LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CATALYST FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

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I dedicate this talk, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of Sydney WEA, to George Shipp. I met George only once, at last year's Adult Learning Australia (ALA) conference. George had travelled to Hobart, where ALA was established in 1960 to receive a life membership in honour of his commitment to liberal adult education in Australia. We spent an evening on a boat hardly noticing the lights of Hobart as we discussed, mostly, Soviet politics, but also the threat in this world of consumerism, credentialism and shock jocks to the notion of learning for its own sake. Beneath the malaise caused not by illness but by a highly critical mind, I could still detect a determination to defend the tradition of serious and impartial study for adults—for its own sake and for civilisation.

We did not talk specifically about learning communities—with someone like George the assumption is that such things are organic, part of the way a community develops. But for many Australians, the notion is foreign. That is not to say the activity of learning is also foreign. It's just not labelled as such because other labels like coaching and winning, volunteering and mentoring are more readily accepted and more often celebrated as Australian achievements. And for others, anything to do with education is a turn-off. They hated school or couldn't pass exams, or just got on without formal qualifications. In a society which particularly admires those who make it to the top against the odds—the dyslexic Kerry Packer comes to mind—people without much schooling, often because their learning style did not suit the system's managed—until, that is, something went wrong—until, for example, a back injury took them off the building site or a job promotion which revealed their poor literacy skills or their workplace saw the introduction of a new technology they were reluctant to accept.

To those with this frame of mind and to governments who have all--to a greater or lesser degree—embraced the user-pays model for adult education—I have to sell the learning community idea as one that contributes to their bottom line: to the economy, to creating more jobs and a better skilled workforce, to finding cost-effective ways to spend the welfare dollar and so on.

This is not, however, exclusively what a learning community should be about. Rather, I hope it becomes a way of gaining for learning the place it deserves in Australian society. Not as something we proudly say we do for vocational reasons but as something we believe contributes to a civilised society, one which respects scholarship, celebrates poets, practices tolerance and is capable of constructive criticism and non violent conflict-resolution.

Because that's what we need to rescue our democracy and to repair our international reputation. We need to revive the Socratean notion of education as citizen engagement. In a media-driven world, this means particularly that we must counter the self-censorship of the fourth estate, no longer in a position to resist the slick PR machine of governments and industry. We need to energise a cynical and apathetic public which demands little from its newsmakers and those who

report or comment on the news. We must make sure that our children's minds are not programmed by computer games, advertisements and reality TV.

Thinking about this lecture, I was drawn back to that great city of ancient Egypt, Alexandria, as an example of a learning community, of a place where the intellectual energy generated from one building, the library, encouraged so much creativity. It was in Alexandria that the first clear scientific idea about the nervous system was formed and the circumference of our planet first estimated. Alexandria was also an economic and industrial centre of the ancient world. It provided the main port for the export of wheat and papyrus, glassware, textiles, perfumes and jewellery.

And so you see the financial bottom line does have an important place in a learning community but it must be the **result** of curiosity, experiment and innovation not the driver. These **are** essential ingredients for the Australian economy in the knowledge age. Just as important are what I think of as humanist values—those which appreciate art and music and fiction for the insights they bring into the human condition and which foster a sceptical rather than cynical approach to the body politic. This might suggest another parallel with ancient times, with Platos' view that to increase the calibre of its statesmen, Athens had to school its young men in both the exact sciences and in the dialectic—the art of conversation, of question and answer, and the constant pursuit of knowledge.

But let me return to our own circumstances where we are all grappling to come to terms with the information age. We are bombarded by data and information and opinion. How to convert that into knowledge and wisdom is a considerable challenge. Barry Jones strove to explain the complexity in his spaghetti diagram. In the era of the short grab the diagram became a mocking headline and a serious attempt to create a plan for a knowledge nation was, to our loss, buried.

What ALA is doing in its promotion of learning communities is a similar attempt. We are trying to make explicit to people the role of learning in most facets of their lives and to show how these can be connected to gain maximum social and educational impact and, yes, get more for the public dollar currently invested in communities.

We have a hard job. We are a small association of some 500 people around Australia who operate in all sorts of settings—community houses, TAFES, universities, prisons, health clinics, libraries, museums—the list goes on and on. What they all have in common is a commitment to adult education. Our mission is to advance a learning society through advocacy, research and the celebration of learning. We focus on the adult years of learning because not enough others do, particularly when it comes to activity which occurs beyond tertiary institutions or formal vocational training. That still leaves a potentially huge market, to use a contemporary expression, which with a tiny staff and budget we cannot hope to reach. So we concentrate much of our energy on the disengaged learner who tends also to be disadvantaged in other ways. There is a connection. Levels of education correlate closely with levels of income, health and well-being. Yet, despite the evidence of the benefits of learning, we struggle to get our messages heard and to attract funding to non-accredited learning in the community. When I hear predictions of a 6-7 billion dollar surplus this year, I feel deflated, knowing the battle it will take to get any of that invested in learning for the retired, for prisoners, for the intellectually disabled, for refugees.

Back to learning communities. We know of around 40 geographical communities (and countless other interest groups and communities of practice) who have experimented with the learning community idea. Many have been brought together in crisis to find a solution to economic decline, the drift to the cities, the drought and their consequences: unemployment, suicide and substance abuse. For some the attempt foundered; others are greatly revived, buoyant communities who are proud of the partnerships they have fostered, often by thinking outside the square and getting, for

example, school principals to talk to town planners, business people to talk to librarians, garden centres to cooperate with ACE—that is adult and community education--providers.

Most of these success stories rely on individual commitment. In some places, notably Victoria, they have also attracted government funding to put in place a coordinator who can encourage and maintain the networking, uncover best practice and seek ways to replicate good ideas.

The next step is to make such initiatives sustainable and to spread the concept much, much more broadly. In particular, I think, we have to sell the idea outside the education sector, while at the same time getting the educators to talk more among themselves and to start learning the language of others, be they shopkeepers, health workers, philanthropists or local town counsellors.

So what is ALA doing about all this? We have been involved in the growth of the learning community movement over the last three or four years, co-sponsoring the first Learning Communities Conference in Albury Wodonga in 2000. The other driving force in the movement has been the Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN), with whom we are now cooperating along, with the Australian Local Government Association and EdNA, a portal owned by the eight Ministers of Education, to build a clearing house of information about learning communities in Australia. This has been made possible by a grant from the Australian National Training Authority.

The ALCN, in particular, was inspired by what it had seen in Britain and northern Europe where the ideas of lifelong learning, joined up government, local capacity building and community renewal have become more than rhetoric. In Britain, for example, a change in government in the nineties, coinciding with very worrying social trends—youth homelessness, high levels of adult illiteracy, racial tension—a crisis in skills development and a political push for devolution added momentum to the idea of threading communities together with learning. While much of this effort focuses on the disadvantaged, that focus is not exclusive. There is a much more advanced recognition that the 21st century, the knowledge economy, is demanding a new paradigm for learning, one that moves away from institutions and classrooms—but not, I hasten to add, learning as a social activity—towards a learner-centred approach, which can adapt to an individual's learning style, needs, timetable and so on. More exciting still is that this is an element in policy discussion, not just ideas bandied about by the idealistic.

Again, I have digressed. So let me return to the Learning Communities Catalyst, a website, which I encourage you all to visit, to criticise and to use as a means of communicating with others interested in the learning community notion. The url is www.lcc.edu.au.

Let me tell you, building a website like this requires a huge amount of networking and very organised minds. I was lucky to have people, Mary Hannan and Jacqui Levan, with those talents in the ALA national office.

Another big challenge was the need to speak to multiple audiences and to explain to them a notion which can be dismissed as a set of platitudes if elevated out of its local context. That meant we needed to present the idea in a way that did not lose its vibrancy and individualistic character.

We also had to tackle with the problem of defining a learning community. W e decided it was best to present many definitions but to distill these into something which would, we hoped, appeal to our multiple audiences. We came up, with the help of Jan Simmons in Victoria, these four core functions of a learning community:

- To develop skills
  In this context, the skills to be developed range from:
  - basic literacy and numeracy
  - IT skills
  - So-called life skills in which I include things like environmental knowledge; fitness
  - building community capacity to find solutions to problems and challenges.
- To grow business
  - More skills equal expanding commercial opportunities, especially in the knowledge economy
  - Also in the service industry
  - Forge (more efficient business alliances
  - Cater better to the casualisation of the workforce
- To foster collaboration
  Many of the achievements of a learning community are intangible ones, embedded in the process of developing and maintaining the entity.
  - better sharing of resources (e.g. the use of school infrastructure after hours; joint advertising of adult learning classes; better use of libraries and community centres).
  - within government, so that solutions offered to communities match the local needs rather than funding structures across government and between the three tiers of government.
- To strengthen community
  Learning is the key to sustainability.
  - For example, good outcomes in health and environmental management are achieved when a person understands a problem and is capable of learning to change their behaviour in order to implement the solution.
  - Moreover, wanting and being able to learn are great antidotes to boredom, poor self esteem and despair.
  - Healthier, cleaner and happier communities are stronger ones.

To convey the local flavour of the communities, we have presented them as case studies, which we hope will give policy makers, the media as well as other communities an idea of the many ways in which learning can be used into more productive endeavours. They are catalogued in a way that will help someone find a case study relevant to their own circumstances. For example, that person may want to know how others have enticed young people to stay in rural areas; or how a community has rallied in the face of industry closure; or how a business or local council has been persuaded to get involved in a learning initiative.

As we built the site, it became increasingly apparent that there was an appetite for resources on learning communities. That's where the clearinghouse function comes in—we have collated policy documents from Australia and around the world, as well as many, many links. Moreover, being a sibling site of EdNA we are connected to a vast database of educational resources.

But for some wading through lengthy policy or academic papers is not the answer. They want quick reference tools to help them sell the idea or to get started. That's where the toolkit comes in. Here we are building a library of resources which we hope will encourage practitioners.

We also hope this area—known in the jargon as a collaborative work space—will serve practitioners well. Most learning communities are poorly resourced. The impetus comes from volunteers or perhaps modest grants. There is not much scope for a promotional or communications budget. Nor many resources to write tender or grant applications. There's

considerable risk of burn out and not much capacity for succession planning. We hope that through the LCC some of these problems can be alleviated. Here for example a community can create its own presence in cyberspace without having to build and maintain a website. As the site grows, there should also be opportunities for groups to cooperate in finding and applying for funding.

This won't happen without getting some mud on our boots and going out to places and talking to people face-to-face about the potential we hope we can help unleash. That's why we are planning to take the LCC on the road and holding workshops for people interested in learning communities and in using technology to help them develop.

But let me finish not on a technological note. For today we must be very, very wary of that famous adage that the medium is the message. I wonder if McLuhan imagined when he coined the phrase how the medium would so transform the message--and the language. Did he foresee SPAM or SMS? If ALA's modest contribution to spreading the practice of learning communities in Australia is to succeed, it must be much, much more than a website. Indeed, perhaps that contribution can be to put the technology firmly in the hands of those who do believe in learning for its own sake and who remain committed to enriching the individual and to fighting for our civilisation.