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Shifting shadows in post modern communities

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Postmodern society frequently presents new technologies and ways of doing things. The definition of community has been reshaped by the impact of globalisation. Distances have been reduced by people’s ability to access various types of technology. Many nations foster Lifelong Learning because education is believed to be ‘one of the principal means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development’ (Delors 1996: un). Networking among communities and/or stakeholders links social and educational resources. In Victoria, initiatives such as the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) have resulted in networks of local stakeholders to scaffold the school to work transition. Schools, Adult Community Education (ACE) providers and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers have networked to provide alternative pathways to further education or work for young people in years 11 and 12. However, despite the intent of lifelong learning to overcome exclusion and increase social capital, Bauman (1998) indicates that the freedoms of postmodernity may result in feelings of powerlessness, as previously secure spaces become destabilised. This paper, drawing on the theories of Bauman, discusses some consequences that the shifting of local and global boundaries has on communities and asks if lifelong learning meets the challenges of postmodernity.

Keywords: community, boundaries, globalisation, lifelong learning, postmodernity.

Introduction

The use of the word ‘community’ is prevalent in the media and among individuals. It is heard in reference to rural communities, when fans speak of football club communities or principals speak of their school communities. Etienne Wenger (1998) refers to ‘Communities of Practice’. Many, especially young, people might think that the concept of community is new, as it is seemingly presented as panacea. The word community appears to be used randomly in a wide range of contexts to the extent that Bauman questions the usage of it through reference to Hobsbawn who observed that the term ‘community’ had been ‘used ... indiscriminately ... when communities in the sociological sense became hard to find in real life’ (Bauman 2001: 15).

Is there an emphasis on the creation and maintaining of communities? Are they a solution to all that ails the global world? This paper, drawing on the theories of Bauman, intends to briefly discuss some consequences that the shifting of local and global boundaries has on postmodern communities.

During previous research I found that rural communities had started to disintegrate with the introduction of the motor car and other new technologies that enabled the farming of large acreages with minimal people-power. This consequence reflects a tenet that appears to underpin Bauman’s work, and is best explained by the use of Newton’s third law of motion – “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”. In the case of
farming communities – productivity increased while the density of the population and a sense of community diminished.

It is suggested that it is not only within rural communities that an equal and opposite reaction occurs. It can also occur amongst the intersection of technology, globalisation, lifelong learning and postmodernity. This paper intends to explore that intersection by discussion of the following:

- Globalisation and Technology – what is the impact on daily life?
- Lifelong Learning – is there a downside?
- Shifting Boundaries – have they created a space?
- Communities – what do they look like?
- Summary – among the shadows.

Globalisation and Technology – what is the impact on daily life?

Technology has resulted in different ways of doing things (Franklin: 1992). People no longer think local, they think global. Goods are imported and exported between countries relatively quickly. Our modern day mobility reduces distance ‘depending on the speed with which it may be overcome’ (Bauman 1998: 12). Distance is not only negotiated by cars, planes and trains. Advances in information technology have made information almost ‘instantaneously available throughout the globe’ (Bauman 1998: 15).

However Bauman (1998: 2) warns that globalization ‘divides as much as it unites; it divides as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe’. Bauman indicates that what ‘appears as globalization for some means localization for others....[an] integral part of the globalizing process is progressive spatial segregation, separation and exclusion’ (Bauman 1998: 2,3). Others stress that globalization is not ‘a single process but of set of processes that operate simultaneously and unevenly on several levels and in various dimensions’ (Steger 2003: 36).

Bauman (1998) draws on Dunlap to explain the tension within global companies. Dunlap stresses that the individual local worker is of secondary consideration to the organisation. When decisions are made about the company (as opposed to within the company) they are made by the investors and if the company is deemed to be better advantaged in another geographical location the investors have the right to move the company. However the repercussions of such a decision are not necessarily borne by the investors. The loss of a company that provides employment for local residents and/or trade for local business has a profound effect on the community. Bauman (1998:8) warns that the ‘company is free to move; but the consequences of the move are bound to stay’. Consider what the closure of Ford’s car manufacturing plant in Norlane will do to the families of employees and Geelong.

Christine Schulz: Shifting shadows in post modern communities
Another example of tension between investors and their company is evidenced by the commercialism of childcare. In early 2008 ABC Learning’s share price plunged as investors withdrew support fearing that the company’s financial foundations were not solid (Carson and Burrow 2008). Two communities were affected by the actions of investors. One was the community of employees and suppliers, the other was the community created by the parents and children who used the centres.

In a globalised world there has been a ‘disconnection of power from obligations’ (Bauman 1998: 9). Yet, in a community, obligation to each other is an important synthesizing factor because communities are social safety nets of people living in groups (Bauman 2001).

Technology is an ‘agent of power and control’ (Franklin 1992: p. 13). Since the industrial revolution there are less holistic technologies and more prescriptive technologies. For example the craftsman that produced items such as pottery were involved in the process from beginning to end and made choices as they were required (or sensed) during the creative process. The craftsman had total control over the product specialization. In contrast, prescriptive technology is process specialization. It specifies the production methods. It involves discipline, planning, organization and command, all predetermined by others. Franklin (1992: p. 23) refers to prescriptive technologies as ‘designs for compliance’. As new technologies become available people’s behaviour changes. For example many people now carry mobile phones and no longer have a home telephone landline. Many people no longer send letters, they email. However technology (the way things are done) has developed in two ways. One is pertinent to work-related technologies e.g. the computer has replaced the electric typewriter which replaced the mechanical typewriter. The second is control-related developments that increase the control over the operation of the task being performed e.g. computers that control mass manufacturing of ‘widgets’, so they are all exactly the same without any individuality. In this context technology is both enabling and limiting at the same time (Franklin 1992).

Both globalization and technology cast shadows, in the case of globalization it is the localizing or excluding of those without access or involvement in major decision making and in the case of technology it is the control which a group with power is able to exert on a group without power.

**Lifelong Learning – is there a downside?**

In 1996 the International Commission on Education emphasised their belief that the education of today’s young people is of critical importance to ensure individuals are able to build relationships with each other, so that they can collaborate as part of a group on both a local and global level (Delors 1996). Since the OECD’s policy commitment to Lifelong Learning in 1996, Australia has considered the inclusion of Lifelong Learning when formulating policy (Watson 2003; Watson 2004).
Most discussions about lifelong learning tend to focus on the positive outcomes of social cohesion and social capital. However there are those such as Bagnall (2004) who raise concerns about the ethical appropriateness of imposing lifelong learning on a population, regardless of the expected outcomes. It is also timely to consider that not all outcomes of lifelong learning might be positive.

Along with formal and informal learning, incidental learning is another way learning occurs. Incidental learning occurs in everyday experience when information is absorbed. Often there is no awareness that learning has taken place (Marsick and Watkins 1990). As Longworth (2003) argued, learning in a globalised, technological world can be absorbed through the powerful images and information heard and seen. If those images convey attitudes and prejudices which promote exclusion, social disunity or even apathy the subsequent incidental learning may undermine the original intent of lifelong learning. This is another strong example of how technology could be used as 'an agent of power and control' and also of 'change' (Franklin 1992: 3).

Subsequently technology can cast a shadow over lifelong learning and the harmony that it was intended to facilitate in the global village.

**Shifting boundaries – have they created a space?**

Bauman (1998) indicates that once information passed quickly within a community (which assisted in keeping the community united) and slowly between communities, which assisted in sustaining the individuality of communities (see diagram 1). Now communities are disappearing because 'inter-community communication has no advantage over inter-communal exchange, if both are instantaneous' (see diagram 2) (Bauman 1998: 15).
Globalisation results in fragmented communities. Distance is simultaneously reduced due to advancement in the technology of communication and maximised as the space between cause and effect increases. Boundaries no longer curtail cause and effect.

However Bauman (2001) emphasises that boundaries may shift, but they do not disappear. For example the creation of a capitalist society freed workers from their communal subsistence, only to subsequently tie them to an employer. Franklin (1990) says that the industrial revolution 'freed' craftsmen from the freedom of creating from their imagination only to require them to create according to a prescribed method. However although workers were freed from communal subsistence they also lost the benefits of community living and working. Despite employers and workers needing each other in a mutual relationship, the power in such relationships depends on the amount of fear held by either party about the longevity, viability or stability of the relationship. If one party is experiencing fear and uncertainty, they do not hold the power in the relationship. In stable relationships parties are more able to negotiate as it is in their long term, best interest to do so (Bauman 2001). Bauman’s point of view is put this way by Smith (1999: 114) ‘power flows to social groups who can influence or control the sources of uncertainty’.

Christine Schulz: Shifting shadows in post modern communities
Bauman (2001) indicates that the physical place people live in is also disintegrating due to factors such as relationship breakdowns when franchises and department stores replace local, intimate services. The relationship between ‘known’ customers and ‘known’ service providers is no longer a safe, friendly and binding one. Bauman says

'gone are most of the steady and solidly dug-in orientation points which suggested a social setting that was more durable, more secure and more reliable than the timespan of an individual life' (Bauman 2001: 47).

Many independent religious schools reflect the freedom of postmodernity by being touted as ‘an expression of freedom of choice and freedom of religion’ (Bachelard 2008). However in one instance, critics argued that religious schools were dividing the community by not delivering the same curriculum that was delivered at secular schools. A psychologist/educationalist was quoted as saying ‘Values are the foundation of human bonding. If we don’t have agreed values that everyone can understand and respect, that are common, it leads to a whole lot of disparate sub-groups that are suspicious of each other’ (Bachelard 2008). This point of view was supported by an ex OECD education chief who said that education was intended to create ‘social cohesion. What we are doing with our system is increasingly dividing people up’ (Bachelard 2008). This is another example of Bauman’s assertion that globalisation is divisive and that when boundaries are removed, others replace them. In attempting to shift boundaries to create social cohesion, shadows of exclusion and disunity are created.

Communities – what do they look like?

Communities might be social safety nets of people living in groups or networks of professional like-minded stakeholders (Bauman 2001). However are many types of togetherness that are experienced in daily life and not all types of ‘togetherness’ are the same as ‘being together’, rather the opposite might be the case (Bauman 1995). Often ‘togetherness’ is simply a statement of the common purpose that explains why people come together, such as to travel on an aircraft. When large crowds of people are gathered ‘together’, individuals may not want to form relationships with others, even if fleeting and temporary, as the relationship may turn out to be unpleasant or unsettling.

The government has undertaken a collaborative community approach to lifelong learning by promoting the use of networks to facilitate learning outcomes. Networking of communities and/or stakeholders links social and educational resources. In Victoria initiatives such as the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) have resulted in networks of local stakeholders being formed to scaffold the school to work process for young people. Schools, Adult Community Education (ACE) providers and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers have networked to provide alternative pathways to further education or work for young people in years 11 and 12. It is perceived that there is great benefit in using partnerships and collaboration between stakeholders (governments, employers, education and training providers and communities) in

Christine Schulz: Shifting shadows in post modern communities

However Bauman (2001: 4) says that there 'is a price to be paid for the privilege of 'being in a community'’. Often various freedoms are given up in conforming to the behaviours required (or demanded) as criteria of belonging to that particular community. He indicates that the values of both 'freedom' and 'security' cannot generally be simultaneously experienced by a member of a community. Bauman (2001) highlights the (so far unresolved) complexity of community members who wish to display their individualism and yet still experience belonging. Community members have the freedom (of choice) to choose to be bound by certain guidelines, which in turn, results in the security of being with others of like mind. Such a choice might involve relinquishing certain freedoms to move from a place of little or no security into a community offering security. When individuals move between communities they may find that some freedoms might be regained while others are given up.

Bauman (2001) argues that advances in technology have resulted in communities not being able to use geographical distance from one another as a safety barrier to maintain their inherent being. Improved transport technologies have made distances easier to travel, in shorter times, with less inconvenience.

On the other hand it is possible that members of certain types of 'community' (those being of like-mind and values) are scattered geographically. Due to information technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet, those community members are able to communicate on an as required or desired basis. The geographically dispersed communities may be long-lasting or short term as likeminded people come together to address, support, protest or resist certain issues (such as coastal development). Bauman (2001) calls support groups and self help groups that regularly come together 'aesthetic' communities. People are able to opt in and out of them without explanation and 'do not truly bind' (Bauman 2001: 71).

Bauman (2001: 27) says that at the time of the industrial revolution the 'war declared on community was waged in the name of freeing the individual from the inertia of the mass' however he asserts that the 'genuine even if unspoken end of that war was very much the opposite of the declared goal: to take apart the pattern and role-setting powers of community so that the human units stripped of their individuality could be condensed into the labouring mass'.

Shared long term memories and experiences are part of the foundation of a community (Bauman 2001). In a world where technologies underpin change and people move frequently, shadows fall on the ability of communities to survive.
Summary – among the shadows

This discussion started by highlighting an assertion that appears to underpin Bauman’s work – for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

The global village was once a decentralised society made up of many small communities. Often the centre of the community was a church or school. People travelled relatively short distances by foot, bike or horse to purchase food and other necessities of life. However new technologies facilitated globalisation which destabilised local communities.

During the industrial revolution ‘the emancipation of some called for the suppression of others’ (Bauman 2001: 26). Workers were ‘freed’ from a workplace where they had control to be employed in prescriptive technologies in which they had no control and which limited their creativity (Bauman 2001; Franklin 1992).

Lifelong learning is now considered to be a way of ensuring that the globalised world lives in inclusive harmony. However not all people are able to access educational opportunities while there are others who do not wish to. There is evidence to indicate that education and training is more likely to be taken up by those who are already engaged in education or have an environment that encourages learning (Watson 2004; Field 2005; Johnston 1998; Watson 1999; Tuijnman and Van der Kamp 1992). One of the biggest challenges to implementing a policy of lifelong learning is to ensure a universal participation in education and training without widening the gap between the marginalised and the advantaged (Kearns 1999). Additionally, there is the consideration of the ethical implications of imposing lifelong learning on the population, regardless of the altruistic intent (Bagnall 2004).

Bauman believes that those who have the greatest influence in any culture are those ‘with the best access to knowledge, wealth and other means of power’ (Smith 1999: 20). Both technology and lifelong learning are tools of power, but as Longworth (2003) warns, incidental learning may promote disunity and exclusion, depending on who has control of it.

The inertia of technology and globalisation is powerful, as is the interaction between them. Lifelong learning is intended to create unity and cohesion, but there are still those in the shadows either by choice or circumstance. Boundaries have shifted but they have not disappeared. Postmodernity may give freedom, but not to all.

References:


