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**The Likelihood of Learning Communities:
A Canadian Australian Perspective**

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Abstract

The concept and practice of 'learning communities' has received favourable responses in Canada (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2003) and Australia in recent years (Kosky, L. (2004). "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." (Faris 2001a). Specifically, it is a form of learning-based community development in which the concept of lifelong learning is explicitly used to mobilize the learning resources of all community sectors, including those of the civic component (Faris 2001a). Governments in both nations recognise the benefits of empowering local communities through the facilitation and support of learning communities, yet people and institutions in both places grapple to implement policy ideals and develop satisfactory institutional mechanisms to create sustainable learning communities. The uncertainty of institutional mechanisms is a function of the differing dynamics of the federal structure of government in each country. This paper will explore the recent history of learning communities in two local governments, one in the province of British Columbia in Canada, the other in the State of Victoria in Australia. It summarises the involvement of municipal/local, provincial/state and national governments in the advocacy, development and resourcing of learning communities in each place. It identifies the characteristics of effective leadership from local/municipal government in the support of a learning community culture.

Key words: learning communities; local government, globalisation

Introduction

Regional development scholars and practitioners now recognise that endogenous, internally driven local development, delivers results which endure over time, when compared to central government imposed, exogenous development (Putnam 1993, 2000, Wong 2001). While central government support is an essential complement to the initiatives of local people, state funding alone is never sufficient to sustain local development. 'Learning towns' or 'learning communities' are programs supported by central government which enable local communities to develop their human and social capital to address change. Local government has the potential to play a key role in the development of learning communities, however there have been mixed responses by this level of government to engaging in this area of activity. In this paper we look at two best practice examples in Canada and Australia in order to identify the motivation for local government to take on learning as a basic pillar of community development and sustainability.

The 'knowledge base' of a community is now regarded as fundamental – in fact a critical factor for effective local development (OECD 2001). The human and social capital in a community determines the long-term success and development of that community (Faris 2001c, Gertler & Wolfe 2004). Given this view central governments have sought to empower communities through a broad range of 'capacity building' projects. In the State of Victoria the Government has established 'Local Learning and Employment Networks', Community Capacity Building Initiatives, and 'Learning Towns'¹. In Canada there are many good examples of community building through learning communities^{2, 3}. The Adult and Community Further Education Division of the Victorian Department of Education established the Victorian Learning Town Network (VLTN) in nine, non-metropolitan regional communities as pilot programs for the Learning Town Program launched in May 2000. (Cavaye 2003, p. 4). In the Province of British Columbia the government facilitates a range of adult education initiatives which build the capacity of local citizens⁴. These projects typically involve seeding new ideas and processes in regional communities, especially in rural regions. In 1999 the (federal) Office of Learning Technologies provided funding for pilot projects under their Community Learning Network. In British Columbia the Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers partners Canada-BC Learning Community Initiative (Faris 2001a). Like most funding programs in Victoria Australia they have a limited life, usually within the term of the incumbent government, making it challenging for the community to continue on with some momentum

A key policy question is how much should central government support these initiatives and how much should be left to the local community? What should central governments do to ensure the sustainability of their learning communities?

This paper looks at two leading examples of learning towns; Whistler-Mt Currie in British Columbia and Yarra Ranges in Victoria Australia. Central governments in both nations (federal and provincial in Canada, and the Victorian State government in

¹ See www.dvc.vic.gov.au/building.htm

² See <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>

³ See <http://www.learning.ab.ca/>

⁴ See http://www.ola.bc.ca/About_OLA/

Australia) have supported the idea of learning communities, and resourced them to varying degrees. What stands out with these two cases is that the local authority, local businesses and the local community have embraced the idea and actively set about to create a learning community. We will first discuss each learning community before attempting to identify the common principles driving each case.

Whistler-Mount Currie Learning Communities Project

The Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) is a world-class destination resort located 120 km north of Vancouver, British Columbia. Whistler, which has a population of approximately 10,000 has formed a Learning Partnership with the First Nation reserve of Mt. Currie with a population of over 1,000 persons who live about 50 km north of the resort.

The RMOW was the original supporter of the Learning Communities initiative. The highly respected Village Administrator instigated the initial community meetings, and creation of a community-based advisory committee, which commenced in the fall of 2002. The Resort Municipality provided supplementary funds for the project developmental stage and assigned a mid-level official as the project contact person with the federal Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) of the then Human Resources Development Canada. It also promoted contact with its future learning partner, Mt. Currie. Both communities were aware that a successful bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics would have a profound effect upon their future quality of life and socio-economic opportunities. They intend to work and learn together to build their communities' capacity to withstand future threats and maximize opportunities.

The Learning Communities three-year project, which commenced in the autumn of 2003, has received consistent support from the RMOW Mayor and Administrator. The Municipal Council has passed a formal resolution of support and it has supported the budget process, and that budget is adopted via a Council bylaw.

The Resort Municipality will provide C\$45,000 per year for the term of the project (2003-2006). The hope is that this funding will continue after the OLT funds end to support a p/t person and provide some additional funding to continue to move the Learning Communities agenda forward. RMOW funds for Learning Communities are currently being considered for use for several initiatives:

- a. Summit on Citizen Engagement C\$20,000 over a two year period. This would see Learning Communities as a co-founding sponsor of this event, provide seed money for it to grow and once the project ends it would be a legacy of learning communities as it would always be a co-founding sponsor. (www.whistlerforum.com)
- b. Leadership Sea- To- Sky- Tuition of C\$2900 for a Whistler community member to be a candidate in this regional program of 15. Two day retreat in October and monthly meetings with others in the corridor, a project is developed and this group of community leaders see the project to its end. (www.whistlerforum.com)

These funds have been dispersed to move initiatives forward:

- a. C\$5,000 to the 2010 in support of training of a pilot project called *ihost*.

The funding was given based on the fact that this training model could develop into the model used to become a volunteer with the 2010 games.
(www.whistler.ca/ihost)

- b. C\$5,000 to the Whistler Arts Council for Board Development - an essential process to move the Cultural initiative forward.
(www.whistlerartscouncil.com)
- c. C\$1,000 to the Lil'Wat Pow Wow traditional dance competition. Cash prizes for winners will enable them to continue their learning of traditional dance.

Indirect support for the learning community includes:

- a. Annual grant-in-aid contributions to a wide array of community "non-credit" learning organizations.
- b. Support of *Whistler Card*. This is an innovative approach to seek both some additional funding from individuals in the community as well as raise community awareness of the project. The Whistler Chamber of Commerce has promoted community value cards that are essentially loyalty cards which support local shopping. Each card can be purchased for C\$40 and residents are required to fill out an online survey at the time of purchase.
- c. In-kind contribution of staff time and meeting space at various Municipal locations is estimated at C\$10-15,000 annually.

The Municipality will play a long-term role in the future of the learning community through the inclusion of a Learning Strategy in the Municipal Community Sustainability Plan (CSP). The Municipality, as part of its CSP process, has held a Learning Strategy Workshop that included people from the Learning Communities, the school district, post-secondary institutions, early childhood educators and the RMOW. Action items have been identified and prioritized – including those of the Learning Communities.

Yarra Ranges Learning: A Learning Communities Strategy

The Shire of Yarra Ranges (<http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/>) is located between 30 and 110 kilometres east of the Melbourne central business district. It covers an area of approximately 2,500 square kilometres, making it the largest metropolitan council and it is home to a little over 143,000 people. It is comprised of nine wards and around seventy distinct communities with their own place name in predominately rolling hillside country that is a favoured place for many Melburnians to live.

The Shire has a Learning Communities policy and strategy document including goals, objectives, strategies, and measures. The policy states that:

The Shire of Yarra Ranges in partnership with community groups, and service providers, is seeking to increase participation of the Yarra Ranges community in a wide range of learning opportunities for the purpose of:

1. Increasing people's work and life skills
2. Providing individual fulfilment
3. Assisting those in the community who are excluded from the workplace or are isolated from their communities

4. Providing for economic regeneration and community capacity building (Shire of Yarra Ranges)

This policy is driven by a higher order community concern set out in the Shire's Sustainability Principles (Shire of Yarra Ranges 2004). These principles, in summary, are:

1. Long term rather than short term actions
2. Strengthening communities (*specifically mentions learning communities*)
3. Developing local solutions in response to wider issues
4. Working together.

In a comprehensive statement of their Learning Communities Strategy the Shire of Yarra Ranges sets out the structure, methodology, the conceptual basis for the strategy, a schematic representation of the strategy as well as the rationale and performance indicators for the three themes covered in the strategy:

1. Learning for individuals: increasing individual participation in learning
2. Learning to create sustainable communities: increasing community learning
3. Learning to create a sustainable Shire: promoting a culture of learning (Shire of Yarra Ranges)

For **individual learning** the objective is to increase participation of residents in a wide range of learning activities and the indicators of performance relate to participation rates throughout the life span; participation in all forms of learning; with a specific focus on 15-25 year olds being actively engaged in work, education or training; and, the degree of innovation found in collaborative learning. These require both quantitative and qualitative indicators and it is a reflection of the commitment of the Shire that they hold themselves accountable to such measures.

The strategies they employ to meet these indicators include, in summary, a focus on

1. early childhood development
2. schools
3. recognition of prior learning
4. recognition of volunteer learning
5. 'engaging disengaged' adults
6. inter-generational activities
7. workplace skills
8. computer skills (Shire of Yarra Ranges)

For **Community/Township Learning**, for the seventy townships which make up the Shire, the objective is to encourage whole of community learning opportunities and the indicators of performance relate to the number of communities undertaking a Township Development/Learning Communities program; the number of people participating in each community learning activity; and, the number of case studies produced on learning activities held in the Shire. These indicators also require quantitative and qualitative measures, some of which will be challenging to monitor.

The Shire's strategies for learning to create sustainable communities are more wide ranging than those focussed for individuals, and include:

1. Establishing a network of people involved in township development
2. Facilitating the documentation of township development/learning communities experience in the form of case studies
3. Provide an opportunity for every community in the Shire to participate in a township development/learning communities process (Shire of Yarra Ranges)

Finally, the global strategies of **Shire-wide learning** to create a sustainable shire three objectives are identified: (A) recognise the value of learning; (B) train support and recognise people and organisations who take a leadership role; and, (C) inform residents about the wide range of learning opportunities available in Yarra Ranges. Indicators include the percentage of the Shire's population undertaking a learning activity each year; how many acknowledge learning as a valuable means for improving their quality of life; how many people and organisations nominate for learning awards; and, the amount of press coverage about learning opportunities..

For these shire-wide objectives the following strategies have been put in place:

1. (A) Implement the 'Yarra Ranges Sustainable Community Quarterly Question'
2. (A) Establish an awareness campaign around the value of learning
3. (A) Hold a 'State of Learning' conference each year
4. (A) Establish awards to recognise individual, group and community learning
5. (A) Focus on local cultural programs
6. (B) Review and continue the Vista Community Leadership Program
7. (B) Develop a training program for all community groups
8. (C) Hold an Adult Learners Week Festival
9. (C) Establish a Community Link Shire wide online, interactive database system
10. (C) Include information about learning opportunities in the Shires' welcome kit for new residents
11. (C) Advocate the installation of state-of-the-art telecommunications infrastructure across the Shire. (Shire of Yarra Ranges)

Clearly the Shire of Yarra Ranges has developed a comprehensive learning town/learning community policy and strategy for their community. This is still in its early days and reporting on performance against the indicators at the end of 2005 will provide some idea as to just how valid they are, and how committed the Shire is to implementation. Martin has visited the Shire of Yarra Ranges meeting with the Mt Evelyn Learning Community – one of the leaders in the State in this field – as well as with officers from the Shire to discuss their approach. It was clear to him that the strategy in this local government organisation was very well understood throughout and there is every likelihood of success with implementation.

Comparing Common Structures and Processes in these Two Cases.

We have chosen two leading examples of local/municipal government engagement with the concept of the learning town or community. Here we summarise some of

these common themes around leadership, principles based, legitimacy and an inclusive approach.

Clearly the leadership shown by the Village Administrator in Whistler and the CEO in Yarra Ranges is essential for such a reorientation of local governance to occur. They play a pivotal role negotiating and brokering with key community stakeholders, the elected councillors and their organisation the issues and opportunities surrounding learning communities. Heifetz and Laurie (1997) best summarise the role of these organisational leaders with the idea of the 'adaptive challenge'. These senior managers have a broader view appreciating that people in their respective communities need to work together to address the collective issues they face, a most important one being that this process be inclusive. The RMOW is exemplary in this regard ensuring the neighbouring First Nations community at Mt Currie is engaged with the Whistler ski resort community in working together to address the common concern they have to effectively manage the impact of the 2010 winter Olympics to be held in Whistler.

Both local/municipal governments have also institutionalised the concept of the learning town/community into their organisational planning documents. RMOW has a Municipal Community Sustainability Plan and the Shire of Yarra Ranges has a Council Plan which is driven by Sustainability Principles. Both organisations have also identified officers responsible for assisting each organisation work toward achieving outcomes based on these principles.

Important also for each place is that they are both inclusive communities. They reflect a concern to engage all citizens regardless of status and location. Both have created various types of forums to ensure they are appropriate to the members of their communities. Some involve coffee shop conversations, others more formal learning settings. The point being that there are numerous activities which are pervasive enabling people to be connected, or networked in their community finding out about what is going on and making a contribution to the debate. Having an opinion, allowing it to be heard, as they listen to others.

Finally, both approaches also orient their communities to the world beyond their place, or region. This makes them global citizens as they learn about people in other places; how they cope with similar change, how they work together to realise the advantages they bring, and so on. Clearly this helps to strengthen and build communities, a major priority for all levels of government in both nations.

Learning Communities and Local Government: Policy Implications for Government

From these two cases there are a number of policy implications for State/Provincial and local/municipal government.

- The local government needs a well thought through, conceptually sound basis for the project to succeed, which should be reflected in strategic and corporate plans
- Knowing how well the policy is being implemented is a key factor in sustainability. Therefore measures must be valid (realistic) and reliable (can measure consistently and with confidence)

- Decision making should be made using evidence-based criteria to distinguish between socio-economically advantaged communities that require only start-up funding, and disadvantaged communities that need long-term support
- Governments should create evidence-based readiness criteria to distinguish between those communities ready to commence learning community development and those that require developmental work prior to launching learning community initiatives e.g. some First Nation communities are prepared to work with nearby non-First Nation communities while others may need to strengthen their communities' capacity so that they may collaborate as equal partners
- Other government funding should be a supplement, not an end in itself, otherwise so will their learning town initiatives

Conclusion

If governments at all levels are going to take advantage of the latest research about community resiliency then the importance of connectedness and a sense of place must be reflected in their community development policies. Clearly a learning towns/community strategy is one which enables community leaders to learn about and understand the pressures from without and within for change. It enables them to interact with these changes in positive ways which empower individuals and communities making them healthier, productive places where people have a greater sense of well being, lead enriched lives and make a contribution to their neighbourhood, nation and the world at large. There can be no finer purpose for governments at all levels to pursue the development of learning communities.

We have chosen two leading examples of local government-led learning communities in Canada and Australia to demonstrate that it is possible for local government to play an active role in this field. It is our view that such leadership will ensure the issues of economic development and infrastructure, the typical focus of most local governments will be addressed as the community learns together to make choices about their collective future.

The gap between national policy and local programs is wide as governments' look to address immediate issues, often the making of their own preoccupation with electoral life cycles. Sustainability demands a long term view and an investment in our most valuable resource - people. A learning community strategy will play a key role over time ameliorating the negative and disruptive impacts of globalisation.

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