



Good practice guide

Bringing a social capital approach into the teaching of adult literacy and numeracy

This good practice guide is based on research by Jo Balatti, Steve Black and Ian Falk, who examined how adult literacy and numeracy education and training can be delivered using a social capital approach. The guide describes strategies to assist vocational education and training (VET) practitioners to adopt this type of approach to their teaching, particularly the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

What is a social capital approach and what are social capital outcomes?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines social capital as ‘the networks together with the shared norms, values and understandings which facilitate cooperation with or amongst groups’. By a social capital approach to literacy and numeracy provision, Balatti and colleagues are referring to the ways in which networks are drawn on or created at the various stages of the literacy or numeracy program. ‘Networks’ means any formal or informal groupings of people with which the learners engage, including family, friends, special interest groups, government systems such as health, education and tax, employing bodies, and goods and services providers.

Research has found that, when teachers adopt a *social capital approach* in their literacy and numeracy teaching, the students themselves experience *social capital outcomes* from participating in courses, that is, participation draws upon *and* builds social capital.

By social capital outcomes Balatti, Black and Falk mean the changes that participants experience in the way they interact with members of their existing networks and also the changes in the types and numbers of networks they access or of which they become members. Furthermore and most importantly, these outcomes can improve participants’ own socioeconomic wellbeing, as well as that of the communities they belong to.

Factors that affect the nature of social capital outcomes are the existing social, cultural and human capital that individuals bring to the learning experience and the resources they can draw on in their community. The design of the learning—that is, where, when and how it is offered—also affects the quality of the learning experienced, including the kinds of social capital outcomes achieved.



This good practice guide is based on research undertaken for the NCVET publication *A new social capital paradigm for adult literacy: Partnerships, policy and pedagogy*, by Jo Balatti, Stephen Black and Ian Falk, and is available from the NCVET website at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2170.html>.

Bonding, bridging and linking ties in a social capital approach

A social capital approach to building learning communities emphasises the kinds of *bonding*, *bridging* and *linking* ties that teachers would like their learners to develop. Through these ties, learners will use existing knowledge and their identity resources—how they perceive themselves—to build new resources that may lead to improved socioeconomic wellbeing.

Bonding ties are the strong ties that build cohesion and a common purpose within the learning group. They require trust-building, a process which takes place through many interactions between all participants, including the teachers. Building trust requires encouraging people to get to know one another and creating a non-judgmental climate in which people feel safe to share life experiences and to make errors as they are learning. Bonding ties nurture a sense of belonging in a group. For example, Balatti, Black and Falk found in their study that a teacher of Indigenous students aimed to create an environment in which the students did not experience the same sense of marginalisation as they did in their daily lives.

Bridging ties are usually weak ties and are associated with the learner accessing new networks. Bridging ties require learners to interact with people who are not part of their usual networks but who are important in the learning experience because they are the means of access to new ideas, attitudes, beliefs and other important resources. By developing bridging ties, learners may begin to feel more part of the wider community. In their study, Balatti and colleagues illustrate how bridging ties can be developed when they write about one particular teacher who organised for her students to identify the location of the gyms, swimming pools and health clubs in the local area. The teacher then arranged an excursion to enable the students to make contact with the officials of these organisations.

Linking ties facilitate connections between individuals and institutions, systems and organisations. The kinds of resources required to make linking ties often entail know-how, connections and the confidence to actively engage with institutions when the need arises, for example, teaching people which websites to access and how to navigate and read them can increase access to important information and services.

What signals whether social capital outcomes have been achieved?

Social capital outcomes in learners are indicated by changes in:

- ✓ *their personal characteristics*, which include trust levels; beliefs about their capacity to influence their lives and those of others and to solve problems in their lives and in others'; and understanding people different from themselves
- ✓ *the structures of their networks*, which include the number and character of existing and new networks; the ways the learner keeps in touch with others in their network; and the nature of the relationships within their various networks
- ✓ *transactions occurring in their networks*, which include the support sought, received or given in the learner's network and the ways the learner negotiates and shares information and skills
- ✓ *types of network*, which include the activities undertaken with the main groups with which the learner interacts, the activities with the groups that are different from the learner's; and the links that learners have to institutions.

Key elements for incorporating a social capital approach into the teaching of literacy and numeracy

The research, which focused on literacy and numeracy teaching in the areas of personal financial literacy and the health and justice sectors, identified three key elements of a social capital approach. These were:

- ✓ the *partnerships* involved in the design and delivery of adult literacy and numeracy programs
- ✓ the *policies* that influence the kinds of partnerships possible
- ✓ the *pedagogy* that teachers use.

These three elements are interlinked, and they are each necessary for the development of literacy and numeracy using a social capital approach.

Partnerships in a social capital approach

Creating partnerships among different agencies and organisations and service providers in the delivery of education and training is in itself an act of social capital building—the process draws on existing networks and creates new ones. Effective partnerships develop when there is an important social policy issue or problem that can best be addressed by collaboration; when funding—which is a key factor in the development of partnerships—is available and ongoing; and when, through a partnership arrangement, those most in need of support can be reached.

The various configurations of players that can lead to learning and social capital outcomes from adult literacy and numeracy programs for both individuals and the community require partnerships at three levels. At the *macro* level partnerships are established between government departments and peak organisations or philanthropic groups. This study, for example, identified a partnership established between Reconciliation Australia and the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs—the National Indigenous Money Management Agenda (NIMMA) project—whose role is to examine and respond to the financial needs of Indigenous Australians.

At the *meso* (middle) level, we see partnerships between service providers and welfare groups—cross-sectoral partners—for example, the federally administered Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program (LLNP), where Centrelink and other job agencies refer job seekers to contracted literacy providers. And at the *micro* level, arguably the most crucial, partnerships are established ‘at the coal face’ between teachers, learners and community representatives; for example, the research for this study identified a health literacy course in Western Sydney involving a health worker, a TAFE literacy teacher, and Muslim women from the local Muslim women’s centre, working together in the classroom.

Notwithstanding the importance of community-level partnerships to effective literacy and numeracy and social capital outcomes, robust relationships across the various levels of partnership are also crucial to successful provision. For example, excellent relationships between community members, teachers and learners are meaningless if they are not supported by long-term funding allocated through a government department and mediated through the service provider. The research demonstrated that ‘whole of government’ or ‘linked up’ partnership approaches across government, industry, community groups and philanthropic organisations are the most effective means of getting the right sort of provision to the people for whom it is intended. Such partnerships are also dependent on effective policy at the various levels.

What makes partnerships work?

Partnerships are more likely to be successful in securing the desired outcomes if they:

- have common understandings of their joint purpose
- have common understandings of how to assess progress made towards achieving the common purpose
- bring with them the appropriate resources in terms of financial, social, cultural and physical capital to achieve the common purpose
- hold compatible philosophical positions with respect to their common purpose, while having respect for each other
- communicate well and work as part of a team.

Policy in social capital approaches

Policy is the often invisible but defining underpinning of the partnerships that produces the networks, which in turn draw on and build social capital. It provides the rules by which the practical strategies are played out. There are indications that the stronger the partnership base across policy bodies and sectors, the stronger the social capital that is built. This will influence the policy. Policy that ‘listens’ to the grassroots and has the capacity to adapt to local needs will be more effective.

Strategies for teaching from a social capital perspective

Teaching developed from a social capital perspective places the learner as a member of networks. These networks are: the learner group; their existing networks; and their potential new networks.

The choice of teaching strategies is influenced by two factors relating to the learners; these are also connected to the idea of networks. The first is the set of resources that the learners already possess by virtue of their networks. In this context, in applying a social capital perspective, teachers need to possess skills to:

- recognise the capital that learners bring to the group
- encourage learners to draw on those resources relevant to the learning experience
- manage those resources that are not relevant.

The second is the social capital outcomes that learners will acquire through the learning experience and which can enhance the ways they interact in their current networks or enable them to access new, useful networks.

The teacher's objective is to create conditions that maximise the opportunities for building learners' social capital. Below are teaching strategies that can be effective in developing social capital outcomes.

Learner group network—or the 'classroom'

Conceptualising the learner as a member of networks begins with teachers recognising that the group or class in which they are teaching is a new network for all participants, including themselves. It is probably the most important network from the teachers' perspective because it is the one that they can most directly influence. In this network learners acquire the new knowledge and identity resources they can draw on in their interactions inside and outside the class. Learning is the common purpose across this network, which can also be described as a learning community.

The learning community provides the safe environment in which learners feel they can make errors, play out new aspects of identity and practise new skills. Increased self-confidence—itself a social capital outcome—is an indicator of learning opportunities successfully being taken up by learners.

Case study: Health–literacy partnership for Muslim women

About the women

A partnership designed to address the literacy and health challenges faced by Muslim women was established between a Muslim women's centre, a metropolitan TAFE college and a local health service, with the women's centre using its networks to recruit the Muslim women. Twelve women enrolled in the course—most spoke Arabic and their proficiency in English varied, but they were different in terms of age, ethnicity and marital status.

About the course

The course covered healthy eating, exercise and stress relief. It was conducted according to a 'popular education' format, meaning that it was based on what the learners wanted to discuss and involved conversations, group work, and tapping into the knowledge and stories of the women themselves.

The course was taught by a literacy teacher and a health educator. The major role of the literacy teacher was to ensure that the teaching strategies were enabling the learners to learn; this included use of suitable vocabulary, group composition and activities.

The course focused on identifying social capital outcomes and their relationship to improving health practices, *and* literacy, with the physical layout of the classroom—a small room with one central table—playing a pivotal role in this by encouraging interaction within the group.

About the social capital outcomes

A number of the defining features of social capital were realised during the course. A growth in trust was evident, with the women beginning to discuss elements of their private lives, while bonding occurred, with some women referring to other members of the group as 'sisters'. A few of the women developed 'self-efficacy', that is, they recognised in themselves an ability to solve their own problems; for example, one woman discussed how she had managed her divorce process. There was also evidence of positive changes in the nature of existing relationships, with one woman recounting how previously she had felt alienated from her now mainly English-speaking children, but as a consequence of the course was now able to communicate with them more easily.

Teaching tips for successful learning communities

The approach adopted by the teacher towards his or her learning community influences both the social capital and the literacy and numeracy outcomes. The crucial elements here are to build relationships among learners, and between learners and teachers, and facilitate delivery through collaborations and co-teaching.

Fostering relationship-building

Teachers play an important role in the learning community by helping learners transform the way they see themselves and interact with others. Through their own contacts and networks, teachers also provide opportunities for learners to expand their networks. By promoting interaction between learners, teachers facilitate the development of stronger bonds within the new group and also change the way people share information and perceive themselves. Strategies teachers can adopt to build relationships in the learning group include:

- ✓ reducing the social distance between themselves and the learners, including sharing relevant material from their own lives with the learners
- ✓ minimising teacher-directed pedagogy and maximising learner input
- ✓ becoming part of small discussion groups, rather than merely monitoring them, and encouraging debate
- ✓ connecting with their learners by using humour, finding common ground and valuing the life experience that learners bring with them
- ✓ providing opportunities for peer learning by encouraging interactions among learners, including sharing experiences, group work, mentoring and buddy systems.

Case study: Workplace re-entry course

About the participants

The participants were job seekers or people over 45 years of age who were looking to gain skills to help them increase their job prospects. Fourteen learners, mostly aged over 40, commenced the course; all were parents and were from an English-speaking and low socioeconomic background. All but two were women, with most not having worked outside the home for many years. A wide range of written literacy skills and computer skills was represented in the group.

About the course

The course was a Certificate II in Business for Workplace Re-entry, delivered over an eight-week period. The teacher, who had substantial experience in teaching this course, became involved in the project because she wanted to improve the social capital building capacity of the training she delivered.

The teacher also wanted to include a ten-hour, non-assessable and non-compulsory financial literacy component because of the importance of improving the financial literacy of the course participants. Initially, the financial literacy component was delivered as an online self-paced package, in which the learners worked independently using headsets in a computer laboratory. The learners' reaction to this form of delivery was very negative. Almost immediately they felt disconnected from it, as the package referred to milestones that people should have achieved or be experiencing at different ages in order to achieve financial security in retirement.

Once the teacher had redesigned this component to be similar in approach to the rest of the course—allowing the learners to choose the topics of interest to them and involving group activities—the enthusiasm for the learning significantly improved.

About the social capital outcomes

Many of the social capital outcomes this course aimed for were achieved. There was a strong sense of camaraderie and team identity, encouraged by specific strategies implemented by the teacher, such as establishing an agreed code of conduct and creating a safe, supportive and respectful learning environment with the learners. The teacher also attributed the high completion rate for the course (13 learners completed) to the way the learners assisted each other in both formal and informal ways. Many learners commented on the fellowship they experienced within the group and on the way the learning experience had led to positive changes in their interactions outside the classroom, particularly with their families. Mentoring opportunities arose for some students, leading to profound effects on these learners' self-confidence.

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Co-teaching and other forms of collaborative delivery

Collaborative delivery can take the form of co-teaching, working with guest presenters or teaching with support staff. Co-teaching between teachers with literacy and numeracy expertise and others with expertise in specialist areas can lead to enriched learning experiences. In practice, collaborative forms of delivery represent informal partnerships, which over time may develop into more formal understandings. Benefits to students of co-teaching, many of which constitute the development of bridging ties, include:

- the knowledge they acquire about a specialist field
- the opportunity for them to get to know professionals they may never have met in their everyday lives or with whom they could feel uncomfortable interacting
- through the specialist teacher, familiarity with organisations, systems or professions that may lead to future contact
- observation of interactions between two or more professionals that present a model of sharing, robust discussion and collaboration.

Other kinds of collaboration involve the teacher inviting co-presenters into the classroom who bring with them resources in terms of life experience, expertise and networks that are valuable to the learners, for example, successful past students, who may also act as a role model or mentor.

Teaching tips using the learners' existing networks

- Use content that is relevant to everyday living (for example, improving eating practices at home, working with computers at home).
- Embed the teaching into other programs participants may be undertaking or into an existing activity.
- Draw on learners' life experiences.
- Set up the teaching so that other family members can participate, for example, a course for adults and a concurrent companion course for children
- Allow opportunities for family members or friends to be part of the course (for example, attend celebratory events).

Teaching strategies to promote participation in new networks

- Arrange for learning experiences to occur in out-of-class contexts that will be useful to the learners.
- Set tasks that require learners to interact with networks (organisations, community groups, service providers) they have not yet accessed.
- Invite people from potentially useful networks to co-teach or co-participate in the training.
- Foster the building of bridging (for example, arranging visits to a museum) and linking ties (for example, teaching people which websites to access and how to use them).



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