

LIFELONG LEARNING JOURNEYS ON THE MOVE: REFLECTING ON SUCCESSES AND FRAMING FUTURES FOR AUSTRALIAN SHOW PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the successes and contributes to framing the futures of and for Australian show people as lifelong learners, drawing on qualitative interview data and analysis of their periodical *The Outdoor Showman*. Their lifelong learning journeys on the move are innovative and empowering, yet also vulnerable to capture.

KEYWORDS

Australia – Queensland School for Travelling Show Children – *The Outdoor Showman* – show people – Traveller education

INTRODUCTION

The travelling agricultural show has been a rich part of Australia's cultural history for decades, playing a significant role in national development. The show has traditionally been part of local community life within regional and rural Australia (Danaher, 1997), providing a showcase for those areas' industry as well as a site for recreation and social interaction, in addition to facilitating a link between the city and the bush (Danaher, Danaher & Moriarty, 2003). In this sense, the travelling show people are a rich part of the Australian national narrative.

At the same time, there has been a concern that the show people are placed outside this national narrative in relation to educational provision. That is, lacking ongoing exposure to schooling that settled communities have enjoyed, the show people have been configured as being educationally at risk (Danaher, Danaher & Moriarty, 2007), unable to develop the academic skills that would enable them to participate effectively in the knowledge economy as it has developed in the 20th and 21st centuries. This concern provided the impetus for the development of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children in 2000, a joint federal and state government initiative that produced a set of mobile classrooms that accompany the show on its circuits through rural, regional and metropolitan Australia (Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, 2006).

The overall purpose of this paper is to adopt a long-term perspective to reflect on the successes and to contribute to framing the futures of and for Australian show people as lifelong learners (understood as encompassing both formal and informal approaches to learning and teaching).

On the one hand, semi-structured interviews with show people in selected years from 1992 to 2003, augmented by show community members' articles in their periodical *The Outdoor Showman*, confirm the genuine successes in formal educational provision, culminating in the show school's establishment, as well as in informal learning passed from one generation to the next. On the other hand, the show people's educational futures are by no means guaranteed, subject as they are to broader sociocultural and economic pressures. Thus the Australian show people's lifelong learning journeys on the move are innovative and empowering, yet also vulnerable to capture.

The paper is located in a broader field of literature about the formal and informal education of mobile communities. While that literature ranges from Australian seasonal workers (Henderson, 2005) to English fairground people and Gypsy Travellers (Kiddle, 1999) to Irish Travellers (Kenny, 1997) to African and Asian nomadic pastoralists (Dyer, 2006), these varied accounts have in common a dual focus on the richness of the children's and their families' opportunities for informal learning on their respective itineraries and on the difficulties of conventional educational systems in catering to their specialised circumstances and needs.

The project's research design was qualitative, interpretivist, phenomenological and poststructuralist (Somekh & Lewin, 2005). That is, the research was directed at understanding the lifeworlds and worldviews of the show people and those who help to bring them formal education by analysing their spoken and written words and by giving priority to the phenomenon of mobility while emphasising the politicised character of the contexts in which that mobility is enacted. The data corpus to date was divided into two phases: annual visits to the showgrounds from 1992 to 1995 inclusive, supplemented by an interview with a home tutor in 1996; and an intensive visit to the Queensland School for

Travelling Show Children in 2003, when four researchers conducted 14 interviews with 20 show children, six parents and nine educational officials. In both phases, questions derived from a pre-designed interview schedule but were merely stimuli for what were often long and widely ranging discussions, eliciting the participants' perspectives on formal and informal education. Data analysis was ongoing and iterative and framed by the identification of categories and themes in the interview transcripts.

The paper is divided into four sections:

- A discussion of the Australian show people's past, present and possible future formal and informal learning experiences and opportunities;
- A conclusion that links those experiences and opportunities with the reflected successes and the framed futures of the Australian show people's lifelong learning journeys on the move.

Australian show people's past lifelong learning journeys

In providing a linear periodisation in this account of the Australian show people's lifelong learning journeys, it is important to acknowledge the risk of presentism (Kuklick, 1999), whereby the attitudes and values of contemporary society are assigned anachronistically to members of previous generations. It is necessary also to avoid the potential for progressivism (Foucault, 1991) attendant on assuming sequential improvement in the rights of particular groups within communities. In particular, as will become clear, there is certainly no automatic or guaranteed progression in their educational access and equity; on the contrary, every gain has been hard fought and must be zealously guarded against (re)capture by forces of marginalisation (see also Danaher, 1998a, 1998b, 2001).

That caveat notwithstanding, Australian show people's past lifelong learning journeys were centred on their distinctive cultural history. Although Australia's first agricultural society was the Van Diemen's Land Agricultural Society, formed in Hobart in 1821 (Mant, 1972, p. 17), it was not until the 1870s that agricultural shows in regional and rural towns began in the eastern colonies (Broome with Jackomos, 1998, pp. 20-21). Show people exhibit great pride in this long historical association between sideshow alley and Australia's development as a nation in both its urban and its rural manifestations. That association is inextricably linked with show people's perceptions of their community's capacity for informal learning, encapsulated in

Bob Morgan's (1995) summation of the principal threads running through his interviews with seven well-known members of that community:

...their great capacity for hard work, their grim determination to succeed under very harsh conditions, their morality and integrity in dealing with those who worked with them, and despite fierce competition, their compassion towards those going through hard times who needed a hand up.
(p. xvii)

While clearly this is a celebratory discourse that downplays the conflict and negativity evident in any community, it is remarkably similar to national narratives about (white) (male) Australians (see for example Turner, 1993). In both cases, the informal dimension of lifelong learning is framed in terms of demonstrating individual initiative and resilience, innovating by making do with what is available, ignoring or overturning rules that are seen as restrictive of opportunity and exhibiting a healthy scepticism towards authority.

It was those same characteristics, reductionist and mythical as any such list of qualities must be, that show people mobilised when describing the formal lifelong learning opportunities previously available to them and their actions directed at improving those opportunities. Certainly the show people's mobility had led to a more limited range of formal educational options than those available to settled residents:

- sending their children to local schools along the show circuits
- sending their children to boarding schools
- not sending their children to local or boarding schools but instead teaching them correspondence lessons on the show circuits
- coming off the show circuits and finding alternative employment for the duration of their children's education so that the children could attend local schools
- remaining on the show circuits and sending their children to live with relatives and attend local schools
- not sending their children to school at all. (Danaher, 2001, p. 255)

These options were considerably broadened in 1989, when the show people gained access to a specialised program within the Brisbane School of Distance Education (Danaher, 1998a, 2001). While this program had several benefits for the show community, parents lobbied successfully for the establishment of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children, which began

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Semi-structured interviews with show people, continuing from 1992 to 2003, attest to the perceived success of the expansion of formal educational opportunities available to them. For example, one parent stated in 1992 that before the creation of the Brisbane School of Distance Education program:

...the choices that were available to the parents were basically zilch....[The children] just went from school to school and there was no continuity or gauge on what the kids were doing, so they got to a certain age and lost interest very quickly. (as cited in Danaher, 2001, p. 257)

Another parent interviewed in the same year lamented the difficulties of teaching show children correspondence lessons while travelling along the show circuits:

I don't know how the parents managed with the correspondence. I couldn't have done it. I think you've got to have a lot of patience to do correspondence with your own kids. I mean, to be a mother and a teacher, and the kids just saying, "Well, I'm not doing it". If you're a teacher, you can say, "Yes, you are", but if you're the mother you just don't seem to be able to do anything about it. I've seen plenty of people nearly fall apart trying to do correspondence. It must be really hard. (as cited in Danaher, 2001, pp. 265-266)

These feelings that previously available opportunities facilitated informal lifelong learning but hampered lifelong learning journeys on the move for the show people were articulated also in their trade periodical *The Outdoor Showman*. This is a quarterly magazine published by the Victorian Showmen's Guild, and it contains articles of interest to show people in Australia and New Zealand, such as reports about major shows, discussions of legislation relevant to equipment registration and advertisements for rides such as ferris wheels and joints such as laughing clowns (Danaher, 2001, p. 19). It also publishes letters and reminiscences by show people about the community's cultural history. One example, entitled "Behind the Loudspeakers, Toffee Apples and Fairy Floss" (Osborne, 1997), conveyed simultaneously non-show children's perceived fascination with the show and their hostility towards show children:

The thoughts of a young boy that take me back to when as a Showie kid going to school, inundated with questions about the show. What's the best ride? The fastest one? Will it make me sick? What's your dad

got at the show? The questions that went on. I felt important, commanding this unbelievable respect from kids that normally wouldn't give me the time of day. (p. 21, as cited in Danaher, 2001, p. 20)

The following reminiscence from *The Outdoor Showman* (Taylor, 1998) evocatively summed up this dual theme of limited formal educational opportunities and heightened informal learning constituting the show people's past lifelong learning journeys on the move: "Mickey Taylor...had a great learning ability for someone who never attended school[;] he learnt to read[;] he always said if you can read you can teach yourself anything" (p. 43).

Australian show people's present lifelong learning journeys

As indicated in the introduction, a significant element in the lifelong learning journey of the present generation of Australian show people has been the establishment of the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children in 2000. At this stage the school caters for students from kindergarten to Year 7 and features two teachers in each of two mobile classrooms teaching multi-aged level classes (Saleh, 2003, p. 23). The school can be understood as an attempt to normalise the schooling experience of the Traveller children. Rather than being located on the showgrounds, the school is placed within the grounds of a local primary school for the duration of the show's stay in that community. For example, when the show comes to Rockhampton each June, the school is located at the Crescent Lagoon Primary School. This arrangement means that the show children need to arrange to travel from their caravans on the showgrounds to the school each day. In addition, the school has a dedicated uniform and school song; these are important factors in establishing the school's distinctive identity, on the one hand, while locating it within the geographical boundaries of mainstream schooling, on the other.

As the school is limited to kindergarten and primary schooling years, it does mean that options for secondary education among the show children are still somewhat limited. Many children go to boarding school, while correspondence and home schooling with a dedicated tutor are options for others. And there is still a generation of adult show people who have had limited formal educational provision. One possible innovation being considered here is to use the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children to provide night classes in literacy to show people (Fullerton, 2003), thus equipping them with reading and writing skills to

provide a basis for further learning, as suggested by Mickey Taylor's experiences as cited above.

One way in which the show school is seeking to challenge the negative images still associated with show people is through generating media interest (see for example Saleh, 2003, p. 23). The advanced technology of the classrooms, with television monitors and satellite dishes to access the Internet, along with the story of the parents' active lobbying in order to secure this joint state and federal government initiative, presents the show community as being cohesive, proactive, technologically and politically savvy and concerned for their children's future. This set of characteristics has been central to the way in which the show community has deployed the resources at their and others' disposal to secure ongoing support for their educational endeavours.

Similarly, the principal of the show school and her colleagues have been acutely aware of the difficulties that families in this transition phase have faced and have been sensitive to their uncertainties and needs. They have also been aware that inducting families into a more formal school community, if approached sensitively, can provide opportunities for other family members to learn and to impact on their lifelong learning trajectories.

Australian show people's possible future lifelong learning journeys

The lifelong learning futures for Australian show people are likely to be characterised by the same tensions and opportunities that have framed their past and present educational experiences. The show competes with a variety of other diversions such as electronic media, travel opportunities and home entertainment to attract customers. It is clear that, to be competitive in an environment in which diverse cultural and entertainment provision seems bound to increase exponentially, show people will need to remain innovative in providing rides and distinctive experiences attractive to the general public, while continuing to draw on the rich heritage and traditions of the show circuit.

It is evident that a mix of informal and formal lifelong learning experiences will be needed to sustain the show culture and business (as is already apparent from the school's effectiveness in mobilising multiliteracies that integrate the children's formal and informal knowledge; see Fullerton, Danaher, Moriarty & Danaher, 2004). With regard to formal provision, it is likely that show people will need tertiary as well as school qualifications in order to engage with the

complexities of operating a sustainable business in the future environment. The massification of higher education places pressures on those communities who traditionally have not had access to this experience. Innovations in distance education through information and communication technologies are likely to be significant in enabling a mobile community such as the show people to access tertiary education. It can be envisaged that increasing formal qualifications in areas as diverse as marketing, public relations, accounting, multimedia and engineering will assist in sustaining the families of the show communities as viable business operations with innovative products. It is likely that the travelling show school will continue to play an important role in launching these formal lifelong learning pathways.

From the perspective of informal lifelong learning futures, it seems evident that the show people's experiences will be shaped by the largely regional and rural communities with which they interact. While the show has played a historically important role in bringing the 'bush' to the city in events like the Royal Easter Show in Sydney and the Brisbane exhibition (or Ekka), its lifeblood seems likely to remain located within the regional and rural locations through which it travels for much of the year. These communities face challenging futures in relation to economic viability and social wellbeing. Uncertainties in commodity prices, drought and the impact of climate change are likely to challenge the futures of many rural communities. At the same time, seachange and tree change movements are altering the makeup of certain regional locations. One possible future for these communities sees them growing in size and economic and social significance as they innovate in farming practice, ecological management and cultural infrastructure to confront the environmental and other challenges of the 21st century. The show would then play an important part in supporting and exhibiting these innovations, demonstrating the adaptability and resilience of the deep, lifelong learning of these communities. A less positive vision of the future sees these communities withering away owing to lack of infrastructure and the effects of climate change and economic forces. Such a future would have severe consequences for the travelling show circuits.

From this perspective, questions about the future are much broader than just questions around schooling and education. There are bigger questions looming around the future of agricultural shows that are now magnified by a future situation in which more formally educated

generations of show people will have open to them opportunities for higher education and employment outside the show circuits. Those who appreciate the magnitude of the impact of agricultural shows on the lives of generations of people, particularly in regional and rural settings, and on the way that Australia is perceived more broadly, will wonder whether improvements in educational and career opportunities of upcoming generations of show people will alter forever the wider landscape of Australia and the distinctive characteristics by which Australians perceive themselves and are perceived by others.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING JOURNEYS ON THE MOVE

I think anything that allows us to demonstrate and to quantify, in both the quantitative and the qualifiable sense, that this...has value and this adds value, and it should be identified and treasured and promoted. Because, at the moment, a lot of the stuff that we're doing runs off the heart factor; it's a cardiac assessment rather than being a cerebral assessment. I think this is the nature of community and the nature of the body politic these days...that's all very interesting.

These words by an educational official in 2003 talking about the Queensland School for Travelling Show Children encapsulate the past, present and future dimension of the Australian show people's lifelong learning journeys on the move. They evoke the struggle, animated by commitment and determination, to disrupt decades of educational marginalisation and neglect; they focus on the school as a current artefact of that struggle and the aspiration for alternative and more empowering educational provision; and they suggest possible future iterations of the school as a model for such provision.

At the same time, these words highlight how the successes being reflected on and the futures being framed in this paper are tentative and vulnerable, and how they are liable to capture by competing forces of broader sociocultural and economic pressures that dispute the claims to a distinctive cultural heritage and educational circumstances by communities such as the show people. This in turn emphasises how lifelong learning policy and practice are situated in, and hence potentially compromised by and complicit with, wider political factors and forces that are frequently homogenising and controlling rather than working to value diversity and heterogeneity.

Or as one of the parents, also in 2003, reflected on the successes and framed the futures of the show people's lifelong learning journeys on the move:

I think the school's come a long way, and it takes time. Like any school when they first bring in their first years of little kids, it takes time to actually adjust and get used to the routine. I think we've all got used it now and the way the system's going, and it's going along really well.

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