

Learning Communities and Cities:

“The city is dead. Long live the city! Those who have rushed to pronounce the city’s demise in today’s globalized communications world may have to eat their words. For cities – and their regions – can offer just the right mix of resources, institutional structures, modern technology and cosmopolitan values that allow them to serve as incubators and drivers for the knowledge-based societies of the 21st century.”

Kurt Larsen, “Learning Cities: the New Recipe in Regional Development,” OECD Observer, August 1999.

There is a growing body of research and literature on learning communities and cities in the emerging knowledge-based economy and society.¹ It is important, however, to situate the learning community of place (i.e., neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities and regions) within the confused and confusing literature on learning communities.² Perhaps, predictably, the web documents tend to focus on “electronic” or “virtual” communities – a function of self-selection. In the United States, interest in “virtual learning communities” is paralleled by research and development of “academic learning communities” – classrooms, schools and colleges that intend to promote a sense of community and shared learning within the educational institution by such means as team teaching and collaborative learning methodologies.³

In a recent study of the term “learning communities,” an example of the shifting definitional sands is contained in an otherwise worthy analytical summary, as follows: “...as humans lose their capacity to engage in processes of cultural learning, they lose the ability to build strong and vibrant communities capable of supporting varied tasks like identity formation, social integration and cultural reproduction. Without an immediate, diligent and long-standing commitment to improve “learning communities,” Canada is at risk of continuing to lose what is perhaps its most important social, cultural and economic asset: the capacity of its citizens to participate fully in learning together in communities of practice.”⁴

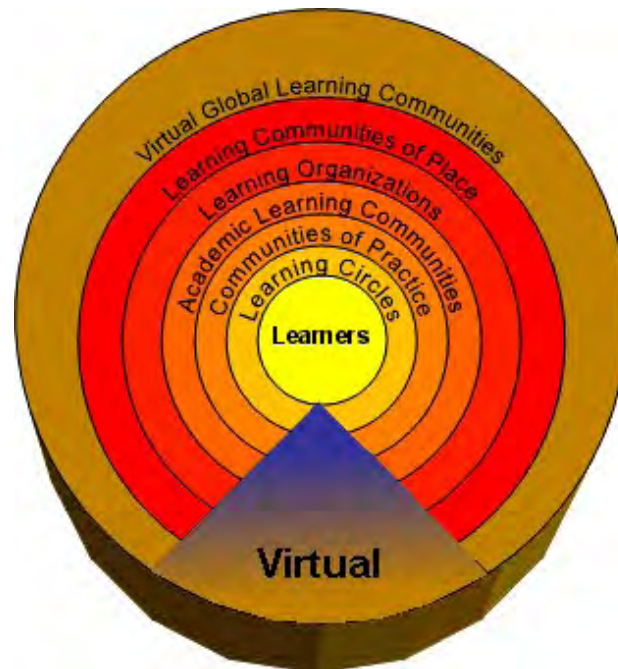
¹ Faris, R., 2006, Learning Cities: Annotated Bibliography, Vancouver Learning City Working Group, Vancouver.

² See; Plumb, D. and R. McGray, 2006, Learning Communities: CCL Review of the State of the Field in Adult Learning, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, and Kilpatrick, S., Barrett, M. and T. Jones, 2003, Defining Learning Communities, CRLRA Discussion Paper D1/2003, University of Tasmania, Launceston for discussion of various uses of the term “learning community” Faris, R., 2006, Learning Cities Annotated Bibliography, Vancouver Learning City Working Group, Vancouver conducted a Google web search on January 21, 2006 using the term “learning community” that found of the first one hundred references, 42% referred to “academic learning communities;” 38% referred to “electronic or virtual learning communities;” 14% referred to “communities of practice;” and 6% referred to learning towns or cities – “communities of place.” Subsequent replications of such a search result in similar findings.

³ An analysis of American definitions is found in the ERIC Digest 1999 document on “Learning Communities” that identifies “five major learning community models in existence” – all institution based. It makes no reference to OECD, European Commission, United Kingdom or Australian learning communities of place. Eric Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington D.C., BBB32577_George Washington University, Washington D.C.

⁴ Plumb and McGray, 2006.

Greater clarity is possible if we view the generic term “learning communities” as a nested concept of social/cultural learning with an expanding scale of learning environments. The following diagram and table are an attempt to locate “learning communities of place” – learning neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities and regions – in a nested Russian egg of social learning.



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Learning Communities: A Nested Concept of Expanding Scale and Cascade of Social Learning Environments.

The following Table I illustrates the differentiation of social learning groups from those of smallest scale (learning circles) through to those of largest or global scale (virtual global learning communities). It also attempts to distil the unique features of the various types and, when possible, identify leading exponents of each concept. Finally, several examples of each type are provided but with the recognition that a wide variety of organizations or models could be cited.

While there are clear definitional boundaries among all types of learning communities, at least two generalizations applicable to all are possible. First, every type is subject to “virtualization,” that is the creation and adaptation of every type on the Internet, regardless of the argument by early exponents that the original face-to-face learning version provides unique learning processes and outcomes. For instance, both the “learning circle” and “communities of practice” were initially premised and promoted as means of gaining the special benefits of face-to-face interaction and group dynamics. Today, there are a myriad of learning circles and communities of practice that are conducted electronically. Second, learning in every type of “community” is recognized as a two-way, interactive social process.

Table I: Learning Communities: A Nested Concept of Expanding Scale and Cascade of Social Learning Environments

<i>Type</i>	<i>Scale (Smallest to Largest Scale)</i>	<i>Example(s)</i>	<i>Unique Features or Characteristics</i>
Virtual Global Learning Communities	Largest: World Wide Web Networks of Shared Interest or Purpose	*CISCO Academy of Learning * Commonwealth of Learning	Solely dependent upon Information and communications technologies (ICT) e.g., Electronic Learning Communities
Learning Communities of Place	▲ Civic Entities: Neighbourhoods, Villages, Towns, Cities or Regions	*Kent Learning Region *Victoria Learning City *Finnish Learning Villages	Place-Based Settings *Places that explicitly use lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal *Political jurisdictions *Residents define operational boundaries * ICT used to network within and among learning communities of place
Learning Organizations	▲ Corporations/Bureaucracies through to Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises	*IKEA Natural Step Eco-Economic Model * UK Investors in People Scheme	Private, Social or Public Enterprises that Foster Learning as a Strategic Objective * Shared Vision * Systems Thinking * Mental Models * Personal Mastery *Team Learning - Peter Senge, chief exponent
Academic Learning Communities	▲ Educational Institutions: Colleges/Classrooms	*Evergreen College *Community Schools	Formal Education Settings *Team Teaching * Interdisciplinary Approaches *Co-operative Learning - A. Meiklejohn, chief exponent
Communities of Practice	▲ Communities of Interest: Professions, Trades, Avocations, etc.	*Artists' Workshop *Legal Assistants' Network	Initially Solely Face-to-Face *Often Theme-Based *Members are Practitioners *Members Learn from One Another - Etienne Wenger, chief exponent
Learning Circles	▲ Smallest: Small Groups Engaged in Learning Activities of Mutual Interest	*Swedish Study Circle Movement *Small Group Discussions	Initially Solely Face-to-Face *Small Group Dynamics *Optimum Size: 8-12 Persons - Kurt Lewin and Myles Horton, chief exponents

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Why the Emphasis on Place?

“The world is a sum of its parts and all the parts are local.”

Sheila Fell, quoted in *From Place to Place*, Common Ground, 1996.

In the midst of an age of the growing use of information and communication technologies and the creation of the “virtual” dimension of almost every human experience, the expanding research and literature on “place-based” theory, analysis, planning and practice may appear paradoxical. Disciplines such as geography, history, anthropology, social psychology and urban planning are, however, predictable sources of such perspectives.⁵ Similarly, the unique aboriginal worldview, with its profound respect for the land and the living systems thereon, promotes a concern for place.⁶ These concerns are increasingly reinforced by the findings of the ecological sciences and the associated environmental or eco-literacy movement.

In more recent years leading economists, often concerned with the development of creative, sustainable cities or regions have engaged in place-based analysis.⁷ Of particular relevance to those exploring the conceptual framework of learning communities is the growing interest in “place-based pedagogy” or learning.⁸

Recently, particularly in Australia, “place management” strategies involving collaboration among different levels of government (federal, state and local or sometimes state and local) across a cluster of departments – in a whole-of-government approach – have focussed substantial public resources to successfully

⁵ See Bradford, N., 2005, Place-Based Public Policy: Towards a New Urban and Community Agenda for Canada, Research Report F/51 Family Network, Canadian Policy Research Networks, Ottawa for an inter-disciplinary, international comparative analysis to inform place-based public policy in Canada. This report cites the Vancouver Urban Development Agreement, and other western Canadian urban agreements as emerging place-based models. It should also be noted that there is a body of research in social psychology around the concepts of “propinquity” and “proximity” that analyses the apparent importance of space and human interaction in human social intercourse.

⁶ Semken, S., 2005, “Sense of Place and Place-Based Introductory Geoscience Teaching for American Indian and Alaska Native Undergraduates”, Journal of Geoscience Education (March, 2005). Some geographers argue that a “sense of place” comes into existence when humans give meaning to a part of the larger, undifferentiated geographic space – a view akin to a constructivist learning theory.

⁷ Florida, R. 2002, The Rise of the Creative Class and How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life, Perseus Books Group, New York; Duke, C., Osborne, A. and B. Wilson, 2005, Rebalancing the Social and Economic: Learning, Partnership and Place, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, Leicester; Wolfe, D., 2000, “Social Capital and Cluster Development in Learning Regions,” Paper presented to the XVIII World Congress of the International Political Science Association, August 5, 2000, Quebec City.

⁸ Gruenewald, D., 2003, “The Best of Both Worlds: Critical Pedagogy of Place,” Educational Researcher, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 3-12. Rae, K. and B. Pearse, 2004, “Value of Place-Based Education in the Urban Setting”, Presentation at the Conference on Effective Sustainability Education: What Works? Where Next? Linking Research and Practice, Sydney.

address a variety of issues of special concern in a specific locale or place (neighbourhood, town, city or region).⁹

Summary

Human beings are social creatures and their learning, too, is a natural social process. Little wonder that there is a growing interest in diverse types of “learning communities” in which social learning is a common denominator. Yet people often have a profound “sense of community” closely linked to both a “sense of place” and a “sense of belonging”. It is in place-based learning communities that you will find diverse learning communities ranging from small learning circles to large-scale learning organizations. Even the dominant ideology of globalization and the related role of information and communication technologies are challenged by the alternative concept of “glocalization” in which local assets and values - including cultural, spiritual, social, and environmental - and their interaction with the global is valued and celebrated. We are at once both community members and global citizens.

⁹ Faris, R., 2004, Lifelong Learning, Social Capital and Place Management in Learning Communities and Regions: a Rubic's Cube or a Kaleidoscope? Observatory PASCAL: Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions at URL: <http://www.obs-pascal.com>