

DEC07446

Dr Phoenix de Carteret
Monash University

Title: People, place and purpose: informal learning in community

Introduction

This paper is one of three in the first panel of a Symposium presenting current research and theorising around issues of space and place in education. The two sequential symposium panels explore the question of what might be adequate educational responses to contemporary issues including climate change and eco sustainability. The panel to which this paper contributes, presents research from an ARC funded project 'Enabling place pedagogies in rural and urban Australia'. It focuses on how we learn about place and form community. This review takes up that focus by considering learning that occurs informally through social participation in community. I am particularly interested in community activities that are loosely organised, rather than governed by formal rules and regulations, or organisational structures. An interest in informal learning is timely, when the Australian population is said to be aging and years spent outside of formal education or paid work are increasing with life expectancy. In approaching these issues I reiterate a question posed by David Gruenewald; '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).

The implication of Gruenewald's question to begin with lived experiences, reflects recent 'bottom up' approaches to community development that link community wellbeing with lifelong learning. In this paper I refer to two examples of community activities that I have experienced and are a source of immense pleasure for me. The two activities, social dancing and local markets do not usually come under the rubric of education and are more commonly associated with leisure and alternate economies. It is not within the

scope of this paper to elaborate these examples to the extent of case studies however, by way of brief description, both involve voluntary participation, they are minimally regulated, and they are marginal to the mainstream economy; dances in their fundraising activities and markets as income that is often supplementary or minimal. A distinct feature of these examples is that the venues shift throughout regions and each venue shapes a local event idiosyncratic to that place. In this way people, purpose and place are connected in these community activities. I am interested in how these activities sit with the literature that informs community development and lifelong learning.

The relevance of informal Learning

Foley (1999: 1) observed that ‘the most interesting and significant learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people’s everyday lives’. However, he goes on to explain that in contrast, the field of adult learning has become focussed largely on institutionalised settings and generally equates education with organised provision by professionals, and in doing so it excludes much of adult learning (1999: 2). While Foley’s focus is with adult learning that takes place through social struggle, dances and markets offer the opportunity to think about learning in activities associated with leisure and pleasure. As sites of learning, dances and markets involve ‘informal, incidental and embedded learning (Foley, 1999: 2). Embedded learning suggests the relevance of context to informal learning and implicates place.

Social dances and markets are both firmly grounded in place as an organising framework. From the physical journeying between venues mapped over regions, to the particular amenity of each site, place brings together contextual specificity, and links the activities to community. However, community in this instance is chameleon. It refers to both the population of each geographic locale, and also to the groups created by actual participants in dances, or the stallholders, organisers and visitors who together make a market a social event. These configurations of people form communities that are neither bound, nor exclusive, nor governed by a creed or formal incorporation. Rather, they are informal groups of people who gather and disband at different places and times around a shared activity. Informal learning occurs as participants learn from each other in these

communities. The learning in both activities involves diverse types of information for example, the correct dance steps, local issues and interests, information about local produce or industry, local history as well as social attributes such as trust. Academic literature tends to conceptualise informal learning in terms of the attributes of social capital such as trust, rather than specific information which is more usually considered the business of formal educational processes.

The rise of the expert

My interest in nonformal and informal learning grew from work as a childbirth educator and in a family support role. In these positions I worked with an independent, not for profit parent association. This association had strong community ties and worked from its grassroots origins to lobby for social and institutional change in obstetrics, and policies relating to families during the 1980s and 90s. Working with women becoming mothers I was increasingly disturbed by how frequently they censored their personal experiences as irrelevant to the knowledge they needed to face birth and parenting. I perceived a significant lack of self-confidence in their ability 'to know'. The women were more used to looking to expert opinion for advice than to listening to their own bodies and the experience of other parents. I wondered how they had learnt to mistrust their own bodies and everyday experience so decisively.

Lack of trust and confidence in personal experience has been linked to the growth of institutions and reliance on specialist expertise. Ivan Illich for example, linked the trend to undermining individual self-confidence in solving problems with the rise of institutions such as schools and medical processes (Illich, 1976, & Smith 2006:21). In a similar vein, Ife and Tesoriero have recently noted that reliance on the expertise of strangers works against individual decision-making and erodes personal power and agency (2006: 18). Smith also makes a link with the commodification of education, arguing that, 'learning has increasingly been portrayed as a commodity or as investment rather than as a way of exploring what might make for the good life or human flourishing' (Bekerman, Burbules et al. 2006:12). While I do not want to be nostalgic and essentialize an imagined, utopian past by mourning the loss of intuition and self-reliance,

I do mourn that loss and at times feel despair that the reciprocal human and ecological potential to flourish is threatened by the economic imperatives of globalisation that foster both reliance on the expertise of others as well as heightened individualism. Yet, I have also experienced the considerable cooperation and pleasure that community activities such as country dances and markets involve. These offer hope in the ability of communities to thrive.

Renewed interest in the local

Interest in the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities has grown since many local places succumbed to the withdrawal of long established economic functions. Communities that once thrived on a unique economic and local base have become increasingly depressed and withered with the loss of industry and subsequent loss of jobs, followed by declining populations. A bifurcation of national and regional interests occurred as 'community has entered policy debate via a new language of economic management, it has also assumed its inherently geographical association with the 'local' and place based concerns' (Gibson and Cameron 2001: 97). As a response in Australia, the vitality of rural and regional areas has come under the scrutiny of research into new approaches to community development and economic management (Gibson and Cameron 2001: 3). Discussion is galvanising around vocational training and non-formal learning in adult and community education as investments in social capital, to reinvigorate communities with new possibilities. Contemporary educators and theorists like Smith (2006: 13) see the potential for education to counterbalance commodification, through associations that foster dialogue, relationship and friendship in local places. These are typically the mode of learning in informal community activities.

The question of community

Community is an elusive concept to define because of its subjective use in everyday life. Nevertheless, it is commonly understood as group interaction among individuals who experience a sense of identity through belonging (Ife and Tesoriero 2006: 97). Community also incorporates obligations that imply active participation (Ife and 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.

A community provides an opportunity for an antidote to the phenomenon of 'mass culture'. The culture of modern society is produced and consumed at a mass level, resulting too often in sterile uniformity and the removal of culture from the local experiences of ordinary people (Nozick, 1992). A community enables the valuing, production and expression of a local or community-based culture, which will have unique characteristics associated with that community, which will enable people to become active producers of that culture rather than passive consumers, and which will thus encourage both diversity among communities and broad-based participation.

(Ife and Tesoriero 2006:98)

Community and culture are here expressed broadly and global culture suggested as a threat to massify individual experience without the antidote of collectivity. In one sense, pursuits like social dancing and going to markets *are* an antidote to mass culture for me, however, they also offer a reading of community as pliant rather than bound. A view of communities forming and reforming around different places and purposes can accommodate the increased mobility of people where participation in multiple groups and diverse associations is not unusual. In this sense community need not represent a fixed and homogenised overarching collective, but allows for overlapping interests and practices negotiated around local activities that bring focus and purpose through participation. Participation is often used as a measure of social capital and the well being of communities (see for example, Ife and Tesoriero, 2006; Townsend 2006; Atherley, 2006; Kenworthy, 1997). Broadly speaking social capital is considered to involve the knowledge and identity resources (Balatti and 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). Based on these criteria the two examples display significant social capital. Townsend elaborates that there are 'three forms of social capital relevant to adult education activities in a community context' (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 (Townsend 2006: 161). Again, both my examples sit easily in this view as they exist in complex networks that involve a degree of homogeneity in terms of interest, yet heterogeneity across different locations and the diverse range of people they attract. These networks are built on criss-crossed webs of personal experiences where trust and a sense of community is established through place-based activities that are nodes of interaction and interrelationship.

Networks are an organising principle in Ife and Tesoriero's (2006) view of globalisation. They explain it through Manuel Castells' idea of the network society where 'power resides in networks that communicate across national boundaries, linking powerful interests in different countries' (Ife and Tesoriero 2006: 188). This view focuses on overarching networks that are reshaping local communities.

One of the effects of globalisation and the network society is that national boundaries are becoming less important as boundaries of inequality, and most Western nations are seeing the widening of inequalities within their borders. This has led to the creation of marginalised communities in the minority world as well as the majority world. These are typically communities that have relied on the 'old economy', former industrial towns and cities, fishing and farming communities ...'

(Ife and Tesoriero 2006;189)

Here community refers to a bounded view ground in demographics of inhabitation and local economics. In this view social capital is the glue that sustains community. Townsend, however, questions the way social capital is used to inform new policy development. He sees social capital as a local effect of social and cultural structures at all levels from global to local, and explains that evaluations of community needs must be 'place and people specific' (Townsend 2006: 168). Townsend goes on to say that, 'measuring levels of social trust, social cohesion and inclusiveness as indicators of the

development of social capital is the current challenge for researchers and governments in all areas of public policy' (Townsend 2006:168). Public policies and systems need to acknowledge local needs, according to Townsend, who argues that the focus on non-formal education as a means to personal and social transformation as limiting. Instead, Townsend suggests looking to informal sites where attributes of social capital such as trust can be practiced (2006: 167).

Research into non formal education has typically looked at settings like libraries and neighbourhood education but has neglected an opportunity in overlooking the social activities of informal groups of people as sites where social trust, social cohesion and inclusiveness are practiced. Stolle (1998) has however, looked at social capital as a way of building trust in voluntary associations, though they were more formal than dances and markets and included sporting teams and groups whose activities revolved around meetings and formal regulations. Stolle found that trust is most significantly built during the early period of participation or socialization into the group (Stolle 1998). Stolle points out that the study indicated social trust is also built in other situations and in depth interviews with adults are needed to 'explain fully the role of voluntary associations in the creation of trust (1998: 521).

Trust, cohesion and inclusiveness are evident at dances and markets where the pleasure of the event is maximised by collective participation and success of the activities is multi tiered. Fundraising for local charity, the small scale production of goods, or sale of self grown produce are local initiatives, marginal to but not disassociated from, the wider economy. All these activities foster community building and in addition to performing a role as hubs of social interaction they are also responses to socio-economic deficits and change. Community responses vary to suit local needs and assets, for example fundraising at markets and dances for Careflight Rescue Helicopter Services in regions distant from major hospitals, or entertaining elderly residents in local nursing homes with a display of dances. While academic literature and policy documents tend to conceptualise *community* broadly and in geographic terms, recognising these smaller groups of people coming together as communities hones in on the social and economic

context and everyday specificity of places. It also raises awareness of these occasions as opportunities where trust is built on participation and a sense of community is fostered in shared experiences.

Local places

Ife and Tesoriero 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). Yet, dances and markets invoke community shaped by geographic location and mediated by function or purpose. These activities and the mobile communities that they shape, are often built on the love of particular places. They derive a sense of community from the interrelationship of geographic location, the function or purpose of the activities, and participation. This resonates with Lippard's view of 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). Lippard 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). People, place and purpose represent:

the intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology [that] form the ground on which we stand – our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull place operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation. The lure of the local is that undertone to modern life that connects it to the past we know so little and the future we are aimlessly concocting.

(Lippard 1997: 7)

Lippard's view is suggestive of multi layers of learning implicated in community

interactions with impact on psychological and social wellbeing. Social capital cannot easily account for these interrelations of place and subjectivity that inhere in a sense of community. Indeed, the spatial particularities of places that invoke distinct psychological meanings also impact on the experience of community (Hornecker nd: 1). Consider the different ambience and feelings produced by markets held outside in open space, and dancing in an enclosed hall crammed with twirling, hot and sweaty bodies. Spatial aspects involve bodies differently through the engagement of the senses, as in movement. So in various ways, place offers a framework with the potential to acknowledge the relationship between social context and the specificities of the environment that contribute to belonging in community.

While it is generally understood that place shapes how we know ourselves. Gruenewald (2006: 2) elaborates by saying that 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. According to Gruenewald, place to matters to education:

because it provides researchers, practitioners, and all learners with a local or nearby focus for cultural study, and 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'.

(Gruenewald 2006: 2)

This perspective expands the parameters of learning beyond the bounds of formality. Learning about self in society is commonly thought of as socialization, the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc, that occur unconsciously during everyday life. This unplanned process is conceptualized as tacit learning (Schugurensky 2006:167). However, socialization tends to overlook the fundamental embeddedness of human activity and social processes, and subsumes local identity in the homogenizing notion of culture, or parochial stereotypes. In this way it does not accommodate the mobilities of contemporary life and everyday learning through participation in diverse activities. Foley suggests that everyday learning ‘is largely informal and incidental – it is tacit and

embedded in action and is often not recognized as learning'. Everyday learning is embedded in action and embedded in place through the shaping of perspective (Rose 2004: 3). Debra Bird Rose gives examples of the powerful metaphors in white language that make explicit the relationship between people and place, for example, 'the country gets under the skin' (2004: 3). Everyday learning is embodied in the experience of place.

Deeply embodied knowledge and perspective is evident at country dances and markets in general conversations, for instance in the knowledge of native animal behavior that predicts when weather patterns and growing conditions will bring the kangaroos out of the scrub to graze on particular kind of grasses at certain times of year, and a local will warn a visitor 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*'.

Learning that happens either incidentally or specifically as a result of involvement in activities is situated or mediated in particular sites:

From a situated learning perspective, learners are involved in "communities of practice" that embody a set of values, behaviours, and skills to be acquired by members. This involvement is seldom homogenous as newcomers move progressively from the periphery of these communities to the center, they become more active and engaged with the culture.

(Schugurensky 2006: 168)

Both socialization and incidental learning are typified as informal in the taxonomy proposed by Schugurensky (2006: 166), however the terms *non-formal* and *informal* learning are sometimes used interchangeably or are not well differentiated. Non formal learning involves an intended pedagogical function and takes place in time formally set aside for work and learning, whereas informal learning is conceived as taking place in leisure time (Silberman-Keller 2003: 14). Nevertheless, Silberman-Keller makes the

point that places where non formal learning is conducted are often thought of as cozy and homelike, a vision that is reflected in the use of the term *community or neighbourhood house* in Victoria for instance. Metaphoric association with desired emotions contributes to informal learning.

Silberman-Keller (2003: 2) outlines four instructional practices common in non formal learning that shape a unique definition of education 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 without the intention of being instructional, at dances and markets and are also common in ad hoc learning as in museums or historical sites (Silberman-Keller 2003: 9). There is obvious slippage of characteristics between non formal and informal learning.

Pedagogy

Learning that occurs outside of formal educational situations is difficult to conceptualise in terms of pedagogy. Yet the notion of pedagogy is central to educational philosophies as a way of linking theory to practices. In thinking about learning that takes place informally it is useful to conceptualise pedagogy in broad terms, as Saguinetti et al do:

the notion of 'pedagogy' often refers to the intangible aspects and processes of teaching and learning and to the social and political dynamics that are enacted in teaching and learning situations. Pedagogy is about processes and dynamics of teaching and learning, including the purposes, relationships, environment, management and social context of learning.

(Sanguinetti, Waterhouse et al. 2004: 7)

This approach accommodates the learning involved in the interrelationship of self, culture and bioregion that Gruenewald (2006) indicates as necessary to ecosocial sustainability. Foregrounding the importance of context and place to informal learning opens up the possibility to talk about the pedagogies of place and place based learning. Gruenewald

asserts that place is profoundly pedagogical (Gruenewald 2006: 4). David Gruenewald explains that:

“place-based education” or “community-based education” can be viewed as umbrella terms for many traditions concerned with learners experiencing, learning from, and contributing to local, community, and regional contexts. Developing a coherent way of naming the traditions we are committed to is an act of intellectual and strategic resistance; to me, it is nothing less than a struggle for life in a schooling environment that is squeezing the life out of learning. Articulating and demonstrating the merits – in a coordinated effort – and policy makers that there are other ways of accountability. These other ways of teaching and learning can help to engage and motivate learners in ways that a standardized curriculum fails to do (see eg. Melaville, et al, 2006).

(2006:4)

Likewise in the case of adults outside of formal education, or who do not see education as being relevant to themselves, or like Wendell Berry have developed a mistrust of organizations (1999), place based activities provide a lens to think about the learning that occurs throughout life.

Somerville (2007) has conceptualized a framework that is applicable to a spectrum of learning situations and is useful in thinking about the pedagogies of place. There are three key elements of this place pedagogy 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. These three elements offer ways to research the learning and the pedagogies involved in non formal situations such as dances and markets. These events are in and of themselves, contact zones because of the changing group of participants and heterogeneity in each setting. The fact of mobile associations, different motivations and changing venues inhibits homogenising possibilities and prohibitive exclusivity.

Listening for the stories that shape relationship to place through embodied responses, and innovative solutions to problems thrown up by social change, extends the possibility of observing place learning in pleasurable activities.

I have recently used the researching place pedagogies framework as an organising principle for a series of Workshops to collect data about women's informal learning about community in Gippsland Victoria. The workshops are a contact zone open to the telling of diverse stories and disparate experiences. The Workshops were developed on the process of collective biography (Davies & Gannon 2006). The conversational method and memory work of collective biography stimulates personal stories that reveal the complexity of embodied knowing shaped intersubjectively and intertextually. 'The discursive and material practices of collective biography can make visible, palpable, hearable, the constitutive effects of dominant discourses' (Davies and Gannon 2006: 5). Storytelling and conversations facilitate the undoing of these effects and open up exploration of how knowledge is made from experiences, heuristically, much as it has been throughout the ages (de Carteret forthcoming: 19). In that sense, collective biography is a decolonising process. It begins with the choosing of the topic for conversation, then participants tell their first memory raised by the topic and the group responds by asking questions to clarify the memory. Reflexivity and refinement of the memory in the light of the discussion, stimulates a new, more considered version, or re-inhabitation of the memory story. In the Workshops, as happens in dancing communities and markets expert knowledge does not disable personal experience:

Beneficial insights for all parties emerge from the experience-knowledge events that result from the blending of perspectives and know-how. Local knowledge is the foundation upon which appropriate responses to expressed needs must be built, and the shifting of beliefs is an essential part of the process which must be approached with sensitivity and open-mindedness'

(Fussell 1996: 53).

Informal community activities are sites where local values and attitudes are re/produced and negotiated. Learning that occurs by personal and collective experience throughout life is beyond the bounds of formal educational settings and is significant. Using the place pedagogies framework opens up these situations so the pedagogical influences can be identified.

Concluding remarks

Edwards and Usher explain that lifelong learning is learning without boundaries and they argue that lifelong learning that is:

not simply a term for a policy or mode of provision. In addition, and perhaps more important, it can be understood as a metaphor that brings to the fore the boundlessness of learning, that is, it is not to be confined by predetermined outcomes, formal institutions, and epistemological control.

The metaphor “lifelong learning” alerts us to a way of seeing learning as without boundaries’

(Edwards and Usher 2001:276)

It is not my intention to suggest that informal learning can or should be harnessed or institutionalised, however drawing from diverse personal experiences including pleasure provides opportunities to examine resistances and suggest ways to re/educate adults to know place from an embodied ethic of care. Or, as Gruenewald has suggested, to reacquaint people with their own environments as a means to also expand educational interest in the cultural and social bioregions we inhabit. (Gruenewald 2006: 2)

When the local is valued as the context of purposeful activities and informal learning, places become contact zones where diversity can be experienced and valued. Most importantly local activities and pleasures provide opportunities where community can be practiced as mobile and responsive to ecosocial issues and should not be dismissed or undervalued as significant sites of learning.

REFERENCES

- Atherley, K. M. (2006). "Sport, Localism and Social Capital in Rural Western Australia." Geographical Researcher **44**(4): 348-360.
- Balatti, J. and I. Falk (2002). "Socioeconomic contributions of adult learning to community: a social capital perspective." Adult Education Quarterly **52**(4): 281-298.
- Bekerman, Z., N. C. Burbules, et al. (2006). Learning in Places: the informal education reader. New York, Peter Lang.
- Berry, W. (1999) "In distrust of movements." The Land Report, morning-earth.org
Volume, DOI:
- Davies, B. and S. Gannon, Eds. (2006). Doing Collective Biography: investigating the production of subjectivity. Maidenhead, Open University Press.
- de Carteret, P. (forthcoming). "Storytelling and conversation as research praxis." Qualitative Studies in Education.
- Edwards, R. and R. Usher (2001). "Lifelong Learning: a postmodern condition of education?" Adult Education Quarterly **51**(4): 273-287.
- Foley, G. (1999). Learning in Social Action: a contribution to understanding informal education. Londong, Zed Books.
- Fussell, W. (1996). "The value of local knowledge and the importance of shifting beliefs in the process of social change." Community Development Journal **31**(1): 44-53.
- Gibson, K. and J. Cameron (2001). "Transforming Communiites: towards a research agenda." Urban Policy and Research **19**(1): 7-24.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). "Foundations of Place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education." American Educational Researcher **40**(3): 619-637.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2006). Why Place Matters: the everyday context everywhere of experience, culture and education. AERA, US.
- Hornecker, E. (nd). "Space and place - setting the stage for social interaction." Retrieved 28th May 2007.

- Ife, J. and F. Tesoriero (2006). Community Development: community-based alternatives in an age of globalisation. Frenchs Forest, Pearson Education Australia.
- Illich, Ivan. (1977). Medical Nemesis: the expropriation of health, New Yoirk, Random Press.
- Kenworthy, E. (1997). Voluntary organizations as agents in the becoming of place, Canadian Geographer **41** (3) 226-235.
- Lippard, L. R. (1997). The Lure of the Local: senses of place in a multcentred society. New York, The New Press.
- Rose, D. B. (2004). "The Ecological Humanities in Action - an invitation." Australian Humanities Review **31-32**.
- Sanguinetti, J., P. Waterhouse, et al. (2004). The ACE Experience: pedagogies for life and employability, Adult, community and further education Victoria University.
- Schugurensky, D. (2006). "This is our school of citizenship": informal learning in local democracy Learning in Places: the informal education reader. N. C. Burbules and D. Silberman-Keller. New York, Peter Lang Publishing.
- Silberman-Keller, D. (2003). Toward the Characterization of Non-Formal Pedagogy. Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association Chicago.
- Smith, M. E. (2006). Beyond the Curriculum. Learning in Places: the informal education reader. Z. Bekerman, N. C. Burbules and D. Silberman-Keller. New York, Peter Lang Publishing.
- Somerville, M. (2007). "A place pedagogy for 'global contemporaneity'." Forthcoming Educational Philosophy and Theory.
- Stolle, D. (1998). "Bowling together, bowling alone: the development of generalized trust in voluntary associations." Political Psychology **19**(3): 497-524.
- Townsend, R. (2006). "Adult, community and public education as primary sites for the development of social capital." Australian Journal of Adult Learning **46**(2): 153-174.