

Building Resilience for Turbulent Times A key objective for learning communities

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Communities and cities across Australia have been challenged by a series of critical disasters in recent years. These have ranged from bushfires, droughts, floods, to the current COVID 19 pandemic. These critical challenges have tested the resilience of communities, so that building resilience should now be seen as a priority objective for learning cities and communities.

Building resilience in a community enables a community to develop new relationships with broader partnerships that enhance awareness of potential dangers. This may be seen as what the Wyndham Learning City called “*a new model of partnership with empathy*” (Gomez, 2020:20)

Judith Rodin, the former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, has described resilience in the following terms.

Resilience is the capacity of an entity- an individual, a community, an organisation, or a national system- to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from disruptive experience (Rodin, 2015:3).

The Rockefeller Foundation contributed to this examination of resilience by organising 100 Resilient Cities program to help cities around the world strengthen their resilience in disruptive times. Most of the great cities of the world participated, including Sydney and Melbourne in Australia. While the strategies adopted were mainly directed at the needs of large cities, aspects of the strategies adopted are also relevant to the needs of smaller cities, including ALCN members.

Learning Cities and Resilient Cities share a number of common objectives, so that sharing experience could strengthen each of these approaches.

Rodin argued that resilience building needed to proceed on three fronts: structural, social, and natural (Rodin:7). Action on these fronts is often relevant to ALCN communities and cities, particularly social and natural initiatives.

One of the main lessons from the Rockefeller 100 Resilient Cities experience is the need to co-ordinate action across a range of areas relevant to resilience. To achieve this, participating cities appointed a Chief Resilience Officer as the co-ordinator of resilience building in the city.

This co-ordinating role is also central to building learning cities, and is usually built into the overall administration of the Learning Community/City.

However, in the disruptive context of recent years, does this role need to be built into the formal structure of a Learning City/Community. While the director of the Learning City/Community may have this role on a part time basis, this is an area where a network of volunteers, perhaps

experienced in action relevant to resilience and recovery from disasters, could make a contribution to strategic development to combat future disasters, particularly on social and natural aspects.

Research on disasters has shown that social cohesion is important in communities recovering from disasters. Rodin notes this influence in respect of disasters such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake (Rodin:65-66). This should be the starting point for Learning Cities/Communities looking to develop a resilience strategy.

In planning for resilience building in ALCN members, I suggest development across the following areas. All fit easily into strategic development of a learning community or city.

1. Fostering social cohesion.
2. Harnessing history, heritage, and the identity of the community.
3. Adopt systems thinking in your planning to broaden and strengthen partnerships.
4. Make resilience an objective in policies to support people in the longevity life.
5. Build environment policies and strategies into your planning to progress ecological objectives.
6. Build resilience into your approach to your ageing population.

Your strategy will be strengthened by the more you could build interaction between these pillars of a resilience strategy for you community. Such a strategy could, of course, be implemented over a number of years as a key component in your learning community strategy.

1. Social cohesion

At the heart of social action to build resilience in communities are steps taken to strengthen social cohesion. While this is a core objective of learning cities, building social cohesion to strengthen resilience from disasters can be used to enhance strategies for social cohesion in disruptive times. Particular issues such as intergenerational fragmentation, giving migrants and refugees a sense of belonging, addressing the isolation of many older people could be addressed in strengthening social cohesion.

2. Harnessing history, heritage, and identity

Closely related to social cohesion, is the history, heritage, and sense of identity of the community as an important instrument for building resilience in a community. Understanding the interactions of history and place over time will deepen your sense of the identity and culture of your community and the resilience of the residents in the context of disasters.

Museums and libraries can play an important role in developing these features in the culture of a community. Cultural and heritage issues are increasingly significant in a world of mass migration leading to increased diversity in many Australian communities (Kearns, Kling & Wistman, eds, 2011). Libraries and museums in their displays, for example on national days of ethnic groups, can build over time a sense of the cosmopolitan structure of the community, and the richness of its heritage. This is an important strand in building resilience.

3. Adopt systems thinking in your planning to broaden and deepen partnerships

It is useful to adopt systems thinking in your planning to strengthen resilience in your community so that there is a full understanding of the relationships that bear on the resilience of a community in times of crises.

Senge has described systems thinking in the following terms.

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing relationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static “snapshots”
(Senge, 1990:68).

Adopting systems thinking in your resilience planning has value from the holistic perspectives adopted ensuring that a structure of learning ecosystems becomes a foundation for your resilience strategy. Business and industry are confronted by similar learning and resilience issues in the post COVID world, so that it is important to ensure that they are part of the resilience planning for your community. I comment on this aspect below.

4. Make resilience an objective to support people in the longevity life

We live through a daunting time of disruptive change where lifelong learning and building community have taken on new objectives in supporting people to develop values and habits that make for well-being and resilience in difficult times. This is a major challenge for learning strategies.

The good news is that resilience building is a concept is a concept that can be learned and a practice that can be developed; resilience is not an inborn natural trait or an inherent characteristic of a company or community. Any entity can build resilience. (Rodin:7).

Learning cities and communities have a new agenda in fostering resilience at the individual and community levels. This is likely to involve a shift in consciousness as people develop both local and global consciousness and enhanced mindfulness.

There are skills and competencies that learning cities and communities can provide that support people developing their resilience to disasters and other unexpected events. OECD’s 2019 the *Future of Education and Skills* advocates the role of “transformative competencies”. Three transformative competencies are proposed:

- Creating new value
- Reconciling tensions and values
- Taking responsibility.

Each of these transformative competencies is relevant to building resilience in people, and overall building a culture in communities that supports people in difficult times. There is a challenge to find ways in which competencies such as these can be built into community

projects, and training and development strategies. Generic skills, such as problem solving, should be a regular feature of these programs (Kearns, 2020).

Closely related to harnessing transformative competencies is action taken in communities to build multiple intelligences into the educational and learning development of the community. From the perspective of resilience emotional and spiritual intelligences have particular importance. The founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, takes this perspective and advocates building the following intelligences in a community in response to the impact of the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution:

- Contextual intelligence – the mind;
- Emotional intelligence- the heart;
- Inspired intelligence- the soul;
- Physical intelligence- the body. (Schwab,2016:106-111).

OECD also recognises the value of integrated systems thinking.

To be prepared for the future, individuals have to learn and act in a more integrated way, taking into account the interconnections and inter-relations between contrary or incompatible ideas, logics and positions, from both short and long-term perspectives. In other words, they have to learn to be systems thinkers (OECD:4).

In what ways could this advice be applied in a community recovering from bushfires, floods, cyclones, plagues, or the impact of the COVID pandemic, and wishing to build resilience in the community for a sustainable future.

5. Build environment policies and strategies into your planning to progress ecological objectives

A practical area in which a community can foster systems thinking and the role of learning ecosystems is in progressing environmental objectives in the community. While these objectives may range from building awareness and understanding, for example with climate change, practical projects involving environmental repair. Community projects can be useful in this area. A good example is provided by a number of community project pilots undertaken by the Taipei Learning City which were directed by the community college located in each of the districts of the city (Reghenzani, ed, 2016).

6. Build resilience into your approach to your ageing populations

Australia, like most countries, has an ageing population. This was confirmed by the recent Treasury Intergenerational Report which showed that life expectancy was predicted to rise to 86.8 years from men and 89.3 years from women by 2060. This ageing of the population is widely seen as the emergence of a longevity society which will change all the habits and arrangements we are accustomed to (Gratton & Scott, 2017; Arrison, 2011). Resilience throughout the life course will then be a critical issue for all learning cities and communities, with the well-being of older people at the centre of this challenge.

The World Health Organization has been addressing questions of the well-being of ageing populations for some years, with the concept of active ageing developed by WHO with three pillars:

participation, health, and security (WHO, 2002). However WHO did not include learning as a necessary stimulus to good active ageing. WHO returned to this question in 2015 proposing a societal and life-course approach (WHO, 2015). This approach has more relevance to the emerging longevity society with ageing populations.

IN 2018 PASCAL and PIMA collaborated in a SIG on *Learning in later Life*. This report saw much merit in the WHO 2015 report, but concluded that happiness, inclusion, fulfilment and employability should be added to the WHO approach of active ageing. The additions have considerable relevance to the objectives of resilience in a rapidly changing society. These additions mix psychological, humanitarian, and ethical objectives with the practical question of employability in a technology driven rapidly changing society.

Can ALA members build on these foundations, and draw out an approach that recognizes the priority that should be given to well-being and resilience in the emerging longevity society (Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns, 2018.) Exchanging experience between members will have much value. The 2018 PASCAL/PIMA report showed the important role of local community institutions such as community colleges, neighbourhood houses, and U3A type institutions. Could these form part of a distinctively Australian approach?

Making resilience a priority for learning communities and cities

There are compelling reasons why resilience should be seen as a priority for ALCN members. Not only recovery from disasters such as the COVID pandemic, bushfires, floods, and droughts, but other long term disruptions to our accustomed way of life- such as ageing populations and new technologies impacting on jobs and employment. These challenge the well-being and resilience of people, and the sustainability of their communities. There will be much value in ALCN members exchanging experience and ideas on action being taken to increase the resilience of people in their communities and cities. As Rodin observed, there is a dividend from action taken “to prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from disruptive experience”.

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