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ABSTRACT

Wesley College, a private urban secondary school, sought a rural location where ninth-grade students could spend a term in a community-based, experientially-derived curriculum to enhance their sense of self and community. The small town of Clunes, in Victoria (Australia), accepted Wesley's initiative and since 2000, Wesley has operated a campus there. Data on 22 students attending the Clunes campus were collected via standardized tests, focus groups, participant observations, teacher comments, questionnaires, and interviews. Relatively few students substantially integrated with adolescent community members, although a majority had some interaction with the community through community service or Clunes project activities. Further development of links between the school and community would increase student-community engagement. To assess Clunes residents' views of the impacts of the school on the community, 119 community members, businesses, and adolescents were surveyed. The school's presence was regarded positively. However, because this initiative originated with the school and not the town, there are issues of uncertainty regarding "ownership." School staff do not wish to impose on the town. Community members assist when requests are appealing, yet otherwise get on with their own affairs. This creates a gentle form of "stand-off" that is not discussed formally. Establishing a mechanism for such discussions would facilitate resolution of any tensions that may arise and provide a forum for purposeful collaborative planning. (TD)

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ED 472 258

Learning and identity: The intersection of micro and macro processes in identity formation for students and the community in a small rural town – the Wesley experience

Doug Lloyd, Tamara Downey and Sharon McDonough

(AARE 2001, LLO01400)

Abstract

This paper is a report on the contribution from Wesley College to learning in Clunes, and the contribution from Clunes to learning in Wesley College. Year nine students from Wesley spend eight weeks in a residential learning village situated in the small rural town of Clunes, where they participate in a curriculum structured around learning in the community, aimed at expanding their knowledge of self and community. The research looks at the intersection of micro and macro processes in identity formation for students, teachers and the community. This paper explores the interactions between these groups, revealing the way in which each learns and the associated outcomes.

The research results demonstrate that this school-community partnership has had a positive impact on both the identity of the Wesley students and Clunes as a town. These findings may have important implications for other schools and rural communities facing educational change, building social capital and focusing on relationships between individual students and other community members.

Background

Wesley College, one of Australia's largest private colleges, has operated a campus in a small central Victorian town, Clunes, since the beginning of 2000. Approximately 100 year 9 students leave any one of Wesley's three metropolitan Melbourne campuses to spend eight weeks in their residential village in the centre of Clunes joining the ~800 'households' in the rural community ~150 km from Melbourne. As recently as 1994, a tourist guidebook described this historic gold mining hamlet as a ghost town.

Figures 1 and 2 provide a panoramic image of a small part of Clunes now (November 2001) and prior to the construction of the residential village respectively.

Figure 1. Panoramic view of part of Clunes, showing Wesley College village, Nov. 2001

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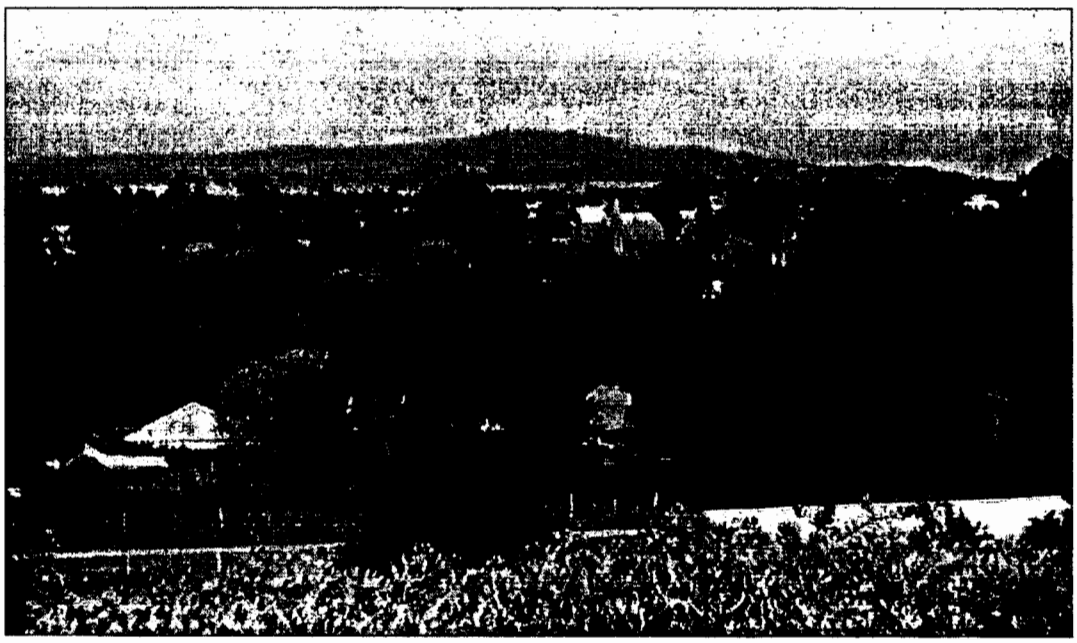
Figure 2. Panoramic view of part of Clunes, pre-Wesley College's village



Wesley College sought a rural location in order for year nine students to spend a term in a community-based experientially-derived curriculum to enhance their sense of self, particularly their sense of community and their role in communities. The Clunes community and its Shire have accepted Wesley's initiative and ongoing presence as a contributor to Clunes' development and sustainability.

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A partnership has developed between Wesley and the University of Ballarat to enhance the understandings of the learning and curriculum associated with this 'natural experiment', and to assess the sustainability of the venture and mutual benefits for the University, College and Clunes community. Elements of the partnership do or may include researching the 'experiment', curriculum development, staff development, community development, and collaborative course development.

This is one of three 'work-in-progress' papers describing aspects of the research element of the partnership. It explores: the implications of the research partnership; the value of these implications for other education institutions and rural towns who may be considering similar ventures; and the intersection of micro and macro processes in identity formation for students, teachers and the community. It also considers the interactions between the participating groups, revealing the way in which each learns, and the associated outcomes. The study is expected to establish a snapshot of the evolution of the venture, providing baseline data and a potential indicator of the state of the relationship and its sustainability. Two other pre-cursor 'work-in-progress' papers being presented at this conference consider preliminary results of the study of Wesley students' learning (Lloyd and McDonough, 2001, LLO01455) and how Clunes community members believe Wesley College has integrated into, and contributed to the community (Lloyd and Downey, 2001, LLO01457). Elaborations of each of these subjects and others will be presented when more detailed analyses are completed.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research report integrates and extends to more general considerations preliminary results from the pre-cursor studies of students' learning during the Clunes experience and Clunes community members' views on Wesley College's impact on their community respectively.

The former study is an exploratory case study using multiple methods of data collection. These include, for or on students, a Self-Description Questionnaire II (Marsh, 1990), approach to learning (Biggs, 1987) standardized tests, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations, and a structured schedule for comments by teachers. SDQ-II, LPQ and interviews were conducted pre- and post-experience, and focus groups were conducted midway through the eight-week program. Stratified systematic sampling was used to obtain a group of twenty two year nine students attending the Wesley College village in Clunes during term three in 2001. Qualitative data analyses were based on both coding techniques as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), and on the elements identified as significant to the study; self-concept, approach to learning and understanding of community. Analyses of the tests is being conducted using the standardized scoring procedures for each and will be subject to statistical analyses. Only those data derived from the first data sets are discussed in that, and consequently in this paper.

For the latter study, surveys have been used to collect and assess the views of Clunes community members concerning how they see the economic, social, environmental and 'cultural' impacts of Wesley College on the community. The survey was conducted in three rounds: a stratified random sample of Clunes community members (n=50, 100% return); Clunes businesses listed in the telephone directory (n=44, 88% return); and a snowball sample of 14-16 year old adolescents (n=20). Wesley teachers in Clunes, and a selection of (other) key informants were interviewed using semi-structured interview techniques. Surveys used a combination of five point likert scales and provision for open-ended comments. The latter were used in many of the responses. Only those data derived from the first group are discussed in that, and consequently this paper.

Survey and interview schedule construction, and analysis of the results in the latter study have been based on themes derived from the following bodies of literature: social capital (Coleman, 1988; Kilpatrick, Bell and Falk, 1999; Putman, 1993); community development (Ife, 1996; Sidoti, 2000); and learning communities (Chapman, 1997; Kilpatrick, 2000). In these preliminary stages of analysis, elements of the overall analytical framework include those derived from Wesley College's primary intentions in locating the campus in Clunes (Loader, 1997; *Wesley's Wider World*, 1999) and the philosophical base on which the approach is developed (Bell and Newby, 1971; Tonnies, 1957; Young, 1990). The development of further analytical tools is still in progress.

The results of these pre-cursor studies have been integrated and analysed to contribute to the production of the results for this paper, which necessarily are also preliminary. Further data have been gathered in the form of notes taken and reflections recorded during meetings of the Reference Group, analysed and integrated into the findings from the projects described above. The Reference Group has been used to provide critical feedback on the progress of the research study. It comprises members of the research team from University of Ballarat, including higher degree students (Ms McDonough and Ms Downey), Wesley College personnel, and a member of the Clunes community, who is also employed part-time at the College.

Results, discussion and recommendations

A number of themes and issues related to the intersection of these studies, and/or the operation of the Reference Group have emerged. They are described here as preliminary results, observations and/or tentative recommendations. The last of these require further consultation with those who would be involved. In particular the recommendations would also need to be assessed for effectiveness in improved student, staff or community learning and development, compared with competing opportunities, expectations and demands.

Students' learning in Clunes: influences on the local curriculum

The curriculum for Wesley College students on the Clunes campus is in the early stages of evolution. It has been operating since term 1 in 2000, following an intense period of planning, and has been under constant review and scrutiny, as Clunes staff discuss and make changes to aspects of the curriculum each term. These staff were specially appointed for the campus. Senior metropolitan-based Wesley personnel have also been directly and actively participating throughout that period.

The curriculum contains a careful balance between each student's need to engage with an aspect of community as part of their Clunes stay, and various opportunities to voluntarily participate more fully in other community activities in Clunes. This approach appropriately and simultaneously both respects students' individual rights and choices, and provides encouragement and support to engage in a welcoming, and socially rich rural community.

In this cohort, relatively few students took the option to undertake activities through which they substantially integrated with community members or groups. These took the form of contact between Wesley College and Clunes adolescents and were contributed to by a number of factors, including a relative lack of structured activities outside of sporting events. However the level and type of integration varied greatly. For example, there was a high degree of integration between particular groups of community members, such as those at the senior citizens centre, health centre and students at the primary school, and Wesley students. Overall, a majority of the Wesley students had interaction of some type with the community through their community service or Clunes project activities.

It appears that an increase in dialogue between the College and community, which seems likely and imminent, and the increasing maturation of the relationships, will allow the identification of a richer range of experiential opportunities within the community. Further consideration and development of the links between the College and the community would help realise the potential for fuller and more practical engagement between Wesley College students and the community.

There will be several possible sources of the new curriculum opportunities. For example, there may be community members who are well placed to contribute worthwhile community projects, or to curriculum design or implementation. There may also be students from Wesley who increasingly participate in evaluation, review and development of the local curriculum, or local adolescents whose views are helpful in considering opportunities for further integration. In the latter case, the consideration and development of a mechanism for some ongoing dialogue between Clunes students (from a contemporary cohort and/or in later years) and adolescents in the Clunes community, and their subsequent input to curriculum design, may also be worthwhile.

The curriculum and daily operations at the village have a relatively high degree of emphasis on students taking responsibility for their decisions and actions. There is evidence to suggest that this, probably in combination with some degree of emphasis on development of students' meta-cognitive capabilities (in Clunes and/or at the student's metropolitan campus), results in an increased reflectivity by students on their approaches to learning. This may be an aspect of the curriculum that could become a stronger or more deliberately considered feature at both the Clunes and metropolitan campuses. The relationship with the curriculum and staff at other campuses is considered further below.

Students' learning in Clunes: potential influences on Wesley College's curricula

There are relatively separate curricula and operations at each of Wesley College's three metropolitan campuses and at Clunes. This is understandable considering at least: focuses in Clunes on establishing the campus, its curriculum and associated relationships; the relatively large sizes, independence and geographic separation of each of the campuses; and the increased pressure and demand on teachers' and coordinators' professional time at their 'home' campus. The semi-autonomous nature of approaches at the three metropolitan campuses leads to an implication for further research in the area of transition and transferability of skills. The collection of data on these effects was beyond the scope of this study. We note there is a potential for this relative separate-ness to create some learning discontinuities and personal or social tensions for students during their transitions.

Careful and caring support is provided during these transitions. It is likely that some mapping of students' personal, social and intellectual paths through this process, and recognition of their perceptions and experiences, will reveal stages when purposeful intervention or additional/alternative support would be beneficial. These supports or interventions could be in the form of: consideration of the desirability and extent of curriculum cohesion between the campuses; purposeful consideration of meta-cognitive and/or heuristic processes to support students' development of their approaches to learning; attention to particular aspects of briefing for, and de-briefing following the transition to the Clunes campus; and more individualised tracking and support mechanisms for students and their carers. These areas represent a range of potentially valuable further research opportunities.

Students' learning in Clunes: influences on Clunes' development

There is good evidence that the contributions students make to the Clunes community is positive, and is regarded as such by a majority of participants in the College and the community. Analyses that would indicate the extent to which Wesley students' activities and/or Wesley College's presence have contributed to the development of Clunes, and whether the development is economic and/or social and/or environmental have not yet been completed.

The discussion above implies that there is some evidence to suggest that if students found a greater level of participation in Clunes' community activities more appealing and practical, then their contributions to Clunes' development would be greater.

Clunes community's perception of, and responses to Wesley College's presence, and

Opportunities for initiatives

In the analyses conducted to date, the data suggest that Clunes community members regarded Wesley College's presence positively. There is also evidence for areas in which greater benefit can be derived, or more strictly, that community members believe that this is the case. These areas include, but are not restricted to, more positive influences on business activity and employment. Analyses of the former are still in progress, and the latter beyond the scope of this and its associated studies. Further developments in these areas can readily and easily be the subject of discussion within the mechanisms suggested in the discussion that appears below. This relates to the nature and extent of interactions between Wesley College and the Clunes community, and opportunities for initiatives.

Wesley College's presence in Clunes is an unusual example of a major initiative in a small country town contributing to rural or small town development, because it originated with Wesley College. More

usually, a town or region will seek mutually beneficial business or infrastructure opportunities, having first created a plan for increased economic development, most likely, and/or social and cultural activity or infrastructure. This latter process would normally provide the town with a strong sense of ownership over, or control (or influence) over the development. This sense of ownership does not show up in the preliminary findings reported here.

The study shows that the issue regarding 'ownership' contributes to several types and levels of uncertainty and/or tentativeness, both within the College and amongst community members. For College members, effects appear as respect for the community and not wishing to impose a large enterprisc or metropolitan influence on a charming and welcoming small rural town. For some members of the community at least, the effects appear as being prepared to recognise the benefits that come from Wesley's presence and/or express displeasure when it is considered appropriate, assist when requested to do so provided the request is appealing, and otherwise get on with one's own affairs. This creates a gentle form of 'stand-off', or absence of communication. It is one that is not discussed openly, at least not between the College and community in any formal or official sense. This in part at least is because there seems to be no established structure or mechanism for such discussion.

The study indicates that establishing such a mechanism for communication and decision-making would help overcome the tentativeness, provide a vehicle for discussion and resolution of any tensions that may exist from time to time, and provide a device for purposeful planning for a proactive, productive and collaborative future. Issues that could be considered, agreed and acted on include:

- Communication and decision-making approaches;
- Design of, and contributions to Wesley College's Clunes curriculum;
- Business development and employment initiatives;
- Social and cultural activities and infrastructure;
- Town- and streetscapes;
- (Further) research and development projects; and
- Plans or initiatives for sustainable relationships and mutual development

Conclusion

These preliminary findings represent a subset of broad issues related to the learning-focused operations of an education institution and the community or setting in which it might operate. Some of these apply whether that setting is a local community in which a school is embedded, or a separate community or environment. They are broader than those that emerge from the pre-cursor studies of the views of the Clunes community and students' learning on and through the Clunes campus. They are also potentially more far reaching and provide some elements of a planning framework for those seeking to establish equivalent learning centres.

The issues raised also constitute a broad research and development agenda. This applies for scholars and other reflective education practitioners with interests in community- or workplace-derived learning. It is also relevant for regions aspiring to become or contain learning communities.

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