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**FROM SMART STATE TO LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
LEARNING FESTIVALS AS A STRATEGY TO STIMULATE AND
FOSTER LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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Introduction

The focus on learning cities, learning regions brings together several different responses to global restructuring, new knowledge economy and information and communication technologies.

In many respects this case study of a small community in rural and regional Queensland is a response to these significant forces of change. Because of this it is appropriate to begin the paper and case study by outlining the different forces of change and shifts in thinking which have come together in the concept of learning cities, learning regions. After a brief outline of a *framework for learning cities, learning regions* the paper outlines the nature of the case study and the objectives which underpinned it. The section which follows outlines the development of the *Outback Learning Festival* and the way this initiative was implemented and experienced in a community in North West Queensland. The final section of the paper discusses the lessons learned and implications for future.

1. A framework for learning cities, learning regions

Learning and the Learning Economy

In pursuing an understanding of the concept of learning cities, learning regions it seems there are at least four related but different impetus for the idea. The first impetus for the reconceptualisation of learning and learning economy (and indeed learning organizations) can be traced to what now must be seen as a seminal paper by Lundvall and Johnson (1994) on the learning economy. Here the importance of different types of learning and the difference between codified and tacit learning is well articulated – something not new to those in the fields of education and adult learning. What is of particular interest however in the paper by Lundvall and Johnson is the explicit connections made to economy. While the role of learning in production and work is not new, generally it was largely 'assumed' and occurred invisibly (Razavi, 1997). What Lundvall and Johnson (1994) and others (Edquist, 1997, OECD 2000) have identified and stressed in newly emerging knowledge economy is that learning is now a fundamental process and resource.

A second impetus for learning cities, learning regions comes from the application of learning within and across organisations (Senge, 1990). Economic geographers too, have stressed how the transfer and sharing of knowledge and ideas across informal networks within industry clusters (sometimes referred to as collective learning) seems also to be a critical aspect of creativity and innovation (Keeble et al, 1999). And since innovation is an essential ingredient in the knowledge economy, ways to promote, support and enhance innovation are important (Edquist, 1997). Drawing on case studies of technopoles and industrial complexes in Europe (Cooke and Morgan, 1998), the United Kingdom (UK) and the USA and Canada (Wolfe and Gertler, 2001) there is growing evidence and awareness that learning is the fundamental process at work in the new knowledge economy. Far from an assumed and invisible force it needs to be made explicit and fostered and supported.

Aside from identifying clusters and communities of practice the work of economic geographers highlighted a third important aspect for the conceptualisation of learning cities, learning regions – the spatial context. Florida (1995) articulated the idea of learning **regions** and others (Bokema et al, 2000) outlined the basis of **regional innovation systems**. Encapsulated here was the idea that in particular locales learning, which was fostered and supported through good learning infrastructure (i.e. a regional innovation system) enabled the locality to compete in a global economy.

This acknowledgement of the regional scale provides an important link to local economic development and the importance of learning, social capital and human capital in community development. In making this connection it is possible to move beyond a potentially narrowly defined regional innovation system which focuses on business and industry alone to take a wider **whole-of-community approach** where increasingly learning and learning processes can be the vehicle to equip and empower whole communities (Amin, 1999).

Allison (2001) has broadened the spheres of activities and influence for learning to articulate a *learning communities* approach to local economic development. In this approach an explicit link between learning initiatives and partnerships and governance, social capital and building local capacity and capabilities and economic prosperity is developed. This lies at the heart of local economic development and several community case studies in urban and rural areas in Queensland illustrate how this approach (Kawana Waters, Cook Shire, Wujal Wujal Community, Atherton) may foster local economic development.

Closely interwoven with this **endogenous approach to local economic development** is the work of scholars in the field of education research. Tooke (2000), for example, argues that the wider value of learning has been recognised by those who work in and focus on education, **lifelong learning, adult and community education**. Clearly this scholarly tradition offers a timely and useful critique to the concept of learning regions provoking an effort to embrace wider social and community development issues. The TELS (Towards a European Learning Society) Project (Longworth, 1999) and the UK Learning Towns Project (Yarnit, 2000) for example, clearly identify four critical objectives for learning and learning initiatives which encompass (i) economic prosperity; (ii) social inclusion; (iii) sustainability; and (iv) governance.

These objectives resonate with those most frequently articulated in local economic development strategies. It is the interweaving of these different dimensions of “learning” which provides a framework for a whole-of-community approach to learning cities, learning regions to underpin the economic and social livelihood of communities in the global economy. In this broader conceptualisation the scope of activity and value of learning goes well beyond narrowly defined industry clusters and issues of competitiveness and innovation (as important as these are). As the plethora of **learning initiatives** developed by Yarnit (2000), Longworth (1999), Longworth and Franson (2001), Allison (2001) and others reveal, learning weaves its way through the community in many ways.

With each of these activities the community may learn and grow sustainably. Learning equips communities to face change, adapt and transform themselves. When the concept of learning cities, learning regions is considered in this broader framework it opens up exciting potential and possibilities for many communities, especially when considered against the backdrop of rapidly changing communication technologies. It is against this view of a learning community that we turn now to tell the story of one community’s response to changed circumstances and the **learning initiative** which launched this response to be “smart”...in the Smart State.

2. The Outback Learning Festival

The trigger – the learning landscape

Before we tell the story of Mt Isa and the Outback Learning Festival it is important to not only outline objectives but also to outline how this particular initiative came about and its link to the concept of learning cities, learning regions. As with many good ideas and innovation, creative thinking, lively personalities and a certain component of serendipity play an important role in this case study. (Indeed as all innovation stories reveal, it is important never to lose sight of the role of these important components). The background to this case study resides in a conversation between two sisters – both in effect “teachers” and passionate about learning and learning opportunities. One is on staff at QUT (Queensland University of Technology), the other Deputy Principal at Sunset State School in Mt Isa. The former had already undertaken a substantial body of research on learning communities. The latter a very experienced teacher working within a Centre of Excellence on Maths, Science and Technology at Sunset State School and committed to lifelong learning.

Early in 2002 it had been announced that QUT would again take its **Innovation Train** throughout rural and regional Queensland. The train would be visiting Mt Isa, a mining community in far North West Queensland. The two “teacher-sisters” brainstormed the idea of linking the local schools to the train visit in a more encompassing way – rather than just a site visit to the train as had been the case in former years. Could this in fact form the basis of a more widely based local learning initiative?

We pause briefly to set the context of Mt Isa. Mt Isa is or has been largely a single industry town. It is a remote township of around 22,000 people in the North West of Queensland. The town’s population and economic base relies on the mining activities of Mt Isa Mines (MIM) and more recently Western Mining Corporation (WMC). The recent developments of WMC represent a shift to some extent from reliance on the extraction, smelting and export of copper, lead and zinc. WMC extracts gases from MIM and uses these residuals to manufacture superphosphates. While this represents some expansion to the economic base, for the most part the community is reliant upon ‘old industry’. In response to this situation both the local authority and these large companies have been concerned both within themselves and in conjunction with the community to respond to new knowledge economy and seek out ways to engage with the Smart State agenda.

Following the preliminary discussions between QUT and Sunset State School three more visits and associated discussions facilitated the idea of a learning landscape as the backdrop to a learning festival.

First, two teachers from Sunset State School (Susan Nystrom and Sue Hendricks) visited Janelle Allison at QUT to hear more about learning communities and the kinds of initiatives which not only have a learning focus but which are also oriented to the economic and social objectives of the community. This centred around work Allison (2001) had undertaken elsewhere in Queensland. Second, Janelle Allison visited Mt Isa, in particular Sunset State School, to meet the Community Reference Group associated with the Centre of Excellence in Maths, Science and Technology based at the school. This Centre of Excellence funded by the Queensland State government department, Education Queensland, has an explicit requirement for community partnering and community engagement. These elements are now being integrated into the Educational Strategic Plan and curriculum and closely align with the emerging focus of capacity building in local economic development.

At the meeting with this Community Reference Group, Janelle Allison made a presentation about learning communities and learning initiatives. Members of the group included other school principals and other senior managers from long established local industries such as Mt Isa Mines and Western Mining Corporation. As mentioned both these large corporations who have a substantial presence and are the main employers in the town have become aware of the need for a more diverse economic base and innovation. The discussion about learning and innovation connected well to these firms' agenda and they promised support .

Allison outlined the idea of Mt Isa as a learning landscape. Besides the formal educational sites and hubs for learning were, in fact, the potential for a plethora of other sites of learning. Other places such as local library, community groups, tribal council, senior citizens centres, residential homes for the aged provide a rich resource for skills and tacit knowledge. But these opportunities for learning often remain invisible. Out of this discussion was born the idea of a learning festival to build community awareness and knowledge of the importance of learning, both formal and tacit, as a community resource enabling the community to respond to change.

The third visit by Susan Nystrom to Brisbane involved her participation in and discussions about a presentation on learning communities by the TELS Project leader Norman Longworth. These presentations confirmed for Susan Nystrom the value of wider community involvement. The sum of these visits and exchange of ideas was the *Outback Learning Festival* – a local interactive event to highlight and celebrate many and varied sites of learning within the learning landscape of Mt Isa. An opportunity to build awareness of lifelong learning and the connection of learning to smart state.

Learning Objectives

These visits and exchange of ideas also generated a clearer idea of the purpose and role of a learning festival. Several key objectives can be identified:

- (i) Building community awareness of and knowledge about lifelong learning;
- (ii) Building community awareness of the link between lifelong learning, learning and economic prosperity and social inclusion;
- (iii) Building community understanding of the knowledge resources held in the community;
- (iv) Building community awareness that learning occurs all across the community and not just in the formal education sector; and
- (v) Building community awareness of the need for partnerships to achieve good learning.

The process – community engagement.

*Underpinned by these objectives the idea became a reality and support for the Outback Learning Festival began to snowball. From the initial meeting of a Community Reference Group, others were invited to join. These included teachers from other schools and members of community groups. From this was formed a Learning Festival Working Group. Broadly what had emerged from the discussions was (i) an event over several days in which the arrival of the QUT Innovation Train was one of the key events; (ii) consolidation of the idea of a **learning landscape** in which there were a whole range of different sites where learning (formal and tacit) occurred; and (iii) the involvement of the whole community in the staging of the festival.*

Learning all over

In reviewing the studies and projects in the UK (Yarnit, 2000) it is clear that learning occurs in many ways and in many places. Thus in creating a learning landscape the idea was to in fact make visible on the landscape sites where “learning” is located and how it might be accessed. The Festival Working Group had the task of identifying all the types and sites of learning which might be included in a festival. At this point aside from the major corporations in town, the local government, various state government agencies and other private firms were approached. Telstra and the Mt Isa Council promised support.

Within Mt Isa there are several primary schools and two secondary schools. At least five of the local primary schools committed to developing learning sites. These learning sites included:

- Early childhood workshops – for parents and teachers;
- Writing Expo;
- Family Maths Night;
- Flight Expo;
- Promoting ICT for Learning.

These activities were oriented towards children, parents and others in the community. Alongside these activities Kalkadoon High School and the associated TAFE also developed learning sites, particularly with a focus on science and technology.

Beyond the formal education sector a host of other community groups also provided learning sites all across the landscape – some were at the railway station, others included an aged persons home and residential village, Mt Isa Mines, the local Town Library, the local Civic Centre and the Police Citizen’s Youth Club.

Further, to assist the community to access these sites the Working Group for the Festival would produce a local map of learning sites and Mt Isa Mines sponsored two ‘hail & ride’ buses across the community so that school children and members of the community could visit the learning sites.

The event – The Outback Learning Festival

To fully appreciate the “event” and how it might provide the impetus for change and action in the community, it is important to remember the spatial dimensions of the learning festival and the themes encompassed within it. Not only did the learning landscape encompass a range of places and sites where learning might occur, it also included a range of themes. The festival program supported a range of themes for all ages. The range of themes included:

Technology – supported Telstra-Country, the ABC radio, an IT Expo and other social presentations;

It also included Telstra’s chatroom on the Railway Station Platform; Internet Training Workshop.

- Science – and a particular focus on flight which involved local helicopter and airline companies;
- Indigenous culture – supported by Western Mining Corporation and the Kalkadoon Tribal Council;
- Art in the landscape – QUT Cultural Precinct presentations and workshops;
- Innovation – QUT Innovation train in which 4 carriages displayed in static and interactive forms new developments across science, technology building construction, health, business, education, creative industries.
- Story Telling – local library and My Isa residents and library staff.

Most of these themes were located on at least one learning site and included on a **Lifelong Learning in the Outback** brochure letter dropped across the whole community.

The event was launched on the evening of 27th August with the arrival of the QUT Innovation Train at the Mt Isa Railway Station. The train was open to the community all the following day (before moving on to other rural communities such as Richmond and Charters Towers). The same day a rich array of other activities were launched to provide an atmosphere of learning with all sorts of lifelong learning possibilities for people of all ages, ethnic and educational backgrounds in Mt Isa. Aside from the local community, busloads of children from surrounding centres such as Cloncurry also 'came to town' to participate in the learning festival.

The learning festival continued for around two weeks. Besides the local sites of learning, the festival was planned so as to take advantage of National Literacy & Numeracy Week. Other activities included in the two week period of the festival included Mt Isa Day, Showcase for Indigenous business and an IT Expo at the Mt Isa Civic Centre.

3. Outcomes – putting Smart State into *local* action

The response to the Outback Learning was extraordinary in terms of the attendance by schools and the wider community at various events at specific learning sites. The Flight Expo at Sunset State School, for example, drew children from all schools both within Mt Isa and from the surrounding district. But lined up around the school oval were hundreds of "mums & dads" – locals who wanted to see and participate. In a small rural community this is an excellent response.

The numbers who visited the QUT Innovation Train (1,500) was the largest for any one day in any rural and regional centres the train visited in Queensland. This too was an extraordinary response.

In general it seems that the response by the community to the event and the will of local schools and businesses and community to participate in the event suggests two things. First, these communities are often rich in the resources of human and social capital. There is much tacit knowledge held in these places and it is important to examine and explore how best to elicit these skills and resources and use them for local capacity building and response to new opportunities. Second, we sensed a 'hunger' for learning. There was little fear of technology but certainly a clear need for access in a user-friendly open way. The Learning Festival does this in a celebratory and 'safe' way.

There are a number of specific outcomes which can be highlighted three months after the event. Some events such as the Family Maths Nights are to continue – due to demand! A small rural outback community with a demand for maths, science and technology in localised forms suggests that issues of smart state and appropriate responses in terms of children's education and learning needs are in the minds of local people. This in turn deserves an equally serious response.

Another immediate outcome came from the QUT connection. The School of Electrical and Electronic Systems Engineering involved in a NASA satellite project which linked children in the USA to children in Queensland included Mt Isa as one of the rural centres. This, in turn, meant visits to Mt Isa by State Government ministers in Education and State Development. Another immediate outcome also arose from the QUT connection. Schools in Mt Isa saw the benefits of direct links to the QUT faculties such as Science and Creative Industries. Possible ongoing outcomes include visits to Mt Isa by 'real' scientists to talk about projects. This too makes the Smart State Agenda and rhetoric of biotechnology, new media/high tech industries and aerospace industry clusters have meaning and promise for young people in remote areas.

However, there were longer term outcomes and lessons which have wider implications. First, it is clear that learning and the idea of learning communities needs a **'trigger' – something to 'kick start' action** and make the link to Smart State. Other studies in the UK (Yarnit, 2000) and the work on Universities and Regional Development (CURDS, 2001; Garlick, 2001; Allison & Keane, 2001) all point to the importance of leadership and a focus. The celebratory and non-threatening and inclusive tone of a learning festival is an effective way to launch awareness of these issues. The train visit and the leadership in the community by staff at Sunset State School provided the necessary ingredients for such a trigger and leadership focus.

Second, the experience of this learning initiative highlights the importance of **creating and building connections**. In this case it was the connecting through sisters of university (QUT) and a school (Sunset State School) which also

happened to be a School of Excellence in Maths, Science & Technology. Connections are important and all the studies on networks, clusters and building social capital affirm their importance. These connections – institutional thickness – may not be sufficient for direct innovation but it does seem to provide the right environment for change (Amin and Thrift, 1995).

Third, while the learning festival revealed a community rich in resources they are neither visible nor well organised. In this context the schools play critical roles as not only educational centres but also as **potential learning hubs**. Two factors become important here. The focus on schools comes from parental involvement and interest in children's education. This, in turn, can provide the entry point for adults to access learning opportunities beyond children's curriculum. Hence there is great potential to channel a range of resources and opportunities through schools as learning centres or hubs. (The other local institutional resource which plays a similar role is the local public library - in Mt Isa this relationship has been enhanced through connecting all local school libraries and the local public library).

However, at the same time **schools as hubs for learning** may exclude other members of the community (Tooke, 2000). Adult and community education programs highlight long term resistance in some components of the population to the institutionalised nature of schools. Other learning sites therefore are needed as these may be less formal places. The experiences of indigenous children and the ways indigenous peoples learn also points to the need for either other ways of looking at schools as learning hubs or the value of making more of other sites of learning across the landscape. These sites may connect to the school hubs but initially provide a less threatening environment. The learning festival illustrates how these might work.

The fourth feature highlighted by the Learning Festival was the **involvement by large local industries like Mt Isa Mines and Western Mining Corporation**. Both these corporations who employ locally were alert to the shifting focus from an industrial economy to the knowledge economy. The commitment to the learning festival both in financial terms and community engagement demonstrates a recognition of these firms of the need to be an integral part of the community response to Smart State. While this is encouraging it also serves to highlight the need to examine precisely how Smart State Initiatives 'work' in these older remote single industry towns. The point of learning is that no 'one size fits all' and the implications are that **learning communities will encompass and respond to global forces but shaped by local needs and local assets**.

Finally, the Learning Festival initiative raises questions regarding the **embedding and sustaining of learning in the community**. The current pace of development and change provides opportunities and challenges for regions. Internationalisation has exposed local and regional economics to additional competition and the transformation of the global economy has had uneven impacts which not only create opportunities but also exacerbate disparity. Mt Isa faces a declining population and the need to retain local employment and shift from its reliance on a single industry base. Local capacity will shape how this community might respond. An awareness of local knowledge resources and of how lifelong learning can enhance effective transitioning are critical requirements if the community is to respond effectively. The Outback Learning Festival played an important role in putting **this awareness in the minds of local people. It also demonstrated in a localised way what Smart State might mean for that community**. The learning festival initiative in Mt Isa demonstrated a community's willingness to engage in these issues.

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