

Module 4 Schools as Learning Organisations in a Learning City

Developed by Professor Norman Longworth, Former Visiting Professor to Napier University Edinburgh, Sheffield Hallam University, Stirling University, Chichester University College and adviser to the CRADALL Centre for Research and Development into Adult and Lifelong Learning, Glasgow University.

Module description and rationale

This module addresses the challenges and opportunities that schools will face in their own journey towards becoming lifelong learning organisations and examines the role they can play in assisting the construction of a learning town, city or region. Children entering primary school this year (2019) will leave secondary education in the year 2035 into a very different world and then, hopefully, many will go on to further and higher education and graduate by about 2040. Hopefully too few of them will consider that their learning is complete. USA will have experienced the inexperience of at least 3 more Presidents, the nations of Europe and Australasia several different Prime Ministers each, and even most of the dictators who bedevil our current world will be no longer with us.

The importance of the schools in the creation of a lifelong learning society in a city or town cannot be understated. Here is where learners are at their most impressionable; here is where the values and attitudes that will serve them for life must be implanted; here is where the possibilities for dealing with social inequalities are at their most opportune; and here is where the early warning signs of learning reluctance, demotivation and emotional difficulty should lead to the application of remedial measures. It is where the love or indifference or hate for learning is engendered, affecting an individual's whole future course in life. What happens in the present has an inordinate influence on what happens in the future, as research study after research study shows. And so the 21st century school will have a vision and a strategy for the development of values and attitudes extending well beyond the academic objectives and targets required of them by government diktat.

Such a strategic vision will open the school mindset to the influence and ideas of organizations and people outside of itself, just as the child's mind profits from being opened up to a variety of experiences outside of him/herself. Unfortunately, in some countries schools take a low priority in the lifelong learning hierarchy of needs. Children in schools are often treated as vessels to be filled rather than candles to be lit, and because there are so many more of them, the per capita resources are much lower. An increasing number of school-teachers are even aware of the existence of the lifelong learning movement, still less that it will affect the ways in which they will work in the future.

To be sure the schools work under considerable difficulty. The minds of the young are attacked from every side by a confusing babble of urgent and conflicting voices each competing for attention. Vastly improved communication techniques exploiting basic human psychology increase the pressure. Neither the children, nor even the teachers and parents who nurture them, have been given the training or the skills on how to handle the sort of information overload which afflicts all of us. Television presents children every evening with most powerful visual and verbal stimuli, reflecting the sometimes exciting, often banal and occasionally distressing nature of life itself.

It is small wonder that schools experience an uphill fight to grasp the attention of a clientele already punch-drunk by information and more exciting vistas. Society expects them to be centres of learning excellence, models of social behaviour and examples of community achievement, almost as if the real world outside – of drugs, of explicit and pervasive sexual titillation, of deprivation and despair – does not exist within their perception. They have not been given the necessary resources and the authority to fulfil that role, either through the constant training and retraining of teachers, or through the increased funding which might enable them to compete with the professional mediemen.

In such times of change and constant stress, there is a great temptation for society to withdraw

backwards into the old certainties. Schools are pressured, often by governments under pressure themselves to demonstrate their commitment to rising standards, to adopt ever more rigid structures, curricula and assessment processes in order to improve measurable literacy rates. Often these seem to work in the short-term. But the in-built failure mechanisms in assessment systems, and increased parental, child and institutional anxiety to avoid them, often have, in the longer term, the opposite effect from what was intended. The objectives become to satisfy the objectives. Children become examination laboratory animals. Learning itself suffers. It becomes a less attractive proposition, no longer spontaneous and enjoyable, more of a chore to be endured than an experience to be enjoyed, and actively switches many youngsters off it for life.

And yet, although the much longer term may bring a complete re-evaluation of mass schooling as an instrument of education it is still the primary task of the traditional school to empower its pupils to respond to the modern realities of change, information technology, social media, changing employment opportunities, lifelong learning and the knowledge society. Its focus has to be on the future as well as the present.

This module tries to tackle those issues in a positive way. What is it that makes a good Lifelong Learning School? How can the human potential of all our children be developed without turning them off the process of learning, and without losing the goodwill and support of the community? How can children be transformed into confident, creative and contributing citizens as adults? How can the habit of learning be instilled so that it becomes an enjoyable and personally rewarding way of passing time throughout life? Such things take time both to prepare and to implement and the process should start as soon as possible.

The module therefore addresses those who are responsible for initiating the changes – the politicians, the city professionals, the educators, the community leaders. It provides about 20 hours of materials for the learning journey of those with an open mind and a willingness to assimilate new ideas and concepts. It explores and explains the roles and responsibilities of the people concerned, the differences in educational terms between the education and training world of the 20th century and the lifelong learning world of the 21st, and the actions that need to be taken to help build the learning city.

Module Objective

The overall objective of this module is to define the changes to the internal structures and external activities necessary to transform a school into a lifelong learning organisation. It will engage staff and others in learning activities to enhance insight into the characteristics of a lifelong learning school and the actions that can be taken to mobilise effectively all the resources available in the community, from the internet and in the school itself in order to develop an organisation fit for the 21st century.