They contribute to this discussion from their varying perspectives, one as a learning centre co-ordinator and practitioner and the other as a university researcher. The second paper by **Janet MacLennan** relates the reflection of a university academic in her role as both teacher and learner. Her paper is structured in terms of a journey through her working life and the ongoing challenge for her as an adult learner to face daunting tasks as a learner.

We would welcome readers' and potential contributors' views on this innovation to the journal.

Roger Harris
Editor

and

Barie Brennan
Section Editor

Professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building in ACE: lessons from the Victorian Research Circles

John McIntyre
Consultant,
Adult Learning Research and Policy

The national reform agenda of the Council of Australian Governments challenges community education agencies to contribute to its goals and raises questions about their capacity to do so. It is crucial to define the conditions that are necessary to develop the capability of adult and community education (ACE) organisations to play a broader social and economic role. These include not only policy frameworks underwritten by strategic research, but the engagement of practitioners and organisations. The recent development in Victoria of Circles of Professional Research Practice, a form of participatory action research designed to promote such an engagement by ACE organisations, is analysed, drawing on material from an evaluation of the Circles intended to capture the experience, document its outcomes and recommend on its future applications. The article reviews the rationale of the

Research Circles, describes aspects of their operation and analyses the factors creating conditions favourable to professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building. In doing so, the Research Circles are theorised as a 'negotiable space' constructed at the intersection of policy, research and practice, drawing out implications for capacity-building in Australian community education and training organisations.

Introduction

When the Senate Report of 1991 (Aulich 1991) recommended a national policy on adult and community education (ACE), it gave the highest priority to the coherent development of the newly defined 'sector' and recommended action on a range of fronts – securing recognition by government and access to funding, building the capacity of community providers and promoting the professional development of the workforce.

The role and capability of community agencies has again been highlighted in responses to the reform agenda of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), especially the discussion paper, *Community education and national reform* (DEST 2006), and the Review of the Ministerial Declaration on ACE. The DEST Paper examined the capacity of the broadly defined not-for-profit community education and training sector[1] to contribute to COAG's goals of increased workforce participation and productivity. Demonstrating the sector's aggregate contribution to vocational education and training, the Paper argued that a national approach was needed to foster the capability of community providers and recommended a 'capability framework' recognising the differences in scale and function across the different community agencies. The subsequent Review of the Ministerial Declaration on ACE will undoubtedly seek stronger commitments by the States and Territories to the development of community-based adult education and training agencies.

If organisational capability is the key issue in the community education sector, how is this to be promoted? Given their relative autonomy, on what terms do community education agencies engage with State or national policy frameworks? What limits to capability are set by the part-time and voluntary workforce found in most community education organisations? By what means can professional knowledge and expertise be developed so as to underwrite organisational capability?

Recent developments in Victoria speak to such matters, in the form of an Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board initiative known as Circles of Professional Research Practice. This was a form of participatory action research designed to engage ACE organisations with government policy and its underpinning strategic research, thereby building their capacity for a broader social and economic contribution. Material is drawn from an evaluation of the Circles intended to capture the experience, document its outcomes and recommend on its future applications (McIntyre 2007).

This paper reviews the rationale for the development of the Research Circles, describes aspects of the operation and analyses factors contributing to their successful implementation. In doing so, the paper theorises the Research Circles as a 'negotiable space' created at the intersection of policy, research and practice, and suggests how they created conditions favourable to professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building in community education and training organisations.

The Victorian Research Circles

Public policy in Victoria has recently accorded ACE a significant role in meeting the 'adult learning challenge' and making Victoria an

'innovation economy'. The *Ministerial Statement: Future Directions for ACE in Victoria* outlined four strategies – broadening ACE's role through community partnerships, widening participation by specific groups, developing sustainable organisations and increasing government investment (Ministerial Statement 2005).

The Ministerial Statement led to a strategic program of commissioned research in three areas – a study of men's learning through ACE and community involvement in small rural communities (Golding 2005); an analysis of pedagogical and curriculum innovation in ACE surrounding the generic skills question (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse & Maunders 2004); and a longitudinal study analysing outcomes and pathways from ACE programs, particularly for educationally disadvantaged client groups (Walstab & Teese 2005, Walstab, Volkoff & Teese 2005, 2006).

Subsequently, the ACFE Board sought to capitalise on this research investment, so it might generate practical benefits and underwrite organisational capacity-building. Its *Research Strategy 2005–2007: Putting Research to Work* proposed 'Circles of Professional Research Practice' (hereafter Research Circles) bringing together researchers, managers and policy experts to inquire into their practice through a dialogic process. The Circles would 'contribute to extending the capability of ACE practitioners to use high-level research, to apply its findings, and, where appropriate, undertake research of their own that will assist ACE organisations to provide innovative and responsive learning environments for their communities'.

The Circles were to apply what was learned from the researchers, designing strategies to meet local needs, developing partnerships with other community agencies to achieve new goals and reflecting on the outcomes of the strategies. Three Circles of Professional Research Practice were established and ran from November 2005 to March 2006, with a second round of activity with different participants from March to November 2006. In each case, an ACE organisation was selected to manage the project, recruit participants from sponsoring ACE organisations, arrange the involvement of the researchers, administer the funding and report to ACFE on their progress.

Each Circle drew members from across the ACFE regions and about equally from metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas – over 100 practitioners, including managers, coordinators and teaching staff, representing over 75 organisations, or about one-fifth of Victoria's recognised ACE providers. The participants carried out action research projects, individually or in teams, facilitated by the Circle managers and the university researchers who had conducted the strategic research, with each Circle determining its own *modus operandi.*

Golding and his associates contributed to a Circle that worked on strategies for increasing men's participation in ACE organisations and improving opportunities for their learning. Sanguinetti and her associates worked in a second Circle that applied the ACE Pedagogy Framework, encouraging reflection on teaching and learning practices, examining how generic skills can be fostered and creating more conducive learning environments. Walstab and Volkoff worked in a third Circle, based on the ACE Longitudinal Study research that explored ways to promote participation by groups not currently using ACE.

Practice in ACE

Before exploring further how the Research Circles supported practitioners to research their practice, it is necessary to appreciate the character of professional practice in ACE – it is both diverse and variable, encompassing the teaching and learning practices of individual teachers and tutors, the curriculum and the ACE ethos and culture (Sanguinetti, Waterhouse & Maunders 2004). Practice also includes the organisational work of setting strategy and marketing programs and services within the local community.

ACE practice is highly variable, owing to the differences in the size and capability of ACE providers, their staff profiles and job descriptions. Most staff are sessional and part-time, and work is less professionalised and career paths less defined than in education generally. Teacher and tutor identity is less defined by qualifications or credentialed expert knowledge, and educational practice may overlap with community development.

This variability sets a key challenge of developing of professional knowledge and expertise in the ACE workforce, one recognised in the goal of the Ministerial Statement 'to enhance the sustainability of ACE organisations' and achieve 'stronger community-based adult education organisations through better business, management, governance, workforce and volunteer practices' and 'increased skills of ACE teachers, tutors and trainers'.

How then is ACE to build its organisational capacity through the development of its core educational and administrative staff and its part-time and sessional workforce? To build capability requires a high degree of collegial interaction within and between ACE organisations to overcome the isolation that is experienced by a largely part-time workforce. How can this development reach those with only a marginal association with an ACE organisation and limited professional identities?

Current thinking about practice

The concept of Circles of Professional Research is consistent with a number of strands of contemporary thinking about the role of practice in the development of professional knowledge. Brown (2003) describes at least six conceptions of practice that are influencing thinking about the professional development of vocational education and training practitioners, and contributing to an emphasis on practitioners researching their work.

The genesis of the Circles can be traced to the ACE Pedagogy research (Sanguinetti *et al*. 2004) which worked with over twenty experienced ACE 'co-researchers' on the teaching and learning approaches that foster generic skills development within the ACE organisational culture and ethos. In what became intensive professional development in its own right, the collaboration and reflective analysis of the co-researchers became the basis for the development of the ACE Pedagogy Framework.

The Circles themselves employed various approaches to participatory action research as a means of developing professional practice, perhaps best known through the leading role of the 'Deakin school' (see, for example, Carr & Kemmis 1986, Kemmis & McTaggart 2003) which has popularised action research as a 'spiral' where 'moments' of planning, acting, observing and reflecting follow each other in a series of cycles. Beyond the critical action research model, adult education itself has a long tradition of activist and participatory research, including the North American, which emphasises community-based activist research as empowering participants (Selener 1992, Deshler & Grudens-Schuck 2000, McIntyre & Grudens-Schuck 2002).

Other strands of thought relevant to the Circles concept originate in the debate about the nature of expertise and its development in the workplace, stimulated by education and training reform. Recent work (Billett 2001, Beckett & Hager 2002) has examined the way that knowledge is brought into play by the objective situations of professional practice in an occupation, leading to the questioning of traditional 'front-loaded' models of professional preparation. Knowledge formation is now being understood as embedded in practice-based workplace learning, under conditions that are organic and holistic, contextual and experience based, and usually collaborative and collegial. Expertise, such as higher-order problem solving, is seen as forged in the heat of practical action (Becket & Hager 2002). Such conceptions of expertise are argued even more

expansively by Gibbons *et al.* (1994) in their concept of Mode 2 knowledge – knowledge produced in its context of application in contemporary workplaces, in a matrix of collaborative relationships between universities, public sector organisations and corporations. Such developments have raised the status of 'working knowledge' and spawned new models of workplace-based learning leading to professional preparation and academic qualification (Symes & McIntyre 2000).

Finally, a further influence on the Circles concept is the 'communities of practice' literature (e.g. Wenger 1998, Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002), which draws attention to the processes that lead a group of practitioners to define themselves as belonging to a community with a distinctive professional culture and shared expertise. The notion of *professional identity* is therefore implicit in the 'community of practice' concept, as knowledge and identity are subject to change via the subjective meanings through which professionals understand and 'enact' their practice.

Thus, the concept of Research Circles finds a powerful rationale in new understandings of expert knowledge as formed and validated through professional experience.

Participants' perceptions of the outcomes of the Circles

It is not possible here to provide an appreciation of the participants' experience of the Research Circles, since this is given in some depth in the case studies of the evaluation report (McIntyre 2007: 21–44). Brief reference can be made to Circle outcomes as they were perceived by members, based on responses to a comprehensive checklist of outcome statements employed in the evaluation interviews conducted with over half the participants (see McIntyre 2007: 54–65).

Overall, there were outcomes and benefits in five areas:

- Awareness of the strategic research, and the need to interpret its significance for their local context, and understand the need to research the needs of the community and develop strategies to promote the participation of specific groups
- Applying research to practice, leading to improvements in teaching and learning practices, to induction systems and staff communication; finding ways to understand and capture good practice in ACE; generating strategies for promoting men's participation in learning and enhancing the effectiveness of providers in meeting the needs of groups in their communities
- Strengthening the capacity of ACE organisations to meet the goals of the Ministerial Statement, by learning how to reach specific groups, opening up dialogue about directions, changing ways of delivering services, developing team approaches and forming partnerships with other agencies
- Promoting professional development through collaborative inquiry into practice, by creating opportunities to work with others, motivating action on needed changes, working with other organisations and learning about their approaches
- Fostering a participatory research culture in ACE, by developing the capacity to research practice in organisations, promoting reflection on practice as a professional activity and setting up action learning as part of work.

Participants attached the greatest significance to opportunities to network with others and learn about their problem-solving practices, to challenge colleagues to think more critically about practice and engage in collaborative and outward-looking professional activity. How the Circles promoted such outcomes is explored further in the following sections.

Constituting the Circles: key dynamics

There were several conditions that were important in giving the Circles their character, engaging practitioners with ACE research and policy and favouring the formation of professional knowledge and the development of organisational capability.

First, the Circles were established in a considered way. Rather than direct it, ACFE implemented the initiative through experienced managers in ACE organisations, who played a key leadership role, freeing the researchers to act as expert resources and supporting the participants in the completion of their projects and motivating them to 'stay the course'.

Second, activities were structured to ensure focused involvement, effective interaction among participants and the best use of consulting researcher time. There was a flexible approach to the adoption of action research methodology, giving scope for experimentation and creativity, and an emphasis on practical relevance rather than academic sophistication.

A third condition was the applicability of the original research on men's learning, ACE pedagogy and the ACE longitudinal study. The research offered powerful rationales for practitioners seeking to change their teaching or their organisation. This was reinforced by the involvement of the researchers, who made available their expert knowledge of ACE policy, research and practice, and their wisdom.

Finally, there was the willingness of the Circle members to engage in the Circle process, to work collectively on researching their practice. Important to many participants was the support of their sponsoring ACE organisations, a core of whom were leaders in innovation, while others were wanting to move in new strategic directions. Funding support was key to motivating organisations and individuals to give priority to the project.

Such conditions created the Circle experience and the outcomes. Though there was some expectation that the Circles would continue in a self-sustaining way and engender a culture of action learning for professional development, in practice their viability was contingent on these conditions.

Conceptualising the Circle experience as a 'negotiable space'

As Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) remind us, practice is far from simple and comprises complexes of knowledge, understandings, skills, performances and behaviours. Practice has both performative and interpretive aspects, referring both to objective situations and to the subjective meanings that participants share in common with others. How the Circles impacted upon the professional practice of participants can be explored in an account that draws on interpretivist social theory with its roots in occupational sociology (Becker 1970), symbolic interactionism (Reynolds 2003), social phenomenology (Schutz 1974) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984). (For a recent discussion of interpretivism in adult education and training, see McIntyre & Grudens-Schuck 2004).

It is clear that the predominant impact of the Circles was upon the professional knowledge and understandings of the participants. The Circles involved a process of expressing and externalising 'knowledges' that were in the normal course of practice, somewhat taken-for-granted, or embedded in practice situations. Professional knowledge stagnates and becomes 'sedimented' unless challenged by situations of practice that are out of the ordinary, triggering critical reflection and an accommodation to new realities.

In understanding how it created a potential to challenge existing professional practice, it is helpful to visualise the Research Circle as a unique space at the intersection of the three 'domains' of the specialised 'knowledges' of research, policy and practice – a space

that belongs to no one domain, that is defined and negotiated by the participants through the Circle process.

In other words, the Circle is a 'negotiable space' that is 'outside' the normal professional experience of the researchers, policymakers and managers as well as the ACE practitioners (Figure 1). This idea is freely adapted from Brown and Jones, following Giroux, of a teacher's pedagogical knowledge as 'a theoretical space, for creating a discourse capable of raising new questions, offering oppositional questions and producing fresh objects for analysis' (Brown & Jones 2002:102).
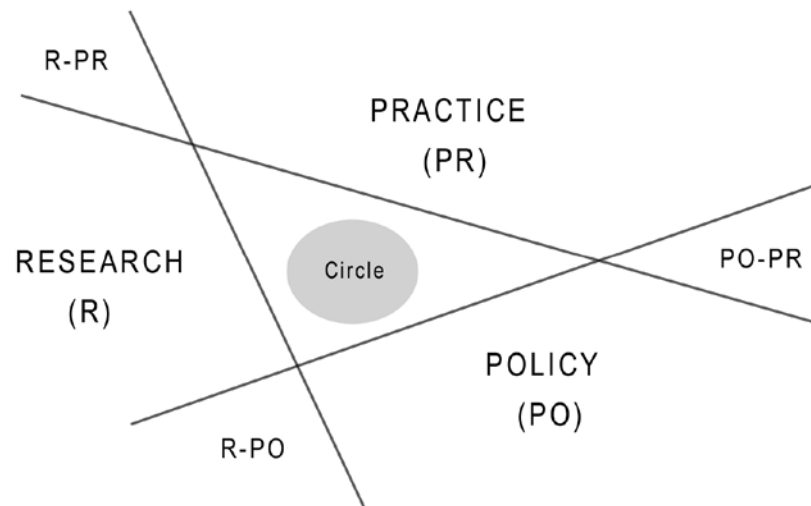

Figure 1: The Circle as a 'negotiable space'

The model suggests that participants 'negotiated' their participation in the Circle by accessing knowledge about the relationships between domains from others who have such understandings and can communicate them. At the outset, the relationships of research, policy and practice were problematic and had to be worked out by the Circle 'inhabitants', leading them to make connections between different domains of knowledge.

These connections, understood as mutual or two-way, include relationships between the domains of policy-practice (PO-PR, right hand side) where some participants have understandings of what policy is currently demanding of ACE practitioners and how, in turn, policy needs to reflect and respond to practice. Similarly, there are research-policy connections (R-PO, left hand bottom), or knowledge of the ways that research engages with policy agendas and, in turn, how policy deploys appropriate research. Finally, there are research-practice connections, (R-PR, left hand top) including knowledge about what research can say about ACE culture and practice and how research can engage with the field's agendas.

The Circle thus represents a virtual web of knowledge relationships. At an early stage, this rich potential of the 'space' may seem ill defined for the participants. The meanings of the Circle are hazy, and it may not be clear to them what professional knowledges need to come into play and how they might 'apply'. Later in the life of the Circle, the participants may more clearly perceive relationships between the different domains of knowledge. The work of the Circle then leads participants (if they wholeheartedly engage with the process) to develop new understandings and incorporate these in their professional perspectives.

Explaining the efficacy of the Circles

This model can be employed to understand the dynamics of Circles and account for their efficacy as a means of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building.

First, it was critical how the Circle 'space' was to be given form and 'constituted' by its participants. Each Circle created boundaries and parameters as a social context set apart from the participants' usual 'life-worlds' of the university, bureaucracy and ACE organisation. This was accomplished through skilled structuring and facilitation by the researchers and managers. Through their interactions, the

participants progressively defined the 'space' in terms of shared understandings of 'what the Circles were about'.

Second, the knowledge and expertise of the facilitators (researchers and managers) was key. The facilitators were effective because they could draw on complex sets of understandings about the interactions of research, policy and practice in ACE, depicted in Figure 1, enabling them to mediate learning about the relationships of research, policy and practice. The researchers' expertise may be conceptualised as an integrated knowledge of these domains and their complex relationships – not merely their substantive research perspectives, but also their understandings of policy engagement and how research can work theoretically and empirically with policy problems. In commissioned research, researchers and policy-makers may develop reciprocal understandings of each other's work and what 'good' research for policy comprises (McIntyre & Wickert 2000). So too, on the strength of their deep knowledge of ACE culture and practice, all researchers had a grounded understanding of 'research relevances' – what research meanings might resonate most with ACE practitioners' understandings.

Third, the model suggests that it is the Circle's negotiable character that creates its potential as an effective change catalyst. The relationships between research, policy and practice have to be worked out by 'doing participatory action research'. As participants negotiate their participation, they review their taken-for-granted professional knowledge and identity and subject it to reflective inquiry. Effective change-management occurs when, for example, organisations begin to challenge typical and perhaps unquestioned situations of practice (teaching and learning practices, ways of working with the local community and so on). The desire of many participants and their sponsoring organisations for renewal set such conditions for change.

Fourth, the model suggests how the knowledge, represented by the domains of research, policy and practice, is made available as 'subjective' sets of meanings that practitioners apply in situations of practice, in the performance of their roles as coordinators, managers, sessional tutor, teachers and so on. It is helpful to understand these 'meanings' as organised as a *professional perspective,* a concept fundamental to the sociology of occupations (e.g. Becker 1970), the social phenomenology of everyday life (Schutz 1976) and its applications to occupational analysis in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967, Heritage 1984).

A perspective organises a range of tacit and formal knowledges relevant to practice, not simply formal theory or academic knowledge (Becker 1970). In this view, an ACE practitioner's professional knowledge is organised in its relevance to typical situations. Change is effected via the modification of perspectives in novel or challenging situations, precisely the kind of experiences that the Circles triggered through their applied research and particularly through the engagement with colleagues in sponsoring organisations. Put another way, the Circles provided an experiential 'shake-up' of existing ideas, as well as an accommodation of new ideas from the research itself, leading to a sense of their 'whole approach' changing.

Fifth, it is crucial to appreciate that, in the Circle 'negotiable space', interactions among participants were maximised, promoting the collaboration of peers. Participants were exposed to others' perspectives and practice knowledge, developing their professional perspectives inter-subjectively in this way. Thus it is not surprising that the participants attached such significance to professional networking as a feature of their Circle experience. Recalling that ACE practitioners can be quite isolated in their organisations and in their work as part-time and sessional tutors, the Circles experience was effective because participants encountered others' perspectives through the processes of particpatory inquiry.

Professional knowledge and capacity-building in ACE

Some implications for questions of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building in ACE can now be drawn from the Research Circles experience. It can be argued that the Circles were 'virtuous' in bringing together three conditions for the development of organisational capability in the ACE sector, three conditions that work together in a dynamic way (Figure 2).
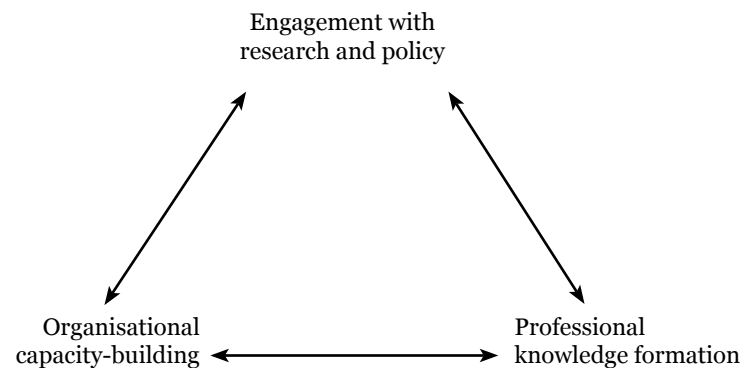

Figure 2: Engagement, professional knowledge and capacity

The *engagement* of practitioners with research and policy is a condition for the *formation* of new professional knowledge and expertise. This production of expertise through engagement with research and policy is in turn a condition for *building* the organisational capacity that enables a broader role for ACE. Taking this further, professional development occurs within the matrix of professional life and organisational capacity-building, understood as an essentially collegial rather than individual response to research and policy. Similarly, capacity-building may take direction from research and policy, but can only be realised through coherent professional development.

In stressing 'engagement' as a factor, it needs to be emphasised again that community education agencies are relatively independent of government, which cannot (as it may in public education) manage change more directly. Community agencies, with a strong component of voluntarism, cannot be bidden to implement public policy objectives. Rather, the challenge for public policy is to assist organisations in self-directed change within a framework that supports coherent development of the sector.

Thus, the Circles were deliberately designed to promote engagement of practitioners with research and policy knowledge through the 'negotiable space' at the intersection of these domains with their practice knowledge, making possible the generation of new professional knowledge (knowledge that is essentially relational). Retaining the expert researchers as Circle facilitators was crucial to engagement – they embodied research and policy knowledge and relationships, providing a rich resource on which practitioners could draw to generate their own understandings through their projects.

This analysis clearly accords significance to the discrete 'domains' of knowledge represented by research, policy and practice that the Circle process brought into productive relationship.[2] It is not merely that the Circles represent an extraordinary level of professional interaction in a context where typically ACE practitioners are professionally isolated. Equally, what was learned through the participatory research process was crucial, and the workable nature of the research has been mentioned already – its potential to generate new professional knowledge.

Professional knowledge formation

Knowledge formation is the key to professional development in ACE, and goes hand in hand with organisational capacity-building. Public policy has been reluctant to recognise the problematic nature of professional knowledge and identity in the sector, originating in the

historical peculiarities of ACE . If expanding the social and economic role of ACE is a goal, then there will need to be more recognition that professional knowledge and organisational capability are mutually reinforcing, just as they can be mutually limiting.

The Circles demonstrated how professional knowledge can be developed through workplace inquiry and feed into organisational capability. First, they enabled the *creation of new knowledge* and understandings, when, for instance, participants developed their skills in researching their communities, in forming partnerships or in generating participation strategies to enhance the participation of certain groups. Second, they led to the *sharing of knowledge* through increased professional networking and interaction, when many participants chose to work with colleagues to review their teaching practices, leading to change in learning and assessment systems, and team approaches to programs. Thirdly, the Circles *validated existing knowledge,* particularly of experienced teachers and co-ordinators. In this last respect, the Circles indicate a potential avenue for formally recognising knowledge and skills in the ACE workforce, if the professional learning of the Circles can be linked to professional qualifications for those who desire this. The Circle model fits well with existing forms of credit for work-based learning in the programs of universities with expertise in adult and vocational education, as institutions are challenged to reconcile new conditions of knowledge formation with traditional structures of academic study leading to professional qualifications.

The professionalisation of the ACE workforce is a related issue. Not all practitioners will have an interest in or need for relevant qualifications, especially perhaps, experienced core staff in larger organisations. However, the theme of organisation renewal has its generational counterpart in the younger practitioners now entering the ACE field, particularly through the expansion of vocational education programs. The goal of a sustainable ACE sector implies a greater commitment to developing professional identity and expertise into the future. The Circles can effectively serve such ends.

The Circles as organisational capacity-building

The sponsoring organisations engaged, more or less fully, with the opportunities that the Circles presented, and among them were many of the sector's leaders in educational innovation. The desire for organisational change motivated some organisations to grasp the Circles as an opportunity to advance the process, including some ACE organisations looking for renewal, with the requirements of accredited training motivating some participants to use the experience of Circles to develop better systems.

Reiterating the challenge of promoting change in the relatively autonomous community sector, it is important to appreciate the necessity of a coherent policy framework for organisational development, such as the Victorian Ministerial Statement (and nationally, the Ministerial Declaration on ACE) provides. Similarly, this discussion has stressed that the strategic research provided practitioners with robust frameworks to guide their pursuit of new directions through professional collaboration. The discussion has stressed the wide range of professional knowledge found in ACE, including the expertise that is required to manage community organisations, to develop, promote and market programs, extending to knowledge of strategies for widening participation and encouraging the learning of particular client groups.

Reference has been made to the possibility for the Circles to effect change, modifying perspectives by creating novel situations. Through the medium of professional networking and heightened interaction of colleagues in their organisations (so highly valued by the participants), the Circles caused an experiential 'shake-up' of existing ideas. It can be readily appreciated how the Circles challenged professional knowledge and identity within the matrix

of organisational life, and how they supported change-management – when, for example, organisations begin to question their accepted culture, prevailing forms of practice, their ways of treating learners, ways of working with the local community and so on. In this way, the desire of many sponsoring organisations for renewal set a powerful motive for individuals to develop new perspectives on practice and so contribute to change.

Conclusion

The Research Circles were successful because they created a unique space where participants could investigate the relationships of practice to research and policy. Their 'negotiation' of the Circle space gave them insight into knowledge relationships not normally available to practitioners. By promoting collaborative inquiry practice, they set up conditions for the formation of professional knowledge and expertise that is essential to building the organisational capacity envisaged in the Ministerial Statement's goals for sustainable ACE organisations enabled to perform a broader community development role.

The Circles were able to activate this key dynamic of professional knowledge formation and organisational capacity-building, by providing a means for ACE organisations to engage with research and policy. In this way, the Circles operated as an effective catalyst for educational innovation and organisational development, in a way that is appropriate to community-owned and managed organisations.

In this way, the Circles are significant in showing how the challenges of developing a sustainable ACE sector can addressed in public policy, showing how change in relatively autonomous community agencies can be achieved at a time when a new wave of education and training reform promises continuing pressures for community education agencies to take an expanded role.

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Notes

1   In the DEST paper, community education is defined as 'comprising not-for-profit community based organisations with a local or regional focus that offer adult learning programs'. The intention of the definition is, quite rightly, to demarcate a not-for-profit community sector as distinct from the publicly-funded TAFE systems and the private sector. However, it is all-encompassing and draws the boundary very wide, certainly and well beyond those organisations identified as 'adult and community education' since the 1980s. It would encompass all those not-for-profit organisations that provide adult education as part of their charter, but not as their primary reason for existence – for example, many sporting and cultural associations, religious or special interest bodies. A useful qualification is to refer to those not-for-profit organisations *whose primary purpose* is to deliver adult education and training to *the general community*.

2   It needs to be stressed that policy itself is a domain of knowledge, though this is often not well understood. The educational policy literature (e.g. Ball 1990, Marginson 1993, Hammersley 2004) has explored in some depth the way policy is enacted by 'policy actors' in educational settings including those conducting commissioned research for government. The high level research commissioned by the ACFE Board is an example of 'research-for-policy', where researchers are part of a policy process and contribute to policy knowledge.

About the author

Dr. John McIntyre *is a research and policy consultant in adult learning. He worked in the professional preparation of adult and vocational educators for over 25 years at the University of Technology, Sydney, where he was later senior researcher and Director in the UTS Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training. He has been a member and Chair pro-tem of the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education, and currently chairs the NSW Advisory Committee on Community Education. He is an Honorary Associate of UTS and, since 2005, has been a Visiting Research Fellow with Adult Learning Australia. His research interests are in policy and participation in adult learning.*

Contact details

47 Boronia Road, Bullaburra, NSW 2784.
Tel: (02) 4759 1443   Mobile: 0405 425 178
Email: artpages@webcity.net.au Website: www.jamc.com.au

Houses and sheds in Australia: an exploration of the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and men′s sheds in community settings

Barry Golding, Helen Kimberley, Annette Foley and Mike Brown
School of Education, University of Ballarat & Equity Research Centre

This article reviews research into the genesis and spread of both neighbourhood houses and learning centres in Victoria and community-based men's sheds in Australia to identify some similarities and differences. Our article asks questions about the gendered communities of practice that underpin houses for women on the one hand, and sheds for men on the other. Our particular interest is with the gender issues associated with the development of the relatively mature neighbourhood house 'sector', and those associated with the very recent and developing community-based men's sheds 'sector'. Our underpinning research question has to do with the desirability (or otherwise) in each of these sectors of political and strategic decisions being either gender specific or gender neutral. We identify a number of tantalising parallels between the rationale behind the establishment of both sectors, for women and men, albeit in very different circumstances, along with some obvious differences.