

Learning Communities: Villages, Neighbourhoods, Towns, Cities
And Regions Preparing For a Knowledge-Based Society

Ron Faris Ph. D. January 2001

The Challenge

British Columbia, like the rest of the world, has been buffeted by a number of inter-related drivers of fundamental and increasingly rapid change including:

- ✓ Globalization;
- ✓ Increased use of information and communications technologies; and
- ✓ Explosion of new knowledge, especially in the sciences and technologies.

These forces, themselves the results of learning and skilled intelligence, can only be managed and directed for the benefit of all if increasing numbers of people acquire the information, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable them and their communities to create sustainable futures. In short, we must sculpt a learning society that mirrors the emerging knowledge-based economy.

Many coastal, rural or remote communities in the province have borne the brunt of not only global market forces but also diminishing natural resource stocks. Some communities have lost whole industries or have felt the effects of major industrial restructuring. Others have limited prospects of growing fish or fibre stocks. All urban centers face deeply-rooted joined up problems of poverty, under-education, inadequate housing, poor health, and drug abuse for those who live in the shadows of their community. Every community must meet the challenge of preparing for a knowledge-based society.

The Learning Community: A Comprehensive, Integrated Approach

One approach to creating sustainable community futures is for them to create “learning communities” in which both formal and non-formal lifelong learning of individuals and groups is systematically fostered in order to enable sustainable economic development, promote social inclusion and cohesion, and encourage civic and social participation. This approach, launched by the OECD and also informed by 30 years of research and development by UNESCO, is now found from Western Europe to Australia. Today there are a growing number of learning villages, neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions preparing for a knowledge-based economy and society.

Learning communities are a form of community development in which local people from every community sector act together to enhance the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions of their community. It is a pragmatic approach that mobilizes the learning resources and expertise of all five community sectors:

- Civic or local government;
- Economic (private and cooperative enterprise);
- Public (libraries, recreation commissions, social agencies, arts councils, health bodies, museums etc.);
- Education (K to university); and
- Voluntary/community/individual citizens.

The total formal (school, college and university) and non-formal (civic, economic, public and voluntary) learning resources of a community are therefore harnessed to provide immediate impacts as well as longer-term consequences according to the needs and priorities set by the community. In every community prior or current local initiatives are not replaced but rather built upon by the learning community approach.

The policy lens of lifelong learning is used to assess the life-span needs of individuals and groups as well as the life-wide dimension of family, work and community. Lifelong learning is therefore used as not only an organizing principle or analytical tool but also a social goal. The intangible assets of social and intellectual capital of the community (the trust, networking, shared values, talent and track record of collaboration) are equally recognized and built upon. Combined with communitarian values – the balancing of individual rights and responsibilities, the devolution of resources and power to local levels, and the use of social and human capital – these concepts are the foundation of a sustainable learning community in an emerging knowledge-based society.

Three success determinants identified by UK research and experience are emphasized, namely learning how to:

- build Partnerships;
- foster Participation; and
- assess Performance and Progress.

Participatory action research that involves community members in developing and carrying out research that informs and improves local practice is central to the evaluation approach.

The Learning Community Initiative: Canada - BC Pilot Projects

Since 1999 the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) of HRDC has provided two-stage funding for a number of pilot projects under their Community Learning Network (CLN) Initiative. British Columbia's Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers is an active partner in a new Canada-BC Learning Community Initiative that will significantly increase learning community projects throughout the province. The first two pilot projects are Upper Skeena and Lumby. Both illustrate the pragmatic and practical nature of the learning community approach to the unique needs of each community.

The Upper Skeena, centered on the Hazeltons, has forged a Learning Community Partnership that has the support of the Gitksan Treaty Office and the village of Hazelton that has declared itself a "learning village". Substantial chronic unemployment, diminished opportunities for fishing and forestry, and a population in which 70% are under 30 years-of-age are among the specific challenges facing the communities. Previous studies outlined many of the problems faced but no comprehensive or organized action had resulted until the OLT and the Ministry of Community Development provided support for initial community-building activities that focused on the life-span learning needs of the community and mobilized a growing range of community partners to provide the life-wide learning settings. Today a number of initiatives, with immediate impact as well as long-term consequences, have been initiated, including:

- ✓ A *Books for Babies* project to promote new parenting and basic literacy skills;
- ✓ Several service-learning projects for school as well as out-of-school youth (17-25), particularly those at-risk; and
- ✓ A *Learning Shop* that is hosting learning events such as Gitksan Evenings of language and literacy; musical jam sessions for youth; and new parent programs.

Future projects will develop outcomes-based community competencies to enable recognition of knowledge and skill acquisition and Prior Learning Assessment. The use of learning technologies in Community Access sites and the *Learning Shop* has added value to this community-based civic and new literacy initiative.

In Lumby, a North Okanagan community that recently lost its largest sawmill operation, a Learning Partnership supported by private and public partners has formed. This resource

dependent community, like many others, has a substantial number of low-income persons with basic education needs. A district Council for Economic Development has been created and steps are underway to develop a Community Learning and Training Centre and an associated value-added wood plant. Learning technologies will be used as tools for acquiring world-class instruction and community networking.

Some Benefits of Learning Communities

Learning communities provide a coherent, integrated and comprehensive approach to face the ever-changing challenges of the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. Placing learning at the heart of community development can help with economic development and diversification – and maintaining competitiveness. Such communities can also foster a new generation of leaders so necessary for both a vibrant local economy and civil democracy.

Learning communities can also be a means of promoting social inclusion. Those previously marginalized can, through active learning, end dependency relationships and contribute to their communities. Investment in formal education and non-formal learning has been proven to be the best means of combating poverty, increasing overall health, and eliminating social exclusion.

Using learning technologies as tools to acquire the full range of literacy and learning for all, to establish intra- and inter-community networks to share common concerns and best practice is an integral part of preparing communities for the emerging knowledge-based society.

The difference between a community which intentionally adopts a comprehensive, integrated approach to mobilizing all of its learning resources and harnesses its the social, intellectual and human capital, and one that carries on in an essentially reactive way is significant.

Learning Community	Conventional Community
<p data-bbox="279 1138 649 1192"><i>PROACTIVE PARTNERS IN A NEW ECONOMY</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="240 1201 779 1264">▪ uses both formal and non-formal sector learning resources <li data-bbox="240 1306 779 1402">▪ economic and education partners share their training resources with each other and the community <li data-bbox="240 1411 714 1474">▪ learning is seen as the common denominator of education/training <li data-bbox="240 1482 727 1570">▪ social/intellectual capital is valued, added to, and used for comparative advantage <li data-bbox="240 1579 656 1610">▪ learning is seen as investment <li data-bbox="240 1619 769 1738">▪ learning is seen as a social process that provides a comparative community advantage for socio-economic development <li data-bbox="240 1747 789 1810">▪ community thrives on greater autonomy of decentralization <li data-bbox="240 1818 792 1898">▪ innovations are supported by interactive learning among learning organizations within the community 	<p data-bbox="870 1138 1195 1169">REACTING TO CHANGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="831 1201 1364 1306">▪ the formal education system has few links to the non-formal sectors, particularly the community <li data-bbox="831 1314 1370 1402">▪ companies and education often compete: there is often limited community access to resources of either <li data-bbox="831 1411 1321 1474">▪ education is viewed as prestigious and training is devalued <li data-bbox="831 1482 1357 1545">▪ social/intellectual capital is unrecognized and largely untapped <li data-bbox="831 1579 1179 1610">▪ education is seen as a cost <li data-bbox="831 1619 1377 1682">▪ learning is viewed as an individual activity for individual benefit <li data-bbox="831 1747 1331 1810">▪ community develops dependency upon centralized policies <li data-bbox="831 1818 1325 1898">▪ innovations are isolated and viewed as competitive threats by others in the community

<p><i>LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AS A TOOL</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ local lifelong learning strategy developed including individual learning plans for economic enterprises and learner smart cards to promote learning for all ◆ universal local access to learning technologies for networking within and among communities 	<p>A DIGITAL DIVIDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ incoherent, sporadic, and unequal learning opportunities are provided with chief benefits to an educated elite with access to learning technologies ◆ limited access to learning technologies with little networking beyond the community
<p><i>LONGER-TERM CONSEQUENCES</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● health determinants and brain research informs preventative learning strategies to save costly remedial education, health, criminal justice, and social programs 	<p>A SOCIAL DIVIDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● access to quality early health and learning opportunities is either limited or non-existent
<p><i>OVERALL GOAL</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ the development of a lifelong learning culture is a community goal 	<p>OVERALL RESULT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ some individuals promote lifelong learning values

Villages, neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions becoming learning communities are committed to a vision and a strategy with immediate impacts and long-term consequences. The benefits of learning as a collaborative social process are as much preventative as they are pragmatic. Investment in learning brings lifelong benefits to both individuals and their communities.

Weaving a 21st Century Tapestry

The task before us is similar to that of the medieval artisans who collaborated to produce the rich tapestries of their era. The intricate and colorful products of their knowledge and skills told the stories and expressed the values of their day for future generations to ponder and enjoy.

The task of weaving the strands of cross-sectoral partnerships with those of formal, non-formal and informal learning - and the warp and woof of social, intellectual and human capital - will call upon constant use of creative, skilled intelligence. What we do today represents the knots and ties on the working side of the tapestry. Future generations will largely benefit from this legacy of learning. They will see the full, rich pattern of diverse, thriving, and democratic learning communities.

For further information on learning communities and related forms of experiential learning such as service-learning see:

<http://www.vanisle.net/users/rfaris>

E-mail: rfaris@vanisle.net

Tele: (250) 658 -0227

Fax: (250) 658 -1821

Canada

The Application Guidelines for the Community Learning Network (CLN) Initiative of the Office of Learning Technologies, HRDC is available at:

<http://olt-bta.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/contribu/index.html#cln>

The Province of British Columbia

The Application Guidelines for the Community Capacity Building Program of the Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers is at:

<http://www.cdev.gov.bc.ca/ComEnterprise/capfact.htm>

A 113 page report on *Learning-Based Community Development: Lessons Learned for British Columbia* is available at:

<http://www.cdev.gov.bc.ca/IGRSI/learning.pdf>

A 24 page Summary of the *Learning-Based Community Development* report is available at:

<http://www.cdev.gov.bc.ca/Publicinfo/publications/Learning%20Communities.pdf>

A 121 page *Inventory of Community Economic and Social Development Funding Programs Serving BC* is available at:

<http://www.cdev.gov.bc.ca/Publicinfo/publications/ICFP.pdf>