

Ideas informing the Gwydir Learning Region

Abstract

The Gwydir Learning Region is a partnership that was originally formed in 2000 between local government, education, business and community stakeholders in the north-west area of New South Wales. An evaluation undertaken in 2006 included an examination of the conceptual framework of the Learning Region. The evaluation showed that since 2000 stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region have consciously investigated a range of other learning regions to see which concepts might apply in the Gwydir region. The stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region subsequently developed their own model of a learning region that contains sophisticated conceptual foundations from the fields of education, community development, regional development and learning communities. The model also contains elements such as the following: shared goals and vision; social and economic imperatives; and an evolving structure and refined processes. Other regions seeking to emulate the Gwydir Learning Region will need to consider the development of similar conceptual foundations and these other elements.

Introduction

The Gwydir Learning Region is a partnership between local government, education, business and community stakeholders in the north west area of New South Wales within the Gwydir Shire Council – a council formed in 2004. The Gwydir Learning Region was initially established in 2000 as a partnership involving three Shire Councils (Yallaroi, Bingara and Barraba), Warialda High School and TAFE NSW New England Institute. The partnership evolved after that, changing its name and organisational structure, but it continues to focus on improving educational, social and economic outcomes for residents of the local community.

An evaluation of the Gwydir Learning Region was undertaken by Dr John Mitchell, from John Mitchell & Associates, from March-April 2006 (Mitchell 2006) and was managed by Bernard Ingle from TAFE NSW New England Institute on behalf a steering committee of the Gwydir Learning Region. Funding was provided by the NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET).

Some key outcomes of the Gwydir Learning Region, as reported by Mitchell (2006), are as follows:

- From the point of view of individual development, the Gwydir Learning Region provides individuals with opportunities to extend their learning, develop new skills, achieve social and economic goals, and pursue pathways that might not have been available to them previously.
- From the point of view of education, the Gwydir Learning Region represents new levels of cooperation between schools and TAFE and ACE, new ways of relating learning to local businesses and communities and new ways of implementing personalised learning – an approach to learning which involves the provision of targeted attention for each student.
- From the point of view of local government, the Gwydir Learning Region demonstrates the importance and value of Council involvement in new partnerships and Council involvement with the social infrastructure of rural and remote communities, where those communities want to build social capital and create their own positive options for the future.
- From the point of view of economic and regional development, the Gwydir Learning Region represents an innovative approach to aligning skill development with local employment needs, to create a sustainable future in rural NSW. (p.3)

The Mitchell (2006) report was a response to the following project objectives:

- documentation of the Gwydir Learning Region initiative including its (a) social and economic context; (b) conceptual framework; (c) structural and operational characteristics
- evaluation of the success of the Gwydir Learning Region model and key success factors, including quantitative and qualitative measures
- identification of system changes required for application of the model to other regions of NSW.

This article examines the conceptual framework of the Gwydir Learning Region – from the first objective cited above. It draws on material set out in chapter 3 of Mitchell (2006).

Literature review

The literature that influenced the stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region will be discussed in two places: in this literature review section and in the ‘Findings’ section of the article below.

From its inception in 2000, stakeholders within the Gwydir Learning Region have examined the ideas emerging from other learning regions. For example, some members of the sub-committee undertook the following activities: they tracked the development of Lithgow NSW as a learning city; assessed the Yarra Ranges VIC learning communities strategy; and monitored the Upper Hunter Beyond 2000 Committee, including the Muswellbrook Upper Hunter Learning Co-operative. They also followed the development of learning communities in a range of regional and rural locations through the Australian Learning Communities Network, including Bendigo, Horsham, Wodonga, Kyabram and Ballarat (VIC), Mandurah (WA) and Spencer Gulf (SA).

From 2000, members established dialogue with key bodies and experts in the field of learning regions and attended appropriate conferences. For example, dialogue was created with the Australian Learning Communities Network and its members and a specialist on lifelong learning, Peter Kearns, visited the Gwydir Learning Region in 2005.

Some members of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee also monitored new literature on learning regions and adult learning, including *Learning around town: learning communities in Australia* (Adult Learning Australia 2000); *Adult Learning in Australia* (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003); *Defining Learning Communities* (Kilpatrick et al. 2003); and *Creativity and Innovation in a Canberra Learning Community* (Kearns 2003).

In his paper with Pat Walls on engaging communities through lifelong learning (Ingle & Walls 2005), Bernard Ingle, R/Education Developments Manager from TAFE NSW New England Institute, and a long-standing member of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee, demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the research into and experiences of learning regions elsewhere in Australia.

Methodology

The overall methodology used in the project (Mitchell 2006) to document and evaluate the Gwydir Learning Region was a mixed methods or pragmatist approach (Creswell 2003), in accommodating aspects of both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Using a combination of approaches enables the researcher to confidently test theories and then develop themes from the data (Creswell 2003, p.18) – and developing themes was very pertinent to this project.

The main data collection methods were a survey, interviews and a focus group as well as the examination of documentation produced by the Gwydir Learning Region. In relation to the specific issue of the conceptual framework for the Gwydir Learning Region, stakeholders were asked in an interview “What are some of the key ideas behind the Learning Region?” and they were asked in a survey “Which ideas have most assisted the Learning Region to succeed?” The following proposition was put to the stakeholders at a focus group: “The Gwydir Learning Region is underpinned by powerful concepts (e.g. social capital, lifelong learning, sustainable

communities) but in emphasising all of them, messages are blurred about the benefits of the Learning Regions.”

Findings

Stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region have consciously investigated a range of other learning regions to see which concepts might apply in the Gwydir region. The stakeholders have also injected into the local initiative a range of ideas from their own professional disciplines, including new ideas from the disciplines of education, community development and regional development. This injection of ideas is a deliberate strategy, as explained by Max Eastcott, General Manager of the Gwydir Shire Council and a member of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee:

It is extremely important that you have a clear understanding of what you wish to achieve before you embark upon a project – at least at an intellectual level. (Eastcott 2005a, p.3)

Prevailing concepts about social capital

Interviews and survey returns showed that members of the Gwydir Learning Region were aware of a range of new publications on the following concepts: lifelong learning (e.g. Adult Learning Australia 2005); defining learning communities (e.g. Kilpatrick et al. 2003); social capital in regional communities (e.g. Falk 2000); and the role of vocational education and training in regional communities (e.g. Kilpatrick 2003; Kearns 2004).

The influence of ideas about social capital, lifelong learning and empowering communities is very clear in the writings of members of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee, even if these technical terms are not used. For example, in the following statement Martin Bower (2005a), Careers and Community Education Officer, Warialda High School, advocates the potential for rural communities to empower themselves:

The Gwydir Learning Region (GLR) is about locals taking control of their futures and building their community the way they want it.

Such gives people a sense of control in their lives and a sense they have something worthwhile to nurture and defend. The GLR is about reversing the slow downward spiral of rural communities and the unbalanced development and marginalisation of people in accessing new technology and essential skills and culturally and socially enriching resources. (p.1)

Martin Bower believes that if rural communities are provided with access to resources they will take advantage of them and gain self-fulfilment:

If rural communities constantly see in the media and the like that rural and regional structures are going to contract, then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. People don't invest financially, socially or emotionally, leading to an overall breakdown of the community.

Yet the rural community is a good place to live and raise children, grow old and gain self-fulfilment. If these communities are provided with access to these resources, usually seen in larger urban areas, the benefits of both worlds are achieved and the downward trend is reversed. (p.2)

Martin Bower has prepared a range of documents on the Gwydir Learning Region, all characterised by a belief in education as an enabler and a belief in the potential for community self-directedness.

Max Eastcott remembers similar lessons from his university studies in sociology:

I remember from my early university studies in sociology that often communities under stress are socially quite cohesive because they band together as no one else will help them – self help and self reliance becomes very important. (Eastcott 2005a, p.2)

Social capital is defined by Lesser (2000) as the product of a person's networks or connections.

Peter Cuskelly (2005a), Principal, Warialda High School, articulates the potential for building social capital through investing in youth:

Another important strategy is the community support for its youth. The investment of time and training in the young people of Gwydir Shire develops for them a sense of connectedness with the local community and encourages them to continue with their education and in some cases remain working locally. Those who venture away for further training and experience are more likely to return to raise a family or to operate a business or service in the future.

Concepts from education

A number of members of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee bring to the initiative their ideas about new approaches to education in rural areas, particularly the application of ideas about personalised learning and the role of vocational education for secondary school students. Other ideas contributed to the initiative are ideas about flexible learning from the TAFE members of the sub-committee and ideas about adult learning by the ACE members. Perhaps the newest of these ideas is that of personalised learning, discussed below.

A definition of personalised learning is provided by NSW DET:

Personalised learning means starting with good knowledge of where the students are in order to determine what they should be doing next and how they should be doing it. This information for each student can be represented as a 'Learning Plan'. Previous teaching and learning strategies have targeted students experiencing difficulties or addressed the needs of high achievers. Personalised learning assumes differentiation: all students receive targeted attention and consideration. (Personalised Learning – Background Paper, NSW DET 2004a)

The NSW DET paper suggested that personalised learning is a means by which schools and TAFE can deliver education to students that will:

- meet parent and community expectations that educators should give close attention to the individual learning needs of students
- enhance the learning achievement of all students
- capitalise on expanded access and uses of information and communication technology (ICT).

Finally, the Background Paper suggested that “personalised learning/instruction” should not be confused with “learning styles” theory, students determining their own curriculum, or individualised learning. In the model of personalised learning proposed, students still learn in classrooms and in groups. Personalised learning still assumes a common curriculum and a common goal – to achieve the best possible outcome for every student.

Peter Cuskelly (2006) cites a number of features of the Gwydir Learning Region, which he groups under the title of “Personalised Learning”:

Student determined curriculum (relevance) – Curriculum Committee

Student access to courses according to readiness not age

Student access to TAFE delivered courses

Part-time student attendances

Part-time traineeships – Gwydir Industry-Educational Links Committee

School-to-Work Plan for all students Years 9-12 – Martin Bower

Flexible delivery of courses and flexible timetable – Curriculum Committee

Adult learning.

Peter Macbeth (paper, 2006), Principal, Bingara Central School, also views personalised learning as fundamental to the GLR:

The GLR is also built on the notion that we must personalise learning and that everyone should have the opportunity to learn. (p.5)

The Gwydir Learning Region demonstrates that the approach called personalised learning can reach across both the school and VET environment. In the school environment, personalised learning can entail collaborative development by teachers, students and parents, and in the VET environment personalised learning can entail collaboration by learners, VET providers and enterprises. In both domains personalised learning can incorporate assessment information and provide a means of setting targets for the student based on an understanding of the student's current achievement and capacity.

A Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) proposal in 2004 for a research project on personalised learning noted that an holistic approach to a student's needs is at the centre of strategies called personalised learning:

In the Australian context, similar strategies have been pursued under different labels such as student-centred learning, flexible learning, individualised or customised learning. These strategies may include initial diagnosis, customised support plans, and the use of information technology applications to supply specific learning resources and support services to match students' needs and plans. An holistic approach to a student's needs is at the centre of these types of strategies. (Proposal to BVET for a Demonstration Project, NSW DET 2004b)

This holistic approach to a student's needs is reiterated in the following statement in which Peter Cuskelly (2005b) describes his beliefs which underpinned changes he made at Warialda High School following his appointment there as Principal in 2000:

Everyone can learn

All learning should be valued

Differences should be encouraged and celebrated

Everyone should have access to school irrespective of age

School is about more than the acquisition of a HSC or UAI score

Courses should be linked to students' interests and needs, with students determining the senior curriculum

Students should be able to access courses according to readiness not age

School and TAFE need to be more flexible in the ways that they operate

Student life chances are not likely to improve without collective action by the school and the community

School should genuinely encourage lifelong learning

School has an important role to play in the renewal of isolated rural communities. (p.2)

Peter Cuskelly's beliefs push the boundaries of personalised learning, but these beliefs sit comfortably with the Gwydir Learning Region's goal and desired outcomes regarding education and training, as set out in the Gwydir Learning Region statement of values (2005).

Concepts from sustainable community development

Interviews with stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region revealed that individual members brought additional perspectives to the initiative from the fields of sustainable management and

community development. For example, Jane Beaumont, formerly the Community Services Manager, Gwydir Shire Council, brought to the initiative her views about community harmony, the General Manager of the Shire, Max Eastcott recently completed a Masters Degree in Sustainable Management which influenced his approach, and the Director of TAFE NSW New England Institute Gary Pollock has a background in community development which he said influenced his approach to the Gwydir.

Peter Cuskelly (2005a) was clear about the community development aims of the Gwydir initiative:

The developers of the Gwydir Learning Region are attempting to change the mindset of small rural communities to have them focus more on what can be done rather than what can't.

The Gwydir Learning Region enables individuals and communities to regain control of their futures, to build confidence and maintain a sense of pride and achievement.

Peter Macbeth (paper, Feb. 2006) recommends the valuing of the passion for long-term sustainability:

The passion and the spirit that exists within the Gwydir Shire are unmatched and is unique to our communities. It is that passion and enthusiasm for long-term sustainability that we must grab hold of and use so that we can continue to enjoy and appreciate the wonderful lifestyle that we have living in the Gwydir Shire. (p.8)

In a public presentation (2004a), Max Eastcott linked the Gwydir Learning Region to the key characteristics of sustainable rural communities developed by the Strengthening Communities Unit, Premier's Department NSW. Max Eastcott noted in particular that to achieve the characteristic of 'The community develops plans that merge social and economic goals and build local capacity' there are three important requirements:

1. Level of Social Capital
2. Level of Creative Capital
3. Degree of acceptance about the Community's Vision. (Eastcott 2004a)

Linking learning and sustainability, he emphasised that the Gwydir Shire Council wants to become "the recognised leader in Local Government through continuous learning and sustainability" and that the Council's objectives were to:

Improve participation and achievement in education and training

Provide better links between schools, Universities, TAFE, business and communities

Expand opportunities for training and learning all through life. (Eastcott 2004a)

He was clear about the vision:

What an opportunity! We will create a new identity and community culture built around our vision. (Eastcott 2004a)

Ife (2002) argues that community development can accommodate two sets of ideas – ideas about social justice and ideas about ecology:

The ecological and social justice perspectives, taken together, form the basis of a vision for a future society. The social justice perspective provides a vision of what is socially desirable: a society based on equity, empowerment, the overcoming of structural disadvantage, freedom to define needs and have them met, the definition and guaranteeing of rights and so on. The ecological perspective provides a vision of what is feasible, and outlines the sort of society that will be viable in the long term, namely a society based on the principles of holism, sustainability, diversity and balance. Taken together, they represent a powerful vision of the future. (p.79)

There are elements of both the social justice perspective and the ecological perspective in the quotes set out above from GLR stakeholders and in the GLR's goals and desired outcomes regarding community development, as set out in the Gwydir Learning Region statement of values (2005). Max Eastcott expresses a social justice dimension of the Gwydir Learning Region:

Truly powerful communities are those that can identify the gifts of those people at the margin of society and pull them into community life.

Gwydir Learning Region is about achieving this outcome. (Eastcott 2006)

The following statement by Max Eastcott reflects both social justice (equity and empowerment) and ecological perspectives (diversity and balance):

Learning is seen as a way to improve the social environment (for older and socially isolated residents) and life chances of individuals and to create a desire for life long learning within our community. (Eastcott 2005b)

Concepts about economic and regional development

Some of the quotations cited earlier in this article from stakeholders of the Gwydir Learning Region demonstrated their belief that collaborative planning and improved educational provision could not only assist community development but could also improve economic development. For example, confidence that education and training can deliver both economic revival and community pride is expressed by Peter Cuskelly (2005a):

Distance, financial restraints and the nature of rural life are deterrents for residents to pursue further education and training. In order to improve access, it is crucial that the delivery of education be local, affordable and flexible.

Declining businesses and services have eroded rural town pride and confidence in many parts of country Australia. Vocational education can be the catalyst for confidence building and revitalization of the community.

The Gwydir Learning Region through cooperative effort facilitates the re-skilling of the community, the completion of community projects, and the development of new business opportunities and services.

Max Eastcott (2005a) is confident that "collective creativity" can redress low educational achievement levels, drawing parallels between the creative classes in cities and the innovators in the Gwydir Learning Region:

In a recent article in *The New Scientist* Professor Richard Florida made the observation that 'when talented people come together, their collective creativity is not just additive; rather, interactions multiply and enhance their individual productivity'. He was talking particularly about much larger centres such as San Francisco but the underlying truth is just as applicable to towns like Bingara and others that are attacking their problems with innovative solutions.

The Gwydir Learning Region, of which UNE is a part, is just one example of the community's response to issues such as poor educational levels. (p.5)

Related concepts driving the Gwydir Learning Region are that employment training needs can be identified through planning and that skills training can be provided. These concepts are expressed in the GLR's goal and desired outcomes regarding employment (Gwydir Learning Region 2005).

Summary comments

A mix of concepts infuses the planning for and approach of the Gwydir Learning Region sub-committee. Some of this mix is expressed in the GLR statement of values (2005), particularly in

the focus section, which traverses the following ideas: lifelong learning, a ‘can-do’ attitude, sustainable communities and inclusive leadership. This focus section is reproduced in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Gwydir Learning Region (2005) statement of values

FOCUS

The Gwydir Learning Region has a commitment to achieve our primary goal of

- promoting lifelong learning by having a bias for action.
- We overcome the barriers presented as obstacles to our success by having a ‘can-do’, innovative and flexible attitude.
- Our success is extremely important to ensure the sustainability of our community.
- We will be true to our mission and vision and display inclusive leadership to our community!

RELATIONSHIPS

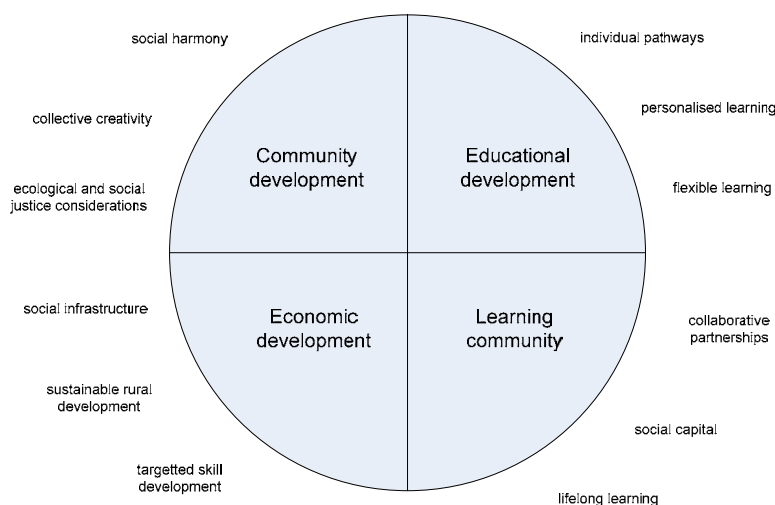
- We recognise that our strength is the result of the diversity of our constituent members and that the external commitment of members to their respective organisations may result in differing points of view.
- At all times we will seek to contribute in a positive and collaborative manner.
- Individually we will be ethical in our dealings with other members and display integrity in overall commitment to the Gwydir Learning Region.
- During discussion all interactions will be respectful, honest and open with ideas challenged, rather than people. We will actively listen to the contributions from other members.
- We will all ‘own’ the resolved position adopted at our meetings and ‘sell’ the outcome to our respective organisations and the community in general.
- We will not ‘white-ant’, externally criticise or work against the best interests of the Gwydir Learning Region within our organisations or the community.
- Members may be assertive in expressing constructive criticism at our meetings.
- We will support each other and recognise our ‘champions’.

Discussion

A rich set of concepts underpin the Gwydir Learning Region, which deserve highlighting for the benefit of others considering developing a learning region. Some of these concepts are drawn from other learning regions and from contemporary literature about lifelong learning and social capital and the roles of education in building social capital in regional areas. An additional concept influencing the Gwydir Learning Region is the newly promoted concept of personalised learning, which encourages the provision of targeted attention for each student. Another key concept influencing the Gwydir Learning Region is that of sustainable rural communities, the characteristics of which fit well with the GLR. A further concept driving the Gwydir Learning Region is that planning and ‘collective creativity’ can identify local employment training needs and that skills training can be developed in response to such planning.

The following diagram cites, organises and summarises some of the key concepts in the Gwydir Learning Region.

Diagram 1: Some of the key concepts infusing the Gwydir Learning Region (from Mitchell 2006)



The Gwydir Learning Region has developed a model of a learning region that contains sophisticated conceptual foundations drawn from the fields of education, community development, regional development and learning communities. The learning region also contains elements such as the following: shared goals and vision; social and economic imperatives; and an evolving structure and refined processes. Personnel in other regions seeking to emulate the Gwydir Learning Region will need to consider the development of similar conceptual foundations and to attend to these other elements.

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