Embedding Participatory and Transformative Learning in Curricula – from social exclusion to social inclusion

Jude Cooke and Patricia Kenny

Statement of intent
In this paper we will explain TAFE NSW's Outreach provision and how we continue working against the tide of pressures from within and outside the organisation to provide meaningful educational opportunities to people in our communities who have barriers to accessing education, community engagement and employment. Participatory learning is central to Outreach provision and has for over 30 years been a vehicle for tens of thousands of students to engage in positive learning experiences that have impacted on their personal lives, their families, extended families, cultural and wider communities across urban and rural NSW.

We are TAFE Outreach Coordinators working in metropolitan Sydney who share a belief that life experience, educational theories, values and beliefs are essential in informing our practice of participatory and transformative education. We have witnessed the difference it makes in shaping the lives of people and communities. Our roles are similar in that we both work with disadvantaged learners and communities however our roles are customised to respond to the demographics of our geographic locations.

Who are we?
Jude has worked in Outreach for fifteen years across three institutes and is currently an Outreach Coordinator at Wetherill Park responsible for half of the Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) in South Western Sydney. This LGA was ranked as the fourth most disadvantaged LGA in NSW in the 2006 ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (Families NSW 2008). In 2006 37% of the states refugees settled in the Fairfield and Liverpool local government area (DIAC 2006). The area, characterised by high unemployment has some of the most significantly socio-economically disadvantaged communities in the State. Below average participation rates in early childhood activities and childcare alongside identified poor literacy and numeracy skills in primary school children contribute to the areas disadvantage. (Families NSW 2008) Public housing in the area, particularly Bonnyrigg and Villawood are identified as having higher levels of social disadvantage. (Nesbitt 2007)

Wetherill Park TAFE Outreach has a well established dynamic community network that includes schools, migrant resource centres, community centres, and faith based groups. Working collaboratively within such a network is a powerful base for the effective provision of TAFE Outreach programs. Outreach programs in the area range from disaffected youth with a multitude of barriers to education and employment including negative schooling experiences, refugees, poverty, substance abuse, homelessness, poor language and literacy. Sixteen of the nineteen students in a community English class at Bossley Park last year had completed year eight or less, nine of these had never been to school. They had little or no English language skills and were illiterate and innumerate in their own languages.
Tricia is the Outreach Coordinator at Petersham College in the inner west of Sydney and has worked mostly in Outreach since 1987. She has seen a huge number of changes during this time. Petersham Outreach covers the LGAs of Leichhardt and Marrickville, Canada Bay and part of Ashfield. Marrickville LGA is densely populated with 4,325 people per square kilometre and has the least amount of green space of any LGA in Australia. Over 52% of the residents live in flats and 45% of people rent. Over 33% of Marrickville residents speak another language at home. There are over two hundred and eighty boarding houses in the LGA with up to ninety seven of these unlicensed. A high proportion of the residents are home and community care clients, many have disabilities, Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) issues and are socially isolated. Public housing accounts for up to 5% of Leichhardt LGA’s homes with the biggest concentrations being in Lilyfield and Balmain.

Outreach provision is concentrated in the Marrickville area and a smaller number of programs conducted in the Leichhardt and Ashfield LGAs. Locally negotiated partnership programs target people with multiple barriers to education including people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with disabilities, boarding house residents, mature unemployed people, young people and adults who have had contact with the criminal justice system, women returning to the workforce, people with low literacy, people with addictions and the socially isolated. Several campus-based programs service people from a wider geographic area including inner Sydney, Canterbury, Campsie, other inner west suburbs and Glebe.

**How did Outreach begin?**

The history of TAFE NSW Outreach is characterised by change and flexibility in response to evolving community needs and different State and Federal agendas. Outreach emerged as a result of the 1974 report by the Kangan committee which was commissioned by the Whitlam government and tabled in federal parliament. The report recommended technical colleges ‘move away from their narrow role of producing manpower for industry’ and into a broader role encompassing ‘life long’ and ‘second chance’ learning. Furthermore, the report recommended TAFE play a role of social responsibility, actively engaging the most marginalised in our communities in education and employment options. Outreach programs began in 1976 with a brief to make NSW education accessible to people who faced significant barriers to learning. Barriers to learning included geographical and social isolation, language and cultural factors, financial hardship, lack of educational confidence, being unaware of opportunities to learn, a disability or family commitments.

**How is it different from mainstream TAFE?**

The role of mainstream TAFE is to provide nationally accredited Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) vocational education and training to a broad range of individuals in response to industry and community need. The role of Outreach according to TAFE policy, is to provide courses that offer alternative pathways for adults who experience barriers to education, employment and community participation and 'to raise community awareness of educational opportunities to improve life chances'. Outreach courses are accredited but are not Training Package qualifications although they contain vocational modules/units from Training Packages supporting greater articulation opportunities for students to mainstream TAFE vocational education and training provision.

The Outreach discipline is multi-faceted and Outreach practitioners use negotiated collective learning to bring about community strengthening as well as catering to individuals, and this requires a highly flexible curriculum. Outreach Coordinators work outside their colleges making contact with people and groups in the community and they listen and are responsive to the needs they discover.
Usually Outreach programs are conducted off campus amongst groups that are not yet ready for mainstream TAFE access and Outreach acts as a bridge for those interested in finding a suitable point of entry into the mainstream.

**Target groups**

TAFE Outreach engages people experiencing multiple dimensions of exclusion (Frieler, 2001) in vocational education and training opportunities including refugees, people experiencing intergenerational unemployment, men and women who are socially, economically, geographically and culturally isolated and excluded, the mature long term unemployed, disengaged youth, people with disabilities, people in custody, ex-offenders, people with no or minimal formal education and people with a limited awareness of opportunities available to them. National census data and the NSW report *Dropping off the Edge* by Tony Vinson finds a complex web of disadvantage ensnaring generations of Australians and highlights the growth of individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage throughout New South Wales. Gillian Considine and Ian Watson’s report, *Who is missing out - Access and Equity in VET* (NCVER, 2005) recognises Outreach strategies to engage the most socially excluded whilst acknowledging the complexities of disadvantage ‘appear to have the best chance of increasing VET access’ for these groups. These practices and the benefits to communities are further supported in *Lifelong Learning: Work related education and training, Meeting the needs of Australian women*, (Turner-Zeller, Butler, 2007) with particular reference to aboriginal women in their communities.

**Outreach discipline, approach and curricula**

Outreach programs are not restricted to particular vocational outcomes aligned to a discipline. Outreach pedagogy fits awkwardly with current trends towards training packages and competency based curriculum as it is not formulaic, rather it is responsive to the specific context of each particular group of students within the big picture. Being able to work within a faculty or college based model but across disciplines is a great strength. Outreach facilitates access and introductory options across disciplines enabling students to learn a range of skills to expand their future work opportunities. Outreach is able to develop a course to offer such education and training options, rather than being tied to one discipline, whether it is in a vocational area of high need or not.

Ongoing community consultation and a professional collegiate network at an institute level and across the state keep Outreach practitioners abreast of emerging issues and innovative practice which shapes their programs. They use a negotiated learning approach talking with community based groups to ascertain the most appropriate focus, location, length, time and type of course. The emphasis is on participants and community partners being involved in the development and design of a course, the setting of group goals, ongoing reflection and evaluation. This requires a curriculum that has the built in flexibility to add vocational and educational subjects as needed to support these goals. Collective learning and community engagement are effective approaches in countering social isolation, a common barrier faced by Outreach groups. This practice supports meaningful learning and student ownership of the learning process promoting deep engagement and strong confidence building whilst enabling participants to become active participants in the life of society, sharing in and contributing to the common good (Vinson, 2008). Many Outreach students articulate into mainstream provision after completing one or several Outreach programs.

Through these approaches Outreach supports the transformation of individual lives and the organising, building and strengthening of communities. In the process they are developing mechanisms appropriate to the achievement of TAFE NSW’s access and equity obligations. Part 9A of the NSW Government’s Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 enshrines Equal Employment Opportunity
(EEO) which includes an objective to ‘improved employment access and participation by EEO groups’. Those groups are ‘women, members of racial minorities and persons who have a disability’. Provision of effective, meaningful, transformative and participatory education programs has been paramount in achieving successful outcomes including access to TAFE services and a range of appropriate specialised services.

Outreach has expertise in building programs to provide access into qualifications up and across the broader industry and higher education spectrum. Programs are designed to develop strong foundations in multiple literacies, goal setting, communication skills, information technology, environmental sustainability, employability skills, study and work skills, community participation, volunteering, community organising and community cultural development. Self confidence and resilience are critical aspects of student outcomes to succeed and deal with crisis.

Outreach practice continues to be informed by research in social transformation, community cultural development, adult education and civil society. Paulo Friere, Myles Horton, Jane Thompson, Jack Mezirow, Stephen Brookfield and Mike Newman are some of the educators whose proven effective strategies and theories for transformative and participatory adult education shape Outreach practitioners adding a further dimension to their practice. The collaborative ongoing professional development, formal and informal, has contributed to the integrity of provision of Outreach programs to the most marginalised people in NSW communities.

‘...we had a common moral purpose: we were looking at how education might best contribute to the development of the total social, intellectual, creative and cultural capital of the country, not just that of an advantaged elite.’ (Scott, G. The Outreach Innovation - Over Twenty-Five Years, 2001 Speech page 1)

Broad and deep community partnerships across all levels of government, non government organisations, industry and other community groups gives Outreach an in depth understanding of local communities and networks that are effective in joining up services to provide support and intervention where it is needed for our students. These practices and the value of the partnership approach are aligned with the Federal Governments Social Inclusion principles of: ‘building on individual and community strengths, building partnerships with key stakeholders, developing tailored services – working together in new and flexible ways to meet each person’s different needs, using locational approaches and planning for sustainability’ (Principles for Social Inclusion, 2008).

An outstanding feature of Outreach is the calibre of its teachers who are not only skilled in education and a broad range of professional and trade related areas but who are also able to meet the needs of adult learners who may lack confidence in their ability to learn and need special encouragement while respecting and honouring their skills, knowledge and life experience.

Recently Outreach curriculum has been redeveloped to be placed into a framework which is based on Training Package philosophy centred on unit based enrolment and employability skills. Outreach practitioners have written units compliant with AQTF and AQF standards. These have been placed in the highly structured qualifications that form the Access Education Employment and Training Framework (AEETF). This has been done in an attempt to salvage facets of the old curriculum that embedded the process and learning outcomes specific to Outreach students such as group goal setting, collective learning and community participation.
Recent programs

In Wetherill Park region Community English classes often run at primary schools take an intergenerational approach whereby participants become active in the school communities and more connected with their children’s education. Such classes draw on the over representation of recently retrenched migrants, newly arrived migrants and refugees in the region. Programs are designed for existing and potential bilingual community workers to develop strategies and skills in adult teaching and learning or to work with families in multicultural communities. The negotiated, collective and collaborative nature of the programs strengthens and builds communities. Young refugees have been identified as a target group where early intervention is highly effective. They are often victims of torture and trauma and have family responsibilities that impact on their capacity to identify their own aspirations let alone achieve them. A pilot program, Social Inclusion Pathways for Refugee Youth recently ran in a partnership that included TAFE Outreach and Multicultural, Fairfield High School, Centrelink, the Department of Health, CentaCare and NSW Service for the Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTs). Ten young refugee students from the war-torn countries of Iraq, Sudan and Burma took part in an innovative program targeting disconnected refugee youth.

In 2004 a community gardening course run by TAFE Outreach grew out of the Belonging project, a Marrickville council initiative facilitated by the UTS Centre for Popular Education, whereby local community leaders and community members were asked to describe their vision for the future of Marrickville, a local government area (LGA) that has the least amount of green space of any LGA in Australia. Participants represented a diverse range of people from community, cultural, educational and environmental organizations. The principal of a local primary school shared her dream exploring ways of sharing a large section of underutilized land at the back of the school with the broader community in an environmentally sustainable way rather than see it sold off for development. The space is now known as Wilkins Green and contains a large permaculture garden, bush regeneration and restoration sites, an Aboriginal food, fibre and medicinal planting trail (Walanga’naminina), a large water tank, storage shed with veranda for water harvesting and a chook run. This learning space grew out of the collective ideas and work of up to nine groups of students who completed an Introduction to Urban Food Growing, Bush Regeneration and Sustainable Living course on the site. A former student now teaches the class. The course comprises a broad range of students with a significant proportion of students having psychiatric disabilities, drug and alcohol issues, offender histories and negative educational experiences. The dynamic learning space and collective learning approaches have contributed to the ongoing success of the program along with the development of strong partnerships with community agencies, other education providers and local government. Many students have continued to volunteer at Wilkins Green or elsewhere in the community, others have continued studies in bush regeneration, permaculture, horticulture, visual arts, counselling, adult learning and teaching and/or accessed employment.

Adapting and surviving

Outreach continually morphs as it meets and responds to the prevalent vocational climate and the restructuring of TAFE as it seems to be returning to Kangan’s description of a ‘narrow role of producing manpower for industry’. Outreach coordinators consistently recognise and address the important demand to remove barriers to learning and the universal right to post compulsory education. Outreach is founded on the belief in education as a national investment and one that enriches society beyond a limited vocational view. It is informed or driven by concepts and theory, it is not prescriptive in content or context thus is able to be continually responsive and innovative. These aspects of Outreach have always placed it precariously so that it has had to fight for its own
survival as well as opportunities for the most marginalised in the state. While this may have been seen as a disadvantage it has probably contributed to the survival and ongoing success of Outreach programs despite it seemingly going against trends.

Collective and negotiated learning principles have accommodated a high aptitude for adaptability and flexibility and this contributes to the reasons Outreach as a teaching section and discipline has been able to survive tumultuous changes to education and training. Influences such as economic rationalism, corporatisation and bureaucratisation of educational institutions, introduction of market design principles to the funding of public education, imposing of fees, the perception of adult learners acquiring literacy and communication skills as institutions producing 'stockpiles of human capital', the demise of the women's unit and central equity sections and multiple restructures have all paid their toll on equity provision in TAFE.

The emphasis on quick vocational outcomes has put pressure on Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to provide programs that train people for entry level employment in fields of work they have no interest in. Mutual obligation rules have meant that welfare recipients are forced to attend call centre and cleaning courses at Job Networks or lose their benefits. Outreach sections receive the fallout from such measures whereby people experiencing disadvantage have yet another negative educational experience to add to their tally.

Generally speaking Outreach students are learning because they have chosen to or agreed to attend, though they can come to Outreach programs as a result of welfare to work mutual obligation directives, or via referrals from a community-based organisation, mental health case manager, TAFE counsellor or disability consultant. We have held strongly to the belief in providing programs that do not have a narrow vocational focus. Students are encouraged to consider a wide range of educational pathways and to follow courses of study that they are interested in. This may involve working in entry-level employment or an 'undesirable' industry while achieving their long term goals. Canadian research has found that:

‘Employment is an important source of well-being,…’

however

‘employment can increase capacity and autonomy, but may not if it is low-wage, contingent, incompatible with parenting or saps employees of their self respect.” (Mitchell, Shillington 2002)

Human capital theory is a contributor to current government policies. The theory identifies humans as economic production units whose productivity can be boosted by gaining knowledge and skills pertinent to their work. The theory shifts the emphasis of education to those elements that make citizens more productive for the economy while neglecting aspects such as culture, social and powerful knowledge that has traditionally been integrated into holistic pedagogy in educational practices.

Current government agendas have embraced the social inclusion approach to address disadvantage in our communities. ‘Social exclusion can happen as a result of problems that emerge during life, or it can start from birth. Being born into poverty or to parents with no jobs or low skills is a major influence on a child’s life chances’ (DEEWR, 2008). The government's agenda to enable such children to receive pre schooling may be impeded without programs such as Outreach community
based vocational engagement courses that apply and intergenerational approaches designed to break down entrenched barriers.

The Rudd Education revolution has been a disappointment and in particular the claim that ‘education is the engine room of equity’. Equity programs in public education are being under-funded, pressured to deliver high level courses or work as brokers rather than educational providers. Employment and productivity are not the only big issues in Australia. The emphasis on reducing skills shortages at the expense of educating people to live productively, sustainably and responsibly in their communities is short sighted.

Over the past 22 years Australia has experienced a downgrading of public education. Funding for TAFE has been reduced by 11% since 1997 despite skills shortages, the need for more educational opportunities for Australians and ambitious COAG targets. NSW risks following Victoria into a fully contestable funding model, where access and equity education provision could be placed in the community education sector resulting in residualised provision, (without support services counselling, disabilities support, Aboriginal education, libraries, student associations) and fluid articulation to higher level courses. Education is Australia’s third largest export industry yet education for the country’s most disadvantaged is under threat.

**Conclusion**

TAFE Outreach is regarded as one of the great success stories of adult education in Australia as they continue to fulfil their brief of providing effective solutions to overcoming barriers to education, employment and participation for the most marginalised people in NSW. We have survived within an increasingly bureaucratic and corporate and underfunded system to create opportunities and pathways for adult learners who would otherwise miss out. Outreach has the trust and respect of communities state-wide, it has strong internal and collegiate networks and a capacity for adaptability and survival. This adaptability has meant that Outreach has been able to survive tumultuous changes to education and training and not narrowed its focus to limit the opportunities of second chance learners. Participatory learning and action pedagogy continue to promote deep engagement and set Outreach apart from the current trend to provide narrowly contextualised learning along with short term or quick fix training which has no real impact on job prospects (ACOSS, 2008).


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