Restructuring adult education: research, policy and the state

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This paper argues that the boundaries of adult education with other 'territories of provision' are being redrawn, not through the shadowy play of Zeitgeist but through the definite agency of the state intervention. Our scholarship in adult education seems poorly equipped to comprehend economic globalisation, the domination of social policy by economic rationalism, the restructuring of public sector agencies extending to the public university itself and the ascendancy of a neoconservative politics which crosses traditional party-political boundaries (Marginson 1993).

It may be just the contradictions of the emerging 'postmodern' state that prevent us from understanding that academic researchers are themselves drawn into its interventions. Is this a cause for resignation or regret, or a reason to put more effort into theorising the contemporary state and examining whether it might not be a site of struggle for a social-democratic politics?

The paper will argue that -

- there are shifts in the nature of the contemporary state which need to be theorised as a consequence of economic globalisation
- there is a new culture of public administration, referred to as 'corporate managerialism', which combined with the state's 'communalisation' of adult education agency, helps to explain the particular way Australian adult education has been reconfigured as part of national 'reform' of education and training
- this new public management culture employs research as a strategic tool, drawing academic researchers into the work of strategic policy formation, but this involves an interplay of research and policy that is more complex than is suggested by impact-on-policy models
- the engagement of academics in state-sponsored policy research can be positive and contribute to theorising of adult education as social policy

1. The state, education and social policy

Analysis of the contemporary state and research and policy in adult education is lacking though it is well known that adult education has occupied a key place in social policy since mass schooling (Griffin 1987). Policy appears to hold little interest for the field (Jarvis 1993) despite an upsurge of scholarship examining the state and education policy (eg Ahier and Flude 1983; Dale 1989; Ball 1990, 1994; Marginson 1993; Henry Lindgard and Rivzi 1997). This may be because of the dominance of the liberal tradition in adult education and

its ambivalence towards the state and its intervention (cf Jarvis 1993) whereas radical traditions see the state as the enemy and adult education movements as oppositional (eg Foley 1990; 1994). Both ignore the extension of the modern state's activities theorised in Dale's Althusserian analysis of education as state ideological apparatus (Dale 1989). Theorists of postmodernity resist generalising about institutions, let alone the idea of a postmodern state which Hinkson argues is emerging from the effects of communication technologies, network relations and information flows (Hinkson 1991).

Much of the reaction to neoconservatism is defeatist in tone and apolitical in response. This not helped by analysing the state in terms (eg in Jarvis 1993) which put it over 'against' the social organisation of adult education, and denies the ways adult education is 'within' the contemporary state. An alternative view recognises that while neoconservative politicians may be 'rolling back the state' it is the welfare state that is displaced by new modes of intervention, particularly in response to economic globalisation (Yeatman 1991, 1993; Marginson, 1993).This requires a grounded and detailed theorisation of the emerging contemporary state and its neoconservative politics.

2. Theorising the contemporary state

Yeatman's theorisation of the contemporary state provides a way of understanding state intervention in education as a response to economic globalisation (Yeatman 1991, 1993, 1994). In brief, economic globalisation, meaning not only the mobility of transnational capital but the intensification of competition in international trade itself, demands a 'competition state' whose prime role is to steer the economy to 'international competitiveness' (Yeatman 1991, 109-113). There is a shift from the welfare state to a leaner and more efficient state to create competitive conditions for private sector investment. To accomplish this steering role, the emerging state shrinks the public sector and makes it more managerial in character (Yeatman 1993).

Yeatman also argues (Yeatman 1991) that the state is now 'complex' and 'interventionist' in character. The emergence of new social movements making claims on government has differentiated and 'dispersed' the state's activity so that it has become 'intertwined in complex ways with the agents of civil society' such as community organisations. (This point is crucial for the analysis I shall develop of adult community education in Australia).

Yeatman says this complex interventionist state is durable and therefore 'a central site of social, political, cultural and economic struggle' over the distribution of associated resources, as major political elites attempt to marginalise social movements and their 'democratising claims', though she says the 'symbolic politics' involved are no longer 'containable' within familiar conceptions of the state.

There is an adoption of economic rationalism as a 'meta-policy' of government and a wholesale cultural change to public administration which she terms 'corporate managerialism'. This new bureaucratic culture is: outcomes-focused rather than rule-bound; flattens authority structures but exercises management prerogatives; professionalises bureaucratic work but subjects it to management control; humanises public service employment through a 'people-and process' orientation but implements more stringent accountability practices; adopts meritocratic selection which admits cultural minorities but excludes the under-educated; opens decision-making to value-led debate, but subordinates values to technical administrative concerns; and in the absence of firm value commitments, produces technocratic managers indifferent to the social ends of their work (Yeatman 1991, 13-32).

Crucially, Yeatman argues that free market ideologues misread the logic of state interventionism involved in national responses to global economic competition, while liberals misread it as 'turning the state over to the market' or dismantling welfarism. Corporatisation of the public sector consolidates the activity of the complex interventionist state (1991, 35).

This analysis of the state provides a useful framework for analysing the complexity of the transformation of adult education as part of the reform of education and training.

3. Restructuring Australian adult education

For over a decade education and training in Australia has been subject to macro-economic reform and the restructuring of its education and training systems, led by a series of federal Labor governments engineering change through tripartite agreements of labour, capital and government (see A.Brown, this volume).

The 'training reform agenda' has challenged and changed Australian adult education, which historically has been organised at the margins of the highly bureaucratised education systems of the states (see Tennant 1990; Willis and Harris 1992; Foley 1995). Within adult education, the vocationalism of reform is often depicted as threatening the values and philosophies of (liberal) adult education. This counterposes 'adult' and 'vocational' in a way which denies the historical fluidity of the boundaries between technical, higher, vocational, general and adult education within state systems of provision.

Given the 'vocationalist' agenda of restructuring, it is significant that adult education has been 'included' at all. How this came to be and how it was managed, has something to say about the workings of the contemporary state. I argue that there is an ongoing transformation of Australian adult education concurrent with the shift away from the welfare state but not explicable simply in terms of 'unleashing of market forces'. This transformation can be summed up as: a *disengagement* with the funding of adult education through the public education system through a *communalisation* of agency and the *adoption* of user-pays funding regimes; a *recognition and privileging* of community agencies as a sector of state-sponsored activity despite the wholesale expansion of other forms of organised adult learning; and the *strategic management* of the claims of adult education organisations and movements by the new corporatised bureaucracy.

The *communalisation of agency* is a key feature which can be explored briefly here. In Yeatman's terms communalisation of adult education has been produced both by the activism of the new social movements and the way the state has accommodated their demands. By and large, women's movements have created the community adult education agencies such as the Neighbourhood House movement (see Gribble 1990; ACFE 1996) and the community adult education centre movement in NSW (Hansen 1991). Yet at the same time, in NSW the state transferred the old evening colleges system (based in public schools) to the 'community-ownership and management' model (see Tennant 1991).

Community-based adult education is thus the institutional form of adult education preferred by the contemporary state which represents it as a 'partnership' of government and community. Communalisation goes hand in hand with corporate managerialism. Community-based provision transfers both responsibilities and costs from government to communities, limiting the call on public funds while maximising the 'return to government'. The state's activity is now 'dispersed' through such agencies yet the state manages at arms length through the strategic policy framework and funding regimes (McIntyre 1995).

The recognition and inclusion of the 'adult community education sector' (ACE) within national education and training policy is an achievement of organised adult education movements working on government, especially through the federal parliamentary inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (1992). This recognition is highly congruent with Yeatman's view of the state as 'dispersed' state and intertwined with the organisations of civil society. At the same time, the 'inclusion' of ACE is congruent in other ways with the goals of corporatist government to limit the claims on the public purse and transfer costs of education and training from public to private agencies.

Thus the inclusion of ACE in 'training reform' has had both practical and symbolic value to the state. ACE, dependent on user-pays and impoverished as a result, nevertheless exemplifies the ideal of 'market-responsiveness' that is the goal of training reform. ACE organisations are seen as having the virtues of private providers and few their defects. Moreover, community agencies can be put in competition with public sector agencies to make them more responsive and 'client focused'. Further, ACE makes out its difference from other agencies in terms of the very rhetoric of lifelong learning which the state is promoting as a rationale for an economically driven learning society. Thus, the very marginality of ACE has been a basis to recommend its inclusion in a de-bureaucratised and 'open' system.

It is in this context that the new educational managers have engaged policy with research.

4. Research, policy and the state

I am suggesting that both social movements and changing modes of control by the state together have worked to redraw the boundaries of 'traditional' adult education. However, I argue that the shift to the new culture of corporate managerialism has been instrumental in the transformation, and in this, the new bureaucrats have employed research as policy strategy and drawn academic researchers into their interventions.

Why should academic research become strategically important to the state? Not only because the new state is too lean and mean to do work that can be done by through contract, but because university research holds some credibility in policy debates, and can provide key information to those debates. This is important in dealing with powerful policy adversaries in restructured employment-and-education mega-bureaucracies. The new bureaucrats have had little option but to ride the tiger of training reform and try and 'position the sector' advantageously. Academics can be useful allies.

I argue that strategic policy research is constructed in specific ways by corporate managerialism, which cannot be understood by calling on typical dissemination models of research described in the literature (cf Husen and Kogan 1984; Finch 1986; Anderson and Biddle 1991; Halpin and Troyna 1995). Rather, there is an *interplay of research and policy perspectives* because the new public sector manager thinks of policy in strategic terms and decision-making needs to be open to value-led debate on the basis of good information. Further, the tertiary educated new managers are oriented to available knowledge bases and comprehend research perspectives relevant to policy issues, whereas the old public service bureaucrat had expertise accumulated over a long career in the portfolio (Yeatman 1993). Hence, bureaucrat and consultant academic come to negotiate common understandings about the role of research in policy.

Moreover, the university and its academic workers are also subjected to educational restructuring by the complex interventionist state - internally, through a corporatising of

authority structures, and externally, through research consultancy. Academics develop network relationships with bureaucracies which weave the universities into the state's 'dispersed' activity. Consequently, the academic, far from being a naive researcher, may acquire sophisticated policy understandings - indeed, strategic policy work cannot be done without them. (Critically examined, these understandings can feed into the theorisation of adult education as social policy, as I hope this analysis demonstrates).

It is difficult to represent the complexity of the negotiated relationships of research and policy particularly through brief 'examples' of strategic policy work. However, I will focus on some recent research around three key policy arguments and highlight tensions between research and policy in particular constructions of policy.

Determining the vocational quantum of ACE

The politics of inclusion in the new 'national' vocational education and training arrangements required that ACE demonstrate its vocational worth. The state adult education authority commissioned research to define and measure the vocational activities of the sector. This dauntingly narrow brief was subverted by the researchers (McIntyre, Morris and Tennant, 1993) who read it (not without debate) as needing a more complex and multi-dimensional account of the vocational contribution of the sector (if they were not to be seen as selling it out). Thus the research reframed the problem of the 'vocational quantum' of ACE in ways that could be used by its advocates.

This academic cheek was rewarded with a second and nationally funded project to document the 'vocational outcomes' of ACE from a range of multiple perspectives of the learner, skills formation, industry and the community (McIntyre, Foley, Morris and Tennant, 1995). Hence the policy construction of 'needed research' shifted significantly in the second project as a result of the first, as a result of the research perspectives elaborating arguments of the value of ACE through detailed empirical work (for example, that some 20% of general adult education participants were enrolled for directly work related reasons).

Refuting the myth that adult community education serves 'the disadvantaged'

Part of the politics of 'inclusion' of adult community education in national policy has been that it provides 'second chance education' for 'disadvantaged groups'. This is meant to counter the perception that liberal adult education is both privileged and vocationally inconsequential.

The research effectively undermined the policy argument that 'community' adult education was performing any special role in equity. It confirmed the known trend for general adult education participants to be relatively advantaged in education and employment. This discomforting result was met by several strategic policy responses - first, to reframe the value of ACE as promoting lifelong learning across the workforce, and second, by developing strategies to target non-participation of disadvantaged groups. In general, policy has shifted to adopt a participation perspective.

The idea that ACE plays a special role is itself highly ambivalent, because if it did, then the state might then argue that ACE had this function, 'equity' could then be safely marginalised as the concern of community providers.

Showing current funding regimes produce inequity

If the policy ideologies of the new bureaucrats were ruled entirely by economism, a project to examine the economics of funding ACE could easily have prescribed a 'unit costs of

course delivery' methodology, and not, instead, have invited an analysis of the political economy of ACE organisations. Nevertheless, the project was meant to inform a change in funding regime (McIntyre, Brown and Ferrier 1997). A key background issue was the chronic under-resourcing of community-based provision.

The research exposed the varying fortunes of community-based adult education providers under user-pays and marginal government assistance. It showed (unsurprisingly) that the ability of community providers to generate fee incomes from a user-pays regime is severely constrained by the population density and affluence of their localities. Detailed postcode analysis of participation showed that the combined effect of the user-pays system and current government funding regime was to encourage participation in 'advantaged' localities and inhibit it in less advantaged. Hence, the research demonstrated that lack of 'equity outcomes' results from maintaining historical (untargeted) funding when provision has been re-organised on a 'community-pays' basis.

These examples perhaps suggest something of the way research which is commissioned in a turbulent policy can interact with competing policy discourses to produce particular strategic directions, so that 'restructuring' is a negotiated and managed accomplishment.

5. Conclusion

Commissioned research is often seen as dirty work subordinated to policy imperatives, and highly constrained by project timelines and policy agendas. I argue that the policy interest may often require both depth and complexity and invite or tolerate the contradiction of current policy positions. Under the corporate managerialism it is as likely to demand an elaboration as much as a suppression of research perspectives and may contrive their productive interplay in policy formation.

This position obviously rejects the view that 'adult education' scholarship is best formed in the pure confines of the cloister, if that is in any sense now possible. The conditions of an emerging 'politics of discourse' (Yeatman 1991, 120ff) challenges academics to understand if not participate in the dialectics of policy formation, at least while their is ideological space to do so. Moreover, I argue that the exigencies of policy work in the contemporary state need not inhibit but may indeed stimulate innovation in theory and method and develop a critique of the state grounded in knowledge of its processes. However, the poverty of social analysis of adult education (running right through to the heart of the adult learning project) is a serious impediment to this development. We need a reframing of research priorities that takes social policy seriously and locates it within political economy.

Nor is it that researchers simply have a 'public duty' to interpret the complexities of a turbulent environment to politicians, bureaucrats and adult education practitioners and other 'audiences'.

Because the public university is now clearly identified as a target of education and training reform, academics cannot easily escape the reconstitution of their work by social and economic policy. Hence, the point of this paper is definitely not whether academics should participate in state-sponsored research that redraws the boundaries of territories such as adult education. The point is that an era of neoconservative politics and state intervention is giving us compelling arguments to turn critical attention to the public policy process and to education as social policy as part of defending the university and the viability of adult education scholarship.

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