Balancing Between Smart and Inclusive: Learning Cities for Sustainable Urban Communities

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Abstract:

Since 2012, Global Learning Cities has become a successful network-based movement of UNESCO which demonstrates not only linkages, but also dependencies amongst community development, adult learning and active citizenship (UNESCO 2017). Examples of Cork, Espoo, Belgrade and South Korea have highlighted (Németh 2020), that communities are unable to develop successful models of learning cities unless they combine smart, creative and sustainability dimensions through community-based adult and lifelong learning for social cohesion, economic stability, growth and environmental awareness. Equitable ways of community learning can better reach underrepresented groups of adults who want to develop and sustain their neighbourhoods through collecting and sharing knowledge (Ó Tuama 2020). Other examples from India, Palestine and the UK demonstrate that it is not the label itself, but the smart and creative urban adult learning which can be combined with needs of communities (Németh et al. 2020). In the evolution of learning cities, we have arrived to an Era of uncertainties, therefore, we have to demonstrate that the learning cities depend on better participation, performance and partnerships in learning, surrounded by collective actions for better futures of education.

Keywords: Adult Learning; Community Local Engagement; Equity; Global Networking and Partnership

1. Learning City Evolution in Progress: A Creative Response to Global Challenges

Learning cities have become a focus for research, development and innovation as a consequence of the Maastricht-process of EU countries, leading up to the formation of lifelong learning policy orientations by 1996 and 1997 and through the initiation of the first budget-period of the EU by using several funds, especially the European Social Fund.

The return of a forgotten initiative of learning cities, based on OECD models of educating cities dated back to early 1970s, was a truly positive and rather inclusive approach to bridge social and economic aspirations around urban development. However, a better use of human potentials has signalled a stronger focus on building knowledge, skills and competences both at individual and community levels. This opened gates to a more flexible and inclusive concept of lifelong learning to connect formal and non-formal grounds of learning and recognise

several kinds of informal learning based on community capacities. Learning cities and regions became incorporated to emerging discourses on learning spaces, place management and social capital (international conferences, PASCAL International Observatory website) as part of an accelerated dialogue on lifelong learning and not only economic, but also social stakeholders and governmental bodies shared the view of having to use models of learning cities and regions to reach for economic growth with sustainable development and social cohesion.

As Longworth (2003) identified, the mid-1990s discourse on lifelong learning helped rediscovering learning regions as a marker of the *Age of Innocence*, leading to planning and initiating local and regional models to connect better education/training, governance and lifelong learning.

In the second half of the decade, the result of the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) offered guidance to develop some of the early charters for learning regions – charters that demonstrated the commitment of a city-region to improve learning opportunities and methodologies for all its inhabitants. It resembled this – the grounds for a wides dialogue on promoting the culture of learning. Cities as far apart as Adelaide, Halifax in Canada, Espoo in Finland and Dublin applied this charter formula and exploited it for their own goals to develop lifelong learning in their communities and neighbourhood regions.

The middle of the same decade could experience the realisation of the European year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 – it was taken very seriously by ELLI and relatively many universities – as there was a funding initiative and programme contacted to it. Its value was soon neglected by many relevant organisations and institutions across Europe. However, the cornerstones of today's work on learning cities and regions are based in the early works on adult and lifelong learning, to which was given an impetus by the European Year. The year 1996 provided a renewed awareness of the impact of education and learning, more particularly to the scope that a world of rapid political, economic, technological and environmental change in turn takes rather quick steps in both the practice of learning and the provision of education. At the same time, a huge number of quality initiatives were either marginalised or ignored, the process still emerged on to *the age of experimentation* into the late 1990s when National Learning City networks began to raise – firstly in the United Kingdom and later joined by those in Finland and Sweden. Therefore, North European approaches signalled very much 'the centre of gravity' of lifelong learning and learning city focuses.

This was the same level of engagement and enthusiasm which drove a number of cities from the Scandinavian communities to make use of the model of the learning city-region so as to turn quality learning and education into a dynamic mood for economic growth, competitiveness and innovations, combined with inclusiveness and sound attention to vulnerable social groups. That approach also formulated a certain commitment with a wider perspective to incorporate learning cities into the global campaign for lifelong learning within the international community. With several distinguished exceptions, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe have taken much longer to realise the direct reward of creating learning cities and regions. In this *new age of experimentation*, Learning

City-Region projects began to be financially supported – one of them 'TELS – Towards a European Learning Society' delivered, what it is called a 'Learning Cities Audit Tool', and analysed the performance of 80 European municipalities. Unsurprisingly, it reflected that the words 'Learning City' and 'Learning Region' were almost unknown. Indeed, in more than two thirds of those 80 cities, they were completely missing.

At this time too, there were several conferences and learning city launches – at places like Liverpool, Espoo, Edinburgh, Glasgow and many others. Learning Festivals celebrated the joy of learning in Glasgow and in Sapporo, Japan, right before the Millennium. At the same time, when Europe stepped towards the new millennium, the *age of advance* accelerated mainly by the European Commission's Lisbon agenda, which put lifelong learning at the forefront of European policy. The development of learning cities and regions was one key strategy of that policy – and so the European policy paper on the local and regional dimension of lifelong learning was published in 2002. This important document was built on the results of TELS and written by Norman Longworth. The document clearly stated that «Cities and regions in a globalized world cannot afford not to become learning cities and regions. It is a matter of prosperity, stability, employability and the personal development of all citizens» (European Commission 2002). They were indeed clear and forward looking words and a striking challenge to every local and regional authority to have read them, which, because of the nature of information transmission, were unfortunately very few.

The OECD also geared up the process in 2001 with its learning regions project in five European regions – Jena in Germany, Oresund in Sweden and Denmark, Vienne in France, Kent in UK and Andalusia in Spain. Among its findings was the perhaps surprising statement that secondary education would apparently be strikingly important for regional development, and the more predictable one, that there was a need to encourage creativity at all levels of education. This particular conclusion, referring to regional development, highlighted the influential role and the potentials of public education upon the development of basic and vocational skills amongst the members of individuals and towards knowledge transfers within communities. That's a theme that crops over and over again in learning region folklore – creativity, innovation, vision at all levels of education.

Despite the fact that many cities and regions are still well behind the mark of the millennium, the movement to create learning cities and regions threatened to become an avalanche – as a couple of examples among many, Germany established around 76 learning regions as part of the 'Lisbon-process', while every city, town and municipality in Victoria, Australia, became a learning entity. Moreover, the Chinese government decreed that every large city in China should become a learning city by 2010 and beyond. Not too late for this, the IDEOPOLIS was born, described by Tom Cannon and his collaborators as «A City or Region whose economy is driven by the creative search for, and the application of, new ideas, thinking and knowledge, and which is firmly rooted to the creative transfer of ideas, to opportunities, to innovation, and eventually to production» (2003, 9).

These initiatives accelerated most researchers into what might be called *the age of understanding* and many of them finally thought they got it – or knew, or thought they knew – what was being a learning region, at a time when the number of European projects increased. From every part of the Commission – Learning Cities and Regions became included in the Framework research programmes and a lifelong learning element had to be included in the vast majority of the Commission's Social and Development Funding. There also came a great need for tools and materials that would help cities and regions to get that understanding.

Therefore, some relevant Socrates-funded projects developed those learning toolkits for city and regional management and learning materials to help them propagate the message to others. And yet, the OECD would have you believe that all regions seek to sustain economic activity through various combinations of lifelong learning, innovation and creative uses of information and communication technologies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001).

Since 2011, we have arrived to the *Age of Innovations* as learning city collaborations reached a level of character and complexity that made UNESCO to start with a Global Learning City Initiative so as to analyse the connections between urban-based community development, governance and lifelong learning with intercultural and intergenerational dimensions. This initiative provided good grounds for global networking amongst learning cities and the mainly Asian orientation turned into a wider global networking by 2013 at the Beijing International Conference of Learning Cities and resulted in a declaration to describe major goals of promoting lifelong learning by building learning cities and communities under the UNESCO umbrella of the Global Network of Learning Cities – GNLC (GNLC - Beijing Declaration 2013). Arne Carlsen, the director of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), and his team worked immensely hard to get this idea a reality both in policy and collaborative contexts. UIL formulated several descriptive documents as guidelines to support cities of different continents to build up their learning city models based on different composite elements and interests (UNESCO UIL 2015). Since Carlsen had arrived from adult education, it was not at all hard for him to recognise the values and power of learning cities to make use of adult and lifelong learning by building various forms of knowledge transfers, based on the needs of local citizens.

2. Why and How to Develop Learning Cities in an 'Age of Uncertainties'?

Since 2012, the development of learning cities has become a flagship issue for UNESCO and its Institute for Lifelong Learning under the umbrella of Global Network of Learning cities (UNESCO UIL 2021). UNESCO has developed an internationally driven wide platform amongst cities as *sustainable cities* addressing a number of challenging issues like inclusion, creativity, health and well-being, resilience, innovation, smart developments, technology and digitalisation, education, workplaces and jobs. The global network was based on the realisation that learning cities would have to share their experience in

developing communities in urban environments and to collect good cases for reflecting the power and joy of learning in communities based on collaborative actions and the celebration of understanding and respecting each other. It is no wonder that the Beijing Declaration (2013) of the first International Conference of Learning Cities advocated such principles and demonstrated the collective power of urban environments of lifelong learning with intercultural and intergenerational dimensions (UNESCO UIL 2015).

The way the global movement has developed in the last ten years is a marker of potential ways out or rather to say effective forward-looking models for urban citizen to collaborate within and beyond their cities and their regions so as to understand and reflect upon their achievements, but also to pay attention and integrate messages and positive models of smart and creative cities for the benefit of their own communities.

On the other hand, learning cities have clearly signalled the capacity of integrating various interests to promote them all through lifelong learning, since it is certainly better to develop smart, creative and green cities, etc. through promoting learning based on public needs and on interests of stakeholder groups.

Our recent uncertainties of environmental and climate changes, challenges of stagnation and structural changes of economic sectors and finally the COVID-19 pandemic have deformed learning communities either to reduce community-based learning activities or to move them into virtual forms which resulted in alienation, exclusion, inequities. However, learning cities have clearly stepped forward and provided fairly strong responses to those challenges above through immensely lot of voluntary work, partnerships and mutual actions so as to pursue lifelong learning especially for vulnerable groups. All the examples UNESCO-bases sustainable cities platforms have recently gathered, may demonstrate how rich and innovative learning cities are (UNESCO. *Cities Platform*).

3. Learning Cities and Community Development Through Adult and Lifelong Learning. The Impact of PASCAL International Observatory

When someone may want to understand the reason why UNESCO incorporated the movement of learning cities into its activities and its policy concerns around lifelong learning, a strong attention to PASCAL International Observatory is inevitable. This globally driven international organisation was formed by former OECD researchers around CERI, the Center for Educational Research and Innovation, so as to make use of a non-governmental platform in the development of social capital, place management and lifelong learning right after the millennium (PASCAL International Observatory).

PASCAL turned attention to learning cities for its potential to integrate several dimensions of lifelong learning, for example to underline the roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions, economic stakeholders and other respected local and regional bodies, as local and regional councils, to take action in the advancement of the so-called *learning economy*. Its *broader*

conceptualisation, the scope of actions and *value of learning go well beyond a limited definition of industry clusters and issues of competitiveness, innovation* (as important as these are).

As the flow of learning initiatives, described by Yarnit (2000), Longworth (1999), Longworth and Franson (2001), Allison and Keane (2001) and others, learning makes its way through/in the community in different manners. With each of these activities, the community may learn and develop sustainably. Learning enables communities to face, change, adapt and transform their own. When the concept of learning cities and learning regions is understood in a broader framework, it opens up exciting potentials and possibilities for many communities, particularly, when considered against reductionist narratives on exclusively economy-centred structure, by turning to more balanced models.

The impact of PASCAL can be grabbed by the use of some of its models to get different fields of learning city innovations, combined for the sake of proper knowledge transfer through parallel collaborative actions for economic development, social cohesion and well-being. Namely, the EcCoWell model PASCAL was firmly developed in order to make use of potentials of several stakeholders in a combined way to reach for economic growth, and community actions for well-being. One good example was the Irish city of Cork, where distinguished stakeholders, together with the local council, decided that they would make firm steps in order to implement EcCoWell-frame as one composite element of a learning city through collaborative actions.

The Cork Learning City development is cemented on a special learning environment to represent four circles of learning embedded into a community model. This model resonates a community with strong local resonance and global reaches through UNESCO learning cities network and that of PASCAL International Exchange (PIE). Those circles of the learning environment demonstrate certain dimensions of a learning city which overlap with each other, however, they signal some specific aspects at the same time. They are the Cork Learning Festival, the UNESCO Learning City Award and Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork, Learning Neighbourhoods as a pilot project of UNESCO in partnerships with PIE and, finally, EcCoWell, to reflect that learning cities should include environmental, economic, health, well-being and lifelong learning in order to reach for good societies (ÓTuama 2016; UIL 2019a).

The Lifelong Learning Festival at Cork has particular community routes and has been dedicated to participatory actions with intercultural and intergenerational aspirations. In this respect adult and lifelong learning plays a specific role in planning its programmes and raising participation in its events, gatherings and local discoveries, by collecting and sharing good knowledge and experience amongst members of the community. Moreover, the Festival chains ten Community Education Networks which were established upon the 2000 governmental paper, called as *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science 2000). These networks offer actions and programmes as parts of the Festival and have their special approach to some special groups of the community, for example, disadvantaged groups.

Distinguished stakeholder groups play an important role in the planning and achievement of their programmes.

Various forms and ways of communication are regularly used to reach out for the attention to different kinds of people, therefore, not only modern and electronic communication, but also traditional posters and brochures are used to capture the contact of potential visitors and participants. One has to point out that there is a significant free citizen engagement in the Festival, based on the principles of equality and inclusion so as to provide an opportunity to participate in learning (Neylon and Barrett 2013). In this regard, inclusiveness, free entry and open access to all are ongoing themes of the festival (Keane et al. 2013). The UNESCO Learning City initiative has also played a significant role in the achievements of the Cork Learning City development. Both the establishment of the Cork Learning City Forum and the initiation of the Lifelong Learning Festival provided significant forces to realise the vision of people behind the original plans to make Cork a learning city and community. The attention of PASCAL towards learning city developments and innovative approaches made PASCAL to get Cork be involved in its networking.

That step brought Cork close to international partnerships which soon accelerated engagement with UNESCO agenda on learning cities in 2012. The example of Cork also reflects outstanding partnerships with wide stakeholder groups so as to engage them with the mission and goals of the project. The Learning Neighbourhoods initiative signalled a serious focus on local people, especially concentrating on the needs of districts of the city and people living in those municipal areas of Cork with specific social, economic and cultural conditions and aspirations. There have been several impacts and challenges to the Cork Learning City initiative and project. But collective actions of the communities of the city strengthened alliances amongst participants and brought higher level institutions into contact with marginalised groups. UNESCO interest may also help the renewal of the commitment of politicians and stakeholders to the initiative.

Cork may provide a good lesson for other cities which are right at the step to expand their initiatives into a wider public project and movement: start small and build up systematically, keep participation voluntary, ask all your participants to publicise their events to provide a special ownership and belongingness to the programmes and networking. Another lesson is to make sure that the kinds of learning showcased are as broad as possible, do not restrict participation to the state sector, publicly recognise and thank all those who organise events and, finally, never forget that it is a festival – fun and celebration are a powerful means of changing attitudes to learning (Neylon 2015).

4. Combining Aspirations of PASCAL and UNESCO – the Example of Pécs

The Pécs Learning City-Region Forum was formally grounded in the year of 2010 amongst thirteen different institutions of education, training and culture, together with the local and regional authorities of Pécs and Baranya County and that of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Based on a decade-old international project-based partnership to have dealt with Learning City-Region innovations in association with PASCAL and UIL, the University of Pécs and its Faculty of Adult Education and HRD re-initiated the establishment of the Pécs Learning City Region Forum in 2013 to develop a direct tool in certain areas of pedagogical/andragogical work targeting training trainers, educators and facilitators of learning.

Through projects, like LILARA (Learning in Local and Regional Authorities), PENR3L (PASCAL University Network of Regions of Lifelong Learning), and Grundtvig R3L+ accelerated our partnership with the City of Pécs and its local authority together with several other distinguished stakeholders in education, training and culture Those former PASCAL projects together with special session of the Commission of Education (EDUC) of Committee of the Regions in 2006 and the 2007 PASCAL Conference in Pécs generated a good ground for further platform building amongst relevant bodies engaged in effective knowledge transfer lifelong learning activities (PASCAL Observatory 2007).

The Learning City-Region Forum identified some potential issues which accelerated the development of the learning city-region model of Pécs. On the one hand, the Forum renewed its membership in PASCAL International Observatory's Learning Cities Networks (LCN), more precisely, it integrated the Pécs Learning Festival programme into the group called 'Harnessing Cultural Policies in Building Sustainable Learning Cities' in order to continue its ties to this international platform which was formally established in 2007 when Pécs hosted PASCAL's annual international conference on learning city-regions (Németh 2016a).

The University of Pécs initiated, still in 2016, the realisation of close ties to UNESCO's Global Network of Learning Cities so as to prepare for the Global Learning City Award of UNESCO which may help in further developing collaborative actions amongst key providers of lifelong learning in and around the city of Pécs. In this regard, the University of Pécs and the local authority/municipality of Pécs decided to launch a campaign for using the Learning City-Region Forum to establish an annual Learning Festival where both the concept and the three areas of action of the Forum can be multiplied into a real learning community of around seventy institutions and organisations under the same umbrella movement.

The Learning City Programme of Pécs identified its first *Learning* Festival in 2017 as a set of three thematic topics in order offer flexible platforms to include each and all learning providers with their particular programmes based on the participation of local citizens from school-age to retired members of the community. There were three topics for 2017 set at the beginning of the year to represent a broad range of interest and, simultaneously, to incorporate different interests be channelled into representative topics to signal both global and local focuses with popular calls. Those 2017 learning city topics were (UIL 2019b): (1) *Culture and arts*; (2) *Environment and Green Pécs*; and (3) *Knowledge transfer and skills development.*

Those topics above generated growing participation since more than seventy organisations and institutions got involved into the 130 programmes of the First Learning Festival for 15-16 September in 2017. One can estimate whether it was a good decision and direction to get the House of Civic Communities to take a central role in the organisation of the Learning Festival. But having evaluated the impact of first Learning Festival, we can conclude that the learning community of Pécs has gained a lot to start getting used to the formation of the Learning City model and its flagship initiative called the Pécs Learning Festival. It is concerning that this focus cemented a bottom-up approach based on trust and partnership, but the initiative could not avoid the lack of funding and limited political attention although the City of Pécs received the Global Learning City Award on 18 September at the third UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities (Németh 2016b). The organisers of the Learning Festival had collected public proposals for topics of the Festival, and it was a great achievement that participating platforms of learning providers came to consensus to provide three authentic topics of lifelong learning which would definitely meet the characteristics of Pécs as a city of culture, high culture influenced by multicultural, multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-religious dimension. This particular focus was highlighted in the GNLC reporting of Pécs as a Global Learning City and incorporated into the publication of UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and to its website (UIL 2019c).

According to the key features of learning cities, the Learning City Programme of Pécs and its Learning Festival has emphasised, from its start, the connection and partnership building with local and regional businesses, corporations and other market-led groups like the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UNESCO UIL 2015). This approach and special attention was lifted up through the organisation-process of the first learning festival in 2017 to initiate and promote the particular angle of business and economy driven narratives, understanding around the benefits of learning and of skills development. Companies like the local forestry group, the local public bus transportation corporation and the local power plant joined the Festival with its programmes and learning models, like environmental learning through the forest/woods, learning community skills on buses and learning new dimensions of the energy supplies for residential and business areas (Németh 2016c).

A necessary conclusion is that the initiation of the Learning Festival resulted in the move of the notion of learning away from negative meanings and contexts, moreover, it helped in the raising of participation, the growing needs towards community learning, intergenerational collaborations and the inclusion of depressed, underdeveloped districts of the city. Those three topics above helped to move Pécs towards smart and creative city directions with culture-based orientations in a city of culture (Németh 2016c). Finally, let us underline that the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities have generated two major clusters where many cities collaborate through advanced knowledge transfer and sharing good practices via webinars and other common actions.

These two clusters are:

Education for Sustainable Development;

Health and Well-being (Cork and Pécs have joined this cluster for the benefit of their stakeholders to promote healthy living, resilience and inclusion through lifelong learning activities at community levels) (UIL 2019c).

5. Recent Outlooks for Comparison – the Balanced Community Focus

The recent Adult Education Academies of 2020 and 2022 integrated the theme of Learning Cities and Learning Communities into its comparative group work (JMU INTALL Academies). The 2020 platform provided a good opportunity to further investigate some recent trends of learning cities across cultures and investigations in Palestinian cities and those from India were put into comparison with European cases from the UK and from Hungary to identify similarities and differences. This resulted in a study to reach for some reasons of the implications of learning communities and community development with strong attention and inclusive approaches to learning needs of adults and their communities and nearby regions based on voluntary work with vulnerable groups of adults (Németh et al. 2021).

Another scope of this research focus is the impact of smart and creative orientations as narratives of learning cities. Examples from Espoo in Finland would highlight such focus in a good combination with community and cultural developments in the city (Erkkilä 2020). Also, Osborne has recently called for the importance of smart cities to rely on learning cities where adult and lifelong learning would provide a potential to make communities recognise the use and benefits of technology, digitalisation, scientific advancements and innovations (2018).

6. Conclusion

Our examples may resonate the evolution of learning cities as connected to the expansion of lifelong and life-wide learning where professional adult educators will have specific roles to generate public engagement for better participation and performance in addressing both skills development from basic to vocational and life-skills, active citizenship and community care with intercultural and intergenerational dimensions. Learning cities, in our understanding, have been collaborating with adult learning and education since those five benchmarks of learning cities, UIL has addressed by 2013, depend on advanced adult and community education and lifelong learning, based on partnerships across and beyond sectors of education, economies, cultures, arts, health and well-being and matters of sustainability (UIL 2015).

Finally, let me underline the roles of HEIs in this specific aspect of urban development. Universities for lifelong learning have a profound role, according to eucen (Royo et al. 2021), in responding the UN Sustainable Development Goals and connect sustainable cities and communities to the development of education and lifelong learning through being committed to partnership-based

forms of knowledge transfer to balance smart, technology and digital-driven aspirations with socially constructed learning opportunities so as to form resilient and progressive communities based on dignity and solidarity.

We are concerned that universities have an important role both in the promotion and in the research and innovation of learning cities which demand mutuality, trust and collaborations around collecting and sharing knowledge and skills.

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