

Diverse pleasures: informal learning in community

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In this paper I suggest that social dances and local markets are examples of resilient practices of place-making and community that involve active participation. These two activities create mobile and pliant communities of participants that involve considerable informal and incidental learning. With dances and markets in mind, I look at the two concepts, social capital and community, that are used to link adult education and development and explore the notion of place. Place is conceived here as necessarily involving the inter-relationship of environment, social and economic landscapes. Somerville's place pedagogy framework is introduced as a methodological approach to research informal learning in the two activities and explore the pedagogies that sustain social attributes broadly conceived under the umbrella of social capital. The paper establishes dances and markets as a nexus of people, place and purpose, a ground from which to research the informal learning that occurs in these diverse pleasures.

Introduction

Adult education is assuming an increasingly central place in community development as a means to strengthen and sustain communities by building the store of social, human and economic capital (Allison *et al.* 2006:11). With local regions impacted by change driven by globalisation, the recognition that adult learning ‘eases the burden of change’ (Falk 2001:3) and has transformative potential, is focusing attention on the significance of community-based education (McIntyre 2005:1). With this, there is a developing awareness that useful learning often takes place incidental to educational purposes in adult and community education, for example the development of social capital in adult literacy and numeracy courses (Balatti, Black & Falk 2007). However, even with recognition of the importance of informal learning to the development of social capital and community sustainability, attention has remained largely on settings where education and learning are overtly part of the agenda.

Meanwhile, research into non-formal education has typically looked at workplaces, libraries and neighbourhood learning centres, and research focused on less formal learning through voluntary participation in groups has been primarily interested in sporting and incorporated associations (see for example, Atherley 2006, Stolle 1998, Teather 1997). Whereas non-formal learning involves an intended pedagogical function and takes place in time formally set aside for work and learning, informal learning is conceived as taking place in leisure time (Silberman-Keller 2003:14). Now, when popular culture is acknowledged as a significant source of information for adults (Guy 2007:16), and when contemporary social and environmental issues confront individuals with uncertainty, then understanding how, what, where and when adults learn informally is increasingly of interest. This is particularly important when, as the editors of a special edition of *New directions in adult and continuing education* pointed out, contemporary issues are complex and people

can easily feel overwhelmed (Hill & Clover 2003:1). Complexity can be a barrier to people envisioning how they can 'make a difference, thereby engendering feelings of hopelessness, fear, confusion and apathy' (Hill & Clover 2003:1).

It is timely to explore informal learning in community settings other than those understood as having an educational dimension. Mulligan *et al.* (2006:9) argue that 'we need a much more sophisticated understanding of the changing nature of contemporary community life' and the activities that play a part in this require 'careful investigation' to understand how they work (2006:9). They explain that greater attention is needed on the experience of participants (Mulligan, 2006:9). This paper takes heed of this point and Gruenewald's question 'how can the experience of citizens be used to inform/renew a critical approach to the social and ecological wellbeing of places that people inhabit' (2003:3). It draws particularly, but not exclusively, on social dances and community markets in the New England Region of northern NSW and Gippsland in Victoria, building the rationale for the place-conscious framework adopted in the research, 'Diverse pleasures: informal learning in community', a project in its early stages.

This paper looks to social dances and markets as sites of community where participation in pleasurable activities involves significant informal and incidental learning. These diverse pleasures provide avenues to explore the formation of community in two different activities that each involves place-making and informal learning through the nexus of people, place and purpose. Whereas creative and aesthetic projects that involve *reacquainting* people with their local places are often designed specifically for community engagement, social dances and community markets are well-established activities often derived from close acquaintance with the local.

Background

It is not within the scope of this discussion to elaborate dances and markets to the extent of case studies, rather to provide an introduction. My interest here is in community dances widely referred to as ‘old time and/or new vogue dances’, and in local markets often described as community craft and produce markets. Community dances and markets both involve voluntary participation, they are minimally regulated, and they are peripheral to, though not disconnected from, the mainstream economy. The participants are not necessarily governed by formalised rules and organisational structures; however, they are subject to regulations such as insurance requirements.

Social dancing has a rich place in the history of community in regional Australia. Davey and Seal explain that dance traditions have been passed down directly through communities (1993:98). While dances became much less central to life in the bush in 1960s (Davey & Seal 1993:98), a quick Google search reveals that old time and new vogue dances continue on a regular basis throughout Australia in 2008. While followers of dances frequently share their own personally compiled lists of dances, some tourist information centres provide lists of local dances and markets (e.g. Swan Hill, Latrobe, Bass Coast and South Gippsland in Victoria, and Broken Hill in NSW).

Markets are often central to community events’ calendars. They may be a focus of celebration, an enduring community event, or an enticement for tourists. At Inverloch, Victoria, a market draws crowds to the retail centre of town several times a year and is a source of fundraising for local service clubs. Nearby at Kongwak, the weekly Sunday market regularly draws locals and visitors to the tiny hamlet for an array of food, entertainment and stalls. Community markets have links with the sundries markets that were once held in conjunction with regional stock and produce markets. At Traralgon in the Latrobe Valley, the fate of the sundries market has recently been

hotly discussed in local media. A long time participant revealed the complex interplay of economic and social issues: 'We like to make some extra cash but we all love chatting away with mates we'd never see otherwise; we chat, swap experiences and advice on all sorts of things' (de Carteret 2008c:28). In their discussion of alternative consumption spaces, Williams and Paddock argue that researchers need to consider that fun and sociality are co-existent with economic issues in people's participation (2003:147). Holloway and Kneafsey, researching the growth of farmers markets in the UK, similarly point out that social issues and geographic context are interconnected with the economies of farmers' markets, which they also acknowledge as fun, social events (2000:287).

Social dance is also recognised as a meaningful activity connected with community. It is understood as both corporeal pleasure and a vehicle for transmission of, and reflection on, socio-cultural meanings (Fensham 1997:14). Nevertheless, it has not been taken seriously in academic scholarship according to Pini (1996:414) and has received scant attention (Andrews 1974, Ward 1993). In 1997 noted dance historian, Shirley Andrews, speculated the reason for this was because dance is part of local culture and associated with folk culture. This view is supported by Pini's view that social dance is trivialised on account of the association with everyday lived experiences (1996:412). A review of dance research in Australia around the same period indicated that most was not funded and was reported independently of universities (Bond & Morrish 1995:81). While Polhemus (1993:3) provides a useful discussion of dance as involving embodied knowledge of culture and in particular gender, there is little apparent academic interest in old time/new vogue dances to date.

Sensuous or embodied experience is overlooked as an attribute of learning in community events such as dances and markets. Ward argued that the marginalisation of dance in academic culture is partly a consequence of the difficulty encountered by rationalist disciplines

in accounting for the irrationality that emotions and the pleasure of dance introduce (1993:20). Similarly, Ollis (2008:331) has recently explained that the mind-body split of rationalist discourse elides important adult learning and sites of learning. Academics, community educators and planners are confronted by a challenge to account for the interrelationship of environmental, economic and social aspects of community life in individual experience. Mulligan *et al.* (2006) explain that the connection between personhood and community is mutually constitutive and yet it is more often rhetoric than 'concretely recognised within social and economic policy' (p.17).

Rethinking learning

Culture and the competence to act within cultural expectations involve learning social practices at a deep level of embodiment (Polhemus (1993:7). People learn through sensuous connections and relatedness with the physical environment and the social world, as Abrams (1997) explains: 'human beings are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, the ears, and nostrils – are all gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness' (p.ix). Learning is therefore incidental and embedded in the experience of activities (Foley 1999:2). Context is relevant to informal learning. It involves the interrelationship of people and place.

Recent interest in the health and wellbeing of individuals in their local communities implicates context. Gibson and Cameron (2001) suggest that as

... community has entered policy debate via a new language of economic management, it has also assumed its inherently geographical association with local places. In response the vitality of rural and regional areas in Australia has come under the scrutiny of research into new approaches to community development and economic management (p.3).

While discussion is galvanising around vocational training and non-formal learning in adult and community education as investments in social capital to reinvigorate communities, contemporary educators and theorists like Smith (in Bekerman *et al.* 2006:13) see the potential for education to counterbalance commodification through associations that foster dialogue, relationship and friendship in local places, typical attributes of social dances and markets that build community.

Community: people and place

‘Community’ is used commonly and unproblematically, yet it is an elusive concept on account of diverse usage (Mulligan 2006:18). It can infer limitation, constrained by geographic proximity and homogeneity, based on assumptions of shared understanding and common desires for sociality and social cohesion (Atherley 2006:349). It is also a politically malleable and idealistically persuasive term, suggesting both a site of resistance to globalisation and a cradle for the nurture of good citizenship. However, it is also understood as group interaction among individuals who experience a sense of identity through belonging that infers obligations and implies active participation (Ife & Tesoriero 2006:97). It is this idea of active participation that receives much attention in adult education and community development literature because it assumes personal agency, which is considered endangered by globalisation. Participating in community enables ‘people to become active producers of that culture rather than passive consumers (Ife & Tesoriero 2006:98). For this reason, dances and markets are a useful lens to explore informal learning because they involve active participation and a sense of belonging in community.

In this discussion, ‘community’ refers to the groups of participants and organisers at dances; at markets, this includes stallholders, organisers and visitors. Both involve changing groups of people.

The communities formed are not exclusive – not governed by a creed or formal incorporation. They comprise informal groups who gather and disband at each different location. The events offer the chance for conversation and discussion, the opportunity to learn and be informed by each other. The learning is diverse, informal and/or incidental. It may be specific, such as the dance steps, information about regional farming conditions or perhaps a particular community issue. Learning also happens in the practice of social skills, conversation, trust or cooperation. The purpose of the activities, for example the dancing and fundraising, the selling and buying, provides a bridge (Balatti *et al.* 2007:257 and Hayes *et al.* 2007:2) that facilitates an exchange of information and learning from one another.

Both situations are examples of contact zones where difference meets (Pratt 1991:33). New and unfamiliar perspectives are encountered at markets where information is often exchanged in lively conversations between customers and stallholders. At dances, individual differences are either suspended or tolerated for the sake of the shared activity.

Each different venue involves new knowledge – of the type of music that will be played, the program of dances, the preferred version of steps and whether or not participants should bring ‘a plate’ for supper. Davey and Seal explain that these preferences are part of the local culture (1993:76 & 98). ‘As newcomers move progressively from the periphery ... to the center, they become more active and engaged with the culture’ (Schugurensky 2006:168).

Understanding communities as forming, disbanding and reforming at different times and places for specific purposes acknowledges the increasing mobility of people where participation in multiple groups and various associations is no longer unusual. Community, then, is not a fixed and homogenised overarching collective but is more fluidly created when activities bring diverse groups into contact via informal networks. As Hayes *et al.* suggest, activities that bridge boundaries can broaden experience, sustaining one’s identity and valuing the identity of others (2007:2).

The sticky question of social capital

Participation is often used as a measure of social capital to gauge the wellbeing of communities (see Ife & Tesoriero 2006, Townsend 2006, Atherley 2006, Teather 1997). Social capital is a somewhat contested notion (McClenaghan 2000, Kilpatrick, Field & Falk 2003) broadly considered to involve the knowledge and identity resources (Balatti & Falk 2002:282) to access social goods in Bourdieu's terms, or 'as trust, norms and networks that facilitate cooperation and mutual benefit' in Putnam's view (Atherley 2006:349). In relation to adult education in community contexts, Townsend elaborates that there are 'three forms of social capital relevant' (Townsend 2006:161); these are: social capital that bonds or links homogenous groups, bridging capital that links heterogenous groups, and linking social capital that connects people and groups of different hierarchical levels (2006:161). As Falk explains, social capital involves a process of learning (2001:4) and dances and markets provide opportunities for all three of Townsend's forms of social capital. They are parts of networks that involve a degree of homogeneity in terms of interest, yet heterogeneity across different locations and the range of people they attract. In New England, the monthly Armidale Market attracts stall-holders and customers from a broad area, while regular dances held in the outlying communities of Ellsmore, Guyra, Kentucky and Puddledock draw people from different walks of life and distant places.

Whereas social capital is often referred to as the glue that sustains community, viewing community as formed around activities that bridge people and place pre-empt social capital developed interactively through flexible networks and multiple opportunities that facilitate learning, often informally (Balatti *et al.* 2007). This is a view of social capital as facilitating pliant and mobile communities.

Context and community

Recognising the groups of participants at dances and markets as communities opens new consideration of the specificity of the socio-economic context in each local place. In rural areas, dances are often held in support of local needs, for example, fundraising to support emergency transport services to metropolitan hospitals. Not for profit organisations like CareFlight in NSW depend on the 'generous donations of community minded people' and fundraising to provide 'equity of access to health care' (CareFlight website 2005). Dances in Guyra and Tamworth fundraise for Can-Assist – an organisation that supports country cancer patients' access to care and accommodation in the city. Local fundraising depends on unpaid work to organise and plan the activities and realise aims. Informal partnerships are created, for example among organisers, with charities, local councils or other organisations, and media to negotiate the use of premises and facilities, fundraising activities and advertising.

In a discussion of learning through social partnerships, Fennessy, Billett and Ovens point out that, 'at its best, the affective, relational learning that individuals experience develops understanding of self and other, and fosters a sense of belonging and community. At its worst, this sense of belonging may endorse exclusionary attitudes and behaviours' (2006:23). Either way, as suggested in this paper, Fennessy *et al.* argue that relational learning aside from educational functions involves significant new learning spaces (2006:23).

The centrality of place

Ife and Tesoriero (2006:98) differentiate between the notion of community based on a particular function, such as a church community or legal community, and community understood in geographic terms. They explain that communities based on function may not be related to a particular locality, whereas community as a

geographic entity invokes place (2006:98). Understanding dances and markets as sites of community draws on place and purpose, a combination that receives little attention in vocational education (Somerville 2008b) and community development literature. Lippard explains local places as the lived-in landscape, where ‘our personal relationships to history and place form us, as individuals and groups, and in reciprocal ways we form them’ (Lippard 1997:9). She explains that ‘each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all “local places” consist of’ (1997:6). Place is central to exploring participation at dances and markets as a means to examine interconnected relationships between the social, economic and physical landscape.

Lippard’s view evokes the multi-layers of relationship implicated in place that influence psychological and social wellbeing. Even the physical and spatial particularities of places invoke distinct psychological meanings that also impact on the experience (Hornecker nd:1). Consider, for example, the different ambience and emotions produced by markets held outside in open space, and dancing in an enclosed hall crammed with twirling, hot and sweaty bodies. Physical and spatial conditions involve bodies differently through the engagement of the senses, as in movement.

Each venue offers different ambient pleasures, resplendent with local knowledge and opportunities for new connections. The Armidale Market is held in the local mall, a paved pedestrian area in the centre of the city’s shopping and business precinct. In Bellingen, the market is held in a large park. Stalls are set up around a football oval, large shady trees and an adjacent creek provide respite from the heat captured by the surrounding hills. Likewise, dance venues vary. In New England, many dances are held in halls that are the last remaining public building in that locality. The hall has been ‘the social lifeline for farming communities’ (Davison & Brodie 2005:3.6) and dances continue to instil them with life. Some halls have been

restored in recognition that these are icons ‘essential to ... sense of community’ (Davey & Seal 1993:73). On dance nights, a trail of headlights can be seen snaking through the darkness of otherwise quiet country roads.

A place-conscious approach to informal learning

A place-conscious approach to informal learning allows exploration of nuances and interconnections of social context, local responses to global trends, and the physical environment. This contrasts with the view expressed in the Victorian Parliamentary *Inquiry into building new communities* (Nardella 2006:20) that dismisses ‘place-based’ as local context independent of root causes. It is precisely on account of inter-dependencies that Gruenewald (2006) explains place matters to education, ‘because it expands the cultural landscape to include related ecosystems, bioregions, and all the place-specific interactions between human and the more-than-human world’ (p.2). Place matters to informal learning and community development for the same reasons. ‘Local knowledge is the foundation upon which appropriate responses to expressed needs must be built’ (Fussell 1996:53). Place shapes how we know ourselves – historically, ‘local and regional culture and geography were the contexts and the “texts” through which people learned who they were, and what they needed to know to live’ (Gruenewald 2006:2).

A place-conscious approach to informal learning admits tacit learning, the internalisation of attitudes and skills in the unplanned process of socialisation (Schugurensky 2006:167). Foley concurs that everyday learning ‘is largely informal and incidental – it is tacit and embedded in action and is often not recognized as learning’ (1991:1). Everyday learning embedded in action and place shapes perspective (Bird Rose 2004: 3). Bird Rose gives examples of powerful metaphors that make explicit the relationship between people and places, for instance, ‘the country gets under the skin’ (2004:3). The experience of

places in everyday life is embodied but not fixed once and for all time. Rather, learning shifts and moves through multiple experiences and situations.

Deeply embodied knowledge and experience is often expressed at country dances and markets in ordinary conversations, for instance, when a local farmer once warned me to be careful driving home after the dance: ‘watch out on the road when you get to the ten mile tonight, what with the moon coming up so late and the grass on the east side so sweet, all the mums’ll be out with the younguns, and you never know which way they’re likely to hop’. He was drawing from his knowledge of native animal behaviour to predict that the current weather patterns and growing conditions would bring the kangaroos out of the scrub late that hot night to graze on particular grasses growing in a very specific spot.

Situated knowledge is also evident at markets in conversations about local produce, food and plants but also more subtly in the range of stalls and goods. Craftwork produced from local materials can involve an historical dimension. Goods created using timber recycled from local woolsheds and fences are a feature of the Armidale Market. Conversations about the genealogy of each piece provide an opportunity for local history to be shared. Similarly, jewellery made from raw materials sourced nearby also prompts conversations about the locality. The friendly banter and sharing of information at markets is richly educational and indicative of knowledge based on experience. Gregson and Crewe (quoted by Holloway & Kneafsey 2000:292) ‘describe the temporary space of the market as “transgressive”, in that it is one where people come to play, where the conventions of retailing are suspended, and where the participants come to engage in and produce theatre, performance, spectacle and laughter’. Retailers are performers who demonstrate both knowledge of local history and contemporary trends in their wares. The suspension of the usual is a rich site for learning.

Learning that happens either incidentally or specifically as a result of involvement in activities is situated or mediated in particular sites where 'learners are involved in "communities of practice" that embody a set of values, behaviours, and skills to be acquired by members' (Schugurensky 2006:168).

Learning without boundaries

The terms 'non-formal' and 'informal' learning are often not well differentiated. Both socialisation and incidental learning are typified as informal in a taxonomy proposed by Schugurensky (2006:166). However, Silberman-Keller (2003:14) makes the point that, while non-formal learning takes place in time set aside for learning, it is conducted in places constructed as cosy and homelike, a vision that is reflected in the use of the term 'neighbourhood houses' to describe local adult learning centers, in Victoria for instance.

Silberman-Keller (2003:2) outlines four instructional practices common in non-formal learning that shape a unique definition of education. These are concerned with time and place, phenomenological teaching and learning, dialogue and discourse, and using play to expand the bounds of plausible reality (Silberman-Keller 2003:2). These practices are evident at dances and markets where there is no educational intention (Silberman-Keller 2003:9). Clearly there is slippage between the pedagogies of non-formal education and characteristics of informal learning. This is evident in Balatti, Black and Falk's (2007) point that social capital is built additionally to formal educational intentions. They believe research into pedagogical practices that increase social capital is needed to be clearer about how this is achieved. While it is difficult to conceptualise incidental or informal learning in terms of pedagogies, yet the notion of pedagogy is important in developing educational philosophies, theory and practices. An approach is needed that encapsulates embodied aspects of informal learning in place. A broad view of pedagogy may be useful,

such as suggested by Sanguinetti (2004) as involving 'the intangible aspects and processes of teaching and learning' (p.7).

Somerville (2008a) has conceptualised a place pedagogy framework based on embodied experience of place that is useful to researching informal learning at dances and markets. The framework animates place with interconnections, such as pleasure, desire and difference. It accommodates the educational practices Silberman-Keller points to in dialogue and play (2003:2). There are three key elements in Somerville's framework: our relationship to place is constituted in stories (and other representations), the body is at the centre of our experience of place, and place is a contact zone of cultural difference where diverse experiences are accommodated (2008a:10). These elements are compatible with my use of biographical methods including collective biography and semi-structured interviews to gather data (de Carteret 2008a, 2008b). The use of individual stories in the place pedagogy framework helps to reveal connections between the personal and the social, the local and the global.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to establish the framework to research informal learning in community through the lens of social dances and markets. I have suggested that these activities involve diverse pleasures and many attributes desired by community development projects from educational settings. Recognising these sites of informal learning can usefully inform educational theories because they are contact zones where difference is encountered. Managing difference is a significant challenge for contemporary educational practice and community building alike. At social dances and local markets, the purposeful activities bridge difference and facilitate social interaction. A place-conscious approach provides a framework to research distinctive features of experience at the interconnection of the social, environmental and economic landscapes in these diverse pleasures.

Valuing resilient, pleasurable activities as sites of adult learning admits the possibility of lifelong learning, 'without boundaries... not ... confined by predetermined outcomes, formal institutions, and epistemological control' (Edwards & Usher 2001:276). Perhaps this can also provide insight into reaching people who do not have formalised education on their horizons. It might reveal the extent to which a focus on formalised community processes has elided significant community work voluntarily undertaken for the wellbeing of local places and the people who call them home, and learning sites that have been off the radar of planners, policy makers and educators.

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