

THE QUEENSLAND INDIGENOUS DRIVER LICENSING PROGRAM, COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATORS, AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Non-possession of a driver's licence is a major contributor to Australian Indigenous incarceration rates. Key participants in a multi-faceted program addressing this problem describe and analyse rationales and strategies of the program. The program offers individual participants immediate benefits (a licence), with communities being offered enhanced skills, educative capacities, the ability to access resources, and social and economic sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

A very low proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland have a driver's licence. Non-possession of a licence, and driving whilst unlicensed, have a range of adverse consequences for individuals and communities. Both situations constitute significant barriers to employment, and contribute to disproportionate involvement in vehicle crashes, high levels of fatality and serious injury in those crashes, and high rates of incarceration (CARRS-Q and Queensland Transport, 2003). A major "whole-of-government" initiative seeks to address the factors contributing to this low proportion of licence holding. It does so by establishing partnerships between communities and both government and non-government agencies to develop a multi-faceted program to enable Indigenous people of all ages to obtain and maintain a driver's licence. This paper focuses on the development within the program of the position and role of community educators in addressing an array of issues arising around obtaining and maintaining licences. At the outset, we point out that what follows blends a description of what is already in place, and a strategic model that is guiding further activities.

There are few studies of lifelong learning in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are largely marginalised in the social contexts in which lifelong learning, as a field of practice, has developed. We argue, however, that the array of ongoing formal and experiential learning involved in the program allows the program to be seen as an example of lifelong learning. The fact that it arises in a context which is largely neglected in lifelong

learning makes it an important example, both as a potential model, and for its capacity to highlight limitations in the field.

It is important to make our own positions in relation to this program clear. One of us (Vick) is Chair of the body responsible for developing the educational components of the program, while the other (Avery) is responsible for the day-to-day development and implementation of the program. Our account of the program is based on our involvement. While our substantive claims about the program are documented in materials released through the program to potential participants, most of this material is not publicly available. Moreover, it does not serve to independently corroborate our claims in this paper, since much of it has been written by us, although it has been endorsed by others involved in the program.

SITUATING THE PROGRAM IN RELATION TO LIFELONG LEARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and especially those in remote areas, both as individuals and as communities, are largely overlooked in studies of lifelong learning. This can be seen, for instance, in the range of topics addressed in Danaher, Macpherson, Nouwens, and Orr (2004), or Willis and Carden (2004), to take two, contrasted, substantial collections of writing in the field. They are also marginalised in, or effectively excluded from, many of the contexts in which lifelong learning is seen to be demanded or sustained. Thus, for example, Evans and Neimeyer (2004) see employment as a key concern in lifelong learning; Lambier (1985) documents the importance of information technology (IT)-based learning and of virtual learning communities in lifelong

learning; and Chapman and Aspin (1997) and Jarvis (2004) document the ongoing importance of formal learning institutions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – especially those in remote communities – are underemployed, have minimal access to information and communications technologies (ICTs), and low participation rates in formal educational institutions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004).

While lifelong learning is usually taken as an unquestioned good, it can also be seen as a problematic extension of governmentalism (e.g., Ecclestone, 1999). Such a view perceives lifelong learning as an extension of surveillance and regulation and, in so far as it is related to the needs of a changing economy, an extension of government's role in organizing social life around the needs of capitalism. In the context of Indigenous Australia, lifelong learning can easily be seen as yet another colonialist venture – a further move in a long history of attempts to assimilate Indigenous people into “white” society and mentality, similar to the ways in which schooling is often seen (Bond, 2004). With this in mind, and despite our positive view of the Licensing Program, we are acutely mindful of questions of power, and of the destructive consequences of many seemingly benign initiatives. However, we juxtapose this “negative” caution with a more positive view that stresses the role of government in building capacities that do not arise spontaneously out of daily life (Hunter, 1994) – a matter we see as especially important in the context of communities that have been seriously incapacitated by the ravages of colonial history.

THE PROGRAM: HISTORY, STRATEGIES, AND PRACTICES

The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Driver's Licensing Project arose from a recognition that a large proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drivers, especially in the more rural and remote parts of North Queensland, did not hold a current driver licence, and that this constituted a problem (CARRS-Q and Queensland Transport, 2003).

In late 2003, a Mobile Indigenous Licensing Team was established, involving Queensland Police and Queensland Transport, to deliver licence testing in (mainly, but not exclusively) remote Indigenous communities. In mid-2004 a whole-of-government body, involving senior representatives from departments of Transport, Police, Justice and Attorney General, Corrective

Services, Education and Training, Emergency Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, and Premier and Cabinet was formed to develop a more comprehensive strategy to address the range of barriers to Indigenous people obtaining driver licences. Three distinct but inter-related spheres of action were established: licence testing, education, and evaluation of the project.

The educational sphere has incorporated a diverse array of initiatives. A register of existing licence-related programs was established (Queensland Transport, 2004), and a range of such programs in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, schools, community organizations, prisons, and youth detention centres was identified and included in the register. These programs were evaluated, on the basis of available documentation, for the cultural appropriateness of their pedagogy and content, and for their potential either for adaptation, sustainability, and ownership at local community level, or for wider adoption by interested agencies. Gaps were identified in both the availability of appropriate programs, and in the materials required to address the full range of barriers to obtaining a licence, especially for people with limited literacy skills. Where necessary, materials were, and are being, developed to address licence-related issues – using both print and digital media. Such issues include dealing with outstanding fines that precluded getting a licence, securing legally adequate evidence of identity, and maintaining or (in the case of drivers who had had their licences suspended) recovering their licences. These materials have been, and are being, distributed by the Mobile Licensing Team and by post and electronic circulation lists among agency and community networks.

A key component of the program's broad educational strategy for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is the development of community-based educator positions and roles. This follows the findings of the initial consultative research which showed that there is a long history of community resistance to programs which are seen as outside impositions, and that key members of many communities were adamant that they should take a central and controlling role in the development of community-based initiatives to address licence related issues (CARRS-Q and Queensland Transport, 2003). The development of such community-based educator positions and roles is currently under negotiation with several communities, at the request of those

communities. Engaging members of communities is a complex and ongoing task, and it would be rash to attempt to predict the outcomes of these negotiations. However, previous research (CARRS-Q & Queensland Transport, 2003), and preliminary discussions with communities, suggest some likely lines of development. It appears, for example, that while it is likely that one individual will assume the role of the educator and take responsibility for developing the role, there are core groups of people within communities who will participate and engage with the challenge of building a learning community. A community-based educator will help draw in such other members, including those who may be hesitant, or who may be intimidated by the forms of involvement with government agencies that the work might entail. It also seems likely that community members, including likely community educators, will play a crucial role in identifying meaningful training pathways for themselves as they prepare for ongoing roles that will support community members across the driver-licensing cycle. Furthermore, in carrying out their educative activities, these people will either work with, or take overlapping roles with, driver trainers, Indigenous Justices of the Peace, workplace trainers and assessors, and others in the community with relevant roles or capacities.

In this context, the role of government and other agencies is to provide organizational and logistical support; assist community educators to develop skills, knowledge, and networks; provide information about existing resources and programs that communities might wish to borrow from and adapt; and contribute to development of additional resources. Additional support might take the form of short- to medium-term financial support, and development of community knowledge of other possible sources of ongoing support, e.g., small-business development support, or the appointment of community-based educators as adjunct staff to TAFE institutes.

The role of the community-based driver licensing educator is emerging as twofold. First, it is to provide support, instruction, and information to community members to enable them to understand the driver licensing cycle, from establishing evidence of identity, through knowledge of road rules and practical driving skill, to knowing how to maintain or recover a licence once it is obtained. This aspect of the role will be supported by the various resources discussed above, as well as by training and other forms of support to the community educators

themselves. Second, it is to facilitate access services to obtain a licence. This entails the development of greater knowledge and confidence on the part of community members in dealing proactively and effectively with government agencies.

The principles underpinning the approach to education within the licensing project at both agency and community educator levels include:

- fostering learning at varying levels, from highly specific to deep learning;
- using culturally appropriate pedagogy, including oral and hands-on practical instruction, and a mix of community language and English, where appropriate;
- enhancing English literacy as a means of facilitating improved capacities to deal with, and take advantage of, opportunities in mainstream society;
- using appropriate materials and other resources;
- providing distributed rather than single-site learning opportunities.

The approach to assessment is congruent with these principles. It seeks to:

- involve all learners in assessing their learning;
- incorporate both community cultural values and broader competencies;
- use multiple sources of information to assess learning initiatives that are supported by the individual community or cluster of communities;
- use the results of assessment to facilitate and measure learning that will support the customisation of training packages and assessment procedures.

This framework, we suggest, provides a solid foundation from which government, community and non-government organizations can collaborate to meet specific local needs where appropriate. It goes hand-in-hand with an approach to providing licence-related education that is based on communities themselves determining the scope of the responsibilities, the institution location, and the financial sustainability strategies for such community-based educator positions or roles. This recognises the generic importance of the issue in remote communities, and the importance of concrete (rather than ideological) self-determination at the community level for

ensuring sustainability and viability, and for developing community social capital. It also recognises the complexity and idiosyncrasy of local contexts and the range of other issues that particular communities might seek to articulate with licence-related matters.

(POTENTIAL) OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

It is clearly too early in the life of the program to make strong claims about outcomes, although it is possible to demonstrate some, to indicate the potential outcomes that might reasonably be expected, and to consider the senses in which these outcomes might be considered beneficial. One direct, tangible outcome that can be claimed already is a reduction in the number of unlicensed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drivers. Our estimates indicate that there were around 9000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland driving without a licence when the Mobile Indigenous Licensing Team was formed. The work of the team over the past 18 months has resulted in over 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people obtaining licences.

A second tangible area in which the program should produce significant outcomes is in the provision of educational programs. Government, community groups and non-government agencies have previously developed and implemented a number of programs and/or initiatives to improve licensing and retention rates in communities (Queensland Transport, 2004). However, our evaluations of the documentation from these organizations show that such programs have characteristically been piecemeal, one-off, short-term, or unsustainable. Moreover, relatively few have been run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves. We confidently anticipate that the program described in this paper will result in the development of a more comprehensive and systematic network of licence-related educational programs. Some of this is occurring systemically through the involvement of relevant agencies (e.g., Department of Education & Training, and the Queensland Department Corrective Services) in the program; some is occurring at the level of specific institutions (e.g., Barrier Institute of TAFE) within these agencies; and early inquiries from non-government agencies indicate that other initiatives are building on existing work.

These two primary, tangible outcomes are likely to generate outcomes in at least three areas. First, the reduction in unlicensed driving will, in itself, reduce the number of offences that currently contribute to high incarceration rates. Further, the development of a network of recognisable, effective programs will provide magistrates with viable, non-carceral sentencing options for people appearing before them charged with licence-related offences. Second, it is strongly expected that the reduction in the number of unlicensed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drivers will lead to a reduction in the incidence and severity of road trauma involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Queensland Transport data, analysed as part of establishing our procedures for evaluating outcomes, show that unlicensed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drivers are substantially over-represented in road traffic crashes and, in particular, in crashes involving serious injuries or death. We expect an increase in licence holding to result in a reduction in the incidence and severity of crashes. Third, both possession of a driver's licence, and any improvements in literacy made during the process of preparing to secure a licence address, removes barriers to employment. So that it seems reasonable to expect the program to have some flow-on effects in employment and economic wellbeing.

The benefits of these developments can be seen from at least two perspectives. From Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, we all want our communities to be strong, healthy, and sustainable, and community members to be and to feel empowered. Reducing the number of incarcerations and injuries will improve health and social wellbeing of our communities. Increasing access to employment offers prospects of improved financial resources and economic independence and sustainability. Providing opportunities for successfully conducting relations with government (e.g., through the work of the community-based educators and through the experience of actually obtaining a licence and resolving issues to do with previous unpaid fines), can contribute tangibly to a broader agenda of reconciliation, and to a greater capacity to tap the benefits of Australian citizenship (Moore & Brooks, 2000; Morphy & Sanders, 2001).

From a governmental perspective, the high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drivers without licences constitutes a policy, administrative, and fiscal problem through incarcerations, road trauma,

dysfunctionality of communities, and difficulties in relations with remote communities in particular and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations more generally. This program offers realistic prospects of moderating some of these problems and, in the process, of reducing some fiscal pressures and achieving some positive (e.g., justice related) policy targets. From a perspective of democratic polity and citizenship, the program is instituting more open, flexible operations within government. It is developing constructive approaches to relations with a significant and massively marginalised and disadvantaged population. The program is making spaces in which people can listen and respond to the voices of this usually silenced minority. And it is developing approaches to government which seek to foster viable self-sustainable communities rather than communities of dependency.

THE LICENSING PROGRAM AND LIFELONG LEARNING

The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Driver Licensing Program can readily be seen to fall within the broad field of lifelong learning. First, it embodies many of what Tuijnman and Boström (2002) and Jarvis (2004), among others, identify as key characteristics of lifelong learning: it engages people in learning across the lifespan, addresses matters of detailed specific knowledge (e.g., road rules), technical skills (driving performance to meet the licence examination criteria), procedural knowledge (e.g., how to access government services and resources, how to deal with government agencies), and 'deeper' understandings (e.g., of the connections between licensing and other aspects of social wellbeing and harm). Second, through the development of community-based educational strategies, it embodies the approach to partnerships and the goals of developing grassroots sustainability and responsibility identified by Chapman and Aspin (1997) as characteristics of lifelong learning as an area of policy and governmental practice. Third, by developing the roles and positions of community based-educators through extended responsive discussions with community representatives, it incorporates the principle of integrating learning initiatives into broader ongoing community-based activities and structures, and encouraging local communities themselves to take the initiative to develop possibilities and take up emergent opportunities,

which Stein (2002) sees as a significant aspect of lifelong learning. Fourth, by supporting community members to work with others across communities and with government and non-government agencies; by enhancing the knowledge, skills, networks, and confidence of key members of communities through the development of community-based educators; the program contributes to the building of community capacity and networks which Field (2005), Kilpatrick, Field, and Falk (2003), Koper, et al. (2005); and Kral and Falk (2004) refer to as social capital, which they associate with lifelong learning.

Further, and despite (or, perhaps, even because of) the relative marginalisation of Indigenous communities from the discussion and practice of lifelong learning, we suggest that this program, potentially, constitutes an important model for the cultivation of lifelong learning in contexts of critically severe disadvantage. In part, it does this through its networking and partnerships, and its capacity to empower individuals and communities and build social capital. In part, it does it through its development of an educational approach which is well grounded in its social contexts, encompasses immediate functional needs, and establishes modes of learning with a strong potential for self-sustaining growth.

Considering this program as an example of lifelong learning has significant implications for broader understandings of the field. First, the fact that such programs among such critically marginalised populations are virtually absent from the field highlights the extent to which the discourse and practice of lifelong learning can be colonised by a nexus of government, business, and economic policy agendas. Second, the tensions for government agencies between enabling and determining roles, and between community needs and established modes of delivery, point to the ease with which even programs intended to address community needs can be assimilated into external intervention. This highlights the vulnerability of the transformative potentials of lifelong learning. Third, and less pessimistically, the program points to the possibilities of partnerships in which more powerful partners demonstrate both restraint (in dictating terms and agendas) and openness to agendas lying outside their own immediate and obvious fields of responsibility and action. For example, agencies such as those associated with transport, and police, are not normally seen as educative agencies. It also points to the importance of constantly pushing

the boundaries of established understandings of lifelong learning's potential to build social justice and social capital that will encompass those groups that are least accessible to such initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander drivers who do not hold a driver licence is a source of harm to both individuals and communities. The Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Driver Licensing program is developing community-based education to address this problem. The strategies, range of learning, and likely outcomes embodied in this program make it an important example of lifelong learning. The fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities are largely neglected in lifelong learning suggests that this example has implications for the field of lifelong learning more generally, especially in contexts marked by critical disadvantage and marginalisation. More importantly, it offers ways to contribute to the sustainability of those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in which the program is being developed.

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