THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF ACE IN NATIONAL POLICY

John McIntyre
Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training
UTS

In this paper I want to explore how the 'adult community education (ACE) sector' has been discursively constructed in national policy during the period of Australian training reform. I will be talking about the 'ACE sector' not so much as a reference to complex institutional realities but more as a problematic policy construction.

My thesis is that the 'ACE sector' has developed a life of its own with high policy values that work in tension with the actual community-based educational practices of neighbourhood houses, community colleges and adult education centres. Though the term is strictly only applicable to such community organisations, in national policy (MCEETYA 1997) it comprehends such a wide a range of provision that 'the ACE sector' becomes the vaguest of ideas. But this policy symbolism and policy reach is exactly what is interesting in terms of theorising policy and training reform - the term 'ACE' has been skilfully used to name, mobilise, organise, defend, legitimate and control a range of activity in the different states (McIntyre 1998).

Why is the 'emergence' of ACE relevant to a forum on national language and literacy policy? It is appropriate because ACE (and here I mean bona fide community providers) participated in language and literacy policy developments from an early stage, so that Whyte and Crombie can say '… this area of practice more than any other, drew the attention of modern governments to adult education' (Whyte and Crombie, 1995, 93). Neighbourhood houses made adult literacy a basis for their work, and adult literacy and TESOL were a major factor bringing adult education in the form of ACE within the scope of training reform and some key debates about access and equity in the 'reformed' VET system.

The discursive construction of ACE

I am interested in the way that the construction of ACE in national policy has called on a variety of powerful discourses to legitimate and promote 'the sector' (I will continue to parenthesise in this way to signify the construct). By discursive construction in policy I mean the ways in which policy understandings of 'the ACE sector' have been shaped and reshaped during the period of Australian training reform, by processes that were part of the institutional work of policy intervention or working in tandem with it.

I will refer to an array of discourses that have been adapted and deployed in this way - communitarianism, liberalism and vocationalism, access and equity, lifelong education, managerialism and marketisation. I don't claim that my descriptions of these shaping ideologies can adequately convey the policy languages that in succession (and in interaction) helped to shape and reshape adult education activities, but I think it is worth trying to subject the policy givens to some analysis, since one remarkable feature of 'the sector' is the finesse of the policy management of ACE bureaucrats (and that is a compliment).

There needs to be more debate about ACE's 'recognition' as part of education and training and its 'inclusion' in VET and more theorisation of the nature of this development as a discursive construction of policy. In my view, there has been too little attention paid to the 'politics of community' and its discourse of communitarianism especially as espoused in the feminist practices of neighbourhood houses, but also in the remaking of older institutions as community agencies through their 'communalisation' by the state. Both trends have transformed the relationships of adult education and 'modern government'. Policy intervention has effectively discarded the values of liberalism for community-based forms of provision that speak a great deal about the working of the contemporary state. In my analysis, communitarian politics have been crucial to this transformation of adult education agency, but this key aspect has been neglected since training reform has concentrated attention on the threats and opportunities presented by the impact of the 'vocationalism' of training reform (see Whyte and Crombie 1995).

The discursive construction of ACE in national policy is rich in contradictions and tensions, however finessed and homogenised the statements of national ACE policy (see MCEETYA 1997). I want to try and account for the evolving 'policy symbolism' of the ACE sector, as well as understand its institutional structuring and restructuring. Naturally, I share a view of training reform as 'policy intervention' and accept that our task is to theorise this, recognising that there is a 'discourse of policy' not just policy discourses in play (Ball 1994). However, I also hope to explore policy processes and give some place to the role of 'actor networks' in playing out policy, and above all I look for some account of shifts in the state and the bureaucratic culture of its 'policy systems' and actor understandings of policy processes (Considine 1992).

I acknowledge that this paper is an account of the discursive construction of ACE, and that there are different narratives or sets of narratives (and that from my position I understand ACE not as a practitioner but as a policy researcher working within a policy system (Considine).

Inevitably I am going to give my version(s) of various narratives of the discursive construction of ACE. One such narrative is the recognition story, where it is possible to trace the genesis of the 'ACE sector' construct from its adoption in the national professional body that fused different adult and community education interests, the creation of the Board of ACE and the ACFE Board in Victoria (both of which drew official boundaries of provision amidst the first-wave restructuring of TAFE systems) to its use by the landmark inquiry of a Senate Committee which referred to the

'emergence' of ACE in its report *Come In Cinderella* (Aulich 1991). This was truly an emergence into national policy discourse under training reform.

This is a success story, of sector lobbyists getting parliamentarians to recognise the 'claims' and 'achievements' of adult education in the broad including workplace training and adult basic education, yet the report *Come In Cinderella* cited the work of community agencies in many of its references. The 'claims' of the sector, it might be said, highlighted those made by the community sector about their role in personal and social well-being as well as economic activity at the local level. The slippage from broad 'adult learning' to 'community agency' is typical.

The success of the Senate Inquiry was followed by the creation of a national ACE policy (MCEETYA 1997) made possible by a national reform agenda and its politics of 'corporate federalism' (Lingard, Knight and Porter, 1993). As training reform reaches its apogée in the formation of the national training authority (ANTA), the story of ACE can be told in terms of the skilful management of the reform environment by bureaucrats who position 'the sector' advantageously, even as their own policy parameters are being changed by a corporatising of government. This is the 'inclusion story' which leads to the creation of ANTA-funded vocational programs by ACE organisations (see Schofield 1995).

However, there is another tale of the restructuring of institutionalised adult and vocational education by state governments, which overlaps in time with the interventions of national policy. This story has as many versions as there are states, and it is one of state administrations abandoning older bureaucratic cultures for a new managerialism, its economic rationalism and neo-conservative politics. There is a complex reworking of the institutional forms of adult and vocational education where new boundaries are drawn between publicly funded institutions and community agencies in terms of a vocational and non-vocational binary that equates ACE to leisure and enrichment and remits its costs to the community (McIntyre 1995, 1997). This is partly the state deciding to limit claims on the public purse at a time where post-compulsory participation was expanding these claims dramatically through TAFE expenditures. The bigger picture is the rejection of welfarism and the promotion of the community services sector (Yeatman 1990). In NSW, before the heat of training reform, as government restructured TAFE it rationalised evening colleges and 'communalised' their agency (McIntyre 1997) while promoting a self-help, community-based adult education centre movement in rural areas. In Victoria, the well-established community agencies reached a different accommodation with government and TAFE institutions. In other states, older forms of adult education are simply absorbed in TAFE. When the 'ACE sector' emerges, it does so embracing a variety of organisations, histories, interests and agendas.

The restructuring story (and I am conscious mine is told by a witness to NSW events) helps to understand how it is that language and literacy policy comes to be so important for the 'emergence' of community-based adult education. It is at this point that I assert the importance of the political economy and policy systems (see Considine 1994). The effects of 'communalising' older institutions through user-pays general adult education is their impoverishment, since liberal adult education does not

pay for itself except in the most affluent urban areas (McIntyre, Brown & Ferrier 1996). This limitation stimulates the new organisations to diversify into other and better-resourced areas of provision, particularly labour market programs and language and literacy. (The story of Central West Community College is well-known, and was part of the case for ACE's vocational standing mounted by research for the NSW Board, see McIntyre et al 1995). Both national and state funds flowed into community agencies as direct result of training reform and its promotion of national language and literacy policy. Thus, we need to explore how 'communalisation' of adult education is a symptomatic of new policy and funding regimes emerging in the political economy of the contemporary state.

In the story of ACE's inclusion in ANTA, the policy discourse shifts from one of terms of sectoral recognition, a language of 'claims' and 'achievements', to a language of worth and validity, as the state debates on what terms if at all community adult education should count as part of the greater vocational education and training system. Whereas the 'recognition discourse' the Senate Report is about claims on government, the dialectics of 'inclusion' are about the extent to which ACE meets the terms of the vocationalist agenda. Whereas the access and equity discourses were dominant in the discussions of the Senate report around the claims of the sector, in the debates about the inclusion of ACE, equity is subsumed into the arguments about the vocational worth of ACE.

My point here is that the 'communalising' of agency paves the way for restructured agencies to become vocational providers by virtue of their need to diversify provision, meet a wide range of community needs and gain resources through business and computing training and their expansion into labour market and literacy programs. Training reform has the effect of catalysing this transformation, resourcing it and finally legitimating it through ANTA.

Discourses

Among the discourses which I argue compete in shaping policy understandings of ACE, I argue that it is the tensions around *communitarianism* that are interesting yet little analysed. This is because the claims of community agency have been all but buried by the dominance of other discursive conflicts, by a politics of recognition that demanded ACE be understood as a broad church with the most general of manifestos - lifelong learning (see again, MCEEYTA 1997). ACE policy has adopted and made its own the discourse of *lifelong learning* and adult participation, positioning and legitimating its activity in relation to powerful global policy understandings that are to be located, as Yeatman says, within a meta-discourse of economic rationalism and the work of international policy organisations such as the OECD.

Communitarian discourses, in contrast, have been a basis for feminist practice in the neighbourhood houses and rural adult education centres, as well as an impetus to the community college model for TAFE that was silenced by corporatisation in 1990. The key point however is how this discourse stands in relation to old (liberal, unreformed and male managed) adult education.

Frazer and Lacey (1993) identify a 'liberal-communitarian debate' and critique it from a feminist position, which rejects this binary. 'Communitarianism' they characterise as 'the thesis that the community, rather than the individual, the state, the nation or any other entity is and should be at the centre of our analysis and our value system.

> Communitarians emphasise the embedded and embodied status of the individual person by contrast with the central themes emphasised in particular in contemporary liberal thought which can construct an abstract and disembodied individual. They tend to emphasise the value of specifically communal and public goods, and conceive of values rooted in communal practices, again by contrast with liberalism which emphasises individual rights and conceives of the individual subject as the ultimate originator and bearer of value ... (Frazer & Lacey 1993, p.2).

I argue that this opposition of communitarianism and liberalism has in fact been constitutive of the policy construction of ACE, though this is *denied in and by policy discourse*. The newer community agencies like neighbourhood houses arose and contended with the older liberal agencies such as the WEA and the Victorian CAE, and this conflict is to be understood in gendered terms as I have already suggested. Yet the policy discourse of 'recognition' and 'inclusion' under training reform defined the competing rationales for adult education as the liberal and the vocational. The 'attack' of training reform upon adult education was the subversion by a vocational agenda of the ineffable breadth and depth of individual learning (see for example, Bagnall 1994; Whyte and Crombie, 1995 and the discussion of the state and adult education in Britain in Jarvis 1992).

This line of argument cannot be confined to ACE organisations, but must also take in the fate of TAFE under training reform. The rise of community agencies coincides with the late blaze of liberalism that we now recognise in the 'Kangan philosophy' of TAFE, an attempt to reshape narrow technical institutions in the image of a liberal vocational education. The 'educational opportunity' of old liberalism was rephrased in terms of new discourses of access and equity for disadvantaged groups within a social-democratic politics. Kangan sought to claim the liberal ground of 'adult education' for a broader vocational institution. Later, in almost every state, TAFE institutions moved significantly towards a communitarian discourse in the form of the community college model (eg Beswick et al 1983) and it is (to me) highly significant that the first act of training reform was the utter obliteration of this kind of comprehensive community-based model for vocational education. The communitarian direction of TAFE was purged for good perhaps.

Both 'adult' and vocational' institutions were being challenged by the new and self-consciously alternative community agencies in the Kangan years and in some ways old adult education soon had no territory to claim as its own. Indeed, in the smaller states adult education in time disappeared as a formal institution altogether. Yet Kangan liberalism had to contend with the new discursive oppositions of the formal versus the communal, and the state-controlled versus community governed (see for

example, numerous TAFE reports of the time assuming discourses of 'participation' and 'consultation').

I refer to these earlier moments before training reform because they did not disappear in training reform even if they were displaced by the dominance of the vocational-liberal opposition. In ACE, the politics of inclusion in national VET policy demanded that ACE demonstrate its vocational worth, and it's at this point that my own experience as a researcher intersects with the development of ACE policy. My work for the Board of ACE was especially concerned with documenting the dimensions of the vocational activity of the ACE organisations in NSW (McIntyre, Morris & Tennant 1993; McIntyre, Foley, Morris & Tennant 1995). Though its not my interest here, this experience has led me to look at the way research and policy relationships that are mutually constitutive under corporate managerialist regimes (see McIntyre 1998). I am interested in understanding how the new corporatist policy-making deploys and is shaped by research expertise.

The point however, is how this research assumed and worked with those discourses constituting the 'ACE sector' in national policy. Briefly, the research can be said to have deconstructed the absurdity of the vocational/non-vocational divide that the state had employed to define the boundaries of TAFE and adult education in the 'earlier moments' referred to above. The discourse of course classification, the 'streams of study' and their supposed types of courses and learning purposes had been a means by which the state limited the expansion of its responsibilities to resource the explosion of participation in organised adult learning. In this classification, adult education was defined as the negative other of vocational worth - as non-award, non-vocational, non-accredited learning for 'leisure and personal enrichment'. In effect, the research on participation and outcomes in ACE showed the extent to which ACE was in practice a vocational provider, paving the way for its inclusion in broad VET.

In a later draft of this paper I intend to explore how the discourses of access and equity, its language of disadvantage, second-chance education, barriers and pathways, were reframed by the demands of strategic policymaking as ACE 'rode the tiger' of vocationalism as it now rides the tiger of marketisation and de-regulation. Here I want to look briefly at the pathway metaphor as a way into examining in more detail the transformations of equity discourse in ACE policy.

Equity discourse: the pathways metaphor

Equity discourses were adopted and adapted to the work of the policy construction of ACE, particularly the idea of 'pathways' to formal education for disadvantaged people. In fact, the early official position on ACE in the Senate Report can be summed in the view that ACE provides a valuable means of 'second-chance' education so it ought to be better recognised, and training reform bought this proposition, notably the Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1992, as one basis for including ACE in the VET system. I say 'adopted' because it is striking how the Kangan discourses of access and equity, disadvantage, lifelong learning and vocational need were taken up and worked to ACE's policy advantage. A textual

analysis of key parts of the Kangan report and *Come In Cinderella* would be revealing in this respect.

Pathways is a key locus of analysis of ACE policy, because the research evidence has shown unequivocally that pathways for disadvantaged people mainly exist where community agencies have pathway planning practices which are based on adult literacy in combination with counselling, training, work placement and other support options. Our work for the National Women's VET Strategy on pathways from ACE to VET (McIntyre & Kimberley 1997) found there was a rich variety of community-based models, but these were concentrated in Victoria, with few pathways models to speak of anywhere else, which is consistent with the weight of the participation evidence. Most of the participants in general adult education (the advertised, fee-paying short course) are not taking a pathway from informal learning to formal learning in TAFE or higher education, but are much more likely to be topping up their store of educational experiences. So long as ACE providers are governed by user-pays and marketisation, so long as TAFE institutes scorn partnerships with community agencies (and are not discouraged by funding penalties for doing so), there will be little bona fide pathway construction in ACE (see McIntyre & Kimberley 1997).

The point is exactly that the pathways metaphor is more powerful policy idea than an accurate description of the practice of many ACE organisations. It has been worked as a key metaphor for legitimating ACE within training reform, where the semiotics of pathways were as important as the 'research evidence'. In our pathways research, Helen Kimberley and I drew attention to the power of the pathways metaphor as a policy construct before we looked for evidence for pathways 'on the ground' as it were.

Beginning from the Shorter Oxford's amazing definition of 'path' as 'a way trodden by the feet of men and beasts not expressly made or constructed', we suggested that that there are several key meanings applied to understanding access by women in adult and vocational education. A pathway could signify the making of connections or linkages by learners between one institutional location or one kind of learning experience and another; it entailed the overcoming of obstacles or barriers along the way, and a choice of direction about life experience, implying an orientation to learning, as well as qualities of venturing. It was a metaphor of learning as personal journey and search for meaning. 'Path' is a key religious metaphor, signifying a way to enlightenment or salvation or at least a progression to higher knowledge or learning by following a way. Pathways also imply a mapping and marking and guiding learners along a learning route. Obviously, there are many possibilities of conflict and tension among these meanings, and it is certainly the case that 'getting disadvantaged people into accredited courses' has been in tension with people finding their way into learning.

This kind of analysis of key policy understandings needs of course to be related to key policy discourses that are relevant to practitioners, and to the 'politics of community' with which the concept of ACE is invested by those who have a well-developed community practice (see Bradshaw 1996). These rationales of practitioners

do not necessarily find expression in the policy rationales which governments advance for 'community' adult education. It is important therefore, in understanding the discursive construction of ACE in policy to draw attention to the social theories of 'community' and to the 'communitarian' ideas, which are assumed in the field.

Conclusion

As a final comment, this analysis of ACE is very much an open-ended and exploratory one that reflects the shifts in my own understanding not only of ACE but also of my own participation in community organisations.

My work on adult community education has gradually arrived at a position that questions the location of adult education in liberal individualism and looks for new meanings of 'agency' within a communitarian politics and the (re)location of adult education within a community services 'sector' of the contemporary state. This new location is defined by a highly problematic relationship with the state in which issues of autonomy and control are continually revisited. It is in this context that the 'policy symbolism' of national policy needs to be explored further.

As a final comment on the development of my thinking on the state and community, I refer again to the *Policy symbolism* article, where in addition to arguing a view of research and policy relationships, I take a position of advocacy for the ACE organisations and their claims for a role within the 'new' diversified and competitive vocational education and training (VET) environment. In summary, I argue that the terms of 'inclusion' in national training arrangements have failed to recognise the potential contribution of community agencies to achieving equity of access to VET. I argue that if equity is to be achieved, government must intervene to fund programs particularly community-based programs, adequately.

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