

Generic skills and pedagogies of adult and community education: An action research exploration of teachers' practices

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Introduction

This project arose from our collective involvements in adult and community education, adult literacy, youth issues, and in researching the new movement in Australia for the inclusion of 'generic skills' in education and training curriculum.

Two of us had been involved a recent research project exploring the notion of 'generic skills for employability' through the perspectives and experiences of displaced workers. This led us to question the notions of 'employability' *and* of 'generic skills'. Does the idea of 'generic skills' point to an abstract set of 'skills' that people 'possess' and that can be applied unproblematically regardless of context? It seemed to us that the focus on generic skills suggested a more holistic and experiential approach to learning than has often been possible with accredited curricula and competency-based assessment and National Training Packages.

We felt that the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector might have much to contribute to debates about generic skills. The development of 'generic skills' has always been an important part of non-formal community education and in this sector teachers have always attended to the intangible developmental aspects of their learners' progress, not just whether they are acquiring the desired skills and competencies.

We therefore conceived a participatory action research project that would engage adult literacy and adult and community education teachers in reflecting upon, sharing and documenting their practice with a view to making the connection between their pedagogies (understood as complex, situated teaching practices) and the 'intangible, processes of learners becoming more confident and self-directed in their behaviour and in their lives.

We were funded by the Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board in Melbourne, Australia and the Victoria University. The project began in March of this year and is continuing. By the end of this year we expect to have collected and analysed all of the data and submitted our report.

The generic skills debate

Generic skills overlap with what used to be known as 'core skills', 'key competencies', 'underpinning skills' or 'capabilities (for example, Mayer 1992). More recently, such 'skills' have come to include 'personal attributes' and to be linked with values and identity. One commonly accepted definition is that generic skills are "those transferable skills which are essential for employability at some level for most" (Kearns 2001 p.2).

The phrase 'generic skills for employability' is now in common usage in policy and research (ACC1 2002-2003, Curtis and McKenzie, 2001, Comyn 2002). But it invites closer examination. According to the recent Australian Council for Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and Business Council of Australia (BCA) review, 'generic skills for employability' are those skills that contribute to industry and business interests. Curtis and McKenzie (2001) note that the term employability

is a more attractive as a descriptor than employment-related since it conveys a greater sense of an individual's long-term capacity to build a career and to prosper in a dynamic labour market. Employability implies qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility, whereas employment-related suggests an orientation to the current state of the labour market (Curtis & McKenzie 2001, p.6).

In other words, it implies that people need certain pre-defined skills, attributes and values in order for them to become 'employable'. The responsibility for employment has thus shifted to the individual who is now *individually responsible* for becoming employable: in other words, to have a particular identity and set of attributes and skills as defined by employers.

Education systems, governments and employer bodies in all the OECD countries are looking at generic skills as part of developing their 'human capital' to meet the demands of the 'new knowledge economy'. Economic output, so the story goes, is becoming more information- and knowledge-intensive with an increasing rate of turnover of this information and knowledge content and thus there needs to be a continual upgrading of the skills and competencies of the workforce. Lifelong learning is now necessary to enable workers to constantly adapt to change in order to maintain their employability and to be able to utilise the latest knowledge technologies. However, the patterns of change through emerging technologies and industries and economic restructuring are such that it is now impossible to predict what skills will be required. Workers therefore require the capacity to adapt and continually upgrade through sets of generic skills that can be readily transferred across different settings (Curtis and McKenzie, 2001 p. vii).

The shift from 'skills for *employment*' to 'skills for *employability*' can be seen in terms of neo-liberal ideology of individualism and reliance on market forces. It is a further move away from the social democratic environment of the 80s and early 90s when the Labor government acknowledged an obligation to provide training and re-training for workers displaced by industry re-structuring and as a way of stimulating new industries. The policy then was directed to producing a trained and skilled industrial workforce to further national competitiveness ('the clever country'). VET policy focused on technical skills, competency-based training, performative assessment and national training packages. Now with de-regulation and transnational takeovers, Australian industry is locked into struggles for profit and survival with their global competitors, high rates of unemployment have become a permanent feature, and commitment to training has waned (Buchanan 2002). Seen in this context, the discourse of 'generic skills for employability' raises the bar for who gets in and who gets locked out of work.

A somewhat different approach is reflected in the OECD DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) (OECD, 2003) project, which was directed to building an agreed theoretical basis for generic skills, and an agreed set of indicators for progress towards implementing key competencies.

According to the DeSeCo website, 'generic skills' should be defined in relation to economic, productivity-related and social justice aims. They should be conceived and promoted with a view to

- producing an adaptive, qualified labor force;
- creating an environment for innovation in a world dominated by global competition;
- increasing individual understanding of public policy issues and ability to participate in democratic processes and institutions;
- contributing to social cohesion and justice; and strengthening human rights and autonomy. The generic employability skills proposed by The European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) include: "critical thinking: the ability to think through a problem or situation, distinguishing between facts and prejudices" and "a sense of service to the community, civic mindedness"(Curtis and MacKenzie, 2001).

By contrast, there seems to be a risk, at least in Australia, of employer bodies having a disproportionate say in defining the educational and training agenda in terms of generic skills for employability, and ignoring the other social purposes and values that are normally associated with lifelong learning and 'generic skills for life'. This trend has been exposed by a number of authors and researchers. John Payne, in his paper 'The Unbearable Lightness of Skill' writes that "we have reached a point ... where 'skill' means whatever employers and policy-makers want it to mean (Payne 2000, p.361) He argues that where educators use employers' definitions of skills, they risk contributing to inequality and discrimination as the social construct of 'skills' overlaps with attitudinal, behaviour and character traits which are embedded in the cultural capital of certain social groups. He notes the expectation for the training system to produce appropriately groomed graduates.

In a similar vein, Willmott (1997) talks about 'corporate culturalism' which threatens to undermine the social and intellectual infrastructure of democratic society and which requires us to relinquish critical assessment in favour of engineered corporate loyalty (1997, p. 191). Clearly, there is a risk in the current discourse of 'generic skills for employability' that the public education system will be asked to provide the personality and values training seen by employers as necessary to boost their productivity.

Why this project?

This project was conceived as a way of involving community education practitioners in the debate over generic skills by reflecting upon and documenting their practice, and feeding into policy a different understanding of generic skills development from the currently orthodoxy.

Research has shown that the ACE sector has been quite successful in engaging with and providing education and training to youth and other often marginalised groups in the community. (Golding and Rogers 2002). Government acceptance of its effectiveness in supporting 15-19 years old who had not been well served by schools was reflected in the decision to direct funds to students under 15 "who are experiencing extreme difficulties in engagement with learning" who enrol in an ACE provider). . (Department of Education and Training, 2003). The project aims to document the reasons for ACE being able to operate successfully in this context.

The Adult Community and Further Education Division (ACFED) vision statement, 'Taking ACE to the Year 2000', draws on the Delors Report (1996) in stating that educational opportunities should be created which assist learners to:

- combine a broad general education with specialised knowledge and skills (to know);
- develop the capacities needed to undertake work (to do);
- learn to live interdependently (to live); and
- take on the responsibility for the development of their own potential (to be).

Clearly, there is much overlap between these educational aims and values, the generic 'employability skills' and the generic 'life skills' that have been identified by the OECD process and by authors such as Kearns (2001). Teachers in adult literacy and basic education (as in other educational sectors) aspire to teach in ways that are supporting and working towards greater levels of autonomy, self-confidence and self-awareness on the part of students.

The application of adult learning principles, (eg, Knowles 1990), of active, co-operative learner-centred strategies, is part of everyday teaching in the ACE sector. ACE teachers, working at the interface between theory and practice are generating practical, grounded educational strategies and developmental models. This project is tapping into teachers' pedagogical 'knowing-in-action'

(Schön 1983) in order to advance our understanding of what teachers do to contribute to the development of generic skills (defined in the broadest sense), and to develop new frameworks for the kind of 'tacit' pedagogies that we believe underpin and enhance the development of such skills.

This project, therefore, is taking up the notion of generic skills 'for employability and for life'. It directed to enabling the expert practitioners of adult education pedagogy to speak about and bring into policy discourse the art and craft of their teaching adults (and young adult) learners.

Methodology

Aims

The design on this project was directed towards four inter-linked aims:

The first aim was to investigate teaching and learning practices in Adult and Community Education (ACE) classrooms in order to learn whether and in what ways the 'pedagogical culture' of teaching in that sector might support or facilitate the development of generic skills amongst learners.

The second aim was to document and analyse models and cases of 'good practice' pedagogy in order to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the kinds of pedagogical practices that are being used with the ACE sector and which are presumably contributing to its effectiveness (Golding and Rogers, 2002).

The third aim was to explore the professional development needs of teachers in ACE in relation to the development of learners' generic skills, including cognitive, interpersonal, creative and work-readiness skills.

The fourth aim was to model action research as a form of professional development within the sector that empowers practitioners by engaging them directly as participant-researchers reflecting individually and collectively on their practice and taking action to improve practice.

A combination of participatory action research, participant observation (eg, Patton 1990) and recording of the participants' small group discussions comprise the three sources of data. The analysis of these data is directed towards:

- 'capturing' the incidents, interactions and learning activities that reflect the development of generic skills amongst learners;
- documenting teachers' interventions or approaches that are conducive to the development of particular generic skills;
- identifying the relationship between learning environments and generic skills development; and
- investigating whether and in what ways problem-based or experiential learning lead to generic skills development.

Participatory action research, with its emphasis on cycles of planning, action, reflection and documentation, and on involving teachers as full partners in the research, is highly compatible with the culture of collaboration and empowerment prevailing within the ACE sector.

How, when, and in what ways 'generic skills' are present in the classroom are subtle questions that belongs to the realm of teachers' 'tacit knowing-in-action' (Schön 1983) or their 'pedagogical tact and thoughtfulness' (Van Manen 1995) which is contingent, relational and improvisational. It would not be easy to capture those 'embodied' teaching practices and nuances through conventional interviewing, as teachers themselves are often barely aware of their practice on that level. Action research enables a protracted period of reflection, discussion, and writing on the part of the teachers through the sharing of insights and experiences.

Action research has other spin-offs in that it is more likely to build the culture of ACE 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) and to contribute to professional development processes and programs for teachers and the field at large.

The teacher-researchers in this project are meeting periodically in small groups including in each case one of the academic researchers to share what they have learned about the links between literacy activities and the development of 'generic' skills amongst learners. The small informal meetings are being taped and transcribed. At the end of a ten-week period, the teacher-researchers will each write an account of their observations and insights.

The participants will each be paid an 'honorarium' for their participation. The honorarium is important in acknowledging the voluntary contribution of time and skills by sessional teachers who are not well remunerated.

The particular approach to action research (including teachers documenting their experiences in response to curriculum innovation and meeting periodically to discuss issues and finally compiling individual 'reports' based on their journalling and discussions) was developed in an earlier study of the impact of competency-based assessment on the adult literacy practices of teachers (Sanguinetti 1995).

The inclusion of participant observation (the researchers sit in on some classes of teachers who are participants in the program) is a means of offering support to the participants, triangulating the findings and adding another layer of data and analysis.

Current progress

At the point of writing this paper (June 2003), the twenty-four participants in three different geographical clusters are keeping reflective journals and recording critical incidents that in some way reveal the students' generic skills or else elements or their pedagogy that support the development of generic skills. The participant researchers have been introduced to a number of definitions of generic skill but emphasis has been placed on Kearns' (2001:52)

clusters, which contribute to personal autonomy and mastery and self-direction.

The three groups have met together once to share what they have done so far, and reflect on what is emerging. We, the facilitators, have begun visiting some of the teachers and have sat in on their classes to get a better sense of what is happening and where the analysis might be going. By the end of August, the ten weeks period of reflecting and journalling will be completed and we expect that each participant will have contributed a report of their reflections on the elements of their teaching, which contribute to the development of generic skills amongst learners.

Initial Reflections on Practice

Initial discussion among participant researchers has indicated that they focused significantly on Interpersonal Skills and Learning, Thinking and Adaptability Skills. It was clear that most practitioners in the group used experiential learning and were aware of the need to start “where students are at” (Steve, PR group G, June 2003) Many students were educationally disadvantaged through language (being non-native English speakers) unsuccessful school experience (one group of students was released from school to TAFE one day per week) or disability such as ADD or Down syndrome.

Jayne (PR group G, June 2003) described a language class where students worked in groups to present opinions in different ways from topics on cue cards. One student was quiet and did not effectively participate. Jayne encouraged her to join in but the student said she could not do it and left the room. Jayne shortly after found her crying outside. The student said she had no confidence to share opinions in the group. Jayne suggested that this were her self-perception but she had the ability to do it. The student said that she could not do it in her native language and that she did not want to come to class again. She felt disenchanted not just with this incident but with the process of learning to be confident and to speak up and have her say.

Jayne felt that she might lose the student and asked her colleagues for advice on how to help the student to gain confidence. The next week, however, the student returned and was much more vocal. “I can’t shut her up in class now.” Jayne was not clear about the reasons for the change and set out to discover them. It did seem that the class enabled the student not only to practice communication skills but also to develop self-understanding and to gain a positive attitude to change, gaining some problem solving skills.

Steve explained that he organised a program of community service for young people, which involved taking elderly people in wheel chairs to go bowling or to play pool. (PR group G, June 2003). This offered the opportunity to develop Interpersonal Skills through communications, cultural understanding and self-understanding. Initially, students worked in pairs with disabled person. Many of these adults had difficulty in speaking clearly or in some cases, speaking at all. Steve felt that his students were progressing “in first gear” and considered

what he could do to “get them into 2nd, 3rd and 4th”. He reorganised the program so that students worked one-on-one and asked them to find out 3 to 5 things about the person they were with. If that person could not speak then they had to ask the carers.

Steve described how one boy was working with a man who could not speak. He talked to him, saying, “Are you enjoying the bowling?” The man was dribbling a lot so without being told, the boy took a cloth and wiped his face. Steve felt that the boy was building a relationship with someone outside his normal peer group.

Steve got the student group to reflect on what they had learned. How did they feel in that environment? What did they feel about the relationships that were forming?

I found that it boosted interpersonal skills. What we would normally get to in a month, we would get to in a week. There was a big difference in the kids too, A lot more mature.

It seems that what is coming out of the initial discussions and reflections is that the teachers are working simultaneously on several different levels of pedagogical practice and drawing on combinations of strategies in response to the different sets of learners and sets of aims and contingencies. These different levels of practice include:

- Providing learners with opportunities (through work experience and community service to take responsibility and to be supportive to others who are more vulnerable than themselves (for example, the old and disabled people);
- Directly encouraging and exhorting learners to ‘take risks’, ‘be brave’, to whilst being open about one’s own fragilities and disabilities;
- Devising processes that involve learners in group processes that enable them to reflect on the roles that they and others take up;
- Providing them with a ‘meta-language’ for naming their own strengths and skills and for speaking about ways of moving forward (for example, a class discussion about ‘comfort zones’.
- Being a teacher who is perceived as ‘real’ person, who can exert personal authority without seeming to ‘control’ learners;
- Setting or negotiating realistic boundaries that coincide with the learners’ needs and expressed wishes, and then policing those boundaries as much as possible whilst accepting set backs and the fact that change is often slow to take place;
- Modelling open and respectful relationships (breaking the institutional stereotype of ‘teacher’ while demonstrably caring about the learners and their learning);
- Choosing curriculum items that enable a discussion of issues directly affecting them without personalising those issues (for example, newspaper articles about bullying in the work place, when bullying at the learning centre has been an issue);

- Assisting the learners to find creative ways of ‘acting out’ or ‘performing’ their personal struggles and traumas in the context of performance art;
- Always being available to offer a degree of personal and genuinely caring support to learners when they raise their personal problems, without stepping into the role of counsellor or therapist - and knowing where the fine line between the two lies.

These very initial findings will no doubt be extended and elaborated as data is forthcoming and the analysis developed in conjunction with the teacher-researchers. We look forward to reporting back to the community of action researchers on this exciting project at future gatherings and receiving your collegial feedback.

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