Building Cities and Towns as Learning Communities

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(See endnotes for document references)

Over the last several years the “learning communities” or “learning cities” movement has gained increasing momentum in Europe and Australia, with considerable activity in New Zealand and Canada, as well building interest in India and China. The focus of this paper is on what we mean by a learning community, why it is an important idea, and some of the common characteristics, principles, and issues now becoming evident. In particular the paper will discuss the current PALLACE project (Promoting Active Lifelong Learning in Australasia, Canada, and Europe) that is partially funded through the European Commission, and incorporates a variety of learning community projects in Australia, New Zealand, China, Canada, Scotland, Finland, and France.

While the term “community” can refer to any group of people linked together by one or more common interests, this paper specifically refers to geographic entities. In North America we usually use the term “learning community” in relation to learning structures within educational institutions, whereas in Europe and Australasia it means a geographic community such as a town, city, village, region, etc., and is interchangeable with the term “learning city.”

What do we mean by learning communities and why are they important?

Unlike the “smart communities” concept, which focuses on economic development through technology and assumes a trickle-down effect leading to community transformation, learning communities place lifelong learning at the heart of community development, growing outwards to encompass the entire community. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive, but there is evidence that “most smart community initiatives—even those that have been around for many years—simply were not very transformative.”

Defining a learning community is hard since each community interprets and implements the concept differently; defining the term puts it in a box and kills the idea. What follows instead are descriptions of learning communities from several sources and countries.

“A Learning City...uses the strengths of social and institutional relationships to bring about cultural shifts in perceptions of the value of learning. Learning Cities explicitly use learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration, and economic development which involves all parts of the community [and] provide local solutions to local challenges.”

“The Learning City concept strives to understand how the community is changing in order to shape its future...new ways to respond to economic and social change through using learning to bring together existing expertise and encourage local community involvement.”

(See endnotes for document references)
“A Learning Community recognizes learning as a measure of personal growth, competence, citizenship, social cohesion, employment, wealth creation, and regeneration; ensures good basic services; involves all aspects of the community.”

“Learning communities are a form of community development in which local people from every community sector act together to enhance the social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions of their community...provide a coherent, integrated, and comprehensive approach to face the ever-changing challenges of the knowledge-based economy”

“A Learning City is a ‘way of life’, it is one where industry, education, business and the community come together to encourage, recognize and celebrate lifelong learning for all. It is a City that integrates economic, social, and environmental development.”

While only a small sample of various perspectives from individuals and communities around the world, these descriptions nonetheless point to four of the fundamental principles underlying learning communities. (i) They are integrative; (ii) solutions and future strategies are inherent in the communities themselves; (iii) they demand practical partnerships; and (iv) they are not projects with beginnings and ends, but are about an ongoing way of life. As The UK Secretary of State for Education and Employment stated in 1998 (and few would argue now) “Learning enables people to play a full part in their community and strengthens the family, the neighbourhood, and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art, and literature...the Learning Age will be built on a renewed commitment to self-improvement and on a recognition of the enormous contribution learning makes to our society.”

One could argue convincingly that this is not a new idea and, in fact, North American aboriginal philosophy has certainly embraced and promoted the concept, as has Chinese Taoist philosophy. Consider the Native medicine wheel philosophy that encompasses a balance between the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health of an individual or community and between the social, economic, political, and environmental elements of a community.

What is also clear is that economic growth is seen as an integral component of community growth and quality of life, not—as is so often the case in smart communities—their engine. Communities around the world that have made great strides in economic development still have immense problems with poverty, health issues, social exclusion, environmental concerns, and more. Some people would argue that those problems are, in fact, exacerbated by economic development that benefits only some community members and widens the gap between rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

**Attributes and Characteristics of Learning Communities**

Learning communities, then, are not just about development, but about development rooted in in-depth exploration, understanding, and evaluation of the whole community. One project that specifically addressed this aspect is TELS (Towards a European Learning Society,) a two-year project sponsored by the now-defunct European Lifelong Learning Initiative, and funded by the European Union. Involving six cities in the first year pilot and over 70 in the second year, it saw each city carry out an in-depth audit based on a variety of indicators in ten strategic areas: Commitment to a Learning City; information strategies; partnerships and resources; leadership; exclusion and social equality; lifelong learning values, environment, and citizenship; technology, networks, and the information society; wealth creation, employment,
One could describe the outcome of each audit as a genetic map of the community, and the exercise as mapping the community genome. Only when a community truly knows where it is now can it begin to create its future and becoming a learning community. (A second project, NewTELS, is currently underway and views adult education specifically against six key areas: Valuing learning; information, guidance, and counselling; investing time and money in learning; bringing together learners and learning opportunities; basic skills, and innovative pedagogy.)

The TELS project highlighted one of the key success factors in building a learning community—formal community leadership (elected and appointed) must be both committed and actively involved all the time (not just at the beginning.) The City of Espoo, in Finland, believes there are two “significant requirements” for creating a Learning City; that “the city creates the preconditions for learning, and that the whole city is a learning environment.” How each city or community works to realize those two goals will differ.

Before identifying some of the characteristics and attributes of learning communities identified by the communities themselves, it is critical to clearly describe what the term “learning” encompasses. In September 2000, the Network for Learning Communities in the U.K. published an extensive report that provided ten case studies of eight UK and two continental European learning communities along with thematic studies of best practices for neighborhood renewal. It remains the most extensive survey of learning communities to date. In that document, author Martin Yarnit identifies three senses of the term learning, and while other people and communities may use different terms, the senses appear to be commonly-accepted. They are:

- Formal learning: Typified by courses, curricula, classrooms, and qualifications.
- Informal learning: Self-directed, involving individuals and groups; and
- Reflexive: Reflecting on what we do and learning to do it better, whether parenting, designing cars, or governing cities.

In the same document, Yarnit records the three key attributes of a learning community as commitment to develop and sustain active partnerships, participation and engagement of the public, and performance assessment. The study also revealed four key objectives common to learning communities.

- Developing urban strategies to secure prosperity and sustainable growth.
- Making the best use of the skills and talents of the people.
- Developing competitive job- and wealth-creating businesses.
- Regenerating disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

How learning communities develop

There is no one “right way” to start and implement a learning community initiative, but there are some common (although not absolute) factors. One is creating a charter in which the elected body (municipal council, for example) clearly states its reasons for being a learning community and the values and principles underlying them. One city, Bendigo in Victoria, Australia, created four charters—one each for enterprise, education, media, and government. (The Victoria State government is piloting nine Learning Towns and Cities.)

In almost all cases, the learning community initiative starts with a small group of people coming together and then working to convince a range of potential partners to embrace the concept. The first formal step is the public statement by the elected leadership, often followed by
a public campaign involving all the partners to promote both the concept and the value of lifelong learning, then the organization of formal partnerships. Clearly there needs to be some kind of framework in which to operate, and the learning community partnership must continually identify outcomes, and develop goals, objectives, strategies, and policies to achieve them. A clear need is for a general framework that communities can use as a starting point, adapting and manipulating as needed. This need is being addressed by the Canadian component of the PALLACE project mentioned earlier and detailed below.

One intriguing example of a specific learning community project is the Fatehpura Learning Park in Udaipur, India: intriguing because this project began with children, was lead and achieved by children, and was done for children. It grew out of the Udaipur as a Learning City process-project. This latter had two underlying goals: Critiquing the current, dehumanizing model of Education and Development as it exists in Udaipur and in Udaipur’s relations to surrounding villages to and to opportunities that support development; and to create and/or regenerate learning spaces and opportunities that support the development of each individual’s full human potential and the city’s collective capacities for meaningful, just, and ecologically balanced transformation.11

Through the Shikshantar organization, a local artist had volunteered one month of time to work with 35 local children, including some from the Fatehpura area. The goal was developing the children’s ability to create their own learning environment. Many of the children wished to continue and expand the process and a number of day-long creative activities were set up in Shikshantar’s garden, but they eventually ran afoul of the landlord. With no other safe places to play, the children were encouraged to create their own spaces, an idea that caught their imagination. With encouragement from Shikshantar, some 12 children from the Fatehpura area identified a small, desolate patch of ground in their neighbourhood, cleared it of garbage, planted trees, campaigned for local residents and merchants to donate materials, time, and energy, fashioned tree-guards from scraps (to protect the trees from cattle and other wandering animals,) made swings, painted walls. Then they planned a wide range of activities in which everybody could participate and that were rotated to ensure each child’s interests were met. These included, “…playing new and non-competitive games, drawing, modeling clay, doing embroidery, using paper mache, making rachis, celebrating festivals, dancing, singing, acting, visiting local lakes, temples, mountains, historical places, gardens…”12

Along the way the children learned to tolerate differences, share resources, and work together for the common good. Udah, a brass maker’s son who did not go to school was being teased one day by Pallav, a milk-seller’s son who did. Udah responded, “I don’t go to school, but I can do a lot. All you can do is read and write; what else can you do?” Pallav came to understand about different ways of learning and knowing.

**Issues facing learning community initiatives**

In an earlier paper, the author presented several barriers faced by communities travelling along the learning community road, identified during a variety of conversations at the first European Conference on Learning Cities, held in Southampton, England in 1998. Since that time more discussions with people in various communities have shown them to be common. They are difficulties in:

- Engaging the active interest of the general public in the learning community concept and its value.
• Truly valuing non-formal learning, the learning that does not happen in a structured setting, and is impossible to quantify.
• Moving responsibility for learning out of the formal organizations and into the community and to the individuals who form the community.
• Separating learning from economic growth; although many discussions (formal and informal) at the conference began with a desire to promote learning in all its myriad forms, and recognizing each form to be of significance and value, just about every one ended up talking about jobs, training for jobs, and learning for jobs.\(^\text{13}\)

Based on personal conversations and meetings with a number of people in and from various communities around the world, the author can also make an intriguing observation. That is that communities in which such indicators as general quality of life, economy, and health are strong (for many if not all community members) will face complacency and therefore have a much harder time overcoming the first of the four barrier in particular. People living in communities in crisis “get it” very quickly. For example, during meetings with district council members in two remote communities in Uganda (Fort Portal on the western border with Congo and Arua on the northern border with Sudan) the author presented the learning community concept in the midst of discussions about building two universities in the regions. Both communities have suffered from three decades of war, oppression, and rebel fighting. They are in desperate straits economically, and have little infrastructure, utilities, and even agriculture, particularly Arua. Councillors and others present immediately became very interested in the concept, and began to discuss how it applied to their goals and dreams for their peoples.

The PALLACE Project

While there have been many learning community initiatives in many towns and cities around the world, and the two TELS projects have involved several communities in Europe, the PALLACE project is the first to incorporate diverse sub-projects in cities spread over four continents. Working under the overall management of Napier University in Edinburgh, Scotland, the meta-project focuses on various aspects of a learning community. Each community leads one project and acts as a second on another, although all can participate in as many of the projects as wished.

Community partnerships are critical to each sub-project. Interaction among partners will be at many levels, engaging a variety of stakeholder groups in collaborative activities, and increasing knowledge of their roles in learning community development. The PALLACE website (www.pallace.net) provides brief descriptions of each project:

Adelaide, South Australia (Coordinator: Professor Denis Ralph, South Australia Centre for Lifelong Learning and Development) is managing a schools sub-project, linking teachers, children, parents, and others in schools (including aboriginal schools) in Adelaide, Espoo, Finland, and Mt Isa, Queensland to develop an e-learning module outlining what a learning city is and how schools and schoolchildren can help contribute to its development.

Cross-cultural innovation is continued in Adult education through links between Papakura and the Auckland Region of New Zealand (Coordinator: Professor Ron McDowall, Auckland University) with Sannois in France. The result will be a learning module on the characteristics of a Learning City usable by Adult Education institutions everywhere to help
them understand the nature of the learning city and how they can help contribute to its development.

Links are being established between City and Regional Cultural Services Departments to design, develop and test exhibitions and projects to bring learning city ideas to the notice of citizens through libraries, museums, galleries and special interest groups. Led by the City of Espoo, Finland (Coordinator: Kristiina Santala) and the Finnish Learning Cities Network, the project also involves Queensland, Australia and Edinburgh, Scotland.

The Centre de Formation des Elus, in Sannois, France (Coordinator: Alain Bournazel, President) is working with Learning City Leaders (elected representatives, teachers, community leaders etc) in France, and with the City of Marion, South Australia to create a learning module for councillors (elected representatives) on lifelong learning in cities and regions.

Queensland, Australia (Coordinator: Dr Janelle Allison, Queensland University of Technology) is working with counterparts in Alberta, Canada to explore the ways in which public-private cooperation projects can help lifelong learning concepts to be built into the very structure of communities. This is based on work already on-going in the Brisbane area.

The City of Beijing sub-project (co-ordinator: Catherine Wang Yan) involves such stakeholders as municipal government, district government, local schools and colleges, training centres, enterprise and business, in the development of a pilot lifelong learning centre for one million people. Beijing is working with other PALLACE partners to produce a module giving insights into the processes from which other areas can learn.

The role of technology providers in Learning Cities will also be explored. Modern ICT effectively used can be of huge assistance in widening the learning options open to citizens and this sub-project, leading to seminars on technologies for lifelong learning, is led in Alberta, Canada (by co-ordinator: Sylvia Lee, President, Knowledge Management International) and in collaboration with Papakura, New Zealand, and Beijing, China. In addition, the Canadian project will produce a one-day community workshop on building a learning community, and post-project, three one-day phased workshops and a handbook for learning communities that provides the general framework briefly discussed earlier.

The PALLACE project partners met in New Zealand in mid-February this year to share ideas and build inter-project relationships and partnerships, and also presented information during the Lifelong Learning conference in Auckland during that time. The next meeting and PALLACE seminar will be in Edinburgh in conjunction with the 4th. European Festival of the Learning City and Region (17-19 September, 2003) followed by the third meeting and seminar in Adelaide, Australia in conjunction with the Asia-Pacific Learning Convention and the International Association of Educating Cities meeting (early November, 2003.) The final meeting and seminar, presenting project results, will be in Alberta in either May or June 2004, in conjunction with the First Global Conference on Learning Communities sponsored by WILL (World Initiative for Lifelong Learning.)

This brief overview of the learning community movement provides only a few examples of various ideas and initiatives happening around the world; there are many, many more.

(See endnotes for document references)
1Eger, J. Cyberspace and Cyberplace; Building the Smart Communities of tomorrow. [On-line] www.smartcommunities.org/wf/cyberspeech.htm
12Ibid