

Place-based Learning Communities: A Diversity of Perspectives – An Editorial by Ron Faris

“Take from the Altar of the Past, the Fire, Not the Ashes” Jean Jaures

The indelible impact of learning cities in the growth of human civilization is recorded from earliest days. From the democratic model of ancient Athens to the seven great university cities of the 8th Century Arab empire, cities were the places where learning was fostered, invested in, and celebrated.

Learning - the acquisition of knowledge, skill, attitudes, and values - is both an individual activity and a profoundly social process. Our learning commences in our families and grows as we participate in our educational institutions, workplaces and communities. From the agricultural era to that of the industrial system - formal learning - better known as the education system, has reflected the dominant socio-economic system: shifting from experiential learning and apprenticeships of the agricultural and feudal systems to the mass industrial model of education of the industrial systems that have evolved over the past 250 years.

Today we are faced with a new political economy characterized by some as the “learning economy”. The knowledge-based economy and society which is emerging has been characterized by three inter-active drivers: forces of globalization; ever-changing Information and communications technologies; and the explosion of new knowledge. The only constant of the new economy and society is rapid change and - paradoxically - our most crucial response may well be change in the form of learning.

The emerging political economy has - thanks in part to the work of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank - sparked recognition of the importance human and social capital. Mainstream economists recognize the impact of strengthened education attainment and health measures - human capital - that, in combination with increased measures of networking, shared values, and trust - social capital - have on economic productivity and innovation. A unique consensus has developed that views positive social capital as the cradle of increased human capital development. Simply put – healthy, learning families and healthy, learning communities result in a stronger triple bottom line: economically productive and innovative, socially just and vibrant, and environmentally sustainable communities.

A place-based learning community model enables community members to identify and analyze the learning resources (people with knowledge and skills worth sharing and local facilities) in all five sectors of their community: **civic** or governance; **economic** (private to social enterprise); **public** (libraries, museums, social and health agencies); **education** (kindergarten to graduate studies); and **voluntary**/community (faith communities, service clubs, recreation and leisure associations). A place-based learning community mobilizes the resources of all five sectors while the conventional community relies on the education sector as the chief source of learning opportunities. Breaking down the silos of all five sectors in order to foster needed cross-sectoral partnerships and strategic alliances is a major accomplishment of learning communities.

A short, practical definition of a place-based learning community is a village, town, city or region that explicitly uses the concept as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal. It is a place that mobilizes

the learning resources of all five community sectors to enhance its economic, environmental and social/cultural conditions in a socially inclusive way. It is a concept that emphasizes the importance of community-based, learner-centred approaches that foster learning throughout the life-span and across all of the life-wide settings of learning.

This edition of *A Lire* provides an array of articles regarding the theory and practice of learning communities and the literacies. It recognizes that multiple literacies are found within vibrant learning communities - and that literacy is a continuum of abilities whether it be literacies such as computer or IT literacy; financial literacy; health literacy; or civic literacy. The old paradigm which contrasts those who are "literate" as opposed to those who are "illiterate" is a false dichotomy which stereotypes and diminishes people who lack certain literacy or numeracy skills but may possess other competencies.

This edition also provides a diversity of perspectives on the theory, policy and practice of place-based learning communities. The first article, *Why Learning Cities?*, (pages) illuminates the urbanization trend, the importance of lifelong learning as an organizing principle in an increasingly complex and changing economy and society, and how learning can be suffused into the policy and practice of organizations in every sector of a community.

The second article, *Learning Community by Community: Preparing for a Knowledge-based Society*, (pages) focuses on the principles and practice of learning community development in Canada. Written for the audience of the Canadian Education Association, the article shares a lifelong learning conceptual framework and gives examples of education sector initiatives and partnerships in pioneering learning communities in British Columbia.

The third article, *"The City is Dead"*, (page) attempts to clarify the use of the popular term "learning communities" and emphasizes that a place-based learning community is one in which a diversity of different kinds of learning communities can thrive, and in which the "sense of place" is seen as important.

The fourth article, *A Learning City and a Conventional City: A Contrast*, (pages) uses a table to contrast and compare how the five sectors of a community, and the use of learning technologies, are distinguished along a continuum of policy and practice in emerging learning communities as compared to existing conventional communities.

The fifth article, *Concepts de l'apprentissage social*, (page) surveys learning theory that views learning as a social process embedded in the local environment, community, and culture, of the learner.

Five different case studies illustrate the diversity of the place-based learning community continuum and how the literacies can be fostered in a variety of ways throughout the life-span. The *Projet SILC* (pages) shares the experience of a literacy project conceived during the development of the Victoria Learning City initiative that successfully built bridges between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities in the Greater Victoria region - and three current spin-off literacy projects that relate to workplace, prison and aboriginal community settings.

The next four cases illustrate how past or present initiatives, ranging from family literacy and early learning through to civic literacy, would easily fit into a comprehensive, community-based learning community. One case, *Avenir d'enfants* (pages) recounts a successful Montreal-based early learning initiative that is expanding across the province of Quebec. Another study, *Mount Royal*, (pages) is an example of a community-based initiative that fostered civic engagement and literacy. A third study, *Centraide: Community Leadership Training* (pages) recounts the importance of “communities of practice”, and of promoting multi-sectoral approaches through the animation of community leaders and parents. A fourth case, *Projet Hawkesbury*, (pages) is an interview with the initiator of a successful community-based adult literacy initiative in that town. Sound community-based, learner-centred practices such as those illuminated in the four case studies, provide valuable building blocks for any emerging, more comprehensive place-based learning community initiative.

A Perspective Internationale (pages) surveys both historic and current learning community development across the world. It identifies learning community/city initiatives from Australasia to Europe and spotlights a number of innovative literacy projects therein.

The final article, *A Learning Community Leading by Example*, (pages) written by a champion of learning communities, Denise Savoie, M.P. (Victoria), highlights the importance of political commitment and action at both the local community and federal levels to the twin fields of lifelong learning and literacy.

A Conclusion (page) summarizes some of the major challenges which Canadian communities, francophone and anglophone alike, face.

In every francophone community in Canada there are people who know, and care, about their communities. They share the belief of Denise Savoie that “we have within ourselves and our communities the resources we need to continually learn in order to solve collective challenges.” Francophone communities across Canada share powerful communitarian values which ensure that they will be continuously learning places. Hopefully the articles in this edition of *A Lire* will stir not only the practical imagination but also the commitment to act of readers in the diverse communities of our nation.