

Learning Community by Community: Preparing for a Knowledge-based Society

Ron Faris



“Education and Training Float on a Sea of Learning”

Alan Thomas, OISE, University of Toronto

A bold new approach to education is arising in a growing number of OECD nations. A new model of learning communities based on the concept of lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social goal is gaining support world-wide. Learning villages, towns, cities and regions are developing from Europe to Australia – as well as in a growing number of communities in British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada – in response to the challenges of the emerging knowledge-based economy and society.¹

Three powerful inter-related forces are driving change that must be directed in order to achieve environmentally sustainable socio-economic development that benefits all citizens:

- expanding globalization;
- increasing use of information and communications technologies; and
- exploding knowledge (especially in the sciences and technologies)

All three drivers, themselves the result of skilled intelligence, can best be managed by communities that are prepared to foster and organize their formal and non-formal learning resources so that community purposes, rather than technology or short-term economic interests, are the engines of change.

Towards a Definition

The term “learning communities” has at least three meanings in the international scene. Some refer to “communities of practice” or “learning communities” when they discuss professional or peer learning development in a wide variety of

vocational settings, including academic institutions and enterprise venues. Research on “learning communities” in school settings has shown that methods such as team teaching and co-operative learning are among the most effective means of harnessing the power of learning as a social process.

Others use the term as virtually synonymous with “learning organizations” – a metaphor that has influenced organizational theory and development, especially in the enterprise sector, for over a decade.

The definition of learning community used in this article is based on over 30 years of research by both UNESCO and the OECD in applying the concept of lifelong learning to a wide range of communities where people live and work and form the bonds of trust, shared values, and networking that enrich both the individual and collective life of our species – the learning that illuminates our humanity. Throughout this article the term “learning community” will mean:

neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities and regions in which the concept of lifelong learning is explicitly used as an organizing principle and social goal as the learning resources of every one of the five sectors of the community – civic, economic (private-cooperative enterprise), public (e.g. libraries, museums, health and social agencies), education, and voluntary – are mobilized to foster environmentally sustainable economic development and social inclusion.

This definition transcends and encompasses “communities of practice” and “learning organizations” as well as the education system – all of which are fostered in the wider environment of “learning communities” and thereby mutually reinforce the

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shared vision of a learning society led by learners.

Rather than simply focusing on the important period of formal schooling and training, the new learning community approach draws upon abundant research studies of health determinants, neuro-science, early childhood, and human and social capital that affirm the substantial influence of non-formal learning in the family and community – the foundation for success in the school system.

In a learning community the links between non-formal and formal learning are integrated in an approach that recognizes, values and celebrates learning in all its forms throughout an individual's lifespan, and in the life-wide settings of family, community and workplace. The expertise and learning resources that exist in every community – the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of those who contribute to the civic, public, economic, education and voluntary life of their communities – are mobilized. Thus school and college boards are no longer scapegoated for alleged failures of what in reality is a responsibility of the entire community – including all levels of modern democratic government — the nurturing of lifelong learning for all.

A learning community, contrasted to a conventional community, is one that:

- harnesses in an integrated, coherent manner the learning resources of every sector of the community rather than relying solely on those of the traditional education sector;
- promotes social inclusion so that all citizens, including those too often excluded, such as the disabled, single parents, Aboriginals and visible minorities, can contribute to their communities;
- recognizes and mobilizes local human and social capital as the critical intangible assets of the new economy and society; and
- uses learning technologies to create community learning networks within and among learning communities – both nearby and across the globe.

A New Conceptual Framework for a New Economy

Recent OECD reports emphasize the importance of communities preparing for a knowledge-based economy and society by enhancing both their human and social capital. There is recognition by leading economists that social capital (e.g. trust, networking and shared values as expressed through strong families and

communities) are the basis of increased human capital (i.e. increased education and training achievement). Indeed Cambridge's Simon Szreter argues that social capital theory will have the same impact on political economic thought that Keynesian analysis had during the forties and fifties. Simply put, so-called intangible assets and "soft interpersonal skills" initially learned in the family and community, and then reinforced in the school, are now seen as crucial in the emerging new economy and society.

Last year the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation supported development of a conceptual model/ framework for a learning-based approach to community capacity building and development. The framework also serves as a basis for a possible national strategy to strengthen community life across the nation through active partnerships of all five sectors at local, provincial and federal levels. The model (see chart, page 6) illustrates lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social goal, and a multidisciplinary approach that challenges the silos of government departments as much as the traditional disciplinary solitudes of many university faculties. It also identifies six inter-related purposes for capacity-building in the acronym **CHEERS** – not just a popular television program but also the six historic purposes of Canadian learning-based community development:

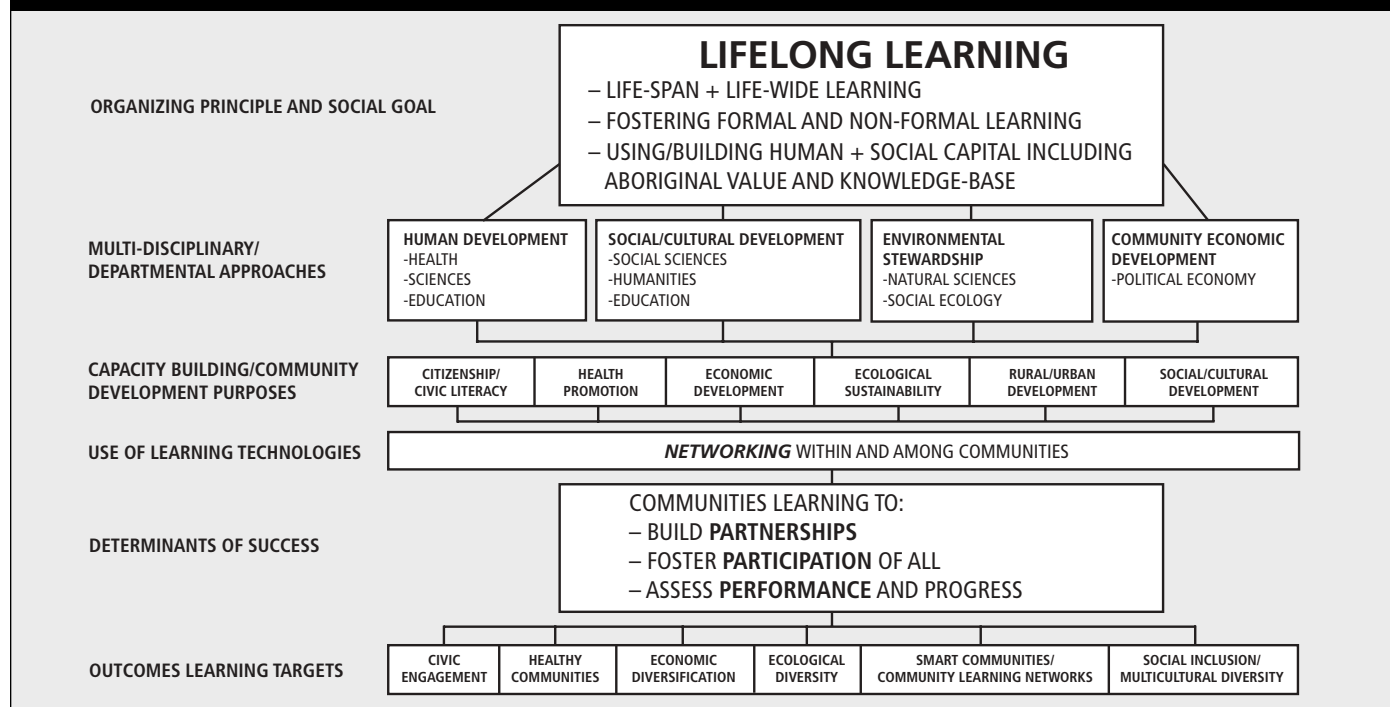
- Citizenship education
- Health promotion
- Economic development
- Environmental sustainability
- Rural/urban development
- Social/cultural development

The use of **CHEERS** also serves to remind us that, as UK Prime Minister Tony Blair has advised, "Joined-up problems



ABUNDANT RESEARCH STUDIES OF HEALTH DETERMINANTS, NEUROSCIENCE, EARLY CHILDHOOD, AND HUMAN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL AFFIRM THE SUBSTANTIAL INFLUENCE OF NON-FORMAL LEARNING IN THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY.

A LIFELONG LEARNING COMMUNITY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: A LEARNING-BASED COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING/DEVELOPMENT APPROACH



require joined-up solutions.” The deeply-rooted problems that so many who live in the shadows of our society must contend with – unemployment, poverty, ill health, under-education and poor housing – cannot and have not been solved by simplistic, short-term initiatives within government silos. A learning community is about whole people in whole communities working and learning for the common good.

The appropriate use of learning technologies, chiefly new information and communications technologies but also including older and cost-effective means such as radio, serves as a crucial variable in every learning community. Experience has shown that using new technologies as a tool rather than a driver for change is essential for success. Community purposes – identified and owned by the local community – are the best assurance that sustained commitment and change will occur. Networking, enabled by learning technologies, within and among communities is equally essential to promotion of social learning and change.

British research and B.C. experience have distilled the three success determinants – the **3 P's** – of learning communities: learning how to:

- Build Partnerships among all five community sectors
- Foster Participation of all, and
- Assess Performance.

Experience has also shown that learning communities are those that build on past and current initiatives rather than assume that the all that has gone before was wrong-headed. Past is prologue in a community where learning is foremost, and there is no such thing as failure if learning from mistakes has occurred.

Performance, while focusing on partnership and participation measures, includes both qualitative and quantitative data.

- Learning objectives and targets identified and set by communities vary with the assets, needs and priorities of each community. They encompass a wide range of measurable and achievable objectives in each of the five community sectors – and for the community as a whole – and could include 3-year targets such as:
- Reducing the number of severely under-weight babies by 20%;
 - Increasing the number of new parents trained in *Parents as First Teachers* type programs by 50%;
 - Doubling the number of elementary and secondary students engaged in community service-learning;
 - Ensuring that every grade six student has achieved basic computer literacy skills;
 - Doubling the number of single parent mothers enabled to complete high school and prepare for further learning and/or employment;
 - Increasing the number of community volunteers with appropriate training by 40%;
 - Tripling the number of local employees with basic computer application skills;
 - Increasing the number of seniors engaged in Elderhostel programs by 25%; and
 - Reducing environmental waste by all five sectors by 30%.

In each case, acquisition of new knowledge, skills, attitudes or values – learning – will be necessary if sustainable change is to be assured. It is only if changed behaviour or attitudes are evident that can we confirm that learning has occurred. Learning communities is a model of transformative learning that is particularly powerful because the learning is related to the real issues of local communities. It is a framework for active learning by all who wish to play more effective roles as citizens, workers and family members.

Continued on page 42

themselves specifically intended that their ruling should not apply to the education context. The chambers judge, who generally perceived the question as “primarily an issue of health, not education or social services”, found that the expert medical evidence indicated that, age-wise, autistic children had a “narrow window of opportunity” to benefit from early IBI, and that the material “period of time extends from the time they are first diagnosed with autism (usually at age two or three) until the age of six, approximately”.⁵ No opinion was expressed on the appropriate treatment for school-age children, and the Court of Appeal explicitly held the chambers judge was correct to refrain from so opining.

Furthermore, both courts went out of their way to disavow expressly the education context from their consideration. The chambers judge clearly stated it was not “appropriate to determine here whether or not the Government will breach its obligations to autistic children by failing to accommodate their disabilities after they reach school age”. The Court of Appeal agreed, and observed that “issues of funding programs for children of school age may involve additional considerations not before the Court, either in evidence or submissions”.⁶

But then again, we have the same *Globe* article ascribing a statement to Mr. Stratas, who is certainly no novice in public law matters, that “since the therapy is really a form of education, the ruling [in *Auton*] also suggests that the court has recognized a right to state-provided special education for the mentally disabled”. Quite apart from the fact that such a right already exists, with great respect (and giving Mr. Stratas the benefit of the doubt that his actual statement may have been misreported or misunderstood), the Court in *Auton* said nothing like that. In fact, it went out of its way to say it was *not* saying any such thing. But that’s exactly my point. 📍

1 *Auton v. British Columbia (Attorney General)*, 2002 BCCA 538. The full text of the decision is available on-line through the British Columbia Court of Appeal’s home page at www.courts.gov.bc.ca. The interested reader can also find the two lower-court decisions of Madam Justice Allan at the Supreme Court’s home page on the same website: see the decision on liability, released 26 July 2000, cited as 2000 BCSC 1142; and the decision on remedy, released 6 February 2001, cited as 2001 BCSC 220.

2 K. Makin, “Court tells B.C. to pay for therapy”, *The [Toronto] Globe and Mail* (Thursday, 17 October 2002), p. A1.

3 *Eldridge v. British Columbia (Attorney General)*, [1997] 3 S.C.R. 624.

4 Ontario Human Rights Commission, *Education and Disability: Human Rights Issues in Ontario’s Education System – Consultation Paper* (July 2002), p. 9.

5 See 2001 BCSC 220 at para. 37; and 2000 BCSC 1142 at paras. 88 and 153.

6 See 2002 BCCA 538 at para. 90; and 2001 BCSC 220 at para. 42.

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Examples in British Columbia

Over the past two years a growing number learning community partnerships, many of which include both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, have developed in rural B.C. With support from the Office of Learning Technologies of HRDC, bridges have successfully been built between the two cultural communities as well as between school and the non-formal learning settings that are so important to successful school performance. For example, priorities identified by many learning communities in B.C. have included

- Collaboration to enhance learning of parents and children from the pre-natal to pre-school period, building on substantial research on the Parents as First Teachers program that reveals both improved elementary performance and increased long-term parent involvement in the school and community;
- Expansion of external courses introduced in B.C. six years ago that grant high school credit for systematic learning experiences provided by a wide range of non-formal agencies such as 4-H clubs, music conservatories, cadets, and traditional Aboriginal dance groups; and
- Promotion of community service learning projects whereby students gain academic credit for applying academic concepts as they work with not-for-profit groups in their community and also learn new leadership and citizenship skills.

British Columbia’s rural communities face serious challenges. The twin blows of unjust softwood lumber taxation by our U.S. free trade partners and major provincial government cuts to education, health and justice systems have hit rural B.C. particularly hard. Despite such bleak news, three case studies illustrate the bridges that have been built between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities prepared to learn and work together towards a more sustainable and inclusive community future.

The first example is in the Upper Skeena, in the northwestern region of B.C. where over 70% of the population is Gitksan First Nation. There, community service-learning projects have enabled students to apply academic concepts to a wide range of activities that have left a legacy for their communities (e.g. building recreation trails; a technology cafe for youth; and a *Book Bags for Babies* project involving school, health and literacy bodies). Gitksan Evenings involving elders and youth interested in language and cultural education have built inter-generational bridges. A ground rescue technician training course has enabled a dozen teenagers to be prepared for future search operations and to gain academic credit for their training. These powerful experiential learning experiences have resulted in changed student attitudes and performance, and have both reduced school drop-out rates and developed future local leaders.

The second case is in the southwest corner of the Cariboo region where about 50% of the population is of the Upper St’at’imc First Nations. There the Lillooet Learning Communities Society has established three priorities:

- Strengthen Families and Communities through early learning initiatives that lead to improved early childhood education and

school performance, and work to encourage the communities' acceptance of responsibility for all children.

- Foster Community Capacity Building of individuals and organizations in all five community sectors by means such as an active Community Listserv, and governance training of voluntary sector boards; and
- Create a Lifelong Learning Centre through collaboration of the school district, college, library, Friendship Centre, the T'it'q'et Community, the District Municipality and the Employment Centre.

In the third example, the Resort Municipality of Whistler and the Mt. Currie First Nation have formed a Learning Partnership that commences its 3-year pilot project in November 2002. A community project advisory committee, which included the Principal of the Mt. Currie school and the school district Superintendent, identified joint objectives that highlight training and employment opportunities for residents of Mt. Currie and Whistler as well as a Web-based *Learning Exchange* that will promote increased learning opportunities for both local residents and tourists. Mt. Currie's objectives include specific employment training and child and youth development programs while those of Whistler – the potential site of the 2010 Winter Olympics – include community capacity building initiatives such as creation of *Electronic Learning Circles* and support for the school district's current professional learning community initiative.

In the North Okanagan village of Lumby, pioneering learning community activities, spearheaded by the local elementary school principal, have included an elementary after-school *Homework Club* in which good study and healthy living practice will be fostered by high school student mentors.

The newly developing learning community project of the Groundworks Learning Centre in Victoria is tackling fundamental issues such as bridging rural-urban gaps by promoting more than a dozen outdoor education garden projects with the collaboration of local schools and organic farmers. The Centre has also engaged students in a variety of community mapping exercises across the curriculum related to a range of issues including greenway planning, food production and use, and community safety.

Is It Time for a New Commitment for a New Era?


The learning community conceptual framework, which is being used for evaluation of Victoria State *Learning Towns* in Australia and as a planning and assessment tool in B.C., has been adopted by the Board of the Canadian Association for Community Education and will be a basis for discussion of a proposed Association Roundtable in the Spring, 2003. Hence the community school movement is exploring use of the new concept as the basis of a potential national strategy in which educational reform is initiated community by community.

Perhaps we should borrow a page from the Australians' playbook. In that federal system, where education is a State responsibility, the Commonwealth or federal government is exploring ways to support development of an emerging

EN BREF

La nouvelle approche fondée sur la communauté d'apprentissage s'appuie sur les résultats de nombreuses études sur les déterminants de santé, la neuroscience, la petite enfance, et le capital humain et social qui confirme l'influence considérable de l'apprentissage non institutionnel dans la famille et la collectivité, un apprentissage que l'on considère désormais comme le fondement de la réussite scolaire. Selon cette approche, l'ensemble de la communauté travaille et apprend dans l'intérêt du bien commun. Car, on ne peut espérer résoudre les problèmes profondément enracinés auxquels font face bon nombre de personnes – chômage, pauvreté, maladie, éducation inadéquate et mauvais logement – à l'aide de solutions simplistes et à court terme dans le cadre de programmes gouvernementaux. L'an dernier, la Fondation Walter et Duncan Gordon a appuyé l'élaboration d'un cadre conceptuel pour une approche fondée sur l'apprentissage pour le développement d'une capacité communautaire. Ce cadre sert également de point de départ pour une possible stratégie nationale visant à renforcer la vie communautaire partout au pays grâce à des partenariats actifs de l'ensemble des cinq secteurs, et ce, aux paliers local, provincial que fédéral.

Australian Learning Communities Network composed of over 20 learning towns and regions throughout the nation. Support for a learning community initiative has come from the prestigious Australian counterpart of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities (CFA).

As in Canada, promotion of "learning" in Australia is no one's jurisdiction and is therefore everyone's responsibility in a knowledge-based economy and society. Would it not be possible for the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada and the Federal government to initiate a collaborative strategy -- in cooperation with bodies such as the Canadian Education Association, the CFA, and various organizations and foundations at the federal level – to work with associated provincial bodies and local chambers of commerce, service clubs, school and college boards, and public sector agencies to create a Pan-Canadian learning community initiative? 

For more information on the concept of lifelong learning communities (including the conceptual discussion paper developed for the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, Government reports on learning-based community development, and service-learning, as well as articles and Web links to B.C. and international learning community sites) see <http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris>

1 Almost 50 towns and cities are members of the UK Learning Cities Network and over 20 towns and cities comprise the recently created Australian Learning Communities Network.

Ron Faris taught high school in B.C., Australia, and in a factory classroom in England. He was an official in B.C.'s Ministry of Education and the National Literacy Secretariat of the Secretary of State before becoming a consultant in the field of lifelong learning strategies. This summer he was an International Fellow of the RMIT University in Melbourne and keynote speaker at the Monash University conference in *Electronic Networking and Community Building*. He has just returned from co-directing a British Council international seminar in Birmingham on *Learning Communities*. He teaches for the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. His book, *The Passionate Educators*, is a history of the struggle for adult educational broadcasting in Canada.