

▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Reframing adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes: A social capital perspective

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▶ THIS PROJECT EXAMINED how adult literacy and numeracy courses contributed to social capital and socioeconomic outcomes.

Social capital, defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as the 'networks, together with shared norms, values and understanding which facilitate cooperation within or amongst groups', is measured using indicators defined by the ABS in their social capital framework.

Socioeconomic outcomes are measured using categories identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as contributing to socioeconomic wellbeing, including health, education and learning, employment and quality of working life, time and leisure, command over goods and services, physical environment, social environment and personal safety.

Interviews were conducted with 57 students and 18 teachers in four adult literacy and numeracy courses in the Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. Students included people from non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and ranged from youth to the mature-aged (45 and over).

▶ Social capital outcomes

Participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses does produce social capital, although the precise benefits vary depending on combinations of age, English proficiency and background.

Social capital outcomes include reported changes in the number and nature of interactions that students experience in existing and new social networks. Students also spoke of changes in the way they interact with people in their networks. Students value these outcomes highly.

Table 1: Examples of social capital indicators and impacts

Indicators	Examples
Change in trust levels	A 17-year-old boy now has his mother's trust because she knows he spends his days at a technical and further education (TAFE) institute rather than truanting from school.
Change in action to solve problems in one's life or that of others	A 50-year-old woman originally from China can now make phone calls to institutions such as banks and the local council to lodge complaints or make enquiries.
Change in the nature of memberships in networks	A 15-year-old boy is now prepared to help out at home. In the past, he resisted being told what to do and was hardly at home.
Change in the support sought, received or given in the networks to which the learner is attached	A 50-year-old Indigenous man no longer relies on others to read his mail for him.

Social capital outcomes can also play a role in improving the socioeconomic impact of course participation. In many cases it is the combination of human and social capital (improved reading, writing and/or speaking skills as well as better interpersonal skills/intrapersonal skills) that results in greater socioeconomic wellbeing, although there can be positive social capital outcomes even where there is no evidence of improved literacy attainment.

For example, one young man did not report improvement in literacy skills but, by participating in the course, he experienced new networks which had positively changed the way he interacted with adults. This, in turn, led him to approach prospective employers and secure a job.



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Socioeconomic impacts

The areas most likely to be influenced by participation in adult literacy and numeracy courses were education and learning, social environment, and command over goods and services. The extent of the impact was different among the student groups. For example, in the social environment category, young people saw most improvement and Indigenous students the least. Overall, the impact in the social environment category was marginally higher than in education and learning.

Table 2: Examples illustrating OECD impacts

Area of socioeconomic wellbeing	Student-reported examples
Education and learning	A 33-year-old man is now able to read more of the newspaper and can use the computer to write.
Social environment	A 17-year-old boy's relationship with his parents has improved significantly as a direct result of participating in the course. He no longer fights with them and they think he has matured.
Command over goods and services	A 41-year-old Cantonese woman successfully installed the internet on her computer by following the telephone directions from the provider. Her poor English a year earlier had made her first attempt unsuccessful.

Implications for teaching practice

The significance of building social capital and achieving the best results from adult and literacy courses suggest that it is important to identify the relevant elements of teaching practice which contribute to these outcomes. These elements include teaching strategies to promote interaction with peers and networks, curriculum development, assessment methods and reporting.

Professional training should clearly explain the context (for example, class size and mix of students) and the teaching practices that provide the best conditions for fostering social capital. In addition, more needs to be known and documented about how trust and respect develop between students and teachers; how student and teacher networks emerge from the curriculum focus on topics relating to the everyday life experiences of

students; and how networks develop from individual and group discussions and other forms of social engagement. In particular, research needs to be conducted into whether face-to-face teaching/learning and various forms of online or flexible delivery produce the same sorts of social capital outcomes and socioeconomic benefits for students.

Adult literacy and numeracy teachers already realise that important intrapersonal outcomes, for example, gaining self-confidence, go unreported. Reporting on these outcomes may go some way towards providing a more complete picture of the benefits of literacy and numeracy courses. However, it is recognised that how this should be achieved is problematic.

Reframing adult literacy and numeracy course outcomes: A social capital perspective, by Jo Balatti, Stephen Black & Ian Falk, will be available shortly from the NCVER website at <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.