

social capital and lifelong learning

We know very little about the way that people's networks affect their access to learning. John Field examines the evidence concerning links between social capital and lifelong learning.

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We hear quite a lot about **social capital** at the moment. To some extent, this is probably old wine in a new bottle: people now say "social capital" where once they might have said "**community**" or, more simply, "neighbourhood". But much as I think the old wine is a classy vintage, I also think that the new bottle really does add a bit of value. In wine-lovers' terms, to extend the metaphor, I am more inclined to the Australian or Chilean view of things than the European. What is new about the concept of social capital is that it asks us to view a whole range of social connections and networks as a resource, which help people to advance their interests by co-operating with others.



The relationship between social capital and **lifelong learning** is one area where this approach can start to make sense. There is a well established debate over community and education, and during the 1970s this discussion increasingly started to explore learning in adult life and not just in schools. What we still know very little about is the way that people's networks affect their access to learning. In other words, how do our social networks help us to create and exchange skills, knowledge and attitudes that in turn allow us to tap in to other benefits? If we have more social capital – stronger and more extensive network ties – then are we more likely to learn new things than people with less social capital? And is our learning affected by the types of network that people have – are networks qualitatively different in nature?

These questions stand at the heart of our conception of the **learning society**. Essentially, they ask us to consider whether some social arrangements are better than other at promoting learning – and some, conversely, may be less good at promoting learning. They also allow us to consider whether some social arrangements promote some types of learning but not others. Because social networks and **learning** are both desirable resources – they both help us to enjoy other benefits (including the sheer pleasure of learning something new or extending our friendships) – these questions may also help us to think in new ways about economic development and social cohesion.

Social capital, human capital and lifelong learning

The relationship between **social capital** and human capital has attracted considerable interest ever since the first publication of James Coleman's seminal paper (Coleman 1988). Coleman demonstrated that schoolchildren's performance was influenced positively by the existence of close ties between teachers, parents, neighbours and church ministers. This insight has subsequently been explored in some depth through both a series of replication studies and studies using other approaches (Field 2003). Various studies examine the role of networks in the economy, focussing on two main topics: processes of innovation and knowledge exchange (eg MacKell 2000); and patterns of job search and

labour recruitment (Field 2003, 51-3. Only recently has the focus turned to the role of social capital in processes of skills acquisition and improvement among the adult workforce (e.g. Green *et. al.* 2003).

The concept of social capital is generally used to refer to the resources that people derive from their relationships with others. According to **Robert Putnam**, the best known author on this topic, social capital is built particularly effectively through **civic engagement**, which appears to be more or less synonymous with active citizenship. Like Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, Putnam today sees active citizenship as an important source of social capital because it is the main way in which people - particularly those who are strangers to one another - experience reciprocity through their pursuit of shared objectives. This in turn helps to create a dense web of networks underpinned by shared values and producing high levels of social trust, which in turn foster further cooperation between people and reduce the chances of malfeasance (Putnam 2000). The concept of social capital is not without its weaknesses, but its potential as a heuristic device, as well as a growing body of persuasive empirical evidence around the concept, have helped make it one of the most influential in the social sciences in recent years.

Lifelong learning has also acquired considerable conceptual significance in adult education research. Admittedly, its origins lie in the policy field rather than in social science, and this has led some researchers to question its value. In the policy domain, the concept has won considerable prominence in recent years. It effectively forms the core concept of the educational and training policies of the European Commission, as well as providing an underpinning to the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; it has also been widely embraced by many national governments, albeit with somewhat modest concrete results at present (Field 2000, 3-9). While the precise meaning of this concept remains somewhat elusive, it is invariably used in ways which highlight the significance of learning in adult life, and which promote a broad understanding of learning as a life-wide process.

The connection between social capital and lifelong learning has recently acquired a wider significance in the European context. It is not only in respect of education and training that the wider European policy agenda has for some years sought to balance the demands of competitiveness with the maintenance of social cohesion; to this has been joined an overarching interest in promoting European citizenship. More recently, the Commission has focussed strongly on economic competitiveness, in the wake of the Lisbon Summit of 2000, but it has continued to emphasise the importance of social renewal as a central element in increased global competitiveness. As part of the work programme on education and training requested by the Stockholm Council in March 2001, for example, the European Commission launched a work programme on "the open learning environment, active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion" (European Council of Ministers 2002). The Commission's "social agenda" arising from Lisbon set out the goal of building social capital as one of its basic principles (European Commission 2005a, 2), and it subsequently funded a programme of social capital benchmarking to inform its social policy debate (European Commission 2005b).

The concept of social capital has also been adopted to examine the factors underling economic competitiveness in the regions of the European Union (Mouqué 1999, 63-72). More detailed but exploratory work has also been undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2001), as well as the World Bank (Dasgupta 2000; World Bank 2001). These intergovernmental agencies, for all their diversity, see a link between human and social capital as central to the pursuit of a socially sustainable strategy for competitiveness and development.

For all of these bodies, as for researchers, both social capital and lifelong learning represent a complex challenge. So far as policy makers are concerned, the key actors in both areas - enterprises, workers,

civil society - lie outside the direct control of government, which must act as a persuader and facilitator rather than solely a vehicle of service delivery (Field 2000, 26-34). This is further complicated in the case of the EU, whose formal competences in this field are severely restricted, so that policy implementation must be undertaken through the open method of co-ordination, with all the risks of goal distortion and uneven achievement that this implies.

The attitudes and dispositions of individuals, as well as the measures promoted by enterprises, are therefore critical to the achievement of a balanced model of development. The evidence presented here therefore should have considerable significance for policy as well as helping to inform our understanding of lifelong learning. Furthermore, it has been argued that these potential links are particularly significant under conditions of globalisation. As formerly localised assets are converted into ubiquities, so social capital - which can neither be traded nor readily converted into a ubiquity - becomes an increasingly significant component of economic development (Maskell 2000).

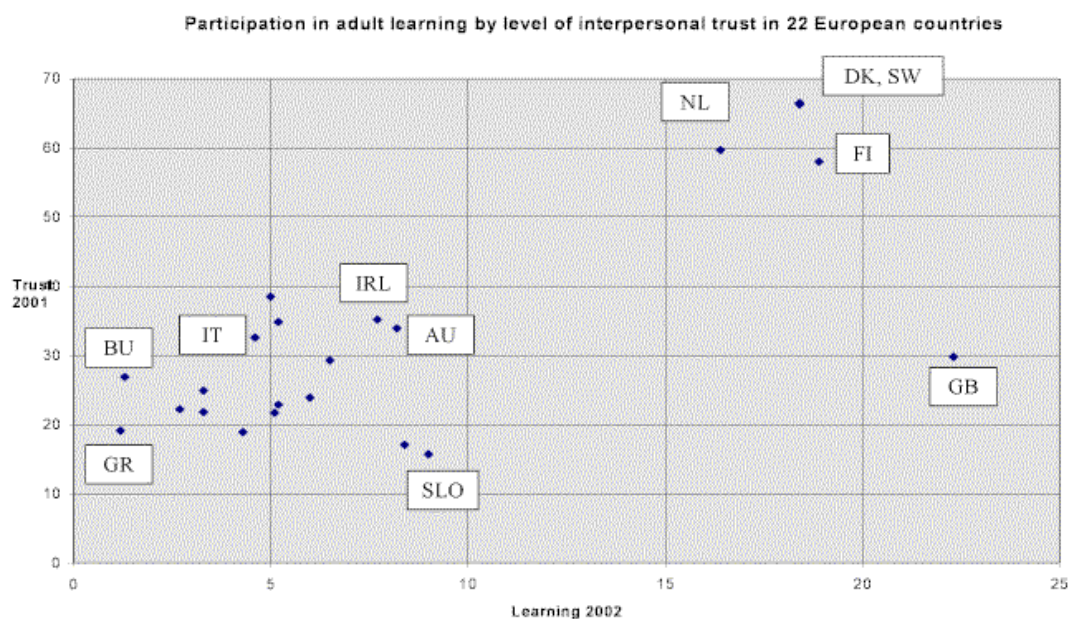
Lifelong learning and social capital - exploring possibilities

Conceptually, the relationship between social capital and lifelong learning is potentially quite complex. Social capital may be defined as consisting of "social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals" (Schuller, Baron and Field 2000, 1). People can use their social capital to gain access to skills and knowledge in a variety of ways. For example, they use their connections in a very straightforward way to find out how to do new things such as master a work process, meet regulatory requirements, or tap into a new market. The process can also be more indirect: in a complex and fast-changing training market, reputations are passed from individual to individual, informing people's choice of provider, and influencing the trust they place in their trainer. At the most general level, the strength of social bonds may shape general attitudes towards innovation and change, as well as determine the capacity of particular groups to survive external shocks or adapt to sudden changes in the external environment. Yet while it is possible that the relationship between social capital and lifelong learning is mutually beneficial, it is equally conceivable that the relationship could be negative. Strong community bonds might reinforce norms of low achievement, for instance, and over reliance on informal mechanisms of information exchange may reduce the demand for more formal and systematic forms of training and education (Field and Spence 2000).

Generally, the literature on schooling and social capital suggests that strong networks and educational achievement are mutually reinforcing (Field, Schuller and Baron 2000). Drawing on the pioneering work of James Coleman, researchers into schools attainment and social capital have concluded that shared norms and stable social networks tend to promote both the cognitive and social development of young people, to the extent that social capital may at least partly compensate for other environmental influences such as ethnicity and socio-economic deprivation. Logically, then, it might be concluded that the same must hold largely true for adult learning. If so, then the better the stock of social capital in a region or a community, the greater the capacity for mutual learning and improvements in the quality of human capital.

There is some empirical evidence that such a beneficial relationship does in general hold true, at least at the most general level. By combining the findings of the World Values Survey with data on adult learning, it is possible at the level of individual countries to show a generally regular and positive association between general levels of (a) interpersonal trust and (b) participation in adult learning (Figure One). At one end are the Scandinavian nations, which score highly on both levels of trust and on adult participation in learning; at the other end are the post-communist nations, which are ranked low on both scales. In between these two extremes are two other groups: the southern European nations are just below the median on both scales (particularly trust), while the north-central European states

(and Ireland) come just above the median. In all cases, though, there is a clear association between both scores. The one outlier - England - is ranked among the upper middle nations in terms of trust, but has very high levels of adult participation in learning.



At a very broad level, then, it seems that the association between trust and participation in adult learning is reasonably regular and positive. Of course, this judgement must be qualified in a number of ways. Trust can only ever be a very loose proxy indicator of social capital (whose measurement is highly controversial). Survey data on participation in learning are notoriously unreliable, resting as they do on a very specific and easily measurable definition of an activity that is pervasive, distributed and highly subjective. Despite these caveats, the association is nonetheless so regular as to be quite striking. It is, though, by no means clear that a positive link at this very general level is necessarily the same as a specific attitudinal association at the individual level. I have explored this question through analysis of people's responses to the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey; in 2001, a module on lifelong learning was included in this social attitudes survey, in order to explore just how people's attitudes towards learning were related to their thinking and behaviour in other areas (a fuller analysis is given in Field 2005).

Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, but in general it has somewhat higher levels of social capital than do the nations and regions of Britain. Previous qualitative research has suggested that this pattern of high social capital was associated with relatively low levels of participation in formal adult education and training. The most reasonable explanation seemed to be that high social capital and low adult learning were partly caused by the existence of dense networks of close ties (including strong linking ties within families, reinforced by close bonds among the main ethno-religious groupings). These close ties provided an effective alternative to participation in courses, by offering less formal means of exchanging information, skills and ideas (Field and Spence 2000). The NILTS findings allow for a quantitative analysis of the association between attitudes towards types of civic engagement on the one hand and attitudes towards aspects of lifelong learning on the other. At the most general level, the quantitative survey findings suggest a clear association between positive attitudes towards lifelong learning and positive attitudes towards a range of different forms of civic engagement, ranging from church membership to organised sports. So far, then, the NILTS findings therefore appear to confirm the picture presented earlier of a mutually beneficial relationship between social capital and lifelong learning. Yet the Survey also provides evidence that the association is a complex one.

Essentially, the quantitative survey data fell into what is known as a bipolar pattern: positive attitudes towards lifelong learning were most common among people who thought a given type of civic engagement was important, but also high among people who thought that the same type of civic activity was unimportant. Positive attitudes towards lifelong learning were weakest, by contrast, by those who thought each form of engagement was “neither important nor unimportant”. So the most positive attitudes towards lifelong learning were found among those who have the strongest feelings about civic engagement, with those who are favourable towards engagement regularly showing stronger support for lifelong learning than those who are rather unfavourable, but with both groups clearly outstripping those who do not feel particularly strongly either way. Interestingly, this bipolar pattern was at its strongest in respect of engagement in church-related activities.

Rather than a simple distinction between engagement and disengagement, then, we need to look more closely at the disengaged. In particular, we need to divide the disengaged between the ‘indifferent’ (or passive) and the actively ‘hostile’. It was possible to explore this issue a little further, by examining the relationship between people’s levels of engagement on the one hand and their willingness to take active responsibility for their learning on the other. In general, the Survey findings showed the same skewed bipolar pattern as was found in respect of general attitudes towards lifelong learning. And as before, the attitudinal differences between the engaged, the hostile and the indifferent are most marked when it comes to engagement in church-related activity. Interestingly, however, they were least marked when it comes to involvement in community groups. Broadly, then, the responses to this question confirmed the general picture: the highest level of positive attitudes towards an active approach to learning were found among those who are actively engaged, whatever the activity; these are followed by those who are actively hostile; while those who are indifferent show the lowest levels of positive support for an active approach to learning.

Conclusions

The possible links between social and human capital are highly significant for those scholars and policy makers interested in the social and cultural dimensions of vocational education and training. That there is a relationship between the two is clear from the evidence considered in this piece. Moreover, the relationship is indeed broadly a beneficial one, in that across several indicators, the two appear to be positively associated with one another. Thus, the paper confirms existing hypotheses about the mutually beneficial relationship between social connectedness and lifelong learning. It also goes further, in challenging what now appears to be an over-simplified distinction between those who are connected and those who are disengaged, suggesting that the latter category must at least be divided between those who are indifferent and undecided towards a given form of engagement and those who are more active and definite in their decision not to participate. Of these three groups, it is the connected who are most positive in respect of adult learning, who are most likely to believe workers have an active responsibility to upskill, and yet show a degree of realistic caution in respect of the likely benefits of adult learning. The indifferent are least likely to score highly in all three respects; the ‘active non-participants’ come somewhere in between these two groups, but are generally closer to the more engaged than to the indifferent.

Of course, one should not place too much reliance on the findings of one survey around social capital and lifelong learning, particularly one confined to a single region. Furthermore, NILTS is particularly concerned with attitudes and perceptions, focussing on peoples’ subjective orientations rather than their objective positions. Nor can a survey on its own present much evidence of causality. Although NILTS points clearly towards a complex but clear association between social capital and lifelong learning, particularly at the attitudinal level, it does not allow us to judge the extent to which one causes the other, or whether both are themselves the product of some other variable(s). It is quite possible that the

relationship operates in both directions, in ways which we do not yet understand. So the conclusions of this analysis must remain tentative, if not entirely speculative. The evidence considered here is probably best seen as a signpost, pointing out a direction which will be taken further through more substantial research in the future. However, there is sufficient evidence to point generally to the existence of a mutually beneficial association between social capital and lifelong learning. This has significant implications for policy, given the autonomy of the actors concerned from government, and the resulting risks of unintended consequences.

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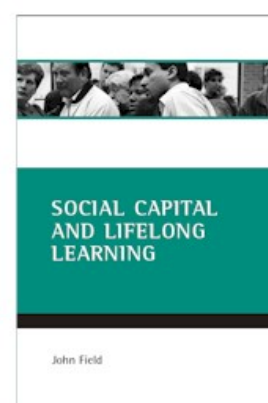
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Links

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How to cite this article: Field, J. (2005) 'Social capital and lifelong learning', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/social_capital_and_lifelong_learning.htm.

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