The learning paradigm in adult education in Aotearoa/New Zealand: some future possibilities

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Introduction

Since 1999 the post-school sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand embraces all educational provision in what is known as tertiary education. Adult and Community Education (ACE), is an integral and inseparable part of the tertiary education landscape. Policies apply to all types of provision, although along with universities, institutes of technology/polytechnics, wananga (Maori aligned institutions), private training providers and industry training organizations, ACE provision is expected to make distinctive contributions. However, the distinctive contributions required only differ in detail from what is expected from the whole sector – developing learners that contribute to a transformation to a knowledge economy. ACE must target learners whose initial learning was not successful, raising foundation skills such as literacy, language and numeracy and strengthening social cohesion (Ministry of Education, 2006). Not only must ACE meet most of the same policy priorities set for all tertiary organizations, it also must abide by the same accountability regimes and similar funding formulae as other actors in the sector. Since at least 2002 ACE has been mainstreamed, its radical potential severely limited. Martin’s (2006) observation that mainstream respectability and responsibility compromises education leading to critical understandings, social action and political change seems to apply to Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In this paper I examine adult education in Aotearoa/New Zealand as an inseparable and integrated component of the tertiary policy landscape. It first examines some of the roots of tertiary (adult) education policy over the last 30 years. In particular it considers trends in philosophies and practices about educating adults as well as some of the varied policy discourses prevailing over this period. Next I reflect on the ever-changing policy landscape, in particular on unresolved tensions between social and economic goals, the development of a learning paradigm and economic transformation, attainment of social cohesion and recognition of cultural diversity. Finally the paper attempts to envision how these tensions may play out in an uncertain future.

Selected historical roots

The intellectual roots supporting post-school education in Aotearoa/New Zealand are diverse. The influence of two root systems is of particular interest here. The first concerns philosophical and practice traditions and assumptions about the education of adults. These include the strictly vocational preparation for economic participation, a humanist emphasis on developing personal growth, a radical tradition with its call for political and social change through education and post-modern concerns that educators and learners must learn to grapple with difficulty, uncertainty and error (Elias and Merriam, 1995). Practice has mirrored these diverse philosophies and assumptions. The social change practice recalled by Martin remains important as many educators have done their utmost to meet the assumptions behind Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed by emphasising critical understanding leading to political engagement, social action and greater social justice. However, continuing dominant is what Barr and Tagg (1995) call the instruction paradigm.
This is characterised by the transmission of information, skills and attitudes from teachers to students so that learners are prepared for life in a status quo world. Evident, but probably to a lesser degree, are multiple versions of their learning paradigm. Here the emphasis is on the learner achieving specified results in terms of positive outcomes for them, society and the economy.

The second root system of particular interest concerns the evolution of policy discourses. In the last 30 years there have been a number competing for dominance. A traditional welfare state discourse held sway until the 1980s. It assumed that the state should protect its citizens from the worst excesses of capitalism by maintaining relative equality. Tertiary education (the education of adults) was a public good, one of the means to achieve such relative equality in an efficient market economy. A royal commission (1987, pp.118) asserted ‘education, like social power and wealth, is one of the most important opportunities, the possession of which enables all to live in accord with their own preferences and wishes’. During the 1980s tertiary education as a public good was challenged and largely swept away in a neo-liberal tidal change. New Zealand’s Treasury argued (1987) that despite its complexity, tertiary education must be exposed to rigorous economic analysis. Once government realized that it is just another commodity whose value will be decided by the market place, the role of government will decline. During the 1990s it did; tertiary education becoming a freewheeling market place primed to meet economic priorities. According to the then government, the purpose of tertiary education is ‘educational achievement and skill development to meet the needs of the highly competitive, modern international economy’ (Smith, 1991, pp.1).

A new centre-left government took the tiller in 1999. Almost immediately it began to reform tertiary education, a process that continues still. It seeks a third way that mitigates the worst of both the traditional welfare state and neo-liberalism. Codd (2002, pp.32) neatly summarized the tenets of the third way as ‘social inclusion, pluralism, and democratic involvement within an active civil society that supports a market economy’. Education is to play a key role in achieving these diverse goals. However, the third way is not a developed philosophy, but a pragmatic response to needs: ‘what counts is what works’ (Giddens, 2001, pp.5); what works also changes and so does tertiary policy. To progress towards diverse goals and to manage the process, an active state uses formal strategic priority setting documents and stringent accountability regimes to steer tertiary education. Critics have long seen the third way as problematic. The tensions inherent in an active government supporting both social cohesion and a free market seem too difficult to manage into the future. Kelsey (2002) suggests that in juggling greater equity and economic efficiency; pursuit of a learning paradigm and economic transformation; social cohesion and diversity, the government will manage the tensions by favouring neo-liberal economic objectives over the social.

Neither the traditional welfare nor the neo-liberal policy discourses focused unduly on learning or teaching processes. Certainly, assumptions about a change from a transmission to a learning model that underpin the work of Barr and Tagg are difficult to find. At the high tide of the traditional welfare discourse, the Educational Development Conference (1974) did include an overarching statement that the education system as a whole should extend the individual’s ability to learn, relate and challenge in order to live with purpose in the community. But there was silence on how this might happen. The report, Learning for Life 2 (1989) introduced key tenets of the neo-liberal discourse to tertiary education policy. Despite the word ‘learning’ and the connection with ‘lifelong learning’ in its title, Learning for Life 2 was largely silent on teaching and learning topics. It focused on structures, relations between providers and government and funding. Even a
white paper on the future of tertiary education (N.Z. Government, 1998) was silent on how learning and teaching practices might assist the achievement of wide ranging goals. The new centre left government in 1999 introduced tenets of the learning paradigm. The Labour Party election manifesto noticed that ‘the landmark Declaration on Adult Learning, issued by the 5th International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg July 1997, calls for a renewed vision of education in which learning becomes truly lifelong’ (Labour Party, 1999, pp.2). Since 1999 what might be called a third way version of the learning paradigm has emerged. In its latest strategic document, the Ministry of Education (2006) focused on educational success: quality teaching enabling learners to achieve positive economic and social outcomes.

Reflection

I have worked in adult education as teacher, facilitator, administrator and researcher over the last 30 years and have experienced the competing pedagogies and policy regimes described above. With some reservations, particularly over the name, I can relate to Martin’s cosmopolitanism both as educational philosophy and preferred pedagogy. However, I do not see that this must conflict with Barr and Tagg's learning paradigm. Sure, the learning paradigm can be, and has been, framed in neo-liberal and third way terms. But where educators and learners engage with the ‘other’, ask critical questions, discover and construct knowledge and understandings, tap the power in quality learning and achieve desired and valued outcomes a more cosmopolitan pedagogy can emerge. By reflecting on three sets of tensions inherent in the third way policy discourse – those between equity and efficiency, between a cosmopolitan learning paradigm and economic transformation; and between social cohesion and diversity - I will attempt to lay foundations for considering a future for a cosmopolitan learning paradigm in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Before the 1980s I could discern little tension between equity and economic efficiency in tertiary education in Aoteroa/New Zealand. A consensus seemed to prevail that tertiary education for social and economic goals were different sides of the same coin. While in the later 1980s and 1990s governments pursued economic goals, the new government in 1999 seemed to return to a more even handed approach to economic and social aspirations. The government’s first strategic document for tertiary (adult) education seemed to reflect this in its priorities. Three of its six primary strategies dealt with achieving equity for Maori and Pasifika (peoples identifying with the islands of the Pacific) and developing social skills to foster wider participation in a knowledge society. The other three were focused more on economic efficiency: building system capability, research and innovation for competition in a global economy and basic skills development to meet the requirements of a knowledge economy (Ministry of Education, 2002). In its second strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2006) there appeared a change of emphasis. Missing are separate strategies for Maori and Pasifika, although there is repeated support for Maori developing as Maori (Ministry of Education, 2006). This is confounded by a strong and persistent emphasis on economic transformation to meet the demands of a global market place. For example, the expected contributions of tertiary education focus on skills development for economic transformation such as developing strong foundation skills, building relevant skills and competencies for productivity and innovation, improving connections between education and industry. Policies supporting social, cultural and environmental outcomes appear as afterthoughts. Reflecting on this latest strategy, I feel that a strong instrumentalism and tilt in favour of economic efficiency pervades government thinking.

Neither government policies nor discussions between educators seem concerned with the
details of learning and teaching. Although many programmes offered by the polytechnic led in the 1980s and 1990s openly espoused social justice objectives that led to conflict with establishment groups and the government of the day, I don’t recall one staff discussion about teaching methods or approaches to learning. The centrality of learners to teaching was assumed, not discussed. Martin is right, such assumptions were suppressed with the mainstreaming of ACE into the wider tertiary landscape. The views on pedagogy in higher education were and remain largely subject centred and instrumental. Here the efficient transmission of disciplinary knowledge remains paramount, although a version of the learning paradigm seems favoured by educators working in e-learning environments. Yet government policies since 2000 have imposed a version of the learning paradigm on tertiary education. This also is largely blind to pedagogic method, but requires providers of tertiary education to deliver quality teaching that improves student outcomes and success so that they can meet the requirements of globalisation and a knowledge economy. I agree that policies to improve learner outcomes are justified and, indeed, overdue. But I question the way the improvement of learner outcomes is tied to economic transformation. In a culture of audit accountability there seems to be little chance that a cosmopolitan learner centred pedagogy will thrive.

A third way desire to use tertiary (adult) education to further both social cohesion and diversity highlights a third tension in current policy settings. This tension is well illustrated by how Maori provision of tertiary education is dealt with. On the one hand Maori are expected to live as Maori according to kaupapa Maori philosophies, principles and approaches, quality teaching, learning and research in environments based on Ahuatanga Maori (tradition) in accordance with tikanga Maori (custom) and programmes informed and embodied by matauranga Maori (knowledge). Tertiary education institutions called wananga spearhead the drive for diversity: ’over time the wananga contribution towards the advancement of matauranga Maori, and to Maori as a people, will be a distinguishing feature of New Zealand’s tertiary education sector in a global sense’ (Ministry of Education, 2006, pp.16). On the other hand, wananga are framed in the western tradition of a modern tertiary institution with comparable qualification structures, operating requirements, funding arrangements and accountability regimes as other institutions in the tertiary landscape. They are caught between two competing requirements, to serve both Maori particularism and economic and social universalism. Few New Zealanders are unaware of the growing tensions between those favouring diversity and those advocating cultural protection of the dominant culture. There are strong differences on questions of Maori self-determination for example. But there are opposing views on immigration also, indeed on the very nature of New Zealand’s national identity. Resolving this tension in tertiary education will be a difficult task.

Previewing the future

So far I have suggested that over the last 30 or so years adult and community education in Aotearoa/New Zealand has lost its radical identity as it has been subsumed into an integrated tertiary landscape. Since 1999, tertiary (adult) education has been steered by a strong central government following a third way path that tries to achieve both social and economic objectives. This has resulted in tensions between a desire for both equity and efficiency; achievement of a cosmopolitan learning paradigm and economic transformation; attainment of social cohesion and diversity. I have also suggested that the shape of the learning paradigm – whether it will be of neo-liberal or cosmopolitan hue in the future - will be influenced by the way the tensions are resolved. The method used to preview the future of these tensions is a loose adaptation of what Inayatullah (1998) calls causal layered analysis (CLA) – a process that critically analyses discourses, practices, values and metaphors. CLA is good at previewing futures and their consequences and of
tensions and differences in meaning perspectives. The notion preview signals an exploratory approach to the future, a surprise free view. It assumes that a credible future can be distilled from current policy discourses, practices, values and metaphors. It is a projection of what could eventuate if current conditions continue.

There will be an election at the end of 2008. Currently public opinion polls trend towards a change of government. However, the main opposition’s tertiary policy direction is as yet unknown. But it is striving to win the centre, and it is difficult to imagine the third way discourse being abandoned, even though the label may well be. The voting public seems adverse to new adventures in neo-liberalism and a return to traditional welfarism is not on the cards. Both centre-right and centre-left will seek the middle ground where what works is a safe and defensible approach to policy-making. Whether the current coalition retains power or a new one takes over, the rhetoric of balancing social and economic imperatives will remain, as will the practice of slippage in favour of the economic. Under a centre right government the slippage would be more pronounced. Training in skills for a globalised economy will be prioritised, efficiency and productivity emphasised; the quest for equality diminished. In a centre right scenario diversity will be much more about encouraging innovation and educating business entrepreneurs than tolerating Maori particularism. Under either centre right or centre left there will be little room for cosmopolitanism. The kinds of questions suggested by Martin will be asked perhaps in pockets, but probably not in mainstream programmes or institutions. Many of the ideas of a learning paradigm will thrive, with quality teaching focused on students completing their studies, achieving employment outcomes and contributing to wealth generation.

Tertiary teaching and learning practices will continue to be diverse. While they probably won’t feature in policy documents, expectations will require both teachers and learners to focus on knowledge suitable for the market place and the knowledge economy. Such knowledge is likely to be what Giddens (1990) calls Type 2 knowledge: contextual, applied, trans-disciplinary and diverse. Mode 2 knowledge is accountable to the market. Its nature and quality is defined by what the global market wants and values. It is exoteric knowledge, dealing in objective facts, figures and practices. Knowledge supporting technological developments and innovation is an example of Type 2 knowledge. This emphasis on knowledge does not suggest that teaching and learning will be didactic. Barr and Tagg are probably right in suggesting that the instruction paradigm is not suitable to educate for a technological and market-driven world. Exploration, dialogue, team-work, questioning, debate, problem solving are more suitable for an economic biased third way pedagogy. Educators working with learners in an e-learning environment demonstrate this. They generally practice pedagogy suitable for the learning paradigm, with students engaged in the personal and collective construction of knowledge. Cosmopolitanism will not necessarily thrive in this future as work place democracy; questioning, dialogue and critique are more likely to focus on technological and economic developments than on issues of wider social justice.

From a cosmopolitan perspective, social engagement with the ‘other’, democracy, diversity and social justice, the future emerging from this analysis seems bleak. Is there then no hope for a different future? Perhaps embedded in the headlong pursuit of economic prosperity, are a couple of Trojan horses. One of the constraints placed on blind economic pursuit is global warming and the potential destruction of the environment. Another is that globalisation is not just the universalising of the particular; it is also ‘a particularisation of the universal’ (Jameson, 1998, pp.xi). Sure, globalisation represents a triumph of capitalism and the market place. But it is also a reason for local challenges to the imposition of universal capitalism, technicist knowledge, environmental degradation and
Eurocentric culture. Edwards and Usher (1998, p.162) suggest that ‘whilst globalization has resulted in the spread of Western institutions across the globe, that very trend also produces pressure for local autonomy and identity. Thus the integration of the globe reconfigures rather than supplants diversity’. This suggests that no matter how dominant a discourse, there will always be spaces for alternative discourses, practices, values and metaphors. In Aotearoa/New Zealand these probably will be found in continuing M?ori activism, environmental concerns, deeply felt opposition to the extremes of neo-liberalism, a basic sense of justice and, perhaps most importantly, in the enthusiastic use of the Internet. While the Internet represents global culture, it is also anarchic, resisting all attempts to control it. In short, the unitary future painted above will be opposed. There could be a settlement that will enable tertiary education to practice in a learning paradigm that values democracy, debate, discussion and diversity.

The future then is like a hydra. One body – global capitalism – bears multiple heads with many voices. There is reliance on tertiary education to fuel the global economy using instrumental knowledge, while at the same time many local knowledges also assume places in the sun. Both phenomena lead to diverse forms of tertiary education provision based on one dominant policy discourse. What will have changed?

References


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