

**The Social Control–Social Capital Debate About Distance and Online
Teacher Education: Critical Reflections on Two Courses at the
University of Southern Queensland, Australia**

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Abstract

One among several crucial conceptual lenses that should be deployed in interrogating the effectiveness of an open learning approach to teacher education is the social control–social capital debate. This debate centres on whether and how such an approach bends the thinking of the individual to the institutional or systemic view on the one hand and/or enables that individual to acquire capital that can be expended to the benefit of students and other stakeholders on the other.

This paper reflects critically on two distance and online teacher education courses (co-)developed and (co-)taught by the author at the University of Southern Queensland in Australia. One course is a graduate, pre-service, teacher education course offered for the first time in 2006. The other course is a postgraduate, in-service, teacher education course offered for several years but significantly revised in late 2005. The focus and scope of the two courses differ considerably, yet in combination they constitute a worthwhile site for an analysis of their intentions and perceived effects as teacher education courses provided by means of open learning.

The author argues that, despite sustained efforts being directed at promoting students' social capital and despite some students demonstrating such capital through their critical engagement with each course, institutional and systemic imperatives continue to exercise a constraining impact that for some students might be experienced as social control. There are no easy solutions to this situation, which mirrors the uneasy tension between social control and social capital in formal educational provision.

Introduction

In a paper in the inaugural issue of this journal (Harreveld & Danaher, 2004), a colleague and I used the concept of innovation to shine a critically reflective light on a suite of distance secondary vocational education and training teacher education courses at a Queensland regional university in Australia. This paper shines a similarly reflective light on two distance and online teacher education courses at a different Queensland regional university, using a different concept as the lens: that of the social control–social capital debate (see also Danaher, Coombes, Danaher & Anteliz, 2000; Kwon & Danaher, 2000; Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2004).

This debate is a crucial one in formal educational provision at large and in open learning and teacher education in particular. There is a clear and direct link between the controlling versus emancipatory potential of school education and the characteristics and outcomes of the programs that certify the teachers to teach in those schools. There is also an enduring debate about the effect and effectiveness of open learning in relation to both school education (Bradley, 2003) and teacher education (Robinson & Latchem, 2002).

The two courses under review, offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, are particularly amenable to discussion of the social control–social capital debate. The courses derive from a similar ideological position that is broadly sociocultural and seeks to question taken for granted assumptions about the world, one course in relation to educational contexts and environments, the other about educational research. At the same time, both courses are as susceptible as any other to the play of institutional and systemic forces that are not necessarily liberatory or capacity building in character.

The paper consists of three sections:

- a conceptual framework centred on the social control–social capital debate
- the application of that conceptual framework to the two courses
- selected implications of that application for understanding contemporary open learning provision of teacher education.

The argument of the paper is that it is difficult – but not impossible – at the level of individual courses to evade the social control of institutional and systemic imperatives and thereby to seek to build the social capital of students and other stakeholders.

The Social Control–Social Capital debate

The social control–social capital debate (Danaher, Coombes, Danaher & Anteliz, 2000; Kwon & Danaher, 2000; Moriarty, Danaher & Danaher, 2004) is focused on the simultaneous potential for educational provision to constrain and/or to enable productive change and transformation by learners and other stakeholders in formal education. Previously my colleagues and I encapsulated the terms of this debate as follows:

Social control can be understood as entailing the various forces that social institutions exert upon agents and that have the effect of constraining and limiting their opportunities for cultural expression. By contrast, social capital can be understood as the value that agents generate within a particular social field and that can be translated into rewards and opportunities within the same or other fields. (Danaher, Coombes, Danaher & Anteliz, 2000, p. 5)

The literature on social control is extensive and persuasive (see for example Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000; Foucault, 1977, 1978; Postman, 1992). A central premise of that literature is that social institutions (such as schools and universities (see also Coombes, Simpson, Danaher & Danaher, 2001) must contain and constrain experiences and expressions of difference and heterogeneity in order to avoid chaos on the one hand and revolution on the other. While such an apparatus of power is ineffective if it is too overt, it has nevertheless proved remarkably efficient and resilient in keeping independent thinking within 'acceptable limits'. It does this through the operation of complex and vast bureaucratic systems that standardise and compare outcomes and develop pre-set and 'narrow cast' solutions to much more broadly based problems as they arise.

By contrast, the literature on social capital (see for example Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Field, 2003; Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002) is more optimistic about both the necessity for and the possibilities of the development of social capital as an antidote and a counter to burgeoning social control. While there are richly nuanced distinctions in conceptualising social capital, its common feature is the acquisition of mutually advantageous knowledge, skills and values by individuals and communities to the ultimate benefit of self and others.

Specifically in relation to open and distance learning, the contours of the social control–social capital debate are encapsulated by the ongoing discussion about the complex and contentious links between open and distance learning and globalisation (Danaher, 2001). Whether they are optimistic, neutral or pessimistic, most commentators on these links highlight the centrality of such issues as access, culture, equity and power in their respective and shared visions for the future of open and distance learning. For example, Mason (1998) noted that “Much of the promise of the globalisation movement in education depends on how successfully cultural differences are addressed, once the first wave of enthusiasts gives way to the mass adopters” (p. x), while Field (1995) emphasised that “distance open learning is used by active consumers within real, often highly localised yet still complex social, cultural and economic contexts” (p. 282). Similarly, Edwards (1995) argued that “globalisation reconfigures the global–local nexus, intensifying the importance of place and cultural difference even as trends towards global cultural uniformity appear to increase” (p. 248) and that “forms of open learning, including distance learning, provide the possibility for the affirmation of a sense of place based on localised requirements and the recognition of difference” (p. 251).

In other words, within the open and distance learning field, the social control–social capital debate is associated with broader questions about the capacity of that field to contribute to educational and sociocultural transformation and/or to be complicit in reinscribing educational and sociocultural inequities. This same association is evident – even if it is implicitly rather than explicitly so – in the more specialised literature pertaining to open and distance learning and teacher education. For example, Jegede (2004) based his carefully constructed call for open and distance learning to generate a renaissance in Nigerian teaching and teacher education on a

conviction that open and distance learning can overcome tendencies towards social reproduction and provide the framework for a much more transformative vision of Nigerian education: "...Open and Distance Learning if properly planned can be an effective tool for mass teacher production and the continuing professional development of teachers" (p. 41).

Following Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002), my intention in characterising the social control–social capital debate in the terms outlined above:

...is not to set up yet another analytical/moral polarity, but to look at the question of...[the distance and online teacher education courses] as a series of contradictions and dilemmas that frame the...[intentions and actions of the staff members designing and implementing those courses]. (p. 109)

That is, individual actions by lecturers and students in both courses need to be understood against the backdrop of the interplay between these two forces of social control and social capital, rather than as necessarily representing either one force or the other. The resulting analysis is intended to be more contingent, nuanced and situated than would derive from an 'either/or' conception of the two forces.

The Two Distance and Online Teacher Education Courses

As noted above, the two distance and online teacher education courses under review are both provided by the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. GDE3002 Contexts and Environments is a pre-service course designed for graduate students, one of a suite of eight constituting a one-year full-time equivalent Graduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching. (The program length for graduate qualifications in Queensland changed from one year to two years full-time in the mid 1990s, a decision that was reversed approximately 12 months ago.) The

course was offered for the first time in Semester One 2006, requiring the course team members to write the distance and online materials for the course very quickly at the beginning of this year. Because the course contributes to a qualification certified by the Queensland College of Educators, most students live in South-east Queensland, the geographical area served by the University of Southern Queensland, although some students are completing their professional experience in other countries such as the Republic of Korea.

The course has an explicitly sociological and cultural studies framework and is divided into four modules of equal weighting:

- sociocultural influences on individuals, schools and education
- whole-school and community approaches to inclusivity and social justice
- features of inclusive learning environments
- educational reform and the role of the educator.

Course assessment, which was decided by the program team prior to the formation of the course team, consists of three items:

- a proposal for a problem-based presentation (10%)
- the report of the problem-based presentation (40%)
- the students' performance during professional experience (50%) (determined by each student's on-site professional experience supervisor).

FET8801 Research Methods in Education is a postgraduate course, studied by in-service teachers as well as others interested in educational research and leading for most students to a Master of Education (although students in the Bachelor of Education [Honours] and the Master of Applied Linguistics programs also complete the course). The course has been offered for many years, but I significantly revised the course assessment as from Semester Three 2005. Students completing the course

live in several different countries, including Fiji, Japan, the Republic of Korea and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Australia (see also Potter, O'Neill & Danaher, 2005).

The new course assessment contains two summative items:

- a philosophical essay requiring students to respond to the proposition that “the researcher you are is the person you are” through a review of at least five topics (selected from 12 possible topics ranging from qualitative and quantitative research and objectivity and subjectivity in research to the impact and utility of research and research ethics and politics) (50%)
- a detailed proposal for a specific research project (50%).

Both courses use the course management system WebCT to promote online engagement, particularly by means of announcements and discussion boards. Each course also has in downloadable format a course introduction, a study guide and selected readings. In addition, GDE3002 makes use of five face-to-face sessions throughout the semester for students who are able to attend the Toowoomba campus where the course team is located.

The social control dimension of both courses derives from the institutional and systemic imperatives that my colleagues and I have had to negotiate in designing and implementing the courses. Both courses have been subject to the application of timelines and other constraints associated with the presentation of course materials in formats suitable for distance and online education (for example, for FET8801 having materials ready at least six months before the offering of the course in a particular semester and for both courses a significant limit on the size and hence the format of files to be downloaded by students, with text rather than media files being privileged through this process). The asynchronous character of communication in both courses

also has the potential to privilege the voices of the academics who wrote the course materials and initiate the online discussions. Furthermore, GDE3002 has had to conform to course and program requirements dictated by the Queensland College of Educators, the body responsible for certifying the pre-service teacher education qualification. In addition, and in common with most pre-service programs, the professional attachment constitutes a different site of learning from the university that might reinforce another kind of social control by socialising the apprentice teachers into particular and possibly unreflexive communities of practice (yet alternatively that might, of course, provide a far more rigorous interrogation of schooling practices than occurs through the university studies).

Three other factors noted (Potter, O'Neill & Danaher, 2005) as signifying social control in the case of FET8801 apply also to GDE3002:

- the constraints imposed by summative assessment items (see also Moore, Harreveld & Danaher, 2005) whose timing and character have to complement those of other courses in the program
- the English language requirement of the courses, despite the diversity of first and subsequent languages spoken by many students
- the privileging of the western cultural and philosophical tradition in the course materials (although both courses seek to interrogate and contest that tradition).

Despite these limitations, both courses are predicated on enhancing students' social capital by means of facilitating their active engagement with, rather than their passive consumption of, the questions framing each course. For example, the focus in GDE3002 on social justice and inclusiveness is on explicating and deconstructing the competing discourses around these issues; recent discussion postings have used a process of dialogue and responses to readings (some supplied in the course, others

located by students) and personal experiences to portray multiple positions on what these issues mean to different stakeholders and the consequent roles and responsibilities of both individual teachers and systems. Similarly, while eschewing an ‘anything goes’ approach to educational research, FET8801 encourages students to identify and interrogate the assumptions underpinning specific research projects and to value difference in approaches to designing and implementing such projects.

These various strategies seek to promote social capital by means of highlighting the mutual interests and the relational dimension of educational contexts and environments and of educational research respectively. Posing and addressing questions such as “Who wins and who loses?” and “Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced?” in particular educational settings and research projects are crucial to identifying and valuing the multiple stakeholders in the successful outcomes of such settings and projects. Whether in relation to the treatment of a particular ethnic minority or to the impact of a new form of literacy or numeracy instruction, understanding education as a sociocultural and political construction rather than a context-free or value-free phenomenon is vital to fostering the development and expansion of social capital (which after all is predicated on the current educational scene being sites of struggle for meaning and recognition rather than a level playing field).

Overall, then, it is difficult – but not impossible – at the level of individual courses to evade the social control of institutional and systemic imperatives and thereby to seek to build the social capital of students and other stakeholders. At the same time, those imperatives continue to exercise a constraining impact that for some students (and lecturers) can be debilitating. There are no easy solutions here, given that this situation mirrors the uneasy tension – what one of the anonymous reviewers

of this paper called the “teeth-gritting harmony” – between social control and social capital that lies at the heart of formal educational provision.

Implications for Understanding Contemporary Open Learning and Teacher Education

There are at least three distinct implications of this application of the social control–social capital debate to the two courses discussed here for understanding contemporary open learning and teacher education. The first implication derives from the strong resonance between social control and the significant challenges facing teacher education in developing nations such as Nigeria, whether for basic education in general (Tahir, 2004) or the education of marginalised minorities such as nomadic pastoralists (Umar, in press). There are thus urgent moral and political dimensions of teacher education that automatically apply to open learning if it is to be assigned the heavy responsibility of helping to render teacher education more responsive to sociocultural inequities – whether in Australia, Nigeria or elsewhere. That open learning can just as easily as teacher education be enlisted in replicating gender inequities, for example (Rowan, Bartlett & Danaher, 1994, 1996), signifies the pervasiveness of social control and the need for continuing vigilance.

The second implication is associated with the counternarrative of social capital. While not a panacea for social control, social capital provides both a vocabulary and conceptual tools for imagining open learning and teacher education differently, in ways that are genuinely constructive, inclusive and transformative rather than destructive, exclusive and repressive. Possible strategies for making this counternarrative a lived reality include the following:

- Inserting in program and course documentation such as mission and vision statements, strategic plans and course profiles explicit reference to the goals and ideals that frame social capital
- Developing pedagogical approaches that engage students and educators in ongoing dialogue about the educational, political and sociocultural issues with which social capital is concerned
- Devising assessment and evaluation techniques that include a clear focus on the extent to which the program or course has facilitated the empowerment and transformation of individual learners and educators and the building of capacity and social capital.

Implementing these imaginings and strategies is neither automatic nor easy, yet they underpin the aspirations of pre-service and in-service teachers in the two courses interrogated here just as they provided the impetus for Ukeje's (2004) compelling vision for an alternative future for Nigerian teacher education.

The third implication is my personal response to many of these competing forces and unresolved tensions in education: ambivalence (Bauman, 1991; Stronach & MacLure, 1997). For me, ambivalence – a kind of strategic uncertainty (Coombes, Danaher & Danaher, 2004) – attends claims, whether my own or those of others, about the character and significance of particular educational contexts and environments, about the practical effectiveness and ethical appropriateness of certain research methods and about the intended and actual impact of open learning and/or teacher education. Specifically in terms of the social control–social capital debate, if ambivalence serves to eschew fixed and final answers while insisting on a continuing attentiveness and openness to the debate and its significance, that ambivalence is probably as good a response as any other.

Conclusion

In an earlier paper, my colleagues and I (Danaher, Coombes, Danaher & Anteliz, 2000) encapsulated what we saw as “the relevance of the social control–social capital analytical framework to open and distance educators”:

On the one hand, the framework helps us to understand how people who have been marginalised within traditional and dominant forms of education have received and exploited a ‘second chan[c]e’ of formal education. On the other hand, the framework encourages us to interrogate those educational practices that are labelled as ‘open’ or suitable for ‘lifelong learners’ in order to examine the extent to which they reinforce social control and/or support the development of social capital. (pp. 12-13)

If ‘teacher education’ is substituted for ‘lifelong learners’, this encapsulation provides an accurate summation of the argument of this paper. Certainly I see the ongoing tensions between social control and social capital as one among several useful conceptual lenses to expedite the ongoing interrogation of the distance and online teacher education courses on which I have reflected critically here. In different ways, while the specific terms have not been used, the clusters of ideas associated with them have undoubtedly been at the forefront of students’ thinking as they have engaged respectively with establishing effective and equitable educational contexts and environments and with designing and implementing educational research that is attentive to the aspirations and interests of multiple stakeholders.

More broadly, as the articles published in this journal demonstrate, both open learning and teacher education are increasingly subject to all kinds of inquiries about their intentions and impact. If they are indeed to promote social capital while resisting

and transforming social control, it is crucial that those inquiries continue. From that perspective, the words of Ukeje (2004), originally presented in 2002, remain current:

Human beings made their greatest discovery, thus far, when they discovered how to learn and how to teach. Our future is inextricably tied up with the future of education, particularly teacher education. It is an urgent need, which needs urgent action. If not now when? If not by us, who? (p. 118)

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