Given recent global trends towards urbanization, the notion of the “learning city” warrants continued critical attention in adult education. While, due to the strong efforts of some of its more notable proponents like Norman Longworth (1999; 2001; 2003), the learning city has gained some prominence as a notion to guide urban development, to date, the concept has yet to receive substantive theoretical or empirical investigation. There are several good reasons why deepening our understanding of the learning city is important. First, as will be described below, most people on earth now live and learn in urban contexts. Based on this alone, certainly, understanding the ways cities form the framework for our participation in learning is increasingly important. Second, over the past decade, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists have taken a renewed interest in cities and urban development. As a result, a rich new vein of critical research now exists to support the development of a far more robust notion of the learning city than currently exists. Rather than lying on the fringes of adult education as it currently does, a fully developed concept of the learning city has great promise deeply to inform the theories and practices of adult education. Third, we must immediately advance our understanding of the learning city to prevent politicized and oppressive use of the notion. For the most part, until now, adult educators have framed the notion of the learning city as a way to enhance the economic competitiveness of an urban area. Many of its most ardent promoters simply take the global capitalist knowledge economy for granted. They assume that the purpose of lifelong learning in the city should, first and foremost, strengthen economic productivity either directly by improving the job skills of workers or indirectly by creating cultural and social conditions conducive to economic growth.

As will be shown below, in our current global context, within which economic development in some urban areas is generating massive underdevelopment in other urban areas, narrow and self-interested notions of the learning city are extremely dangerous. Rather than realizing the full promise of the learning city as a notion that can help promote the development of urban forms that can enable the full participation of citizens in the development of their city, overly economistic notions of the learning city contribute to a growing polarization of urban life.

**Planet of Slums**

A recent report by the United Nations Human Settlements Program (2003) offers important reasons why we should hesitate before we rush to embrace the notion of the learning city. The authors of this report observe how, at the same time as certain limited and very privileged urban metropolises develop in the flows of global capitalism, more and more of humanity are being relegated to large and proliferating slums that span great regions of the third world (their very conservative estimate of the current number of slum-dwellers is over a billion people). Moreover, as the authors of the UN report
observe, “instead of being a focus for growth and prosperity, the cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population” (p. 40). As Mike Davis (2004) relates, “at the end of the day, a majority of urban slum-dwellers are truly and radically homeless in the contemporary international economy” (p. 26). Importantly, according to Davis, the production of surplus humanity is not a result of a malfunctioning process of globalization. The slums of the world are an inherent product of globalization, a side effect of silicon capitalism’s capacity to increase productivity at the same time as it decreases employment.

Davis (2004) tells us how, at some point this year, for the first time in history, the urban population on earth will surpass the rural population. Moreover, from this point onward, the vast urban slums of Africa, Asia, Indonesia and Latin America, will account for all of the world’s population growth, which the UN predicts will reach 10 billion by 2050. Whereas, classical economic theory suggests that the growth in urban populations would be caused by rising economic opportunities in urban areas, the stark reality of Third World urbanization is that population growth has mushroomed over the past two decades despite rapid declines in urban economic growth. In terms of sheer numbers – 80 cities with population of 1 million plus in 1950, 400 today, and a projected 550 in 2015 – the urban form seems to be enjoying great success; in terms of our shared future, the growth of poverty in urban slums is undoubtedly one of humanity’s direst problems (Davis, 2004, p. 5).

Depictions of abject poverty, like those of a recent *Time Magazine* article, “The End of Poverty,” which relates how, each year, over 8 million people die of the effects of poverty, are always extremely disheartening (Sachs, 2005). What is particularly disturbing about the accounts of the effects of urban poverty, however, is that they confound our ability to find easy villains (drought or disease) or to imagine possible solutions (sustainable agricultural production). The poor inhabiting the vast slums of today’s Third World cities have no access to land from which they might scratch out even a meager self-sustaining existence. Their dwellings hang on precipitous hills, ring the polluted fringes industrial complexes, adorn city dumps, or, like in Kingston, Jamaica, the Third World city I know best, cling to the banks of urban sewage trenches, or “gullies,” so treacherously that the police are reluctant to approach them. Without any prospect for “formal” employment, slum dwellers survive by joining the wretched ranks of “informal” workers, eking out a stark existence through a myriad of marginal or illegal activities. In Kingston, for instance, the informal drug economy competes heartily with other economic sectors, drawing hosts of young and vulnerable men and women into a vortex of horrific violence.

Moreover, according to Davis (2004), even amongst the very poorest, the burden of deprivation is unevenly distributed: “Throughout the Third World,” he relates, “the economic shocks of the 1980s forced individuals to regroup around the pooled resources of households and, especially, the survival skills and desperate ingenuity of women…. Deindustrialization and the decimation of male formal-sector jobs compelled women to
improvise new livelihoods as piece workers, liquor sellers, street vendors, cleaners, washers, ragpickers, nannies and prostitutes” (p. 21). Theorists like Marx contended that the very poor, which he identified as the lumpen proletariat, functioned as a reserve pool of labor in the capitalist economy to keep wages low and to provide labor in times of unanticipated expansion. It is very difficult to imagine that the very poor in today’s urban slums have even such a meager function. Davis contends that, “the real macroeconomic trend of informal labour,… is the production of absolute poverty” (p. 26). Rather than viewing the poor as a standing reserve army, it is much more accurate (and heartrending) to see them for what they have become: the refuse of global capitalism – a growing pile of unusable waste, festering with violence, despair and death, which, in cities throughout the world, rings the shining towers of the radically wealthy.

As recent accounts like David Harvey’s, The New Imperialism (2003), powerfully remind us, the vast expansion of urban slums is completely in keeping with the larger trajectory of capitalist development over the past half century, especially since the early 1970s, when aggressive neo-liberal policies mostly of the United States provoked vast global restructuring programs to address declining profitability of US business corporations. To find new outlets for capital investment, the United States and other countries supported IMF and World Bank efforts to restructure Third World economies to open them to unprecedented levels of economic exploitation. Harvey contends that, in recent years, accumulation of wealth has been achieved by the direct dispossession of the assets of some of the world’s most vulnerable and powerless sectors. Harvey (2003) observes the following:

Displacement of peasant populations and the formation of a landless proletariat has accelerated in countries such as Mexico and India in the last three decades, many formerly common property resources, such as water, have been privatized (often at World Bank insistence) and brought within the capitalist logic of accumulation, alternative (indigenous and even, in the case of the United States, petty commodity) forms of production and consumption have been suppressed. Nationalized industries have been privatized. Family farming has been taken over by agribusiness. And slavery has not disappeared (particularly in the sex trade) (pp. 145-146).

In the case of Jamaica, for instance, the Structural Adjustment Program negotiated with the IMF (SAPs) resulted in agricultural policies that made it very difficult for domestic agricultural sector to compete with international agribusiness (Black, 2001). Agricultural employment, once the mainstay of the rural region dried up and, as a result, over the past twenty years, rural people have flooded into the Kingston urban area (including the adjoining cities of Portmore and Spanish Town), often to overcrowded and violent zinc roofed communities.

The Learning City in the Information Age
The important thing about these accounts of modern urban slums is that they help us understand how, due to inherent tendencies in contemporary capitalism, initiatives to help cities more deeply connect to the flows of the knowledge economy (like many
learning city initiatives) must be approached very cautiously. While they can manage to provide access for certain citizens to the flows of wealth and privilege of global capitalism, the very fact that these approaches often strive to support or deepen existing capitalist practices (perhaps increasing the capacity of a powerful urban center to extract wealth from a more vulnerable location) makes them deeply suspect. Unfortunately, up to this point, the notion of the learning city is too poorly developed to prevent its misappropriation for self-interested purposes.

Norman Longworth (1999), perhaps one of the best-known advocates of the learning city, reveals little awareness of the uneven impacts of globalization across the globe. While Longworth does acknowledge the need for any notion of the learning city to be a “caring city” and to “make special provision for the excluded, the slow learner, and the late developer, the eccentric and the deranged, the damaged and the desperate” (p. 115), his prime reason for advocating the learning city is his concern that we all become “members of the Learning Society which must inevitably accompany the Information Society in order to assist and support its development” (p. 109). Citizens “encumbered” by what he calls “the seven Is – Ignorance, Incomprehension, Inability, Incapacity, Impotence, Incompetence, and Inadequacy” must be swept up in a “learning revolution” so that, they too, can enjoy the great benefits of the exciting new Information Age (p. 109). What Longworth fails to realize here, though, is that the very Information Age he glorifies systematically and as a matter of course produces disenfranchisement, poverty and despair. There is no sweeping up to be done. The Information Age is structured to exclude, is powered by dispossession, is rooted in exploitation and oppression.

Lockworth’s view of the learning city as a context essential for the successful production of the Information Age is widely shared. In the UK, for instance “Liverpool, Glasgow, Southampton, Norwich, Sheffield and more than 10 other cities and towns” have participated in an OECD sponsored learning city project that aims to enhance the capacity of its member cities to participate in the global knowledge economy recognizing that “the economic future of the city depends upon creating interlocking and interdependent structures based on lifelong learning principles” (Lockworth, 1999, p. 115). The European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) (of which Lockworth is past president) also promotes the learning city as an engine for economic and cultural growth and a number of European cities have designated themselves “learning cities.” The idea of the learning city as a precursor to competitive success in a global knowledge economy has become widely influential. In Australia, for instance, a coalition of business and education leaders in Bellarat have designated their city as a learning city contending that “the only way Ballarat will find and maintain its place in the global economy is by challenging what we are doing and how we can do it better - by being a Learning City” (Bellarat Learning City Board, 2005).

In my own city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, a coalition of business and government leaders (representing the elite interests of my region) called The Greater Halifax Partnership promotes Halifax as a “Smart City” (admittedly a bit of a derivation, but close enough to the “learning city” to make my point). Halifax is an urban context that is competitive in the global economy, they contend, because it “has 81.1 post-secondary students per 1,000 people, three times the national average. More than 60% of the
working population have post-secondary education, the highest rate in Canada” (Greater Halifax Partnership, 2005). A recent, a visit by Richard Florida (Florida, 2004a) to our region greatly excited the proponents of this vision. Florida contends that urban contexts that support the growth and development of the creative class will be best positioned to reap the full benefits of the knowledge economy (Florida, 2004b). Florida adds considerable fuel to the widely held belief, in my region, that the people of Halifax need to commit wholeheartedly to developing our ability to compete in the knowledge economy. Dissenting or skeptical voices to this utopic vision are rarely heard. The very existence of the world’s slums (let alone our own part in their production) is blithely ignored.

**Revitalizing the Notion of the Learning City**

Given the rather patchy history of the notion of the learning city, one wonders if it might be best, at this point, simply to give up on the idea, write the notion off as a passing fad or dismiss it as another incident of knowledge society boosterism. It is my contention, however, that the study of lifelong learning should not only retain the notion of the learning city, but should place it at the focus of much more energetic and wide-ranging inquiry. I make this claim for several reasons.

First, according to contemporary geographers like Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1989; 2000) and Edward Soja (1989; 2000), the city remains a vital frame for emancipatory and transformative action. Soja argues, for instance, that the density of social interactions that are sustained by urban forms releases an immense creative learning potential uncommon in other forms of human association. Thus, reversing a long standing historical view, he argues that the very first cities did not arise out of agricultural society. Rather, the intense learning interactions in Neolithic cities like Çatal Hüyük actually generated agricultural practices (p. 24). On his account, the city, because it supported particularly intense learning relations, preceded agriculture and rurality. According to philosopher and ecologist Murray Bookchin (1992), urbanization, understood by him as intense human settlement, only has achieved its hazardous form (which he identifies as the modern city) under the particular developmental conditions of capitalism. For him, urbanization in a different context holds great promise because of the fact that urbanization places people in close proximity where they can engage intensely in social interactions. According to thinkers like these, cities are not incidental at all to human learning. Rather, the city has been, is and will continue to be a form of human association deeply interwoven with learning processes. It might even be argued that an important raison d’être for cities is that they enable humanity to express learning potential impossible in other spatial frameworks.

A second reason why it is important to investigate the notion of the learning city hinges on recent developments in learning theory. Rather than viewing learning as a process by which knowledge (imagined as bits of information held in people’s heads or transcribed in books and other media) is transferred into the heads of individuals, contemporary theories of learning, like Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of situated learning, posit learning as a collaborative process of negotiating meaning in situated communities of practice. Learning, on this account, is not an abstract, decontextualized
process of knowledge transfer, but a process that transpires in real spatiotemporal contexts. As David Harvey (1989) contends, whatever spatiotemporal frame we inhabit exerts a deep influence on the nature of our social interactions. As Lave and Wenger (1991) relate, our surrounding context becomes a “framework for participation in social practices” (p. 15) that permit us to form shared understandings, develop relations of solidarity, forge strong identities and engage in social action (Plumb, 2005). Investigating the city, then, becomes a crucial part of our work as people committed to the theories and practices of lifelong learning. The learning city changes from being an endstate we promote, to a context we investigate. In what ways, we begin to ask, do the varied urban forms that make up our world enhance or constrain the prospects for situated learning?

A third reason why it is imperative to retain a revitalized notion of the learning city is that it opens the possibility for transformative action that might begin to address the disastrous urban developments of contemporary times. Understanding the complex intertwining of human learning and urban development, and, in particular, how this intertwining has resulted in the violent and divided forms of urbanity that prevail in our contemporary world, can open possibilities for positing critical, emancipatory and transformative requirements for urban development. It is important, at this stage, to posit a revitalized notion of the learning city that can challenge existing notions of urban development and foster practical actions that can transform the urban context to support healthy learning processes. It is also necessary to develop strategies that can draw on these new learning processes to foster the development of concrete urban forms to support more non-violent learning. To advance the long-range goal of emancipatory urban development, researchers committed to the study of lifelong learning, have much work to do.

**Comparative Case Study: The Learning City in Halifax and Kingston**

With a renewed commitment to investigating the nature of the learning city, researchers in Halifax have begun to explore the different ways urban forms in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Kingston, Jamaica, serve as a framework for participation in learning processes in communities of practice. Graduate students in the Mount Saint Vincent University *Studies in Lifelong Learning Program* in Halifax and Kingston have been engaged in an exploration of the histories and geography of their respective contexts to understand more deeply the ways urban forms shape situated learning processes. Students in Halifax are in the process of establishing a social action group, TLC Halifax (The Learning City Halifax) to support their investigations in their community. MSVU researchers are working with JACAE (The Jamaica Council for Adult Education) to launch a major learning city initiative that will gather stakeholders to investigate the ways the urban context of Kingston enables or constrains learning.

These varied activities will provide an ever-clearer picture of the ways very different urban forms support or inhibit situated lifelong learning processes. They will also point the way to more deliberate and rigorous investigations that can help reveal the complex relations between learning and urbanity. It is anticipated that research initiatives of this type will be very productive. Based on clear and detailed accounts of the
relationship between urbanization and learning in these two contexts, stakeholders can initiate action (perhaps mutually supported) to address pressing social, cultural and ecological issues that plague both centers (although Kingston, with its extremes of violence and poverty is most deeply threatened and in need of transformation).

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