



Community and Learning for the New Economy

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Abstract

The New Basics reform of the Queensland Education sector has identified its central goal as enhanced student outcomes for 'New Times'. Research on this reform (Adkins et al, forthcoming) has identified the role of communities as an important factor in schools' capacity to deliver this outcome. This paper provides a foundation for research into issues regarding the role of community for school reform oriented to the needs of students in the New Economy. Its central purpose is to critique extant theory in order to generate questions about how themes in education reform discourse may be re-contextualised in the context of school practice. First, it reviews the role of 'community' in discourses on the Knowledge Economy and 'New Times'. Second, it examines the way 'community' is conceptualised in the context of Education Queensland's New Basics reform. Third, the paper will consider some "paradoxes" that may arise when this new conceptualisation of 'community' is applied in the practical implementation of education reform.

Introduction:

The Education "Needs" of the New Economy

Increasingly, 'community' is invoked as a critical resource in achieving educational reform for New Times as linked to the New Economy. However, in order to understand the discursive shifts that underpin the nature and role of community in educational change it is first necessary to investigate the way in which the needs of the new economy are constructed on a more general level. While often broadly applied to imply a wide range of economic (in its traditional sense), social and cultural trends, discourse pertaining to the "New Economy" is primarily concerned with changes in the nature of production. In contrast with the 'old' economy that centred on the production of tangible goods, the 'new' economy encompasses a re-conceptualisation of production to include and emphasise ideas and knowledge. In short, 'old' economic production was 'visible', 'tangible' and 'actual'. In comparison, production in the New Economy is 'invisible', 'intangible' and 'symbolic'. The changes implicit in the shift from the 'old' to 'new' economy range from the role of the 'new worker' to the production and distribution of knowledge.

As production becomes increasingly oriented to goods that are symbolic in nature, the productive 'worker' is similarly redefined. The New Economy, described by Castells as 'informational', 'global' and 'networked' (Castells, 2000 as cited in Hartley 2003), requires a self-programmable worker who has the capacity to

constantly... redefine necessary skills for a given task, and to access the sources for learning these skills. Whoever is educated in the proper educational environment, can reprogram him/herself toward the endlessly changing tasks of the production process.

(Castells 1997:340)

The imagined worker within this model is complex. In the 'old' economy, the sufficient 'worker' was a person who had acquired a base set of skills in early life that would likely be adequate for the production of particular tangible goods throughout

the remainder of his/her career. In this framework, the 'worker' is a relatively stable entity, provided he/she had undertaken the necessary education in the first place, is considered a productive and valuable asset. In the New Economy, however, the 'worker' becomes a part of the invisible trade on symbolic ideas. As such, he/she must be both adaptive to, and responsible for, the implementation of changes that are simultaneously consequential to, and engendering of, the New Economy.¹ Thus the role of the new worker is two-fold. S/he is both responsive to the ever-changing demands of the New Economy while simultaneously responsible for the implementation of changes that will facilitate the healthy emergence of the New Economy.

The changing nature of learning as well as the production and distribution of knowledge plays a key role in the re-conceptualisation of the 'worker'. The knowledge economy, as a direct offshoot of the new economy, focuses on individualisation within institutions and helps formulate the new category of worker. The worker, both under the supervision of, and as facilitator for, the knowledge economy, becomes a self-governing one. He/she is highly individual while maintaining links and ties to wider networks of knowledge (Castells 2000). This self-governance also gives rise to the apparent obligation of self-employment (Educational Administration Abstracts 2003) and contributes to the understanding that the 'worker' is responsible for his/her own symbolic production (Thus every worker in theory will be 'self employed'). Subsequently, the institution or organisation does not hover protectively over their workforce but rather lives within the individual worker, not as a parasite but rather as an essential organ, like the heart. Thus a new portability is born, that operates without the boundaries of time and place. Success or failure is attributed not to the institution or organisation but the individual's ability to engage with wider networks of knowledge and symbolic/invisible production that exist within that network.

In order to be successful in his/her endeavours, the 'worker' of the New Economy requires a new applied skill encompassing reasoning, problem solving and behavioural skills in addition to normative skill requirements such as reading, writing and mathematics (eg see Carnevale and Desrochers 2003' positive cognitive style' discussion). Learning as such is not a burden to be carried, but embedded into the everyday activity of life itself. The symbolic and invisible trade of knowledge and ideas is not a four-year degree, but a forty-year degree; learning is 'lifelong' (Flew 2002). Thus the worker in the new economy is not simply defined in terms of what she/he knows but rather in terms of a specific relationship to knowledge and the learning process. Central to this relationship is the idea that he/she will embody the ability to learn throughout life.

¹ While some authors (Castells, 2000) note that this new category of worker will only comprise a small percentage of the workforce (with most people still working in routine de-skilled jobs), discourse on the knowledge economy nevertheless constructs the attributes of the new worker as paramount for all to acquire. While most jobs in and of themselves may be described as menial, mobility between jobs is an example of a domain where these attributes are considered necessary (Bourdieu, 1984:151) Furthermore, authors such as Emmison (2003) argue that the need for skills associated with the knowledge economy is not associated with employment alone, but rather infiltrates all aspects of life (see Emmison's account of reconfiguring the cultural omnivore thesis in Emmison, 2003).

“Lifelong Learning” and the New Citizen: The Case of the New Basics Reform

The New Basics Reform in Queensland illustrates how the new ‘need’ to adopt lifelong learning principles for the knowledge economy has resulted in a re-conceptualisation of the school. This, in turn, has implications for the role of the community. This need was articulated in *Queensland State Education 2010* as follows:

Schools will need to help students develop the skills and knowledge for the knowledge economy, lay the foundations for lifelong learning and ensure that students reach their optimal potential. Initiative is a critical area of skill for the future.

(Queensland State Education 2010)

This is also proposed as a key rationale for the New Basics reform:

Service and information based economies require new blends of skills and competencies, with an increasing segment of workers engaged in information, knowledge and symbol handling and exchange the new work order involves not only skills in high tech and print literacy, but also skills in face-to-face social relations and public self-presentation, problem identification and solution, collaborative group capacity and so forth. These are the New Basics and they extend considerably beyond traditional versions of the 3Rs.

(Education Queensland, 2000)

In the context of this reform, the new economy can be seen to require new forms of community involvement. This is demonstrated through an examination of the central premises that form the foundation of the reform framework.

1. *The Pedagogy Premise*. Improved student outcomes requires a systematic coordination of the message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.
2. *The Futures Premise*. Outcomes should be focused on new workplaces, technologies and cultures.
3. *The Equity Premise*. There needs to be philosophy inclusive of at-risk and culturally diverse communities.
4. *The Research Premise*. Reforms need to be grounded in research of current school practices.
5. *The Professional Learning Community Premise*. Improved student outcomes and reforms in the message systems require high levels of teacher professionalism, shared ownership of reform and dynamic learning environments.

The futures premise points to the nature of the improved educational outcomes required in the reform as those associated with preparing students for participation in the ‘New Economy’. Further, these outcomes are to be achieved through alignment of the three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment as described in

the pedagogy premise. The professional learning community premise asserts that these outcomes require a specific kind of organisational framework. In this respect, the alignment of the three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment is proposed as a key factor producing improved student outcomes for New Times. The equity premise further serves to qualify the nature of outcomes required in terms of closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The production of these outcomes may be enabled or constrained by the level to which schools adopt principles of organisation described in the Professional Learning Community Premise. Thus the new basics research program is underpinned by propositions about the relationship between school organisation and classroom practices, and between classroom practices and student outcomes for 'new times'. Within this framework, new roles for community are proposed at the level of both classroom practice and school organisation.

At the level of classroom practice the content of the reform is guided by curriculum organisers termed "The New Basics" that are 'meant to assist teachers, curriculum planners and schools to move beyond a defence of status quo knowledges to a critical engagement with new social, technological and economic conditions' (EDUCATION QUEENSLAND, 2000; 38). They are described as four clusters or families of practices and are listed as follows:

- Life Pathways and Social futures
- Multiliteracies and communications media
- Active citizenship
- Environments and technologies

While these identify key themes to be addressed in the curriculum, however, the Rich Tasks embody the nature of the curriculum content. They have been designed with a focus on 'real world' topics and themes that address perceptions of problems of relevance in classroom work. The New Basics offers a rationale for this approach in Dewey's theory of learning:

Dewey's theory of learning is that people optimally learn, and human development and growth occur, when they are confronted with real problems to solve. His argument is that curriculum and instruction based on integrated, community-based tasks and activities engage learners in forms of pragmatic social action that had real value in the world (Garrison, 1995). This would have the effect of dealing with what Newmann *et al.* (1995) call "connectedness to the world" and may confirm the SRLS observation that a great deal of motivation and behaviour management problems arise from students' sense of the "irrelevance" of much classroom work.

(Education-Queensland 2000:51)

In the context of classroom practice, the New Basics emphasised the principle of connectedness with students' communities in the context of curriculum and pedagogy (Education-Queensland 2000:51-55) The community is seen as forming the basis of "local school-specific curriculum development in response to community needs as part of school differentiation". Some Rich Tasks are specifically set up with a substantive focus on local communities and to involve input from community

members. Further, in relation to assessment, it was expected that consultation with community members should occur in relation to standards setting (Technical Paper, 99). Connection with the community was also seen as important at the level of school organisation where formative feedback was to be sought in relation to the process of change (Education-Queensland 2000: 103). Schools were expected to seek partners from key stakeholders – “teachers & unions, principals & professional associations, universities, parent, business & community organisations” (Education-Queensland 2000:105). The New Basics thus positions the community as integral to the implementation of the reform, and points to the emergence of new relationships that provide the basis for a re-conceptualisation of ‘community’ in educational reform oriented to the knowledge economy.

As a reform oriented to outcomes suited to the knowledge economy, however, the New Basics rejects ‘one size fits all’ or formulaic approaches to community relationships. Rather, it proposes that different schools and communities may require different strategies and approaches allowing for the emergence of different school based solutions. This raises the question of how to conceptualise differences in school-community relationships in the temporal context of reform for New Times and in a reform environment that caters to different approaches required by specific configurations of schools and communities.

Basil Bernstein’s notion of ‘classifications’ is useful when describing the changing nature of relationships constructed in this discourse. He says:

We can distinguish between strong and weak classifications, according to the degree of insulation between categories, be these categories of discourse, categories of gender, etc. Thus, in the case of strong classification, we have strong insulation between the categories. In the case of strong classifications each category has its unique identity, its unique voice,, its own specialized rules of internal relations. In the case of weak classifications, we have less specialised discourses, less specialised identities, less specialised voices. But classifications, strong or weak, always carry power relations’ (Bernstein 1996:7)

Implicit in school reform discourse is the idea that ‘strong’ classifications between school, community, private enterprise, government, etc... must be replaced with ‘weak’ classifications that blur the distinction between identities, roles and responsibilities. The application of strong classifications is evident in models of the school that tend to invoke an understanding of ‘community’ as separate from, and to some extent inconsequential to, the ‘school’ itself. In these models, the school operates in a relatively autonomous manner, calling on ‘community’, to perform specific functions such as fundraising. The tendency to invoke strong classifications is also apparent in versions of school curricula where disciplines are taught in ways that reinforced the distinction between them. Students learn, for example, mathematics as distinct from language as distinct from science and so on.

However, current educational reform discourse, typified by the New Basics, encourages a degeneration of these classifications. It is a ‘weak’ classification of ‘community’ that is scripted within educational reform discourse to be necessary for

the actualisation of school reform and the production of effective workers and citizens for the New Economy. In this model, professional learning communities do not exist as a separate entity from the school but rather include the school and its members as well as the full range of others who can and should contribute in the provision of education. This is perhaps best exemplified in the principle of ‘connectedness’ that underlies much of the discourse and manifests at a practical level in the accomplishment of ‘Rich Tasks’ as a component of the New Basics. Undertaking ‘Rich Tasks’ requires teachers to map backwards from required tasks to transdisciplinary strategies and adapt them to specific needs of students in order to adequately ‘connect’ students to their life worlds in the community. This addresses equity concerns by providing students with a real world rationale for engaging in tasks that lead them to the “higher order” thinking skills required for participation in the knowledge economy.

Overall, the pedagogical approach based in the notion of ‘connectedness’ implies that education must be based in, and relevant to, the everyday lives of students. The ideals of ‘working together’ underpin the ‘Rich Tasks’, whether this means in classroom practice, or whether it extends to integrate the talents of others in the school, or local community. The weakening of boundaries between schools and communities, as well as between disciplines, is therefore seen as a necessity for positive student outcomes. The ways that this is occurring is demonstrated by continuing practices of involving community specialists in the school, and in new ways of using expertise. The interface between the school and the community is therefore one of the critical spaces involved in the introduction of the New Basics.

So far it has been established that the new economy, providing the context for school reform, plays a particularly salient role with respect to a new conceptualisation of the ‘worker’ and citizen. It is the production of this ‘worker’ and citizen that comes to underpin the purpose of education, marking a shift toward school reform that is oriented to students ‘learning how to learn’. This involves an emphasis on enhancing ‘higher order thinking’, encouraging active citizenship and addressing the need for students to acquire the appropriate skills that will enable them to continually adapt to flexible and ever-changing social and economic conditions. Within school reform discourse, ‘community’, is identified as weakly classified and plays an important role in successfully achieving the instillation of these qualities in students. However, the nature of ‘community’ that is implied in this discourse and the role it is deemed to play in education, may well give rise to incongruities between theory and practice.

The Paradox of ‘community’ and New Basics Reform: Three problems

1. Weak versus Strong classifications

Successful outcomes for schools via the New Basics are linked to the operation of weak, rather than strong, classifications. Given this, some questions emerge with regard to the basis of power relations in the case of weakening classifications between school and community. Arguably, weakening classifications imply that ordering must be based on shared understandings and goals at the level of everyday culture, rather than rules based on explicit and clear demarcations and roles. In theory then, power and by implication, responsibility, becomes dispersed in a manner that is not clearly linked with a specific institution such as the school, but is produced and organised

based upon the particular ways in which ‘communities’ and their members come to define or apply it.

However, this only applies so long as ‘community’ is weakly classified by its members. The question ‘Are strong classifications still at work?’ becomes particularly relevant here. While we cannot offer any hard evidence in this case since further research is necessary, anecdotal evidence suffices to make the point. Weakening classifications between school and ‘community’ intimate that the school is no longer marked as the institution that is independently responsible for education. Education, in theory, becomes dispersed and attainable in a range of settings, institutions and contexts, none of which are clearly distinct from the others. However, it is perhaps a reasonable assertion that terms such as “homework”, “excursions” and “work experience” are still utilised frequently. While only words, in the context of everyday practice, they arguably operate to draw and reinforce strong classifications between institutions. “Homework” implies work that is done at ‘home’ as opposed to ‘school’. An “excursion” infers a trip to a place that is distinct from ‘school’. “Work experience” insinuates a clear difference between ‘work’ and ‘school’. Given that we seem prone to continue to utilise terms such as these, it is reasonable to question whether, despite the theoretical shift toward weakening classifications, strong classifications are still at work.

2. Who’s educating who?

The second paradox that presents itself with respect to ‘community’s’ role in the provision of education pertains also to the classification systems that are currently at work. The significant question here is ‘How does a ‘community’ that is defined and understood by its members in terms of ‘strong’ classifications operate to create a new generation of ‘community’ that is necessarily ‘weakly’ classified so as to perform effectively within the New Economy?’ Within educational reform discourse there is a subtle recognition that the current adult ‘community’ are not necessarily effective ‘workers’ and citizens for the New Economy. After all, they have not been subjected to the necessary educational regimes that will effectively produce the appropriate ‘learning dispositions’ that are demanded by the New Economy. This is why educational reform is necessary in the first place. This assertion is reinforced by research that shows that the procurement of appropriate ‘learning dispositions’ for the New Economy is not necessarily evident. European and Australian Research on everyday tastes and lifestyle practices indicates that the possession of these ‘learning dispositions’ is not uniform (Bourdieu 1984; Bennett, Emmison et al. 1999). This has been seen in recent research commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority as a major problem in the promotion of lifelong learning. In the research, Mary Dickie (1999) found that many respondents did not personally commit to lifelong learning:

Our very early research seems to be telling us that, for the majority of people we have interviewed, across the spectrum, learning/ training/ education does not figure in our personal individual plans for at least the next 10 to 15 years. And then it might figure by necessity, not by desire or design. Learning is not one of our primary life goals – happiness is.

While Dickie's paper did not outline the actual wording of the interview respondents' descriptions, it is important to note the language used in her analysis as an indicator of the categories relevant to interviewees in discussing lifelong learning:

People have been remarkably open about how important motivation is to learning and training and study and amazingly comfortable about saying they don't have it. It's all too hard and they don't want to have to find that source of energy and commitment especially in later life.

The life goal for Australians is not to be rich or educated, but to be happy. In some ways that's very reassuring – in other ways more than somewhat puzzling. It too is a mass of contradictions – education and training don't contribute to happiness; study is positively misery making; learning can be a happy experience – but it's not valued; work contributes to happiness and stability and family; and you need to be educated or trained to work; but education and training won't make you happy – it's all about getting on, moving up, being ambitious, making money and so on.

(Dickie, 1999)

The opposition in this discussion between 'learning', 'study', 'training' on the one hand and 'happiness' on the other suggests that while the former are associated with a sense of economic and social necessity, the latter is applied to other practices not seen to be driven by this necessity. Research into dispositions on education would support this interpretation. Bourdieu's research suggests that a commitment to learning and education for its own sake is associated with the adoption of the scholastic point of view displayed by those, such as academics, high in academic capital. It is a disposition associated with membership of the field of academic life seen as gratuitous by those concerned with other priorities (Bourdieu 1998:128).

This raises important questions about the ability and will of 'community' to engage in a process of educational reform required by the New Basics. School reform not only tends to demand the operation of weak classificatory systems between school and 'community' that do not necessarily exist. It also prescribes a duty for 'community' to take responsibility for the inculcation of 'learning dispositions' appropriate for the New Economy in students, when it is likely that many 'community' members do not themselves possess such dispositions. Nor, as far as Dickie's research suggests, do they want to. This highlights a gap in research and practice in so far as 'communities' who are recognised as not necessarily having the required skills, attitudes or dispositions are nevertheless already responsible for the production of a new generation of 'lifelong learners'.

3. The potential for a new kind of inequity

While it is clearly recognised that different levels of access to education can result in inequity, current school reform will potentially give rise to a new form of inequity. In our discussion so far, we have highlighted the way in which the continued existence of 'strong' classifications coupled with the tendency for many Australians to lack the appropriate 'learning dispositions', may produce a divide between theory and practice. These arguments, while legitimate, have been over-simplified in order to make the point. Essentially, and in concurrence with current educational reform

discourse, we must recognise differences between and within ‘communities’. The New Basics have been developed precisely to take account of these differences, using the principle of ‘connectedness’ to give teachers and ‘communities’ the freedom and flexibility to provide educational experiences that are linked with the different ‘life-worlds’ of students and their particular ‘communities’. However, while undoubtedly unintended, school reform discourse also smuggles in some assumptions that imply a level of consistency across all ‘communities’. That is, that all schools and ‘communities’ will be defined by members according to weak classifications and that ‘community’ members will necessarily develop the appropriate ‘learning dispositions’ in order to deliver suitable lessons to students.

Inevitably, as alluded to above with reference to findings from Bourdieu’s (1984) and Bennet, Emmison and Frow’s (1999) research, the acquisition and possession of particular types of ‘capital’ is not uniform. This will inevitably apply to the exposure to, and procurement of, ‘lifelong learning dispositions’ among both students and ‘community’ members alike. This inequity may also be intensified when we take into account that different ‘communities’ may invoke classifications between school and ‘community’ to differing degrees from very ‘strong’ to very ‘weak’. These differences are likely to give rise to varying opportunities and constraints experienced by students in different areas. For instance, a large high school that successfully develops relationships with surrounding businesses, joining tasks with the community, may be more likely to establish continuity of opportunities for students. As extreme examples, schools with transient populations, or those in remote areas may be disadvantaged in terms of the community links that can be established between students and wider opportunities for post-school careers². Subsequently, given the emphasis on weakly classified ‘community’ as a provider of education, it is important to consider the differences in peoples’ capacity to deliver and access learning even in its broadest sense.

Conclusions

In the context of the New Economy, and the emergence of a new kind of ‘worker’ and citizen, educational reform may well be necessary. As knowledge and symbols become central to the production process, and the productive ‘worker’ is subsequently redefined, the role of learning is undergoing a fundamental shift. Education at the level of the school is no longer solely oriented to the learning of tangible skills that will conceivably be sufficient throughout life. Instead, school education is being reconceptualized as a foundation for learning throughout life. The New Basics are a case on point whereby achieving student outcomes for ‘New Times’ is seen to require re-structuring at the level of both the organisation of the school and classroom practices. Re-conceptualising ‘community’ in terms of ‘weak’ classifications’, goes hand in hand with this reform.

Brief consideration of the way in which discourse about the New Economy and school reform formulates ‘community’ and its role in these processes has resulted in the identification of some key paradoxes that mark a tension between discourse and

² These examples are only possibilities. As yet, we do not know which types of schools or communities will be more likely to employ weaker classifications, nor indeed, whether employing weak classifications will necessarily result in positive student outcomes as education reform discourse implies.

practice. First, scripted within educational reform discourse is a weakly classified version of 'community' wherein power and responsibility is shared and dispersed across institutions and communities rather than clearly demarcated within strict institutional boundaries. While theoretically sound, there is a possibility that 'strong' classifications will continue to be applied in practice by those who are theoretically obliged to operate within a 'weakly' classified framework. Second, educational reform discourse tacitly recognises that those who are responsible for instilling learning dispositions into the younger generation do not necessarily possess these dispositions themselves. Finally, educational reform has the potential to give rise to new forms of inequity deriving from differential classificatory systems operable within and between communities.

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