What are Learning Communities?

Ron Faris writes about a powerful way of learning that can take place beyond the walls of formal education and leave a lasting legacy.

Over one hundred years ago the father of experiential learning theory, John Dewey, revealed that the heart of social democracy rests in the education and learning opportunities for all. Small wonder that recent Canadian research has illuminated the comparative advantage of the Nordic advanced-learning based model when contrasted to the growing inequality of the North American market model in the emerging knowledge-based economy and society.[1]

In the knowledge-based economy and society a major constant is change. Market ideology in resource allocation; rapid increase in use of information and communication technologies; and the explosion of new knowledge, especially in the sciences and technologies, are three inter-related forces driving global change.

Paradoxically, the proactive response to change is change – in the form of learning or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Learning, essentially a social-historical process, is increasingly viewed as a lifelong and life-wide process by which individuals, groups and communities in a knowledge-based economy and society can sculpt the sort of world they want. Learning, in all its forms, is at the heart of sustainable change – and social progress and reform.

The advent of 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning placed the concept on the international agenda. That year both the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) saw the publication of their seminal reports on lifelong learning concepts, policy and practice.[2] The UNESCO report, *Learning: the Treasure Within*, identified four pillars or learning imperatives in the emerging ▶

> " ...We have drifted into a culture that fragments our thoughts, that detaches the world from the self and the self from the community. "

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1 In 1993, Sweden, and 2003, Norway, led all nations in the international adult literacy surveys. Canada was in the middle of the pack with no change in the 42% of adults with what Stats Canada called inadequate literacy and numeracy skills for a knowledge-based economy. The devolution of well-resourced adult education to local municipal levels and their quality social welfare networks are the hallmark of Nordic countries. Interesting comparative studies include: Jackson, A., 2002, CCSD, The Three Nation Socio-economic Comparison, at http://www.ccsd.ca/pubs/2002/Olympic/indicators.htm and Brooks, N. and T. Hwong, 2006, The Social Benefits and Economic Costs of Taxation, CCPA, Ottawa. Mounting evidence of growing inequality in Canada is found in Morisstte, R., and X. Zhang, 2006, "Revisiting wealth inequality", Statistics Canada PERSPECTIVES, (December 2006), Ottawa; Yalnizyan, a., 2007, The Rich and the Rest of Us: The changing face of Canada's growing gap, CCPA, Ottawa, and Campbell, B., 2007, 20 Years Later: Has Free Trade Delivered on its Promise?, North American Deep Integration Series (Vol.1, No. 2 December 2007), CCPA, Ottawa.
2 OECD, 1996, Lifelong Learning for All, OECD, Paris; UNESCO, 1996, Learning: the Treasure Within, Paris.

> " **We are so focused on our security that we don't see the price we pay: living in bureaucratic organizations where the wonder and joy of learning have no place. Thus we are losing the spaces to dance with the ever-changing patterns of life.** "

knowledge-based economy and society: learning to know; to do; to live together; and to be.[3]

Across the world increasing numbers of communities of place –neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions – are explicitly using lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal as they mobilize the learning resources of all five of their community sectors: civic; economic; public, education; and voluntary to enhance their social, economic and environmental conditions on a sustainable, socially inclusive basis.[4]

Pioneering learning cities in the UK commenced in the mid-1990's, and OECD's learning region projects were initiated in the late nineties.[5] Learning community development began in British Columbia and Australia in 1998. The State of Victoria launched a learning town strategy in 2000 that supported a mix of ten urban and rural initiatives.[6]

Hume, an economically depressed suburb of Melbourne, earned an international reputation for its Global Learning Village.[7] In the first two years of Learning Village operation its public library system increased membership and circulation by 50% – in a city with the third lowest socio-economic ranking in Oz and a new Australian population from over 130 different ethnic groups. In 2003, Hume also became the first Australian city to create a Social Justice Charter – the philosophical foundation of its innovative social learning strategy and its groundbreaking civic Bill of Rights.

British Columbia's learning community initiative commenced in rural BC, beginning in the Upper Skeena, in 1999.[8] Recent developments include both Victoria and Vancouver city council's proclaiming themselves as learning cities.[9] In the rural learning communities, and in Greater Victoria, initial learning community development evolved into learning regions. For example, Literacy Victoria, the Songhees Band, and

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3 The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) is developing a Composite Learning Index (CLI) that provides an annual measure of Canada's performance in a number of areas related to the four pillars of lifelong learning including CLI scores for 35 Canadian cities. See CCL, 2007, The 2007 Composite Learning Index: Helping Communities Improve their Quality of Life, CCL., Ottawa which available at: www.ccl-cca.ca

4 Candy, Janet, 2005, Town Planning for Learning Towns, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Flinders University, Adelaide. Candy estimated that there were over 300 learning towns world-wide at that time. In July, 2007 the Korean Ministry of Education & Human Resources announced 19 new lifelong learning cities - bringing to 76 the number of such cities since it launched its national strategy in 2001. See Faris, Ron, 2006, Learning Cities: Lessons Learned, and Learning Cities Bibliography funded by Literacy BC in support of the Vancouver Learning City Initiative for a survey of various learning community cases and related analysis. Both are at: http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/LC.htm

5 Faris, Ron 1998, Learning Communities: Cities, Towns and Villages Preparing for a 21st Century Knowledge-Based Economy, Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, Victoria at: http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/LC.htm

6 The Australian Learning Community Catalyst web site, which provides useful information on learning community initiatives in Oz and abroad, is: www.lcc.edu.au
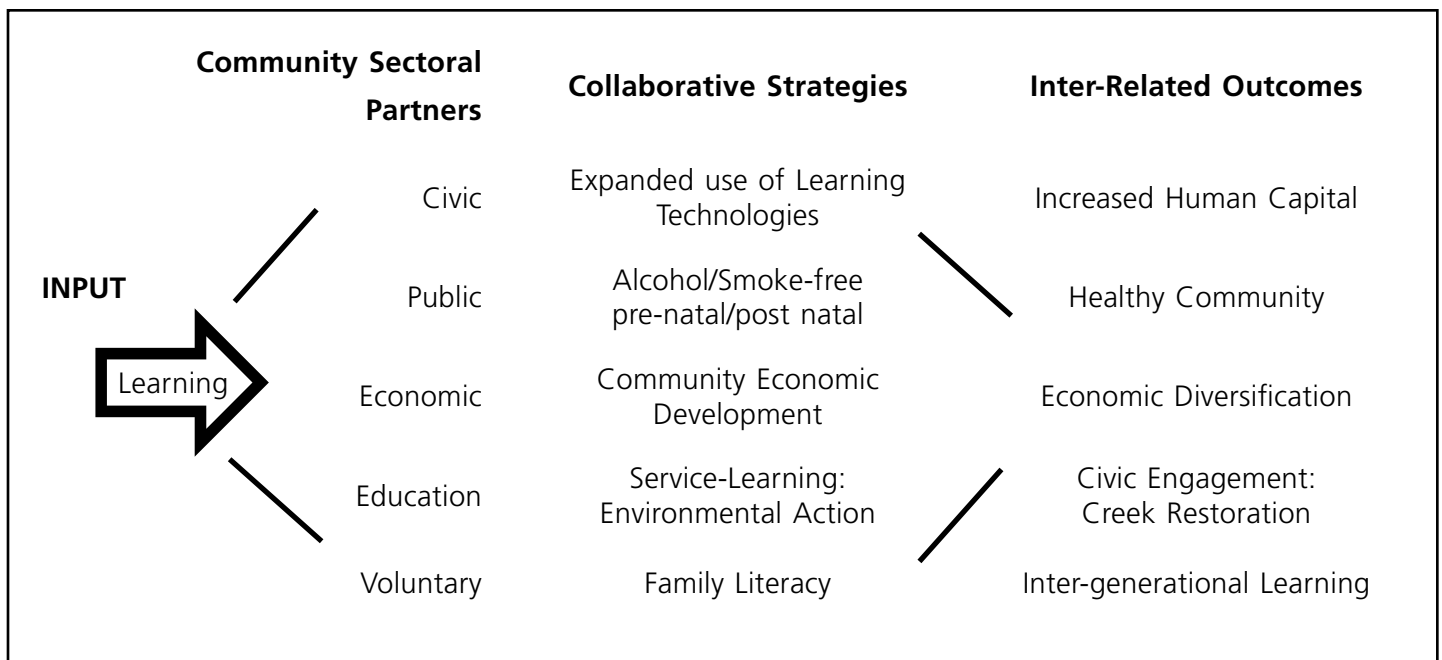
7 The Hume site is: http://www.hume.vic.gov.au/Page/Page.asp?Page_ID182&h-1

> " **We need to invent a new learning model for business, education, health care, government and the family. This invention will come from the patient, concerted efforts of communities of people invoking aspiration and wonder.** "

Figure 1 - Four pillars or learning imperatives in the emerging knowledge-based economy and society

4 Pillars of Knowledge	Learning to Know	Learning to Do	Learning to Live Together	Learning to Be
	Aquiring understanding	Acting Creatively	Participating and Cooperating	Fostering a holistic mental, physical, spiritual & emotional life
Foundational Skills	Learning How to Learn	Transforming Knowledge into Innovation	Celebrating Diversity & Our Common Humanity in Whole Communities	Becoming a Whole, Caring Individual
Role Performance	+ Active Learners	+Creative, productive workers	+Active family & community members & global citizens	+Humane Beings

Figure 2 - Learning Communities: Infusing Learning in Sectoral Policy and Practice, Ron Faris 2007

Community Sectoral Partners	Collaborative Strategies	Inter-Related Outcomes
Civic	Expanded use of Learning Technologies	Increased Human Capital
Public	Alcohol/Smoke-free pre-natal/post natal	Healthy Community
Economic	Community Economic Development	Economic Diversification
Education	Service-Learning: Environmental Action	Civic Engagement: Creek Restoration
Voluntary	Family Literacy	Inter-generational Learning

INPUT → Learning

> " As these communities manage to produce fundamental changes, we will regain our memory – the memory of the community nature of the self and the poetic nature of language and the world – the memory of the whole. " ***All quotes by Pete Senge from "Creating Quality Communities"**

Camosun College created a South Island Learning Community (SILC) literacy project which is a partnership and network that includes all eleven First Nation Bands on the south Island, the Greater Victoria Public Library, the Victoria Disability Centre, Blanshard Community Centre, Industry Canada, and the local freenet provider.

In January, 2007 the public library initiated a new policy of free access for all FirstNation people in the region. It had previously appointed a Literacy coordinator and began a literacy collection. SILC literacy learners, including street people, are learning how to make their own e-portfolios, blogs and individual learning plans. Corporate partners such as Thrifty Foods, Dockside Green and the Empress Hotel will collaborate in a related workplace literacy initiative while Victoria City Council created a Youth Advisory Council of school and street youth, and sponsors an annual Lifelong Learning Festival on International Literacy Day of every September.

Learning occurs in every community but the explicit, systematic mobilization of a communities' total learning resources is the hallmark of a learning community. It is a form of learning-based community development that builds on the assets of a community, including its human and social capital i.e. both formal and non-formal learning competencies: the "intangible assets" of the knowledge-based economy and society.[10] Whether the objective is a "safe", "vibrant", "creative", "healthy", or "resilient" community, sustainable success is possible only if community members and organizations acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values – the learning – necessary for new policy, practice and progress.

The idea and ideal of learning communities is both a socio-economic and an ethical imperative if all British Columbians are to enjoy the fruits of the emerging knowledge-based economy and society. At their best, such communities will create the ambience for the needed reformation of the education system and the context in which all community members are enabled to contribute to the world's work and the world's struggles. Learning, infused in local organizational policy and practice, is essential if conventional communities are to transform into "learning communities".

8 See page 12 in this issue for a report on this impressive learning community model. More information is available at: http://www.upperskeena.ca Other early learning communities include Lumby and district; Lillooet and district; the Fraser Canyon, and Mt. Currie-Whistler. Caledon Institute case studies on many of these communities are at http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/LC.htm. Literacy Now, influenced by the notion of embedding literacy in learning community development, is working with over 100 community initiatives across the province.

9 Faris, Ron, 2006, Learning Cities: Lessons Learned, funded by Literacy BC as part of the Vancouver Learning City Initiative, Vancouver. The Victoria City Proclamation and Lifelong Learning Festival report are at: http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/LC.htm

10 See Peterson, Wayne and Ron Faris, 2000, Learning-Based Community Development: Lessons Learned for British Columbia, Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, Victoria, and Faris, Ron, 2001, The Way Forward: Building a Learning Nation, Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, Toronto. Both documents add to the emerging conceptual framework of learning communities and are at: http://members.shaw.ca/rfaris/LC.htm

Learning Community	Conventional Community
PROACTIVE PARTNERS IN A NEW ECONOMY • uses both formal and non-formal sector learning resources • economic and education partners share their training resources with each other and the community • learning is seen as the common denominator of education/training • social/human capital is valued, added to, and used for comparative advantage • learning is seen as investment • learning is seen as a social process that results in a comparative economic advantage for all • community thrives on greater autonomy of decentralization • innovations are supported by interactive learning among learning organizations within the community	REACTING TO CHANGE • the formal education system has few links to the non-formal learning providers • companies and education often compete: there is often limited community access to resources of either • education is viewed as prestigious: training & non-formal learning are devalued • social/human capital is often unrecognized and largely untapped • education is seen as a cost • learning is viewed as an individual activity for personal benefit • community develops dependency upon centralized policies • innovations are isolated and often viewed as competitive threats by others in the community
LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AS A TOOL • local lifelong learning strategy includes individual e-portfolios with employee learning plans for all sector employees • universal local access to learning technologies for networking within and among communities	A DIGITAL DIVIDE • incoherent, sporadic, and unequal learning opportunities are provided with chief benefits to an educated elite with learning technology skills and access • limited access to learning technologies with little networking beyond the community
LONGER-TERM CONSEQUENCES • health determinants and brain research informs preventative learning strategies to save costly remedial education, health, criminal justice, and social programs • joined-up solutions to joined-up problems are possible in a community organized to "learn its way out" of local problems	A SOCIAL DIVIDE • access to quality early health and learning opportunities is either limited or non-existent • a permanent underclass with joined-up problems: weak literacy; ill-housed, often in ill-health - is created
OVERALL GOAL • the development of a lifelong learning culture for all is a community goal	OVERALL RESULT • some individuals or groups promote lifelong learning values

Ron Faris 2007