

Feature Paper

Learning cities in Australia: yesterday, today, tomorrow.

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It is salutary to reflect on the things we do from time to time, especially when this involves worthwhile ideas such as learning cities. Even the most worthy of ideals date with the passage of time so we need to reflect, and discuss, how we revitalise our ideals in this turbulent world of disruptive changes.

I have been involved in the development of learning cities in Australia from the early days. This included ten years on the Board of the Hume Global Learning Village, so I observed the impact of this vision of the Hume community over some time. I have then been involved in the development of learning cities and neighbourhoods in various parts of the world - especially East Asia and Western Europe - through my work for the PASCAL International Observatory. This included founding the PASCAL PIE program of Exchanges between Learning Cities, and EcCoWell as an approach to integrated and holistic development. This experience guides my thinking on the future, and my reflections on the Australian story of learning cities.

Yesterday

The arrival of learning cities in Australia was an exciting time, as the birth of new ideals usually are. Some international examples, including knowledge of what the European Commission was doing in this area, inspired a surge of interest across Australia. New movements need leaders, so that the leadership role of Jim Saleeba and the CEO of Wodonga City Council, fed this initial wave which led to the formation of the Australian Learning Communities Network.

This initial stage of learning city development in Australia generally involved two ideas:

1. We should harness all the resources of cities - local government, civil society, education institutions and other resources - to extend learning opportunities to all residents of the city, including disadvantaged groups; and
2. We need to use learning strategies to build community and social cohesion in the city.

I will address later in the paper whether our thinking about the future of learning cities requires us to broaden and deepen these themes.

Following the establishment of ALCN, annual conferences were held in places like Albury Wodonga, Adelaide, and Newcastle with significant numbers participating. A critical feature of the learning cities Australia story was that development depended on local development inspired by local "believers" with little support from national and state governments. This resulted in a patchy pattern of development with large areas not serviced by learning cities. Most of the early development was in Victoria and South Australia.

The story of the Hume Global Learning Village in a northern area of Melbourne with considerable disadvantage, illustrates these trends. This initiative started as local community action led by Frank Maguire, now the state member for Broadmeadows, to get a proper library for Broadmeadows. The

Hume City Council responded and the concept of the Hume Global Learning Village was born. *The Age* newspaper supported the building of a first-class library as a community centre and the Council set up an Advisory Board, chaired by the former Premier of Victoria John Cain, to guide the overall initiative. Commonwealth funding was secured to build a second model library/community centre in Craigieburn.

For a decade the initiative seemed secure, then the end came suddenly when the Ford motor company decided to close its Broadmeadows factory so that employment became the prime issue for the Council, and the decision was made to end the Hume Global Learning Village initiative. So, what is the lesson we should gain from the Hume story?

The irony of the Hume story is that when the Council withdrew support, the community continued the initiative with leadership from Ken Thompson, formerly a member of the Hume Board.

This pattern of development has continued up to the present with a fairly small number of local initiatives existing without government funding. A significant aspect of this development has been the key role of the public library as a hub of learning city development, as occurred in the Hume initiative mentioned above with expansion of a Hume Global Learning Centre in Sunbury, and later initiatives such as Brimbank, Townsville, Melton, and Wyndham.

However, for a time there seemed to be a prospect of government support for learning cities. In 2000, Victoria supported a "Ten Towns" initiative with government funding. At the national level, the Australian National Training Authority in 2000 funded a national learning cities project with 10 initiatives across Australia selected on a competitive basis. My company, Global Learning Services, managed the initiative with Jim Saleeba and myself as consultants.

We visited each project twice. A feature for me was that four of the projects were in regional South Australia - Port Augusta, Port Pirie, Copper Coast, and Mount Gambier. At the time it seemed that South Australia was on the path to building a strong learning culture, with good support from institutions such as Flinders university. However, there was no follow up on this national initiative and shortly after ANTA was abolished. So why did this prospect of government support fade?

Looking back on my experience during these years, I see this period as the youth stage of development of learning cities in Australia with all the exuberance of young people, but without long term sustainability strategies.

- There has been excitement and commitment.
- Initiatives have been strongest where councils have taken an active role.
- Most developments have been in small and medium sized communities - no major Australian city has signed up.
- A feature has been the key role of public libraries which have anchored initiatives.
- Universities have not been strongly involved, with the exceptions I have noted, unlike the situation in Korea, Taiwan, and China where universities have had a key role and strong networks of learning cities exist.
- The distinctive role and value of learning cities has not been well articulated in a context where concepts such as Smart City, Green City, Placemaking have had clear constituencies. Learning cities bring holistic perspectives that the others do not.

This is a mixed picture, but foundations have been laid for later development and there is much available in the way of policies and practices that can inform future development.

The role of universities merits comment. While most universities have not supported learning cities, or sought to develop as lifelong learning institutions, there have been exceptions. The role of RMIT was important for the Hume Global Learning area with Leone Wheeler having a key role, James Cook university has supported the Townsville learning city, while Flinders, for a time, was important in the development of learning cities in Adelaide. The university role is likely to be much more significant in the future in line with the socio-economic changes I discuss later.

Today

While much of the early stage of development has carried on, there have been some interesting developments that presage the future. A central feature of the present context is the complexity of the multiple challenges confronting communities of all sizes in an uncertain and rapidly changing world. UNESCO has called this a world of “complexity, uncertainty, and depravity”.

In addition to recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning cities are confronted by multiple challenges occurring concurrently.

- The social, economic, and cultural challenge of an ageing population and the transition towards a longevity society marked by the “hundred-year life”.
- The challenge of the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, particularly the extension of artificial intelligence across more industry sectors, with the prospect of a future with fewer jobs as we have known them.
- The continued impact of urbanisation with population drift from rural areas
- The impact of all these developments on mental health and well-being.

While this complexity of challenges may be seen as beyond the power of learning cities to address, they also open opportunities to rethink the role and power of learning communities of all sizes, as a key initiative in working towards a good sustainable future in a rapidly changing world. I take this question up in my comments of future directions.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the other changes mentioned above, may be seen as a dark period for learning communities, there have been some developments that point the way towards a sustainable future. I will mention two in particular:

- The start of connections with the international development of learning cities;
- The creative use of learning technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The flow of international ideas on learning communities and lifelong learning has been strengthened. Melton and Wyndham are now members of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), while Wyndham also participates in PASCAL development of learning cities and was an active contributor in the 2020 EcCoWell Community Recovery Program. This is a trend that should increase with more learning cities in international networks, including with Asian countries as near neighbours. There is much to learn from the experience of the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, and China, particularly from the role of bodies like NILE in Korea, and communities colleges in Taiwan. China shows how learning cities can be developed in mega-cities with populations the size of Australia's.

The restrictions of 2020 gave a stimulus to the use of technology for learning purposes. The large number of webinars conducted was a feature, while the Global Learning Festival organised by

Melton and Wyndham provides a good example of a creative approach to sharing learning festival ideas across the world in a period of lockdown.

I expect both these themes to take off and broaden on the path to a sustainable future.

Tomorrow

The future of learning cities in Australia will depend, critically, on how well learning cities evolve and contribute to the mega challenges I have mentioned. This will change, the concept of learning cities, and how we approach learning throughout life in cities and neighbourhoods in the emerging “hundred year life”.

The impact of an ageing population and “the hundred year life” will require rethinking all the stages of learning throughout life, and moving, with many partners, beyond the present “front-end model of education” that has little regard for the adult years. The costs of inaction will be too high for society to bear, and we are on the road to realising this. The evolution and impact of the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution will add to this world of uncertainty. In a world of artificial intelligence across a wider range of jobs, we will need to prepare people for a world of fewer jobs. While responses such as social enterprises will help, the implications of less work go before such initiatives. Mental health problems are already a major issue for society, and will worsen unless major changes occur in the treatment of mental health that draw on community resources to support people, including giving meaning and purpose to lives, in a world of permanent transition.

What can learning cities do?

There is much that learning cities can do in this period of transition towards a technology-driven longevity society. Some learning cities are already heading in such sustainable directions. I have listed a few suggestions below as my **Twelve steps towards a sustainable future for learning cities in a learning society**. These are suggestions for discussion that I hope you will discuss, modify, and adapt to your local situation.

1. Have a key regard for the mental health and well-being of people. Harness community resources to give meaning and purpose to lives.
2. Strengthen local communities as regenerative learning neighbourhoods with broad partnerships across government, civil society, education institutions, and industry.
3. Build imagination and empathy in your activities so that you head in the direction of “a new model of partnership with imagination, empathy, and well-being”. Libraries and cultural institutions can contribute much, along with local community centres..
4. Foster local and global consciousness in your activities, including recognition that we have a collective responsibility for the future of the planet and its people.
5. Build local and international networks that support these objectives. Participate in international networks such as the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities and PASCAL Learning City Networks.
6. Aim to make your developments holistic so that the divide between economic and social development is bridged with more holistic strategies. Business and industry will have a heightened interest in the learning capacity of their workforce, and in maintaining the employability of ageing workers.
7. See learning cities as learning ecosystems with both social and biological dimensions. A good test is to work out how your city could navigate its way through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals starting with Goal 4 on education.

8. Harness technology in creative ways to widen access to learning, personal and community development, The Melton/Wyndham initiative for a Global Learning Festival mentioned above is a good example. Build networks with Asian learning cities.
9. Ensure all your people have digital literacy.
10. Foster intergenerational relations as a new dimension to social coherence in a longevity society.
11. Build an enlarged role for libraries and cultural institutions, such as museums, so that their work reflects the progress of your community towards a just sustainable future. Fostering a living heritage can help.
12. Recognise that all these developments will change your concept of learning and community as you progress towards becoming a learning society with a learning culture.

A critical feature in such developments is the changing concept of transformative learning. Makino has described the role of learning in the structural transformation of society in the following terms.

“Learning” is re-inventing oneself in a life with meaning and purpose.

My suggestions above involve a new generation of learning cities and neighbourhoods with a larger role in Australian society. Times have changed radically since the pioneering days of learning cities in Australia, and the new mix of challenges require such changes.

The process of rethinking learning cities is an important aspect of the critical need to reimagine learning throughout life, in an evolving longevity society, in response to the mega challenges I have mentioned. This process of building a sustainable learning culture in Australia will require many changes as we “reimagine knowledge, education, and learning”. For example, we will need to move beyond our “front-end” model of education with universities becoming lifelong learning institutions.

At the start of this paper I suggested two core themes in learning city development. I would now like to add two further themes for learning cities in transforming and enlarging your role in Australian society.

1. We harness all the resources of cities - local government, civil society, education, industry, arts, environment - to extend learning opportunities throughout life to all people in the city, including disadvantaged groups.
2. We use learning strategies to build community and social cohesion in the city.
3. We aim for holistic development of the city with the learning city as an innovative learning ecosystem integrating social and biological dimension in contributing to a sustainable planet and society.
4. Learning cities are an instrument for rethinking learning throughout life and building community to support the well-being of people in the transition to a technology-driven longevity society.

I appreciate that you may describe these themes in different ways, and I welcome this. I hope that my **Twelve Steps towards a Sustainable Future for learning cities in a learning society** will be discussed and revised to fit the circumstances and aspirations of your community. We need to think of learning cities in process terms, rather than as a product. The time is ripe for some creative ideas that move Australia towards becoming a just and sustainable learning society.

To contribute to the conversation contact Peters at p.kearns@netspeed.com.au