

REPORT ON BRITISH COUNCIL INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING EVENT:

LEARNING COMMUNITIES: TOWARDS PROSPEROUS AND INCLUSIVE TOWNS, CITIES AND REGIONS

Event Directors:

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BIRMINGHAM – A LEARNING CITY

INTRODUCTION

This report is summary of the a week hosted by the British Council International Networking Event – Learning Communities: towards prosperous and inclusive towns, cities and regions, held at Aston Business School, Birmingham 28 September – 4 October 2002. The Event Directors were Martin Yarnit and Dr Ron Faris. Participants came from Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Sri Lanka, UAE, the UK, Venezuela and Yugoslavia.

Most participants wanted to find out more about the learning community concept and how such learning-based community development initiatives could work in their own situation. The Event Directors enabled this to happen by using Birmingham as a Case Study. The programme was designed so that participants were able to hear from political and education leaders from Birmingham, undertake visits to a range of new learning centre developments and gain the views of learning community practitioners and speakers with a national and European perspective. The speakers and visits are listed in attachment A. During the week participants were encouraged to identify what was meant by the concept of a learning community and to set about developing an assessment framework, which was then used as one method of viewing Birmingham’s performance as a Learning City.

BACKGROUND

Since coming to power several years ago, the Labour Government has placed great importance on education. Colm McGivern, Assistant Director, WEA, Belfast and Chair, Learning Communities Network gave a potted version of this policy change in simple terms using the following diagram:

THE LEARNING CITY REVOLUTION	
WHAT’S HOT!	WHAT’S NOT
• Lifelong	• Schooling
• Learning	• Education
• New sites for learning	• Institutions
• Student-led	• Provider-led
• Funding mix	• Government funds
• The socially excluded	• Motivated learners
• Learning alliances	• Compartments
• Partnerships	• Single providers

There appears to be no shortage of money for learning based initiatives, however the English system is very complex and requires strong coordination and will from political, funding and skills bodies within a region to ensure the funds are directed to the places of need. Birmingham, through coordination of the City Council, the Learning and Skills Council and the Birmingham Core Skills Development partnership appears to have achieved this. Some of the funding initiatives that were referred to include:

BRITISH INITIATIVES

- Social exclusion agenda:
 - 18 Policy Action Teams
 - Action Team No 15 is on Digital Exclusion
 - UK Online Centres funded from New Opportunities revenue (lottery money, with capital coming from the Department of Education and Science)
- Learning partnerships
- Excellence in Cities
- Investors in People

EUROPEAN FUNDING INITIATIVES

Yarnit refers to the change in policy as the development of new learning systems which are outside the traditional education paradigm (Yarnit 2000). Yarnit summarised this trend using the following chart:

TWO TYPES OF LEARNING SYSTEMS	
OLD	NEW
Mainly formal	All three, ie, formal, non-formal and informal
Mainstream budgets	Mainly project budgets
Provider led	Learner Focussed
Segmented	Integrated
Age Specific	All Age
38 weeks, 9-5	Anytime, anywhere
There	Here

Although this has not been tested empirically, it provides a useful way of placing the changes both in the UK and Australia in a context.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Birmingham is the largest city authority in Britain outside London. The city with a population of 977,100 is home to about 19% of the residents of the West Midlands Region. Birmingham has a relatively youthful population with about 43% of the Birmingham population under the age of 30, compared to 38% for England as a whole. It is also has an ethnically diverse population, with significant communities of Pakistanis, Indians and African/Caribbean. Within a few years over 50% of the population will be non-white.

GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING

The City Council

There are eight Cabinet posts within the City Council that work on a range of issues. Cabinet members are expected to work together on joined up issues. Roy Pinney holds a Cabinet post for Education and Lifelong Learning and is promoting the assessment of issues before all 8 cabinet portfolios in terms of learning. In Birmingham education is seen as a city issue rather than a regional or national issue.

The Learning and Skills Council

Since 2000, each region of the UK has a Learning and Skills Council. David Cragg is Executive Director for the Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council. Its core functions are:

- Duty to provide proper facilities for education and training
- Ensure statutory entitlements for 16-19 year olds in education and training
- Provision of “organised leisure-time occupation connected with education and training”, ie Adult and Community Learning
- Statutory responsibility for securing equality of opportunity
- Requirement to address the needs of individual employment sectors
- Involvement in local economic development and regeneration
- Promotion of life long learning

Its areas of responsibilities include:

- FE/Sixth Form Colleges
- School Sixth Forms
- Lifelong learning/workforce development
- Adult and Community Development
- Work-based learning
- Local initiatives

David Cragg ensures that the Board, which looks after the Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council, contains key decision makers who represent each area – this ensures that key policy decisions are implemented quickly.

Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership

The Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership is a company whose sole focus is to raise the basic literacy and numeracy skills of the population of Birmingham over a 10-20 year period. The main issue was that 30% of young people did not have basic literacy and numeracy skills when leaving secondary schools and these people were ending up, if they were lucky in Adult education. The partnership sees a main role as targeting a broad area of the population, starting with newborns to increase the numeracy and literacy skills of all.

It targets the following areas:

- Unemployed
- Pensioners
- Public sector employees
- Low skilled employees
- Young people
- Homeless
- Refugees and speakers of other languages
- Parents
- Adults in disadvantaged communities

The partnership has very ambitious targets and if approached by groups with ideas seeks to see how an initiative can be replicated on a mass scale, eg, the motivating pack (includes books etc to encourage reading in the home) is provided to every newborn in Birmingham (15,000). This started as a small-scale initiative by one group. The partnership approach is to work on initiatives and target the budget to meet the learning needs of appropriate groups, ie; it may be a nursery, a library, and out-of-school programmes.

All the education leaders of Birmingham spoke of the need to work together to ensure funding is targeted in to the areas of greatest need in order to meet outcomes.

ECONOMIC REGENERATION

Birmingham – A Modern European City

Roy Pinney, Cabinet Member for Education and Life Long Learning informed us that in its early history Birmingham had no natural resources so built itself of the skills of its migrant population and became known as the “city of 1000 trades”. In the 20th Century it developed a major manufacturing centre for cars, aircraft and motorbikes. With the decline in these industries in the 1980s it sought a way ahead through economic regeneration by developing a vision of repositioning itself as a vibrant European city with a focus on increasing business services. This was done by the regeneration of the city centre, eg, new high quality hotels, a convention and exhibition centre, a concert hall, the redevelopment of the canal area within the city. This has been very successful.

LEARNING QUARTER – EASTSIDE DEVELOPMENT

With the success of the city centre redevelopment there is 6 billion pounds to develop the Eastside as the city's new learning, technology and culture quarter. It is based around Millennium Point that is already open and features:

- an Imax theatre,
- a modernised museum known as “Think Tank” (which is very similar to Science Museums in Australia)
- University of the First Age – interactive, multi-media, brain centred fun learning activities based on Howard Gartner’s multiple intelligences
- Young People’s Parliament
- Technology innovation centre (tic). This is a higher education learning centre. It is founded on the University of Central England’s former Faculty of Engineering and Computer Technology. It offers conventional lectures, access to the latest technology and library services at a convenient location. It is also based on partnerships with a range of industry sectors that encompass automotive, general engineering, environmental and jewellery & giftware industries.
- The next stage is a partnership initiative called The New Technology Institute. This will see HE and FE collaborate to establish ‘an integrated facility providing progression education from further to higher education’.
- Future developments focussing on cultural development will see the relocation of UCE’s Conservatoire and London’s Royal College of Organists.

LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE

Apart from Millennium Point we visited the following learning centres to gain an overview of facilities that support new learning systems as defined by Yarnit.

Sheldon Heath – a City Learning Centre

Sheldon Heath is one of six City Learning Centres in Birmingham. It is a state of the art ICT centre based around best practice and the use of the latest technology.

It services 10 schools in the local area. Schools book time to use this facility. The Sheldon CLC has a bias towards enriching the performing arts. The facilities are very flexible and include a performance space, a conference room, hub computer room and reception. This facility is free of charge to everyone, including community, who want to use it. Currently it is funded by the Government’s Excellence in Cities initiative.

It contains about one million pounds worth of ICT equipment which includes, video editing equipment, video conferencing, wireless laptops, interactive whiteboard, digital and video cameras, sound studio with digital audio and midi recording, scanning and colour laser printing.

The entire learning facilities for Birmingham are listed on the Birmingham Grid for Learning Web site.

Summary

Yarnit summarized what is happening in Birmingham by saying that learning communities require a transformation of its learning systems to meet new learning needs and the places the group visited were certainly examples of the way this had been achieved.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES – VIEWS OF THE TOP

The following summarizes some of the concepts about learning communities. It is by no means comprehensive as this is an area, which a body of knowledge is developing:

- It is a Learning City concept NOT a Learn-Ed City concept
- Learn-Ed City focuses on education and training for jobs
- Learning is a wider concept than learning for jobs, it is about
 - Cohesion
 - Cultural development
 - Community building
 - Citizenship
 - Competitiveness
- Learning Communities and Learning Cities need leadership
- Birmingham has given prominence to social exclusion issues by placing these issues at the top of the economic agenda in order to bring business on board, eg, economic activity of working age Bangladeshis in Birmingham is 40% compared to whites 80%. The council put the issue of ethnicity at the top of the economic agenda. This has led to a change in attitude of business and the setting up of a Diversity Board:
- **Local Solutions for Birmingham:**
 - Increase Black and Asian Careers Advisors
 - Targeted working experience
 - Transform the workforce within the public service
 - Marketing campaign to change perception – campaign slogan ethnic recruitment key to economic success
- There is not one model of a learning community, each community will develop its own
- Start with a framework to help sell the concept, suggestion from Colm McGovern, Belfast:
 - **Assertion:** Learning Communities are a “good thing”,
 - **Analysis:** Because they improve lives and localities...
 - **Application:** And we know this because we have...
 1. ...
 2. ...
 3. ...

MEASUREMENT OF PERFORMANCE

There is a difference in approach in the methods used by Yarnit and Faris. Yarnit's work is founded in the UK Learning Cities movement where much more emphasis has been placed on measuring increased participation in learning from an education and training viewpoint. For example, Yarnit worked on the The Sheffield Learning Plan 2002-2004. This outlines key performance indicators that are measuring participation and the quality of the education and training system of Sheffield, that is:

- Learning participation, ie, proportion of 16-18 year olds in structured learning, and other age groups
- Learning achievement, eg, proportion of school leavers achieving 5 A*-C GCSEs, basic literacy measures and achievements of young people in higher education
- Quality of educational provision, eg, Investors in People recognition to acknowledge employers investment in education and training provision
- Employment and Income statistics for the City of Sheffield

The measurement of intangibles such as social capital is increasingly recognised as of importance in the UK and Yarnit indicated that work is now being done on this area. Even in the audit of secondary schools, Lynne Morris, Principal Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College, a Moslem-oriented College in Birmingham informed us that the most recent audit included asking questions about the ambience and social inclusion.

Faris's takes a much more theoretical approach based on OECD and UNESCO models of lifelong learning. The development of the Faris conceptual framework is founded in a community development, capacity building approach, which is understandable as Faris's work to date has been grounded in needs of rural communities in British Columbia.

The challenge for the week was for Faris and Yarnit to lead two groups of participants and come up with an assessment framework that combined the two approaches and develop an instrument, which could be used to assess Birmingham's performance as a learning city.

Yarnit says in his work he can take one of three approaches in the starting point of assessing the work of a learning community:

1. Get all stakeholders to articulate their vision, ie, what does this mean for learning in our locality, eg, improving computer literacy, broadening participation by various age groups, the plan for schools, the plan for community based learning.
2. Start with a focussed aim, that is, an increase in the population who are engaged in purposeful learning, or an increase in citizenship training.
3. Start with a general awareness of the need to change the education and training system:
 - More collaboration between providers
 - More collaboration between sectors
 - More collaboration between community organizations and universities

The starting point will depend on the situation; for example, with a network of learning centres the purpose is to drive up participation rates so you would:

- Define learning needs,
- Establish a baseline for comparisons in the future,
- Count adults involved in different sorts of learning...

Each group started with a definition of a learning community:

Learning Communities can be defined as a people/town/city (defined population and individuals and groups) who are trying to use learning to understand how to solve their common problems, for example, how to achieve prosperity (economic growth, investment etc) whilst not excluding any minority.

The other definition was:

Groups of individuals living together in neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities or regions who use the concept of lifelong learning, supported by learning technologies, to solve their common issues and enhance:

- Social inclusion
- Economic development
- Environmental sustainability, and
- World citizenship

The group developed a draft assessment framework based on a series of steps:

- Analysis of the current situation
- Identification of the purposes for developing a learning community
- Establishment of the processes, ie, the partners involved
- How will ICT be used in the development of a learning community?
- Identification of the funding sources
- Evaluation of the outcomes, establishment of quantitative and qualitative performance measures

This was developed into a detailed chart and was used to assess Birmingham as a Learning City. Generally the conclusion was that in the areas where the group had information Birmingham was performing very well. However, the group had no knowledge of the general public's awareness of Birmingham as a learning city.

CONCLUSION

The main idea is that there is no one model of a learning community. Yarnit and Faris share points of commonality and points of differences. Their work provides a sound basis that enables groups of individuals, towns, villages and regions to start thinking about the development of learning communities. The critical point is that the establishment of a learning community by a group of individuals, a town, a village or a region requires careful planning by key sectorial groups. Faris identifies 5 sectors, ie, education, civic, public (eg, health, social services, libraries), economic, and voluntary/community that should be involved. Learning targets or outcomes should be established as part of the planning process, including the use of information and communication technology. These targets should be reviewed and adjusted as part of an action learning/research approach.

REFERENCES:

Birmingham Grid for Learning

<http://www.bgfl.org>

Birmingham City Council

<http://www.birminghamcity.gov.uk>

Birmingham Core Skills

<http://www.coreskills.co.uk/>

Birmingham Millennium Point:

<http://www.millenniumpoint.org.uk>

DfES Adult Basic Skills

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/>

DfES Lifelong Learning

<http://www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/learningcities/front.htm>

European Union

<http://www.europa.eu.int/comm./education/Socrates>

Learning Communities Network

<http://www.lc-network.com>

Learning and Skills Council

<http://www.lsc.gov.uk/>

Sheffield First for Learning (Learning Partnership)

<http://www.sheffieldfirst.com/learning/index2.html>

Yarnit, M. (2000). *Towns, cities and regions in the learning age - a survey of learning communities*. London, LGA Publications, DfEE, LCN: 92.

Sheffield Learning Plan

ATTACHMENT A:

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE FORUM

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VISITS:

Millennium Point – Eastside Learning Quarter

- University of the First Age
- Young People’s Parliament
- Think Tank
- Technology Innovation Centre

Sheldon Heath City Learning Centre

Prescott Powell Learning Centre