating learning through stories: mature women, VET and narrative inquiry

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This paper explains my choice of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach in my recently completed PhD study. My research investigated learning experiences of mature women learners in VET. Notions of learning as negotiated lived experience called for a methodological approach that privileged the learner's perspective and opened space in which alternative notions of learning might emerge. From interviews with twelve mature women, I explain how I use stories of learning to understand how these women, as learners with distinct yet diverse life experiences, contextualise their everyday into their VET learning. Some ethical considerations in using other people's stories in narrative research are also identified. I argue for the use of stories to research women's understandings of their VET learning and to reconceptualise learning as an ongoing and integrated process that must be understood within the everyday contexts of women's lives.
