

Learning Cities as Inclusive Learning Ecosystems In Steps Towards a Sustainable Humanistic Society

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The UNESCO Futures of Education Commission in March 2021 issued a Progress Update on this initiative. A point of particular interest from the perspective of learning cities and communities was a comment on “The organisation and governance of education: building inclusive educational ecosystems” (UNESCO, 2021:13).

While learning cities have seldom been described as educational ecosystems, this concept has much to contribute to sustainable learning cities, with the PASCAL EcCoWell approach to learning cities directed at an integrated/ holistic approach, along the lines of a learning ecosystem, since 2011. In the light of this experience, this paper explores some of the ways in which learning cities and communities could be developed as inclusive learning ecosystems as steps towards a sustainable humanistic society.

Senge in his seminal book on learning organisations describes systems in the following terms.

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing relationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static “snapshots”.

Systems thinking along these lines has value in connecting up things that involve system relationships, and hence extending our perception in whole ways. This is particularly important in extending the social and economic objectives of learning cities to encompass biological and planetary objectives in an organic model fundamental for a sustainable society in a world in crises.

A key feature of learning ecosystems is that they are “dynamic in composition and porous around the edges, ... and have distributed governance” (WISE, 2020:13). The capacity of learning ecosystems to evolve may be seen in the evolution of the PASCAL EcCoWell concept through several stages since 2011.

The initial stage of EcCoWell development, led by the Cork learning city, had a focus on connecting learning, health, and environmental relationships. This orientation was reflected in the UNESCO Cork Call for Action for Learning Cities, resulting from the 2017 UNESCO Third International Conference on Learning Cities, which was built around three themes: green healthy learning, inclusion and equity, and decent work and entrepreneurship (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2017).

Following the UNESCO Cork conference, PASCAL initiated a review of the EcCoWell experience since 2011. This resulted in happiness and entrepreneurship being added to the objectives of EcCoWell in what was now termed EcCoWell 2.

A further key feature in the evolution of the EcCoWell concept since 2011 has been the close interest taken in development at the local level. This may be seen in learning community initiatives undertaken by the Cork and Limerick learning cities, and Harlem New York and Datong Taipei communities. (Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns eds, 2020). This has been, perhaps, the most innovative of EcCoWell developments. This feature of EcCoWell development aligns with a significant comment in the UNESCO *Progress Update* that has implications for the future development of learning cities.

A world where education is a common good is a place where bottom up, local initiatives blossom and self-organised governance can also succeed on a large scale. (UNESCO, 2021:6).

If learning ecosystems are seen as a path for learning cities towards a sustainable humanistic future, there are several approaches that could be considered. These include the following.

1. An evolutionary approach “porous at the edges” along the lines of the EcCoWell experience, perhaps also evolving from a learning, health, and environment core.
2. A framework reflecting the key themes and objectives of the UNESCO Futures of Education Report.

The second option is the more ambitious approach, but could be a stimulus for finding ways to implement key themes from the UNESCO Report in communities and cities. It could make innovative learning communities and cities developed along these lines important instruments for implementing the report’s key objectives.

If learning cities and communities follow either of these paths, they will derive similar benefits from those identified in the UNESCO Progress Update. These include flexibility to include a broader range of partners such as “libraries, museums, community radio, public access television, spaces of the digital commons, as well as institutions not even dreamed of yet “(UNESCO 2021:13).

While there are significant benefits from such institutional diversity, a more central benefit from the development of learning cities as inclusive learning ecosystems would come from incorporation of the biological and planetary dimensions of learning ecosystems that complement, and strengthen, the usual social and economic objectives of learning cities.

A learning ecosystem approach has much to offer communities as a path towards the “new humanism” objectives of the UNESCO Progress Update. It is likely that empathic sensibility

will be at the heart of the new humanism driving not only inclusion as a core ethical value, but also “biosphere consciousness in a climax economy” (Rifkin,2009:593-616) as an imperative for a sustainable future.

Such a shift in consciousness will need to be driven community by community, city by city, country by country. Networks of learning cities and communities could have an important role in enabling such a shift of consciousness to occur. Learning cities and communities will have a new agenda, and a new importance, in the path to building a sustainable empathic civilization.

References

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