

Communicating Learning Cities

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Between 2002 and 2005 the European Commission's PALLACE project explored how city stakeholders in Australia (Adelaide and Brisbane), New Zealand (Auckland), France (Senlis), Finland (Espoo), Canada (Edmonton) and China (Beijing) could exchange ideas and experiences for the benefit of both. Although grossly underfunded, there was no budget for salaries, it attained a measure of success in what it set out to do. Schools in Finland interacted with schools in South Australia on the contribution that schools could make to learning city development; Teacher Training colleges in both Auckland and Senlis exchanged information and experience about the role of teacher training in a learning city; Brisbane and Espoo discussed online the role of museums in fostering lifelong learning cities; and Edmonton hosted a conference on learning communities as well as contributing knowledge on the uses of technology for education. Politicians in South Australia and France even became involved. Beijing, which was, at the time, planning to transmute a whole city suburb of 800,000 people into a learning community reaching down to street level, learned from all the partners and played its part by supplying information on its rationale and progress.

The project results (Allwinkle and Longworth 2005) contain a wealth of observations, progress descriptions, learning materials and case studies. Salagaras (2005) enthused eagerly about the experiences in Mawson Lakes School, Adin (2005) described in glowing terms the increase in awareness in Auckland and Lee (2005) considered that the project had done much to inform administrators in Edmonton and in particular the outlying town of St Albert. The project manager waxed lyrical about the implications of inter-city communication and its potential for future economic and social development, especially if the links include communication between developed and developing world cities (Longworth, 2006). His utopia took the following shape

'Imagine, if you will, a system of linked learning cities and regions around the globe, each one using the power of modern information and communication tools to make meaningful contact with each other

- *School to school to open up the minds and understanding of young people*
- *University to University in joint research and teaching to help communities grow*
- *College to College to allow adults of all ages to make contact with each other*
- *Business to business to develop trade and commerce*
- *Hospital to hospital to exchange knowledge, techniques and people*
- *Person to person to break down the stereotypes and build an awareness of other cultures, creeds and customs*

And so on – museum to museum, library to library, administration to administration

Imagine that these links include both the developed and the developing world so that say Sydney, Seattle, Southampton, Shanghai and Dar es Salaam, to pick five alliterative cities at random, form one Learning Cities ring among a hundred similar networks.....

Imagine that one tenth of the money used to develop military solutions to human and social problems were to be spent on people and tools to make more than 100 of these rings work effectively.....

Imagine that such links had started ten years ago..... What difference might it have made to today's world?'

However, despite such passionate enthusiasm, and although information about the outcomes was widely distributed to city administrations throughout Europe, the real outcome of all this endeavour was a massive yawn. The project report, like so many similar innovative solutions, lies gathering dust in a Brussels basement. It can however also be found buried in the EUROlocal database at <http://eurolocal.info>.

Since 2005 the world of cities has changed dramatically. In 2008, for the first time, humankind became predominantly a species of urban dwellers when it was confirmed that more than 50% of people live in cities, and that process has accelerated considerably since then. Jin Yang (2012) suggests that *'As the population of the developed world has stopped growing and the population in rural areas of the developing world is also no longer increasing due to rapid urbanisation and rural-to-urban migration, nearly all the population increases will be in urban areas in developing countries'*. UNFPA (2010) projects that *'urban population is going to jump from 3.4 billion in 2009 to almost 5 billion in 2030, with urban growth mostly concentrated in Africa and Asia.'*

At the same time the scope of cities has increased exponentially. Such important issues as sustainability, renewable energy, consultation of citizens, lifelong learning, inter-culturalism, learning organisations, aging populations, health and well-being and community engagement did not overly exercise the minds of city leaders forty or fifty years ago.

The increasingly rapid pace of change, the rise (and fall) of the welfare state, globalisation, the growth and movement of populations, the increasing fragility of global ecosystems, climate change, and much more, have increased the complexity of the civic scene beyond recognition.

City leaders are now responsible for finding solutions to issues that affect the whole planet as well as the day to day concerns of services, citizens and institutions within the city. Such complexity is compounded by the fluctuating unknowns of global finance, skills needs, terrorist activity, political instability and the response to growing world poverty. Continuing Professional Development in city administrations used to be a necessity for a few technicians, managers and leaders. The development of local authorities into learning organisations means that it is now embedded into the continuous learning of *all* employees in many cities, just as it is in many large companies as a component of quality.

Some cities are responding to the challenges by selecting and addressing an issue that seems to them to be of major importance. A simple trawl of the internet will find references to creative cities, resilient cities, transition towns, green cities, healthy cities, smart cities, slow cities, liveable cities, cities of opportunity, cities for poverty reduction and sustainable development, Cool Cities, Sustainable cities, Educating Cities, Energy Cities, Future Cities, Culture Cities, Adaptive Cities, sanctuary cities, Heritage Cities, Sport Cities and more than 20 more. Each of them belong to intra-continental or global networks and each of them have developed strategies and plans to develop further within the sectors they have chosen to represent. Such a plethora of city types is no bad thing, but it has also served to fragment the field somewhat, since it is desirable that all cities will eventually need to address all these topics in order to become a true city of sustainable opportunities – a learning city.

What unites all of them is the incidence and primacy of ‘learning’ in their journey to success. This is why the term ‘learning city’ is often used as an umbrella for all and why Longworth and Yang (2012) suggest that a true learning city will, in the fullness of time, incorporate all these descriptors and more. Kearns (2013) echoes these sentiments in his ‘EcCoWell’ approach which advocates *‘more integrated and holistic approaches to learning cities which bring together the aspirations and objectives of Healthy Cities, Green Cities, Cultured Cities, Creative Cities, and Learning Cities.’*

Two initiatives stand out when considering the way in which cities can profit from international engagement and understanding in the future. The first is the PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE). Peter Kearns has been instrumental in contacting more than 20 learning cities world-wide and encouraging them to produce ‘stimulus papers’ for discussion between cities. Starting with Europe, which he considered to be the original home of the learning city, he introduced papers from Africa and Asia which greatly expanded the scope and the vision of what constitutes a learning city and the methodologies needed to create it. The wide range of cultural, economic, social and environmental diversity encompassed by, and between, cities is amply demonstrated in these papers and PIE provides a solid platform from which future learning city development can advance. In his vision of the future of PIE, Kearns (2013) also identifies key themes which cities will need to address with urgency. These include

- *an enhanced recognition of sustainability issues with the growth of various initiatives to progress development in sustainable ways.*
- *an enhanced recognition that current approaches to health systems are not sustainable in the long term.*
- *Methodologies and mechanisms for helping cities to learn together.*

But what has also emerged clearly from the PIE papers is the different ways in which cities have developed and implemented their strategies. The contrast between Asia, where many mega-cities have, perhaps through necessity, introduced measures to reach the people through devolution down to street level, and Europe, where top-down measures at local authority level were employed to provide adult education, is marked. It perhaps also highlights the cultural differentiation between the democratic individualism of the Western World, which often acts as a brake on progress, and the more authoritarian community ideology inherent in Asian cultures, where change can be managed much more easily. Now that PASCAL has announced its ‘Learning Cities 2020 Initiative’ (Konvitz 2013) it should be possible to move PIE on into a more interactive mode between more cities.

The other project offering a way into the future is the UNESCO International Platform for Learning Cities. This was launched in October 2013 in Beijing. While its focus is more on lifelong learning in cities, it recognises, as does PIE, that lifelong learning in cities is a holistic concept whose components must include the economy, the environment, culture, well-being, communication and resources as well as education. Its methodology is inclusion, of all stakeholders, of citizens, of communities, of creeds, cultures and races, and of political and administrative leaders. The UNESCO pamphlet, *“Learning to live together sustainably in cities”* provided by the Division of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (2013) states

'As places where individuals, families, communities and social groups exist within multiple and shifting relationships of interdependence, cities are a testing ground of our capacity to live together - and education, in its broad and narrow senses, is vital to the task of acquiring that capacity. Learning to live together sustainably in cities is one of the most important educational challenges of our time.'

The 'Key Features of Learning Cities' tool developed by UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (see diagram below) contains a wide variety of indicators that can help cities measure and monitor progress. They include such features as the wider benefits, the major building blocks for creating learning cities and the fundamental political, governance and resource allocation conditions which must be satisfied, in all some 30-35 guidelines for city leaders and administrators to implement.

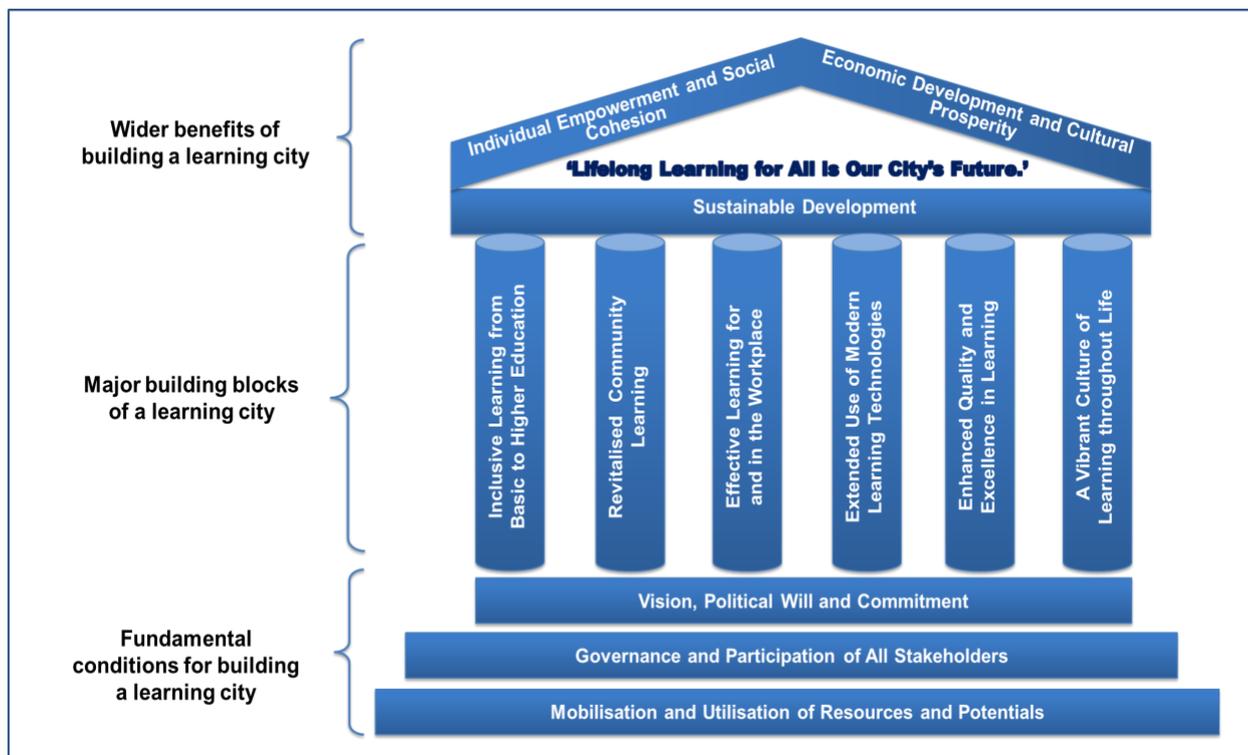


Figure 2 : UNESCO's Key Features of Learning Cities

It can be seen that these two initiatives, PIE and UNESCO, are complementary and it is hoped that they will work together to stimulate productive and profitable interaction between cities globally.

These are not the only aids for aspiring learning cities. Further tools for learning cities have been developed through the years by Osborne and Longworth and their international partners in European Commission funded projects (Osborne and Longworth 2010). In particular, the EUROlocal project, coordinated by PASCAL at Glasgow University, has gathered together a large storehouse of Learning City knowledge, tools, case studies, learning materials, charters, publications and strategies which will assist in the building of learning cities throughout the world. [<http://eurolocal.info>].

Finally, bearing in mind the topic of the conference, the following definitions, worked out during the construction phase of the UNESCO Key Features, may be useful to stimulate discussion at the conference.

A Learning City is one which invests in quality lifelong learning in order to:

- liberate the full potential of all its citizens
- invest in the sustainable growth of its workplaces
- re-vitalise the vibrant energy of its communities
- enhance the dynamism of its stakeholders
- exploit the creative value of local, regional and international partnerships and
- guarantee the responsible implementation of its environmental obligations

In so doing it will release the strength and capacity of all its social, economic, human, intellectual, cultural, technological and environmental resources

A Global Learning City is one which fulfils all the above and...

- **Empowers all its citizens to live in harmony with people of other creeds, colours, countries and cultures**
- **Encourages its primary, secondary and tertiary learning providers to participate in the power of international learning by all their staff and students.**
- **Widens horizons and action by facilitating international dialogue between citizens**
- **Establishes bilateral and multilateral links with other cities to explore how each one can assist the other**
- **Recognises the global reach of environmental matters and accepts its obligations to the future of the planet**
- **Works with NGOs and INGOs to implement the recommendations of international treaties and obligations**
- **Assists with the development of international trade between cities**

High ideals indeed, but necessary ones if the world is not to descend even further into chaos, ignorance and hate.

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