Centres ‘Down Under’: mapping Australia’s neighbourhood centres

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Introduction

What does a take-a-way shop, café, lawn mowing service, and a winery all have in common? There are several answers to this, but one is that they all are part of the work of Australian neighbourhood centres. A second is that they all involve adults learning; and, a possible third is that much of this learning is not captured by the mechanisms that report on adult community education in Australia. Traditionally those interested in measuring, accounting for and reporting on adult learning in Australia have looked towards recognised educational institutions when compiling their accounts. While this has been an appropriate starting point that has facilitated the production of many important national accounts of learning, it has failed to account for learning provided in other settings. The starting point here is a collective comprising 1000 non-government organisations across Australia that, as a sector, is not necessarily considered to be part of Australia’s ‘educational’ framework: that is, neighbourhood centres.

This paper represents a first phase of an early career research project that is exploring the scope and nature of learning in neighbourhood centres across Australia. It takes as given that learning happens beyond educational institutions. A second phase will look more exclusively at learning in these sites, in order to conceptualise features and identify innovative and/or interesting practices. However, before that work can begin, it is first necessary to map the sector. This deceivingly simple task is the focus of this paper.

The paper takes a macro-to-micro logic. Drawing empirical data from documentary sources, interviews and focus groups from across Australia, the paper tentatively presents a ‘mapping’ of the sector in the shape of a ‘realist tale’ (Lather, 1991) - although Edwards and Usher might call it a tracing (2008, p.157). After introducing the project, it begins by providing some broad historical and political context. This is important because while centres’ work shapes these, they are also shaped by them. Next, centre sectors in each state and territory are introduced before moving to the third part where the question of ‘what is a neighbourhood centre?’ is addressed in detail. It concludes by troubling any easy definition of centres. Indeed, the ‘map’ is subject to subversion in order that finite definitions are circumvented. Such a strategy is warranted on the one hand so that any educational contribution of these organisations might be acknowledged; on the other, in order that differences are kept

1 These organisations are known by different names in different Australian States and Territories. However, the term ‘Neighbourhood Centres’ is used here (unless otherwise stated) in the service of clarity.
in play. This is important because, a capacity for difference constitutes these organisations’ contribution to the adult learning landscape.

Context

Project

The empirical material on which this paper draws comes from fieldwork undertaken over a six-month period in 2009. Three main data collection methods were utilised. First, analysis was undertaken of a range of public documents, including over 200 centre websites, where the interest was in how various centres across Australia presented themselves – ie the public identity they projected in the form of ‘identity statements’. By this I mean the statements organisations write about themselves. eg. ‘X centre is….’. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four representatives across each State and Territory. Here the intention was to elicit rich accounts of the idiosyncrasies of the sector in each state/territory as well as to elicit accounts of the sector in terms of: the scope and breadth, funding arrangements, and generally what goes on there. Over 19 hours of interviews were recorded and transcribed. Finally, fifteen centres from across Australia were visited enabling unstructured observations and informal conversations. These visits, and the conversations occurring because of them, afforded ‘a feel’ for the State’s sector as well as ‘a feel’ for centres in action.

Historical-political background

While this paper is concerned with Australian organisations, neighbourhood centres, or organisations resembling them, are found globally. For instance, Finland’s network of Settlementti, Vancouver’s Neighbourhood Houses, Israel’s Community Centers, Germany’s Nachbarschaftshäuser, and Britain’s Settlements, are examples of organisations resembling those found in Australia. Some of these international organisations have been in existence for over two hundred years (Parker, 2009), and have inspired the establishment of similar organisations internationally (International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, 2009).

In contrast to long histories elsewhere, the introduction of neighbourhood centres in Australia is more recent. While a few isolated centres were in operation in the 1960’s, they are said to have amassed alongside the women’s movement in the 1970s (Golding, Kimberley, Foley, & Brown, 2008; Henry, 2000). This development was fostered by the considerable legislative reforms of the era’s socially progressive government. At this time, reforms reflected an ideological shift in the way human services were provided and organisations espousing community development approaches began to appear alongside older benevolent institutions.

Like elsewhere, neoliberal policies were embraced in the early 1980s, and continued through the 1990s. This era saw (among other things) the creation of ‘markets’ where they had previously not existed. For non-government organisations like neighbourhood centres, it was a time where they were re-positioned in purchaser/provider relationships with government and began participating in market processes. In 2005, a Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) outlined an agenda for ‘productivity and participation’ in what has come to be called the ‘Human Capital report’ (National Reform Initiative Working Group, 2005). Here, productivity referred to labour productivity, and participation to ‘participation in the workforce’. While still retaining the ideas of the COAG report, ‘social inclusion’ has become the new mantra. Along with an ‘education revolution’, a ‘Social Inclusion Agenda’ has
become a centrepiece of the newly elected government (DEEWR & Vinson, 2009). This agenda offers a seductive vision, ‘of a socially inclusive society’, where all are ‘valued’ and able to ‘fully participate in society’ because they ‘will have the resources, opportunities and capability to learn, work, engage in the community and have a voice’ (Australian Government, 2009). For NGOs this may suggest a space where their work is valued. However, despite its seductive vision, social inclusion is described elsewhere as ‘neo-liberalism with a smiley face’ (Byrne, 2005, p. 151), and it is difficult to disagree. Continuing COAG’s agenda, on closer inspection, ‘social inclusion’ is code for inclusion in the workforce ... herein lies the smile (smirk?). It is not that work is an unimportant outcome of learning, but a myopic focus on learning for work alone overlooks other important (and often associated) benefits (Schuller, 2004).

**States/Territories**

Australia is generally understood as consisting of eight regions (six states and two mainland territories), and there are over one thousand neighbourhood centres spread across these (ANHCA, 2009). Each State has a peak organisation that supports and resources their member centres. In addition, there is an unfunded national organisation, Australian Neighbourhood Centres and Houses Association (ANCHA), consisting of representatives from each State.

ANCHA’s role is to ‘to promote and strengthen the national identity of Neighbourhood Houses and Centres’ (ANCHA 2009). ANCHA’s task is made difficult by inter and intra-state differences. Australia has three tiers of governance; Commonwealth (or Federal), State, and Local. While there is a federal constitution and divisions, each state also has its own that roughly mirror those of the Commonwealth. This complicates a national picture of neighbourhood centres because centres are funded at State level. Thus they are also shaped by the State’s priorities, which can diverge from the Federal. For instance, according to the ‘tag lines’ from State departments funding centres they may prioritise: child protection (NSW); strong, vibrant communities (WA); community building, community development and preventative health (TAS); vulnerable groups and those most in need (VIC). So even while all centres work within the ‘Social Inclusion Agenda’, differences are reflected in state funding arrangements and this shapes the work of centres in subtle ways. A commonality across all states, however, is that while core funding may be provided (admittedly in some states better than others), almost all centres rely upon on additional funding for specific purposes as well as from volunteer input and/or from fundraising. In other words, most have multiple sources of funding: one example is a centre with over forty different funding sources (along with as many acquittal processes).

Given the emphasis on adult learning here, it is also helpful to appreciate the various relationships between centres and Adult Community Education (ACE) depending on the host state. Various definitions of ACE across Australia (Borthwick, Knight, Bender, & Laveder, 2001, p. 8) result in a range of relationships between ACE and centres.

In some States Neighbourhood centres and ACE are mutually exclusive sectors (eg NSW and TAS). In these States centres may not necessarily identify as being involved in adult education or learning. There are, however, examples of
complementary relationship between sectors. For instance State educational
departments may fund small projects where centres work in partnership with ‘real’
providers (LCSA, 2001).

In other states the relationship between neighbourhood centres and ACE is
*integrated* (eg VIC, WA and SA). In these states, the statutory body responsible for
adult learning explicitly support centres’ to formally provide adult education
programmes (including VET). In Victoria centres are supported directly through
recurrent and (increasingly) contestable funding. In Western Australia the peak
organisation is funded to support the voluntary ACE delivery of centres. In South
Australia Centres receive a quarter of the State’s ACE budget, and are able to
contest the remainder.

Finally, in other states (eg QLD and NT) relationships are elusive. This is because
one or both sectors are themselves so loosely defined. For instance in Queensland
there is a broad collective of organisations that work similarly to neighbourhood
centres, but a recognizable ACE ‘sector’ is more difficult to establish. In the NT both
sectors are so loosely defined that any commentary on any relationship *between*
them is problematic.

*What is a neighbourhood centre?*
Having provided some background and context, and introduced centres in various
states, this paper now addresses the question of ‘what is a neighbourhood centre’?
The response draws heavily on over 200 ‘identity statements’ of centres from across
Australia, as well as from interviews. A first (if not simplistic) answer may be that a
centre is an entity of some sort: eg a ‘*place*’, ‘*building*’, ‘*organisation*’ or ‘*association*’. However, many centres qualified what kind of entity they were: eg a ‘*safe*’, ‘*warm*’,
‘*friendly*’ and/or ‘*fun*’ entity. Many (like the interviewee below) also pointed out what
centres were *not*. For example terms like ‘*not-for-profit*’, ‘*non-government*’, ‘*non-
religious*’ ‘*non-secular*’ and/or ‘*non-discriminating*’ were common among the
descriptions. The use of these terms flag that centres are purposefully differentiating
their organisations from others (ie, those that are government, profit making,
religious etc).

...technically, using the international classifications of not-for-profit
organisations as the Productivity Commission uses, [centres are] a locally
based multi-activity social service and development organisation

This comment also draws attention to ‘multi-activities’ and centres’ descriptions
illustrated this. There were many processes (material, mental and relational)
mentioned, which give an indication of what centres *do* (or say they do). While some
reference was made to mental (eg. *evolve*, *seek*, *believe*) and relational (eg. *belong
to*, *are*, *is*) processes, the most common type of processes by far was material. For
example Centres said that they: *address, change, connect, create, deliver, develop,
improve, initiate, link, lobby, reduce, research, run, serve, stimulate, strengthen,* and
*support* etc. The prevalence of these *material processes* (actual *actions* or *doings*) in
the descriptions of centres indicates that centres are indeed *dynamic* and *active*
organisations. Furthermore, the doings of centres/houses were underpinned by
some very particular principles and values.
Community development approach
While varying in size and focus, a shared characteristic of centres across all states is that they subscribe to a community development focus by responding to grass roots demands (ANHCA, 2009). Most utilise a community management model, where people ‘are involved in defining and taking action on the issues that affect them’ (Tett, 2005, p.126) – or as one interviewee suggested, ‘people come together to work on what’s important in their local community’.

However, CD manifest in different ways in the statements of centres. In some cases it was embedded in centres’ everyday practices, in others it appeared as an explicit feature of centres’ identity (as well as anywhere between). For instance one centre embeds CD in their statement: saying that people, ‘are encouraged to participate in the running of the centre and to become involved in a variety of projects.... or in the management areas’. Whereas another is more explicit: stating that their centre is, ‘committed to social justice principles, believing that people have the right to participate in decisions that will affect their lives... and to advocate for a fairer distribution of resources’.

Centres’ CD focus (in particular, public advocacy and social action) results in complex relationships with government. They can be collaborators, supporters and/or critics of government (Kenny, 1994, p.85) – and often simultaneously. However, recently a fixation on ‘accountability’ has resulted in more frequent reviews of centres’ funding programmes, which in turn (re)shape their work. Staples writes about how Australian NGOs are ‘legislated into compliance’ (2006, p. 20), and interviewees offered many examples where ‘reforms’ were redolent of a push for them to become simply providers of government services: a push that most are resisting! While in some states community development is a seen as a legitimate activity, in others its activities do not fit within a service system approach.

Location/place
A further tenet of CD is its emphasis on ‘the local’ (Kenny, 1994; McArdle, 1999), and again this is seen in centre’s identity statements. This was more than merely adding an address. Rather, most explicitly located themselves using terms like, ‘community based, local [organisation etc.],’ ‘heart of your community’, or ‘your local area’ etc. The effect of this signifies a strong identification or embedding within a particular geographical area, region and/or community. Centres do not simply exist, or do, but they exit (and do) somewhere in particular. Location matters! Interviewees also emphasised the importance of location: as one said, ‘it’s about the place’.

Notwithstanding an emphasis on ‘place’, in interviews and observations it became apparent that centres exceeded this ‘place’. Rather than centres being ‘containers’ where action happens, centre action happens beyond the confines of the buildings themselves. One example is a take-away-food shop that a centre established to address social, economic, employment and educational issues of concern to the local people. Others examples included a winery, a lawn mowing business, and social action campaigns around turtles – all of which occurred beyond the ‘bricks and mortar’ of centres.

Moreover, these (problematic) places are ‘peopled’. Within CD there are various notions of what the term ‘community’ refers to, although ‘all the definitions referred to
people ’(Hillery in Kenny, 1994, p. 32). Centres stressed the importance of people. A few claimed to direct their efforts to ‘everyone’, but most said that they worked with ‘everyone within the specific location, community or region in which they are located’. Moreover, efforts were often targeted to specific groups of people (eg. those on low incomes; people returning to work; vulnerable people; people living with a disability; families). It is here that the importance of ‘safe/friendly places’ resonates and the value of these places was, as one interviewee phrased it, in:

... reaching hard to reach learners, you know providing people who would never set foot in anything remotely resembling a school to somewhere that’s a safe learning environment for them to go into and try to re-engage in any kind of education process, learning process.

Learning
Despite some significant differences in how centres are funded in terms of adult education, most provide learning opportunities. This is hardly surprising given that community development and adult learning are closely allied (Tett, 2005, p.126). However, again there was a range of ways in how it manifest. For instance, some centres made explicit use of educational discourses and infrastructure: using terms like training, courses, accreditation, and registered training organisations as part of their offerings. Whereas others’ ideas were more embedded in day-to-day work: using statements like, ‘meeting new friends, joining a group, and sharing a skill' or ‘finding out about...’. The latter implying learning, although not explicitly foregrounding it.

Of Australia’s 1000+ centres, less than half receive funding specifically to deliver adult learning. In a sense this is not a type of learning that is of particular interest here – not because it is unworthy, rather because it has been relatively well documented (McIntyre, 2001; McIntyre & Kimberley, 1998). With that said, even this funded delivery delivers ‘something more’ - an ACE representative explains:

We are very lucky because what the centres can do value adds to the piddly little bit of money that we have available for the activities ... We’re not paying for the real cost, we’re paying for a little bit, but all the other services that the centres provide are what makes a success of it. It’s not the bit we pay for...

This interviewee draws attention to the additional support mechanisms and services provided by centres and how these add value to funded ACE programmes. However, specifically funded learning, while valuable, is only the ‘tip of the iceberg’. In other centres, indeed even in the centres that also provide ‘real’ ACE, there is even more of adult learning. It is this learning that is of particular importance to future research because it is rarely accounted for in learning terms, let alone examined for efficacy - this is a major oversight of people interested in improving learning outcomes for disadvantaged or marginalised groups. Centres are, thus, important sites for further research to better understand how learning is (and can be) provided for people under-represented in legitimate educational institutions.

Moreover, there is a sense of urgency for such research to take place. In some parts of Australia (despite the lip service given to whole of government approaches), much adult learning is not only unfunded but runs the risk being ‘legislated out’ of
existence. To illustrate this final point, one interviewee recounts the response he received by the Department during a review of their funding programme, where ‘adult education’ was reported among the contributions of centres: ‘yes we’ll agree to that but we actually can’t fund this... and one of the things they put their finger on is adult education’.

(A problematic) Conclusion
Despite having presented a brief ‘mapping’ of Australia neighbourhood centres and (what I believe is) a reasonable response to the question ‘what is a neighbourhood centre’, this paper now concludes with a twist. This is the admission that interviewees found this question problematic. As one suggested, ‘it’s the barbecue stopover because you can’t answer it’!

While at first the interviewees easily described ‘what a centre is’, when pushed all provided contradictory accounts and pointed to the difficulties in giving a description of centres. Generally speaking an argument for similarity between a Finnish settlemetti and a neighbourhood centre in outback NSW can be made. But there will always be some profound differences. As demonstrated here, these organisations are shaped by national, state and local conditions along with political conditions and histories (and they shape these through their CD work). Australia’s centres continue to be shaped, as well as re-shape themselves – rendering the question ‘what is a neighbourhood centre’ redundant. Perhaps a better question is, what can centres be(come)?.

In Australia (and I suspect elsewhere) a CD focus has resulted in some innovative responses to local issues that also have learning components. Australian centre’s have also become cafes, and wineries, and lawn-mowing businesses. Moreover, it is not difficult to surmise that the people involved in these are learning. However, these activities operate in ways that suggest concerns that extend that beyond ‘learning’ alone. These activities may well have employment implications that contribute to visions set out in social inclusion agendas and the like. Yet, at the same time there appears to be something else besides. This ‘something else’ is the focus of the forthcoming phase of this project.

References
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