

Mapping Australia's neighbourhood centres

Donna Rooney,
University of Technology, Sydney

Introduction

What does a *winery, café, lawn mowing service, and a take-a-way shop* all have in common? There are several answers to this, but one is that they all involve adults learning; a second is that they all are part of the work of Australian neighbourhood centres'. A possible third answer 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 (Rooney 2004; Rule 2005): that is, *neighbourhood centres*.

This paper represents a first phase of a current 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 deceptively simple task is the focus of this paper.

The paper takes a macro-to-micro logic. Drawing from empirical data from documentary sources, interviews and focus groups from across Australia, the paper first 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 project, historical and political context. 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. Fourth, and finally, discussion turns to trouble 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 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, can be found globally. For instance, Finland’s network of *Setlementti*, Vancouver’s Neighbourhood Houses, Israel’s Community Centers, Germany’s *Nachbarschaftshäuser*, and Britain’s Settlements, are all 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 et al. 2008; Henry 2000). This development was fostered by the considerable legislative reforms of the Whitlam 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.

Neoliberal policies were embraced in the early 1980s, and continued through the 1990s during John Howard’s term of office. 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, and still under the Howard government, 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* refers 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 in the newly elected Rudd government (DEEWR & Vinson 2009). However, despite its seductive vision, social inclusion has been described as ‘neo-liberalism with a smiley face’ (Byrne 2005, p. 151). 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, 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 not an important outcome of learning, but a myopic focus on learning for work alone overlooks other important (and often associated) benefits (Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning 2009; Schuller 2004).

States and Territories

Australia is a nation generally understood as consisting of eight regions (six states and two mainland territories), and there are over one thousand neighbourhood centres spread across these regions (ANHCA 2009). Each State has a peak organisation that supports and resources their member centres. In addition to State peaks, 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 typically funded at State level. Thus they are shaped by the State's priorities, which can diverge from the federal. For instance, according to the 'tag lines' from State departments funding centres' respective WebPages 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 local funding arrangements and this shapes the work of centres in subtle ways. Furthermore, while State departments may provide some core funding (some better than others), almost all centres rely upon on additional funding for specific purposes, from volunteer input, and/or from fundraising. In general, most receive multiple sources of funding. For instance, one centre visited had 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). Federation governance complicates this too. Various definitions of ACE across Australia (Borthwick et al. 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 do not generally identify as being in the business of adult education or learning (Rooney 2007; 2004; Flowers 2005). 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 programs (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, 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 all parts of 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, when centres described themselves some 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 themselves endorsed 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 were material. A small sample of these appears below. Centres said that they:

- *accomplish, address, advocate, care for, change, connect, coordinate, create, deliver, develop, facilitate, form, guide, help, host, improve, initiate, link, lobby, maintain, move, offer, open, operate, promote, provide, reduce, research, run, serve, stimulate, strengthen, support, work, work in partnership, work together 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, which means they are community owned and managed (through volunteer committees). In other words, people 'are involved in defining and taking action on the issues that affect them' (Tett, 2005, p126) – or as one interviewee suggested, '*people come together to work on what's important in their local community*'. Actual practices of CD may take the form of lobbying for redistribution of resources or to change a social structure, providing information (so people can make informed choices) (Butler 1992; McArdle 1999). However, CD can manifest as being *embedded* in everyday practices to being 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 when they say 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 the state. They can be collaborators, supporters and/or critics of government (Kenny 1994, p.85) – and at times simultaneously. Measures to 'legislate them' (Staples 2006, p. 20) into simply being providers of government services are common and reviews of the programs that provide their funding are frequent. Interviewees from all states gave examples of how such reviews' continue to (re)shape their work.

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 the emphasis on 'place' by the centres themselves, in interviews and observations it became apparent that centres exceeded their 'place'. Centres are not mere containers where action happens. Indeed, neighbourhood centre action happens beyond the confines of the buildings themselves. An example is a take-away-food shop, that one centre established to address social, economic, employment and educational issues of concern to the local people. Similarly, elsewhere there were examples of wineries, lawn mowing businesses, and social action campaigns – all of which happened beyond the 'bricks and mortar' of centres.

Social places

Moreover, these places are also 'peopled'. Within CD there are various notions of what the term 'community' refers to. One study found ninety-four different definitions of community in addition to noting the many inconsistencies, although 'all the definitions referred to people' (Hillary cited in Kenny 1994, p. 32). Within the identity statements centres stressed the importance of people. A few claimed to direct their efforts to 'everyone', but most centres said that they worked with '*everyone within the specific location, community or region in which they are located*'. Moreover, efforts were targeted to *specific groups of people* (eg. those on low incomes; people thinking about returning to work; vulnerable people; people living with a disability; families). It is here that the importance of 'safe/friendly places' resonates:

Where the real value of neighbourhood houses is ... is 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 reengage in any kind of education process, learning process

Learning

Notwithstanding some significant differences in how centres are funded in terms of adult community education, it is evident that most provide learning opportunities. This is hardly surprising given that community development and adult learning are closely allied (Tett, 2005, p126). However, there were also some stark differences in how it manifest. Some centres were explicit and made 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. For instance, 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. Furthermore, this 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 ... they offer say more bangs for the bucks, but we're not paying for that.

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. I'm sure that helps a lot, or I hope that helps a lot, but we don't pay for the true cost of those successes.

This interviewee is drawing attention to the additional support mechanisms and services provided by centres and how they add value to ACE funds. This support and additional services are not typically provided through educational institutions. Centres' contributions becomes even more impressive when it has been estimated that for every dollar spent of adult community education for people of lower socio-economic standing, there is in excess of twenty-two return . *Value add indeed!*

However, funded learning, while valuable, is only the 'tip of the iceberg'. In other centres, indeed even in the same centres as recognised ACE delivery, is another layer of adult learning that 'goes under the radar'. It is this layer 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 adult education institutions.

Discussion

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 cited 'what a centre *is*', when pushed they all provided contradictory accounts. On the one hand Centres exist, as do 'the communities' they work *with* and *for*. Ontologically, they and the community *do not* (but this is a longer argument for another time).

Generally speaking an argument for similarity between a Finnish *settlemetti* and a neighbourhood centre in outback NSW can be made. But there will also be some profound differences. These organisations are shaped by national, state and local conditions along with political conditions and histories (and they shape these through their CD work). In Australia (and I suspect elsewhere) a CD focus has resulted in some innovative responses to local issues that also have learning components.

These responses offer learning opportunities, yet during the visits to centres they were spoken about in ways that suggest concerns that extend that beyond 'learning' alone. Centre activities may well have employment implications that contribute to visions set out in the social inclusion and the like. Yet, at the same time there appears to be something else besides. This 'something else' will be the focus of the forthcoming phase of this project. 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)?*.

References

- ANHCA 2009, *About ANHCA*, Australian Neighbourhood Houses and Centres Association, 2009 <<http://www.anhlc.asn.au/ANHCA>>.
- Australian Government 2009, *Social Inclusion*, viewed February 2009 <<http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>>.
- Borthwick, J., Knight, B., Bender, A. & Laveder, P. 2001, *Scope of ACE in Australia: implications for improved data collection and reporting*, vol. 1, Australian National Training Authority, Leabrook, South Australia.
- Butler, P. 1992, 'Reflections on 'good' community development', *Community Quarterly*, no. 24, pp. 5-9.

- Byrne, D. 2005, *Social exclusion*, Open University Press,
<<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/utslibrary/Doc?id=10161354>>.
- Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning 2009, *There's more to learning than earning*, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, viewed February 2009 <www.learningbenefits.net>.
- DEEWR & Vinson, T. 2009, *Social inclusion - The origins, meanings, definition and economic implications of the concept social inclusion/exclusion*, in DEEWR & University of Sydney (eds) Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- Golding, B., Kimberley, H., Foley, A. & Brown, M. 2008, 'Houses and shed in Australia: an exploration of the genesis and growth of neighbourhood houses and men's sheds in community settings', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 237-262.
- Henry, K. 2000, *Like a circle: a story of LCSA. the first 25 years*, Local Community Services Association, Sydney.
- International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres 2009, *About ISF*, viewed December 2009
<<http://www.ifsnetwork.org/Membership/CurrentMembers/tabid/463/Default.aspx>>.
- Kenny, S. 1994, *Developing communities for the future: community development in Australia*, Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne.
- Lather, P. 1991, *Getting smart: feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*, Routledge, London.
- LCSA 2001, *Partnerships in ACE: A report to BACE*, Local Community Services Association, Sydney.
- McArdle, J. 1999, *Community development in the market economy*, Vista Publications, St Kilda.
- National Reform Initiative Working Group 2005, *Human capital reform: report by the COAG National Reform Initiative Working Group*, in Council of Australian Governments (ed.) COAG, Canberra,
<<http://www.coag.gov.au/search.cfm>>.
- Parker, M. 2009, *The past, the passion and the potential: how the history of the Settlement Movement informs our pursuit of social justice today*, in British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (ed.) BASSAC, London.
- Rooney, D. 2004, 'Cinderella has balls?: other sites for adult learning', *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 143-157.
- Rule, J. 2005 'Tracing discourses of social action: inner-city Sydney neighbourhood centres', *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 135-153.
- Schuller, T. 2004, 'Three capitals: a framework', in, *The benefits of learning: the impact of education on health, family life and social capital*, Routledge Falmer, London & New York, pp. 12-33.
- Staples, J. 2006, *NGOs out in the cold: the Howard Government policy towards NGOs*, vol. Discussion Paper 19/06 (June 2006), Democratic Audit of Australia, Canberra.

ⁱ 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.