

## **Sea Changes, Tree Changes and Bush Lessons**

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### **Dedication**

In memory of Jenny Simpson. A dear colleague and a warm and loving friend.

*When people dare to risk . . . they are able to engage strategically with the uncertainties that gives life empowerment.* (Simpson 2004: 74)

*. . . to be fully human, a person has to see that life has a heroic dimension.* (Swimme 1997: 10-11)

Ms Jenny Simpson's unique capacity to care for others was matched with a keen, incisive intellect that she shared generously with her students and colleagues throughout her life as an educator in Central Queensland. She played down her contributions as a scholar and researcher while making so many resonant ideas available to those of us privileged to work with her.

Jenny's continuing presence and influence are with us still as this special theme issue of *Rural Society* has taken shape. In particular, her fierce commitment to making post-compulsory education possible for adults wanting to make their own intellectual sea change has produced a rich cadre of people who have gone on to make their own contributions to rural societies, not only in Australia, but also throughout the world. Jenny was going to be a co-editor of this special theme issue of *Rural Society* but instead her spirit guides our words as she has always guided our hearts and minds.

### **Introduction**

The Dawkins and subsequent reforms to Australia's post-compulsory educational systems have been designed in part to provide greater opportunities for communities in regional and rural Australia, delivering wider access to universities and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), including Institutes

of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). At the same time, these communities have been undergoing significant transformation. Although technological, market and climatic variations have challenged some traditional rural industries and the communities of which they are a part, others have experienced a 'sea change' or a 'tree change' syndrome in which the influx of people from metropolitan centres has dramatically affected these communities' demographic, cultural and economic life. This issue of *Rural Society* explores the iterative impacts of post-compulsory education on regional and rural communities, both in Australia and internationally.

While other recent journal theme issues have explored the dilemmas and strategies underpinning educational provision in Australian rural communities (Danaher, Danaher & Moriarty 2004; Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher 2003; Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher 2003), this issue focuses on the specific contributions that post-compulsory education can and should make to rural renewal in the context of the 'sea change' and 'tree change' syndrome noted above. 'Post-compulsory education' from this perspective is understood as referring to at least four distinct yet overlapping forms of educational provision:

- The senior years of secondary schooling, including school-based vocational education and training (VET) (see, for example, Binns et al 2008-2009; Harreveld & Danaher 2004-2005; Harreveld et al 2006-2007).
- Provision by Institutes of TAFE and other RTOs in the VET sector.
- Provision by universities in the higher education (HE) sector (see, for example, Simpson, Danaher & Danaher 2006).
- Adult and community education's (ACE) non-formally accredited learning opportunities of multiple kinds operating in rural communities (including the University of the Third Age and informal community groups).

Geographically, the rural societies featured in these articles are in regional Australia from Euchua and Bendigo in northern Victoria, Stanthorpe on the southern downs in Queensland and western New South Wales. In addition, they include communities in Newfoundland and Labrador on the east coast of Canada and the central Appalachian mountains in the United States of America. In the Australian vernacular, 'the bush' is used to denote spaces and places outside the metropolitan centres. We go out, to and in the bush. Some of us visit people and places in the bush, while others live in bush towns or way outback. In the bush, all things come together because there are not many people living in those regional, rural and remote communities, which in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States are not only geographically isolated but are also socially, economically and culturally diverse.

Government policy frameworks that seek to provide a better life for all citizens are often exposed for their divisive tendencies when operationalised in the bush. This is never more so that in the field of education and in particular the complex and often contradictory field of post-compulsory education. In regional, rural and remote societies, sectoral divisions are exposed in ways that potentially constrict rather than enable people's engagement in post-compulsory education. Here the ACE, VET and HE sectors share learning landscapes with the schooling sector (early childhood, primary and secondary education). Financial and social capital moves into and out of rural societies with consequent mutation, shrinkage or magnification of populations, public and private infrastructure, institutions and organisations large and small. While this situation is often blamed on neo-liberal policies of globalisation (Munck 2005), in recent times the consequences of a global financial market maelstrom are further implicated in changing and often inequitable power relations, identities and social networks. It is timely indeed to examine regional and rural renewal in this context with diverse conceptual reasoning to provide us with insights into the multiple 'dimensions of communications technology, ecology, economics, work organisations, culture and civil societies' (Beck 2000: 19).

Rob Townsend and Melinda Delves (2009) argue for a broadening of the role of post-compulsory education programs and providers in regional areas to incorporate social and community development. This necessitates a new policy framework to acknowledge and fund diverse programs as well as educate managers with the vision and community connections to encourage the facilitation of diverse programs from ACE to VET and HE university-level learning. Their message is all the more poignant since the release of the recent Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2008) that recognised the unique role of education in rural communities and recommended refreshed and refocused policy and funding frameworks. There is cautious hope that some of the sectoral disjunctures identified by Townsend and Delves (2009) will be ameliorated if the report's policy implications are realised in practice.

People working in community organisations and public institutions in rural communities need accredited learning leading to professionally and industrially recognised qualifications. Susan Mleck (2009) reports on an Australian cross-sectoral partnership that resulted in a co-enrolment program between a rural TAFE college and an inland national university (Charles Sturt University). For the first two years of their Social Work degree program, students are co-enrolled through the local TAFE college and the university. Significantly, this initiative was not mandated from government policies. It provides a salutary bush lesson in the ways of people making systems work for rural communities such that issues of 'isolation, resourcing, distance, harsh environments and

socioeconomic disadvantage' (Mleck 2009: 115 this edition) are addressed explicitly and not ignored.

Making sense of such rural realities is a challenge that Ken Stevens (2009) addresses through information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as cybercells. In the current political and economic climate of access and equity, new ways to use ICTs in post-compulsory education offer much for inter-generational and cross-sectoral learning opportunities. In a selection of Australian and Canadian rural communities, Stevens has found that the integration of actual and virtual discussions, meetings and classes has particular application in rural secondary schools to facilitate, inform and extend young people's perceptions of their 'nonlocal worlds'. In addition, pre-service and practising teachers interact via this medium to extend learning beyond the university campus into rural classrooms. These complementary research studies suggest that cybercell technology can assist both 'students in geographically-isolated communities who have to make post-compulsory educational choices related to non-local, often urban environments' and 'teachers educated in cities considering appointments in rural schools' (Stevens 2009: 125 this edition).

From cybercells to satellite lessons, ICTs continue to provide a web of connectivity for post-compulsory learning. Interactive distance e-learning (IDL) uses satellite-supported two-way broadband voice, one-way video and Internet access for school-age and adult distance education in western New South Wales, Australia. Kylie Twyford, Stephen Crump and Alan Anderson's article (2009) on interim findings from an Australian Research Council Industry Linkage project illustrates a 'common-sense' sharing of this communication technology infrastructure among educational providers in the bush. VET is now available to adults living on properties or in remote Aboriginal communities. They access the VET courses via their children's School of the Air equipment or community ICT facilities. While cognisant of immense challenges in meeting adults' desire for VET with its hands-on, skill focused learning, the authors find that positive outcomes are achieved in the areas of employment preparation, readiness for further study, digital literacies and local and global connectedness to worlds of learning and earning for adults and their children alike.

Considering these communities as small elements in a broader redistribution of knowledge and power among global, national, regional, local and rural spaces raises questions about the nature of knowledge that is constructed through such learning. Terence Maybury's contention (2009) that a regionalist discourse, with its focus on economics, is both irrational and abstract provides theoretical connection to his elaboration of key concepts such as 'bastard', 'chora' and 'chorography', which are helpful in connecting with his construct of the learning region. Furthermore, he argues that the discursive dominance of a politically

and economically constructed global market is itself a component of the irrational, an example of bastard reasoning. Maybury aims for a more profitable situation in which people access, develop, integrate and utilise a 'whole set of multi-lateralising knowledge domains (all variously intersecting, cross-pollinating, contradicting one another, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously)' (Maybury 2009: 142 this edition).

Kathryn McLachlan and Catherine Arden's conceptual work (2009) extends to a consideration of a participatory action research methodology that enhances rather than constrains community learning and promotes the resilience and renewal of people's engagement in learning in the rural communities of Queensland's Granite Belt. They conduct a collaborative critical review of three community learning projects, each constructed with cross-sectoral and multi-level partnerships among post-compulsory education providers:

1. An investigation of factors contributing to individual and community resilience
2. Community engagement in e-democracy and lifelong learning; and
3. The development of an electronic portal to support community learning.

They conclude that 'despite the rhetoric that encourages the 'smart state', policy directives are still maintaining business as usual' (McLaughlin & Arden 2009: 158 this edition) in which non-recurrent, sectorally separated post-compulsory education provision continues to be the norm for community learning. Moreover, while their data show 'outsider knowledge' to be important for the provision of leadership and resources, an insider 'broker' is needed to sustain connections among learners and providers. Yet informed collaborative partnerships can serve to disrupt such discourses, thereby opening up discursive spaces for robust practitioner research informed post-compulsory education inclusive of formal and non-formal learning.

Ulrich Beck (2006) offers five interconnected principles that can be understood in both a normative-philosophical sense and an empirical-sociological sense to unpack and investigate the internal contradictions and external manifestations of a cosmopolitan outlook, which is implicated in the articles noted already and also in the research of Michael Corbett (2009: 163 this edition). Beck's (2006) work finds resonance here for parents and young people in rural communities who are increasingly technologically and economically coordinated with:

1. An awareness of global risks and crises
2. A recognition of cultural and identity differences
3. An acknowledgement that situations may be perceived as both opportunities and threats

4. The dissolution of old borders and the rebuilding of new and shifting boundaries and
5. An interpenetration, interconnection and intermingling of local, national, ethnic and religious cultures and traditions (p.7).

Corbett (2009) asserts a limitation to a sociological analysis of class and life trajectories (for example, by Bourdieu and Lareau) because of perceived challenges to notions of habitus which require engagements with the ways in which educational planning is undertaken by a cohort of 20 young people from a regional secondary school on the east coast of Canada. The significant perceptions of parents in relation to a post-compulsory education decision-making discourse also illustrate stark practical challenges for them in advising their young adult children regarding future life/work trajectories.

A place-conscious, capacity-building model is proposed by Jerry Johnson, Aaron Thompson and Kim Naugle (2009) as a means of positively influencing the ways in which rural communities construct themselves and their relationship with a cosmopolitan worldview. Set in central Appalachia in the United States, their model develops the notion of regional stewardship as integral to institutional engagement, in this instance a university's use of physical and human resources to identify, cultivate, strengthen and support a community's learning capacity. In this model and the research on which it is based, universities 'serve' their communities through taking 'active leadership roles' that are inclusive of 'research-based responsive practices' (Johnson, Thompson & Naugle 2009: 180 this edition). Significantly, the enactment of the model is embedded in an education research framework with education extension agents out in the bush among the 22 counties serviced by the university. Their brief to sustain current initiatives and act on opportunities for 'culturally-responsive and place-conscious strategies' (Johnson et al 2009: 186 this edition) is relevant not only for rural Appalachia, but also for other communities serviced by rural and regionally focused universities.

It is exciting to see these articles individually and collectively engaging with the positive connections post-compulsory education can make between different rural and global communities. Authors have challenged us to consider the provision of post-compulsory education through new conceptual lenses in social contexts affected by climate change, challenges to rural industries, the 'sea change' and 'tree change' syndrome and shifting demographics. These bush lessons offer much to adults both young and old who wish to continue learning while living in regional, rural and remote communities throughout the world, and also to the educational providers charged with servicing their learning needs.

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