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Forum: Innovation and Adult Literacy

(Part 1 of 3)

Problematizing the Imperative to Innovate: An Examination of Innovations in Adult Literacy

Keiko Yasukawa, University of Technology Sydney

Innovation is a ubiquitous word in education. It would be unusual not to see some claim of an innovative learning environment or program on websites and other marketing materials of education providers. Awards are given to innovative practitioners. In Australia, for example,

> The Excellence in Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) Practice Award recognises **innovation** and excellence by an individual involved in improving LLN skills in an educational, community or workplace context. (Australian Training Awards, n.d.-a, para. 8; emphasis added)

However, if one were unsure about what would be considered an innovation, they would be none the wiser when they read the explanation of the criterion:

> Criterion 1: Excellence and innovation in LLN delivery
>
> How have you demonstrated excellence and innovation in your approach to the design and delivery of adult LLN programs? For example, you may consider:
>
> - innovative approaches to training program design, delivery and evaluation
> - innovative approaches to deliver LLN training and assessment in flexible and engaging ways
> - highly effective or unique methods for improving collaboration between vocational staff and foundation skills specialists
> - strategies to integrate and contextualize LLN training
> - collaboration and partnerships
> - positive outcomes. (Australian Training Awards, n.d.-b, n.p.)
>
> It appears that innovation is something that is self-evident: "you know it when you see it."

In this Forum piece, I argue that innovation in adult literacy (and perhaps in education generally) is a concept that needs to be problematized. While there appears to be a general agreement in the education and wider social science literature about the definition of innovation, expressed for example as: "the application of a better product, idea or method" (Ellis, 2017, p. 41), the problem is the lack of specificity in *what the innovation is better for* when celebrating innovation as if it is inherently good.

Problematizing innovation is not an original idea: critiques of the implied normalization of desiring innovation can be found in the scholarly literature. Drawing on a Marxist critique, some scholars of critical innovation studies argue that there is a pro-innovation bias in contemporary business and government discourses that ignores the reality that the value of some innovations may be at best questionable (Leary, 2019; Walsh, 2021). For example, Leary (2019), who argues that innovation is a "capitalist buzzword," suggests that contemporary references to innovation come with

> an implied sense of benevolence; we rarely talk of innovative credit-default swaps or innovative chemical weapons, but innovation they plainly are. The destructive skepticism of the false-prophet innovator has been redeemed as the profit-making insight of the technological visionary. (p. 94)

It should not be difficult to find application of a

Correspondence: Keiko.Yasukawa@uts.edu.au

"better" product, idea or method in education that may be better from one perspective (for example, in terms of cost and speed) to have questionable or clearly damaging consequences such as on students' understanding, agency or sense of purpose in what they are supposed to be learning and/ or on teachers' professionalism and agency.

Problematizing Innovation in Education

Critical analysis of innovation in the wider social science literature calls for a reflection on how the term is used in education. Here, too, there are scholars who have reflected on the uncritical pursuit of innovation. The philosopher of education Gert Biesta (2020) writes:

> Education, world-wide, suffers from an obsession with the new, with renewal, and with the assumption that what is new is better, and hence what is not new, what is old, must be worse or bad. The demand for educational innovation not only puts a relentless pressure on education to constantly keep up, constantly go for the latest fashion, without providing much time for careful judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed. (p. 1025)

He argues that like fashion, the obsession with innovation creates a sense of need and therefore demand for the new as well as generating an anxiety of being left behind if one cannot claim to have something innovative to show. Michael Peters (2020), in considering Biesta's critique, says "innovation in education and pedagogy is largely a reflection and outgrowth of what I call 'Algorithmic Capitalism in the Epoch of Digital Reason'" (p. 1016). The two concur in the observation that the word innovation is shrouded in a technocratic, economistic discourse. They further observe that it is often invoked when an initiative is focused on efficiencies and often tied up with what is measurable: "if you can't measure it then it doesn't count" (Peters, 2020, p. 1018).

Biesta and Peters disagree, however, on Peters' optimism that an alternative view of innovation may help to shift its economistic or technocratic focus to one more aligned with educational values such as "fostering international understanding and developing social platforms for enhancing collective intelligence and creativity" (Peters, 2020, p. 1019). Peters refers to this model as that of open and social innovation that is built around the ethics of collective processes of collaboration, co-operation and co-production. He suggests that developing this model can help to realize an educational theory of innovation that is "based squarely on social democracy" (Peters, 2020, p. 1022). Biesta, on the other hand, argues that while openness may lead to the kind of social democracy envisaged by Peters, it would have to be a certain type of openness which is far from guaranteed through the kind of measures outlined by Peters, citing the impact of social media in building clusters of solidarity around undemocratic ideologies such as racism and neo-Nazism (Biesta, 2020).

Importantly, Biesta (2020) argues that one should never lose sight of the question of "the good of education" when considering what is proposed as an innovation. According to him, the good of education has to be considered with regard to "the three-fold 'remit' of education – the work of qualification, the work of socialisation, and the work of what I have termed subjectification" (Biesta, 2020, p. 1024, see also Biesta, 2016). Biesta uses the term qualification to refer to the building of human capital through skills development, socialization to refer to learners' greater engagement in the cultural life and social practices of their communities, and subjectification to refer to their growth as individuals who have greater capacity and capabilities to engage in learning and community life and make choices with reduced dependencies on others. A good education, he argues, should be understood in relation to these three dimensions.

He is particularly concerned about the increasing investment in measurement in education: measurement of the efficiency and effectiveness of achieving outcomes without the same investment in discussions about what outcomes programs should be aiming for.

Another critical perspective on educational innovation can be found in a discussion by Deneen and Prosser (2021) on the possibilities of authentic educational innovations in higher education. They observe that the rhetoric of innovation is rampant in the higher education sector, however the rhetoric is largely a neoliberal rhetoric that positions universities as "commoditized, market-driven business ventures" (p. 1128) which in turn positions learners as customers and therefore, teaching as customer-service. Further they observe that although the neoliberal rhetoric is infused with the word innovation, contemporary universities, including public universities, that are increasingly market-driven and treats students as consumers rather than learners are also risk averse, having in place "controlled and reductive approaches to course design, assessment and evaluation" (p. 1134) that affords little agency for academics to innovate to enhance learning.

These critiques of the uncritical pursuit of innovation in education suggest some common themes, the most salient one being the lack of articulation of how innovation serves a pedagogically defensible purpose. Founded on a neoliberal ideology, innovation is justified on the basis of making processes more economically efficient and more effective in achieving outcomes that are limited to what is measurable. It also supports the trend towards standardization of outcomes and curricula to enable comparisons of program effectiveness easier and encouraging competition between education providers. As Deneen and Prosser (2021) have shown, this in turn reduces professional agency and autonomy from the teachers, the people who are closest to the students' educational experiences.

Problematizing Innovation in Adult Literacy Education

Adult literacy has not escaped the impact of neoliberalism either. In Australia, as well as in other English-speaking countries, this impact has been supported by neoliberal education policy initiatives of transnational organizations, particularly the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). With reference to Biesta's framework on the three domains of education, Larson and Cort (2022) have analyzed the lifelong policies of UNESCO, the OECD and the European Union. They conclude that OECD's focus has come to dominate, and "the main purpose of adult education has become qualification, subordinating other purpose to neoliberal ideals of expanding the market economy and creating subjects who are entrepreneurial, competitive and adaptable to labour market needs" (Larson & Cort, 2022, p. 103). The OECD's influence has then been reflected in local education policies such as in Australia (Yasukawa & Black, 2016).

At the national levels, the focus on qualification as the main purpose of adult literacy has been translated into forms such as the standardization of curricula and introduction of standardized assessment frameworks (Osmond, 2021; Tett & Hamilton, 2019; Yasukawa & Black, 2016). Studies have found that adult literacy learning outcomes and assessments are increasingly externally determined, prescriptive and heavily biased towards employability related outcomes at the expense of other authentic goals and needs of their learners (Allatt & Tett, 2019; Taylor & Trumpower, 2021): trends consistent with the human capital

conceptualization of literacy. They have also noted the loss of the teachers' ability to cater to the needs of their learners using their professional judgement. These observations resonate with the observations of Deneen and Prosser (2021) in the loss of teacher agency and autonomy to which externally determined outcomes can lead.

The implication of the type of policy innovation that the adult literacy field has seen is that teachers' working environment is not particularly conducive to innovation that ought to privilege the pedagogical needs of and benefits for their learners. This suggests the need for reflection about what we mean by innovation in our own field of adult literacy: what kinds of innovation are being reported; do they reflect the neoliberal goals of the institution or the government, or goals related to the experiences and outcomes of the learners; are innovations argued on educational or on other grounds?

Despite the constrained policy environment within which many adult literacy programs operate, some examples of innovations in adult literacy education that are grounded in principled pedagogical grounds can be found in the recent research literature. I select a few for interrogating: what is the innovation being discussed and to what extent is the innovation argued on pedagogical grounds.

Among publications in the last decade, Rosen and Vanek (2017) call for the teaching of digital skills of adult basic education students as an innovation and challenge for the field. Although the word innovation appears only in the title and is not specifically used within the article, the authors argue that centering digital skills development of adult learners would be both an innovation (a significant shift to existing practices at the time of their study) and a challenge. Their rationale for the need for this innovation is based on the view that adult basic education is lifewide: that is, it has a mandate to prepare adults for a wide range of social practices in the technology-saturated and changing world. They also point to the way digital skills are part of being literate in the sense of the multimodal literacies that interact with people's personal, community and work life; not having the digital skills for the new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) would limit their access to employment, government services and social networks, including any overseas family networks with whom it is now much easier to stay in contact using digital technologies.

When the world was hit by COVID-19, the necessity of the innovation highlighted as a priority by Rosen and Vanek (2017) was nothing less than prophetic. Belzer et al. (2022) document the rapid emergency responses made by adult literacy providers to the pivot away from face-to-face classes. Their study shows that the changes such as remote teaching necessitated by the shutdown had been a response to the emergency "using whatever combination of old and new technologies was necessary including anything from mail and telephones, to texting apps and shared photos, to online learning platforms and video meeting tools" to reach and help the students stay connected (Belzer et al., 2022, p. 83). What is salient in Belzer et al.'s (2022) account is the care for the learners as "whole" persons that underlined the range of innovations on which the teachers embarked. The innovations they cited include locating places, including the local bus depot which was a hotspot, where students could access the internet for free digital resources, and sourcing information on food banks, mental health and other services that some of the students needed to get through the period of shutdown financially and emotionally. These initiatives suggest more than being innovative in

their "duties" as teachers who would teach literacy skills, but a deeper commitment to be responsive to their students' lifewide challenges such as social isolation and poverty.

Both Rosen and Vanek's (2017) and Belzer et al.'s (2022) studies discuss innovations in adult literacy that are in part or in whole related to the use of digital technologies. However, they are not driven by technologies, rather they are driven by the need to ensure adult learners' participation in education as well as in other domains of life are not limited by their lack of the necessary digital skills. Belzer et al.'s (2022) study shows how the pandemic created a situation where students and their teachers were compelled to build their digital skills so the students could continue to study and perhaps more importantly, stay connected.

Innovation studies in the adult literacy research, moreover, is not all related to technology. A study by Coxhead et al. (2019) report on the development and incorporation of a specialized technical word list in a Fabrication course for apprentices as a pedagogical innovation to help the students navigate through the large amount of technical vocabulary. In this study the innovation related to a pedagogical tool that benefited the apprentices to take greater control over their learning.

In the studies reported in this issue on the theme of innovation, technology does not feature strongly. In fact, in his research in Timor Leste and remote Australian Aboriginal communities where the Cuban mass literacy campaign *Yo, sí puedo* based on Freirean adult education principles was implemented, Boughton (2023) rejects the notion that the mass campaign model was an innovation, despite the model offering a radical alternative to the more common human-capital based approach. Instead, he argues that it was the capitalist notion of innovation imbued with the ideology of marketisation and competition, that has contributed to the marginalization of mass literacy campaigns which is ideologically incompatible with the neoliberal ideals. While not wanting to impose a characterization that the author rejects, if one were to rescue the word innovation from the stranglehold of neoliberalism the initiatives to bring the campaign model of literacy to Timor Leste and remote Australian Aboriginal communities are innovations; they shift and widen the program focus from literacy as a human capital, to literacy as a resource for community empowerment, and to that end, transforming literacy education from something that is externally designed to something that is led and owned by the community. It is an innovation that is founded in its historical successes, and on the strengths of those successes, introduced into and adapted to the needs and aspirations of the people in new contexts.

Conclusion

Innovation is a ubiquitous term, and its use to promote neoliberal values such as competition, efficiency and its privileging of technology driven initiatives has been critiqued by educational researchers, including adult literacy researchers. The field of adult literacy has not been immune to innovations aligned to neoliberal values. As found in other areas of education, the neoliberal context constrains teacher agency and professional judgment for pedagogical innovation by attending to qualification alone, that is, only one of what Biesta (2020) identifies as the purpose of education.

Despite the constraints posed by the neoliberal policy contexts that are not aligned with the purpose of adult literacy education as seen by many of the practitioners, innovations driven by educational aims have also emerged, a few of which I have described. These innovations

are varied and while the focus of some includes the purpose of qualification, they also include the other purposes of what Biesta (2020) calls socialization and subjectification.

While the examples of adult literacy innovations embrace all three purposes of "good education," these innovations are taking place within a larger neoliberal policy landscape. The policy rhetoric that supports innovation for economic growth alone and practitioner-based innovation co-exist in our field. The policy rhetoric cannot be ignored because policy compliance is required for funding. Thus, the challenge for us is to mobilize a shift from a solely economic-driven adult literacy policy to an educationally driven adult literacy policy: this is the innovation challenge for our field. In the meantime, claims of innovation in adult literacy must be examined critically: who is making the claims and what are the educational consequences of these innovations for the learners?

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