

Teaching for social capital outcomes: The case of adult literacy and numeracy courses

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There is strong evidence that participation in education and training can produce social capital outcomes. There is also strong evidence that such outcomes are useful outcomes; they can enhance the development of other outcomes often called human capital and they can contribute to the social-economic wellbeing of the learners and the communities in which they live. Yet, little research has been done on the pedagogy and other conditions that produce social capital outcomes in education and training. This paper reports on a research project that investigated what teachers do to produce social capital outcomes in adult literacy and numeracy courses.

Introduction

There is a growing body of research which indicates that learning outcomes are a function of the social capital students bring to the program or course and that, furthermore, learning can produce additional social capital outcomes for students (for example, Coleman 1988, Field 2005, Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy & Bynner 2004). Social capital refers to the norms, networks and trust which Putnam (1995) identifies as the ‘features of social life ... that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives’. Portes (1998) observes that, ‘[w]hereas economic capital is in people’s bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships’. Because social capital is comparatively intangible, its definition, let alone ways in which it can be measured, remains debatable. For pragmatic reasons, the study reported in this paper adopted the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition which describes social capital as the ‘networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups’ (2004: 5).

Despite the ongoing difficulties of definition and measurement, the relationship between social capital and learning has captured the interest of both research and government. Much of the research relating education and social capital has been conducted in the schooling sector (e.g. Dika & Singh 2002). There is also an increasing body of literature that is exploring the relationship between social capital and adult learning (e.g. Allison, Gorringer & Lacey 2006, Balatti & Falk 2002, Falk 2006, Falk, Golding & Balatti 2000, Field & Spence 2000, Kearns 2004, Kilpatrick 2002). In the area of adult literacy, such research is limited but growing (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006, Falk 2001a, Tett, Hall, MacLachlan, Thorpe, Edwards & Garside 2006).

Because there is sufficient evidence to suggest that adult education programs, including adult literacy and numeracy courses, can produce social capital outcomes, it is worthwhile investigating the pedagogical practices that generate them. The assumption being made here, of course, is that pedagogy does have an impact on the social capital outcomes that students experience. This is not to imply that pedagogy is the only factor that impacts on the production of social capital outcomes. Curriculum, context, funding, and the resources and needs that the students themselves bring to the course, are just some of the factors that are likely to impact on the social capital outcomes experienced. Nevertheless, pedagogy is certainly an important factor to investigate if only for the reason that to some extent it is within the realm of the teacher's influence to modify or develop.

This paper is about identifying some of the ways in which teachers draw on the social capital that participants bring to stand alone adult literacy classes and some of the ways in which they go about providing the learning environment that fosters the development of social capital outcomes. The term 'pedagogy', however, is not unproblematic. It can be defined so narrowly as to include only a technicist description of what teachers do when teaching or so broadly as to also encompass elements of education and training that impact on what teachers actually do (Hammond & Wickert 1993). In the research project reported in this paper, the term refers to what teachers do with their students in delivering literacy education.

The study

The research reported here comes from a study (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006) that investigated the nature and usefulness of social capital outcomes of stand alone literacy courses (Black, Balatti & Falk 2006) and that also attempted to identify at least some of the pedagogical practices that supported the development of social capital outcomes. Here the discussion is limited to the pedagogy.

The concept of social capital was operationalised as a set of 12 indicators (Balatti, Black & Falk 2006) based on the ABS social capital framework (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). The indicators looked for change in the participants' interaction with new or existing networks. For example, participation may have led to change in trust levels, change in the number of networks that the learner accessed or change in the way that the participant sought support from or gave support to other people.

A point of clarification requiring immediate attention concerns the ownership of the social capital. Social capital can be viewed as a private good (Coleman 1988), that is, an asset owned by individuals, and it can also be considered a public good (Bourdieu 1986), that is, owned by a group and beneficial to members of that group. Consistent with Coleman's position, this study is based on the premise that social capital outcomes can be identified as a private good, that is, social capital outcomes, if they exist, are experienced by the individual learners in literacy courses.

The data for the qualitative study were a set of 75 interviews with 18 teaching staff and 57 of their students in three locations, Darwin, Townsville and Sydney.

Data relevant to pedagogy were mainly produced by the teacher interviews. The kinds of questions that elicited information about pedagogy included:

- How do you decide what to teach and how?
- What do you think students get out of this course?
- What is it that you do that produces these sorts of outcomes?
- What sort of strategies seem to work better than others?

Most teachers in their responses did not refer to the term 'social capital' although many did refer to aspects of social capital (for instance, networks, trust, links) without actually using the term. The link between pedagogy and social capital outcomes, therefore, was sometimes explicitly made by the teachers and sometimes it

was inferred by the researchers. Inferences were made when the data comprised a description of what the teacher did in a teaching/ learning episode that resulted in a learning experience producing outcomes that were evidence of one or more of the 12 predetermined indicators.

Findings

The data reported here summarise what it is that teachers do when teaching their students that seems to be directly related to the production of social capital outcomes. The pedagogical strategies and techniques are clustered around the contexts in which they have the primary impact. The contexts are described here in terms of the three types of networks that students become members of by virtue of joining a class (see Figure 1). The first network is the formal network of staff and students that operates in the classroom at designated times over a period of weeks. The second type of network that students enter is the teacher-based networks that may operate both inside and outside the formal course time. The third set of networks is the informal networks that students make with other students and that operate outside formal class time.

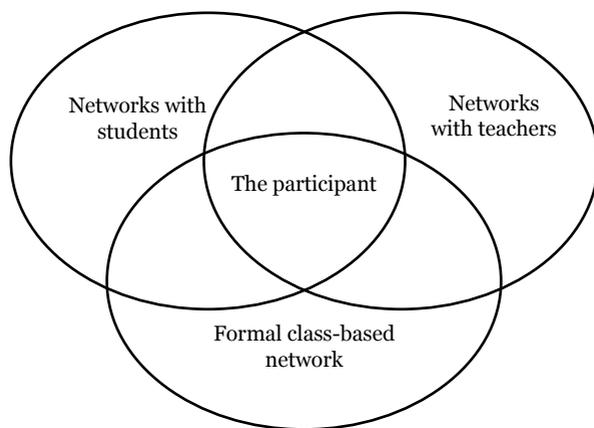


Figure 1: Participant membership of course-related networks

Formal network

Possibly the most visible, and certainly most formal, new network that the participant enters comprises the teacher(s) and the students in the classroom. It is in this network particularly that teachers are important. The principles of adult basic education teaching are well documented (Lee & Wickert 1995, Scheeres, Gonczi, Hager & Morley-Warner 1993), as are adult basic education practices (Herrington & Kendall 2005, McGuirk 2001). While these principles could be discussed in terms of how teachers operationalise them to produce social capital outcomes, this paper will not do so. Rather, attention is drawn to two aspects of the classroom network (important in adult education pedagogy) that appear significant in understanding how social capital outcomes are generated. These are the norms that operate in the group and the nature of student membership in this 'whole of class' network.

Network norms

Being an active and productive member of the class is integral to adult literacy and numeracy courses, regardless of whether the focus is writing, reading or speaking. Discussions led by teachers or students, buddying, peer tutoring, mentoring, pair work or small group work are just some of the ways that group work forms part of the modus operandi. Consequently, teachers and students alike conform to a set of norms that produce a social-emotional environment in which tolerance and good manners prevail; in which new students are welcomed; where students feel safe to take risks and share; where people listen patiently when others talk; and where being non-judgemental is paramount. Non-compliance, if persistent, is ultimately challenged.

Participant membership in the network

Student membership in the adult literacy and numeracy group is defined within the constraints of the norms described above.

Providing that students do not infringe on the rights of others, they are welcomed as full members of the group.

Students are invited to nominate topics of interest, to bring into the classroom setting their histories, their interests and their aspirations. A feature of the student membership remarked upon by students and teachers alike was agency. Students have some control over what transpires in their time together as a group and have complete control over the pace at which they wish to learn. In other words, in this network, students have full membership by simply being themselves.

A story of the student-turned dancer illustrates the way in which this kind of membership can produce a chain of events replete with social capital outcomes for the student and for fellow students. A newspaper article discussed in class on the health benefits of dance caught the interest of a student originally from Hong Kong. After that discussion and unbeknown to his class, he started attending classes in modern dance with four different groups in the city, four nights a week. Several months later, in a class discussion on hobbies, he let his class know of his interest and provided a demonstration. This led to a group excursion by train to one of the dance venues for a lesson. Two other students took up dancing classes as a consequence.

The norms established and the nature of the student membership resulted in students reporting that they felt safe amongst the other students in the course. This allowed them to be open about who they were, including being open about their language and literacy skills.

Networks with teachers

The significance of the student-teacher relationship in many of the interviews warranted the need to identify the teacher networks that students access as being very important in producing social capital outcomes. Relationships between students and staff were built in the public forum through interaction in the classroom and on outings

to locations as varied as museums, wildlife parks, legal courts, restaurants and even dance venues, but also, more privately, through personal conversations and through letter-writing.

For a number of students, the relationships they had with their teachers were perhaps the most significant factor affecting outcomes, including social capital outcomes. It was through these relationships that many students redefined their connection with education institutions, redefined their relationships with other adults in authority positions, and even more significantly, redefined themselves as learners and sometimes even as members of society.

Two of the more important aspects of the teacher-student network discussed here are the nature of the student-teacher relationship and the role that the teacher takes in linking students to networks outside the course context.

Student-teacher relationship

When referring to how students felt teachers treated them, the most frequently expressed sentiment was ‘with respect’. The contrast with remembered school experience was commented on often, as evidenced in the following comments:

I expected it to be more like the teachers standing there and telling you what to do ... I was really surprised. They’re not really judgemental. It’s really changed everything for me coming to this course because the teachers are really good role models for you because they tell you, ‘You can do it!’ and it gives you confidence. (Female, age 18)

It’s like chalk and cheese. No comparison. You get treated with respect, and your opinion is valued and everyone can make comments. (Male, age 50)

One story, in which many of the key elements typical of the teacher-student relationship in adult literacy and numeracy appear, is reproduced below. This story is from a teacher who uses letter-writing

with her students of non-English speaking background as a way of embedding language in social practice.

One student in her letter last year said to me she was wanting to bring back her mother's ashes from Hong Kong and didn't know how to go about it. But that was just in her letter; she would never have said that in class. Then I wrote back to her and I said to give me a few days and that I'd find out what to do. So I got on to the government departments and gave her the telephone numbers. Eventually, months later, in one of the letters she wrote back, she said that finally her mother's ashes were on the way out, and she could have them rest in the Buddhist temple where she went. That was a really big thing for her, but without the communication in the letters that wouldn't have happened.

A brief analysis identifies important features of the teacher-student relationship. The story reveals the authentic engagement of both teacher and student in the interaction. It also illustrates that it is the student who controls the interaction rather than the teacher. In writing about her personal problem in the letter, the student shows trust in her relationship with the teacher; when she informs the teacher of the outcome, she shows respect. The teacher follows suit by also responding in writing, accepting the appeal, explicitly or implicitly made, to assist in any way possible. To do this, the teacher needs to research an area about which she knows little. She then gives the student the contacts necessary and waits for the student to tell her the final outcome of the exercise, if and when she chooses. The story also illustrates the connections that teachers can help students make with other groups and networks outside their own personal sphere of interactions.

Teacher as connector/link to other networks

Teachers interviewed drew on their own human and social capital to connect students with their own networks and with other groups, organisations and institutions in society. The individual student

needs, aspirations and capabilities informed the advice teachers gave, and the degree of intervention applied to facilitating the links.

In some instances, teachers physically took the student to the appropriate destination. In one case, a teacher took a student to the city library and helped with the membership application process. In another, a tutor drove the student to the transport department to enable him to undertake an oral driver's licence test she had specially arranged for him. More commonly, the intervention took the form of teachers explaining how to access the necessary information, for example, phone numbers, addresses or websites of support services, volunteer organisations and government agencies. The most common of all interventions was the encouragement given to pursue particular goals or to contemplate possibilities hitherto unconsidered that led students to form new links or connections.

That some students remained in contact with their teachers well after their course participation ended suggests that the relationship can be particularly significant. One teacher spoke of an ex-student in her thirties and now employed, who visits her teachers just to 'keep in touch'. Other past students draw on the teacher-student network when the need arises. For example, an ex-student recontacted her teacher when she wanted assistance in writing a letter of complaint to the city council. A numeracy teacher told of students who have moved on to other courses, including university, but who still contact her for advice.

This study has shown that the teacher can be a very rich resource for students in a number of ways, apart from their expertise in teaching literacy courses. For many students, the teacher may be the only person they get to know well and who is educated, relatively knowledgeable in areas that are important to the student or who is a member of networks that could be useful to them. For many more, the teacher is a person of authority or of some standing who treats them with respect – this can be a new experience for students.

Networks with students

The informal networks that students make with other students present more sites for social capital production. The membership provides opportunities for new attachments and new ways of interaction.

Different classes produced different kinds of networks. Many commented on the course participation having provided them with the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. For some, this led to socialising in their free time, including visiting one another's homes and joining clubs together.

There were some non-English speaking background classes, for example, that seemed to produce rich student networks. Information on a variety of topics relating to their everyday lives, such as health, food, customs, education and holiday destinations, was exchanged and group outings were planned. In contrast, other groups seemed to have less cohesion, but nevertheless still provided an information network for jobs, further training, services or general knowledge.

The teachers interviewed were cognisant of the importance of the student networks formed among the students. One teacher of an adult literacy and numeracy class of mainly young people who were disenchanted with the school system observed that 'if they don't form a friendship almost straight away, then they are not going to last'.

Changes over time in student networks provide evidence of social capital outcomes being realised. For example, within a class comprising students from many different ethnic backgrounds, a teacher observed that, six months after joining the course, a student originally from Hong Kong welcomed people of different cultures into his network:

And it was a real turn around. He invited the guys from the Middle East to come and sit with him because they all sort of sit in groups and he sort of said, 'Come and sit here and we

can discuss this together'. Big smile, very positive, open arm movements and very open body language. That was really, really encouraging to see ... It's only just recently starting to occur. So he's feeling more confident within himself and more able to be more welcoming.

Such networks may seem independent of any teacher intervention but this is not the case. Interaction and trust build within the group in great measure due to teacher strategies. Opportunities in terms of space, time and motive, for example, have to be created as the starting point for these networks of informal interaction to occur.

Discussion

The findings in this study suggest that the literacy and numeracy courses that the students experienced serve two functions in social capital building. Firstly, the course-related networks serve as a 'practice field' in which students experience the conditions conducive to acquiring new identity and knowledge resources. Secondly, the students are able to bridge or make connections between the learnings from their course and the rest of their lives. The role of pedagogy is critical to both functions.

The term 'practice field' is borrowed from Schein (1993, 1995) who used it in the completely different context of organisations to describe a way of bringing about organisational change. Because the processes involved in making the transition to new ways of thinking or doing and firmly establishing them in one's repertoire take time and practice, a practice field is necessary. It is a space, literal and metaphorical, separate from the rest of the organisation in which a group of employees is able to learn new ways of doing and thinking and be free to make mistakes without fear of penalties. Schein (1993) states that individual learning, especially habit and skill learning, is best supported in a group situation where there is the psychological safety to experiment and make mistakes. This may

require temporarily moving employees out of the normal everyday work structure into a learning space where new norms can become established. Such a space comprises a group of people who come together to support and learn from one another. Essential elements of a psychologically safe environment include opportunities for training and practice, and effective norms that legitimise making errors and that reward innovative thinking and experimentation. Once they're ready, the employees re-enter the mainstream of the organisation.

When the notion of 'practice field' is applied here, the practice field is the course related networks that exist within the larger 'organisation' of the participant's world. For many, the networks are a new and safe environment in which to play out new aspects of identity and practise new skills. Resources developed may include new attitudes and beliefs about self and others, new ways of interaction and new links and connections. Within these networks, social capital outcomes are experienced.

However, there is an important difference between the two contexts of the organisation and the literacy and numeracy course. Unlike the organisational setting where participants move from the practice field to the wider setting of the organisation once they are ready, literacy and numeracy students participate in both the practice field and in the rest of their world, at the same time. This allows for multiple opportunities to bridge the two sets of experiences.

The analogy of the bridge is used here to describe the second function that literacy and numeracy courses have in producing social capital. A bridge suggests a means by which there is a two-way flow. For example, in the context of roads, a bridge allows traffic to flow both ways, often simultaneously but not necessarily. In this context of learning, the two-way flow refers to the flows of identity and knowledge resources developed in the interactions in the course-related networks, and of those developed in the other networks to which the students belong. The networks external to

the course may include family, friendship groups, workplaces, faith groups and special interest groups. The 'bridges' that encourage this flow to happen are the 'bridges of confidence' that the students ultimately build. The bridges are those new interactions that learners are prepared to engage in – new because they are drawing on new resources or new because they are drawing on existing resources in new ways or contexts. It is these new interactions outside the practice field that are able to produce changes in the nature of the memberships that the students have in their networks.

The two-way flow occurs in a variety of ways. It occurs when resources such as skills or confidence generated within the relatively safe environment of the practice field are applied, deployed or transferred to new or existing networks outside the course. It occurs very obviously when contacts made in class lead to other contacts in networks that learners had not accessed previously. Just as importantly, the two-way flow also occurs when students draw on their out-of-class lives in their interaction with teachers and peers in the course.

The choice of pedagogical practices that teachers make impacts on the nature of the practice field and hence on the extent to which students risk new kinds of interaction in the networks that comprise their lives. The pedagogical practices influence the nature of the networks formed not only in providing the conditions for them to grow but also by influencing the nature of the memberships and interactions of their participants. Despite the limitations of this study especially in terms of size, it is evident that the interactions that teachers have with students are critical in having students develop the confidence and the know-how to redefine themselves in the networks in which they find themselves.

Conclusion

The teaching staff interviewed in this study employed practices that came out of a commonly held set of beliefs about what it means to teach adult literacy and numeracy. Broadly speaking, they shared a socio-cultural perspective in which the individual is the focus. Whether a social capital perspective is merely a 'dressing up' of a pedagogy that is true and tried into something that only appears new, or whether it actually does signal the need to review the desired outcomes from literacy and numeracy courses, and therefore to revisit the pedagogy, remains to be seen.

Even if it is the former, exploring the teaching/learning adult literacy and numeracy experience from a social capital perspective still offers tremendous value. It is a way of reinvigorating a set of pedagogical practices that were established 15 to 20 years ago (for example, Grant 1987, Lee & Wickert 1995, Scheeres *et al.* 1993) and that need critique in the light of the developments that have occurred in adult learning research since then. It is particularly worthwhile, at a time when many of the teachers in adult literacy and numeracy are approaching retirement, and new teachers are taking their place though in a whole new policy environment in which teaching literacy and numeracy is often fragmented into short courses and subject to the single focus of immediate job outcomes.

If, on the other hand, it is the latter, and a pedagogy designed for social capital outcomes as well as for the traditional outcomes of skills, knowledge and self-confidence is warranted, then constructing the learner as a member of networks is a start. Either way, more research, especially practitioner-led research, on pedagogical practice is needed.

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