

# *Mapping community connections: in adult & community education*



Barry Golding  
School of Education, University of Ballarat  
[b.golding@ballarat.edu.au](mailto:b.golding@ballarat.edu.au)

Tasmanian ACE Conference, 15 November 2006



# Why are network relations timely in education in 2006?

- There has been a move away from dependence on formal and directive educational organisations.
- Networks have increasingly been used to describe learning transactions that occur beyond governments and schools at less public cost.
- There is a growth in lifelong & lifewide learning and the knowledge economy.



# Knowledge ...

Cohen, D & Prusak, L (2001) *In good company: how social capital makes organizations work*, Harvard Business School, Press, Boston, pp.66-67.

- Exists more in networks of individuals & organizations than in individuals themselves
- Is local, 'sticky' and contextual Davenport & Prusak 1998
- Is difficult to codify since much of it is tacit:

... which makes standardised curriculum, in formal sectors, based on a common body of knowledge - more problematic.



# Social capital (Productivity Commission 2003)

- has social networks and/or social norms as key elements
- trust is an additional element or a proxy for levels of social capital in a community
- is a resource that people can use to achieve certain objectives
- cannot be owned by individuals: it is always situated and shared.



Social capital is ... Cohen & Prusak 2001, p.4.

*‘... the stock of active connections among people ... that bind members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible.’*



# A caution that... Cohen & Prusak, 2001, pp.14 & 15.

- ‘The ties that bind can also blind.’
- There is a ‘dark side of social capital’.
- ‘Closed’ networks can involve ‘clannishness, mutual delusion and normalisation of deviance.’



# Learning & social capital (Burt 1999)

- Since information circulates more within than between groups, networks with closure may not be a good source of social capital or for diffusion of ideas.
- Individuals able to build bridges that span *structural holes* in networks may be more important in learning organisations than people who forge strong bureaucratic links.



# All this becomes important in an age of:

after Cohen & Prusak 2001, pp.15-21.

- **Interdependence:** No one knows it all: networks can enhance our necessarily limited knowledge.
- **The engaged organisation:** Social capital is critical to the new (and less mechanistic) nature of learning & work.
- **Change:** Volatility can erode social capital (that depends on stable connections & agreements about what is necessary learning).
- **Virtuality:** Social capital defines the natural limits of virtual learning & work.



# Bridging social capital

- There is an association between structural holes and learning.
- People with more diverse bridges rather than people with more similar links do better in learning organisations.
- Bonding social capital is useful but can be insular. Bridging social capital connects dissimilar groups, is harder to create but is more valuable in enhancing learning.



# Social network analysis ...

Cohen & Prusak 2001, pp.74-76

- looks beyond formal organisational structure
- helps identify players who help (& hinder) networks
- provides new insights into how knowledge moves in organisations. Therefore ...
  1. Heightening awareness of existing networks in communities is the best investment in networks.
  2. 'First do no harm': understand where your valuable networks are.



# *Networks & communities*

(as in ACE providers): After Cohen & Prusak 2001, p.55

*'... are at once the source and shape of social capital in organisations [and] between people.'*

- Analysing them ... reveals information about existing social capital.
- Supporting them ... encourages social capital growth.
- They are the prime source ... of membership & commitment in organisations.
- They are the places ... where people feel most at home & responsible for one another
- They identify sites ... for organisational learning & the main place where knowledge develops.



# Can we measure & map it?

- There is no commonly agreed or simple measure of aggregate social capital.
- Mutuality within organisations & communities (*bonding* social capital) on its own is a poor measure of a community's ability to adjust to change, or of the ability to learn
- So how do we also chart *bridging* social capital and *missing* links?



# Different perspectives and contexts create different diagrams

*Three main variations:*

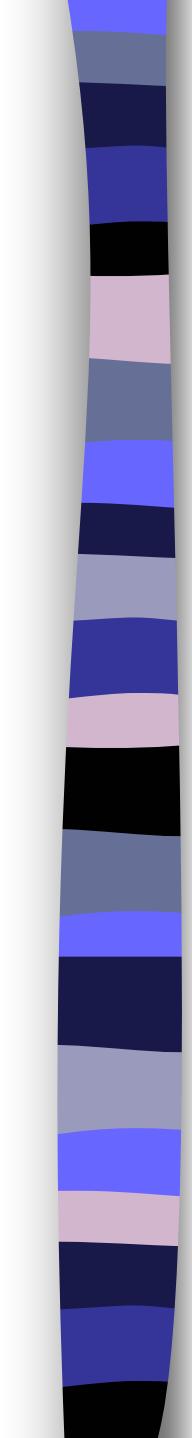
- From one organisation outwards \*\*\*
- Within and between parts and individuals in an organisation
- From an individual perspective (e.g. as a learner, volunteer, person, family member, worker).

*See the A3 Sheet Handout \*\*\**



# Networks diagrams are useful in ACE & VET because they ...

- delineate sites for learning in geographic localities & regions; organisations and communities; ethnic & cultural groups.
- allow for a teasing out of complex inter-relationships: within & between places, organisations & groups
- illustrate the nature, strength and *lack* of linkages, blockages and competition
- recognise that individuals have different perceptions & perspectives of the same links.



Network diagrams are particularly powerful ...because they are illustrative and respectful of:

- individual perceptions
- different themes & perspectives
- actual relationships
- the situation at a particular time
- different vantage points
- the value of social capital.



# Some general findings (1)

- Excellent for conceptualising structural, sectoral & geographic discontinuities
- All are individual and different.
- Links are indicative of trust & social capital from one perspective at a particular time.
- Local learning networks typically occur on the scale of towns or suburbs.
- Networks are a function of gender, age and experience.



## Some general findings (2)

- Different diagrams result from different organisational types & starting points
- Experience and time creates extensive networks. [Short time frames in modern organisations limit the ‘ripening’ of trust’]
- Artificially & funded networks are very difficult to establish and sustain.
- Weak, blocked and missing links are particularly critical.
- The diagrams create dialogue.



# Some anecdotes from research

- A Victorian neighbourhood house & learning centre next door
- Katherine (NT) black & white networks
- Victorian learning centres with poor 'bonds' but good 'bridges' (& vice versa)
- Prison learning centres
- Functional & inter-organisational relationships (Fire & SES)



# Judicious advice for encouraging networks

Cohen & Prusak 2001, p.78.

- Fund face to face meetings & network activity [but money can distort networks].
- Learning and trust is only developed with sufficient time & space.
- We all need encouragement to legitimise our informal and formal networks.



# Social capital and the Web

Cohen & Prusak 2001, pp.172-181.

- Electronic networks alone do not create either community or collaboration.
- Absence of norms & trust are the greatest barrier to organisations using the internet to build social capital.
- Many important 'vibrations' are missing in an on-line environment.
- There are social capital costs of virtuality.
- Balancing the traditional (human) with the virtual are essential.



# Network diagrams are ...

- quick, efficient, replicable and ethically defensible, if used sensitively
- excellent at establishing context
- most effective in suburbs, neighbourhoods & the smallest towns and organisations
- invaluable in situations where organisational and functional informality, complexity and ambiguity increases
- excellent even in the most loosely coupled organisations
- important guides to reach & social capital.



## In conclusion, network diagrams:

- have great practical potential in ACE contexts
- are difficult to qualitatively or **qualitatively compare** without full knowledge of the informant role and of the network context
- reveal the absence or weakness of some bonding & bridging links
- are indicative of reach & social capital.



Questions?

Comments?