



Adult education and place: a vital link for learning cities

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Introduction

It is hard to disagree with the recent statement from Mike Russell, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in the Scottish Government in the Forward to the recent Scottish Government's policy paper on Adult Education in Scotland, that everyone in the country should have 'the right to access high quality learning to meet their needs and aspirations – throughout their lives'. The notion that adult learning should be life-long and life-wide, that it should be learner-centred and informed by the interests and motivations of learners has underpinned policy and practice in adult education for many decades in many countries in Europe and elsewhere (see for example, Delors *et al.* 1996, European Commission 2000).

Research has also demonstrated that there are potentially multiple benefits of adult learning that extend beyond the economic to a range of other outcomes including those relating to health, social care, social cohesion and civic participation. These wider benefits of learning have been highlighted by the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning and more recently in UK policy reviews. Whilst there is a general consensus about the desirable nature of lifelong learning for individuals and about the wider benefits for society associated with lifelong learning, it is often less clear how policies on lifelong learning relate to, and are integrated with other policy contexts. One aspect of this which is of particular importance is the tying of policies on learning to the resurgent interest in, and recognition of the importance of place, and especially of cities in social, economic and cultural development (see UNESCO 2013). It is this issue which is the focus of for this policy briefing.

The importance of place

Policies aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty, deprivation, unemployment, health inequalities and low educational attainment, and focussed on disadvantaged communities have a long history. In the Scottish context the importance of place has recently been re-affirmed in policy documents on child poverty and on improving child health. The latter, for example, argues that 'good places', that is those offering high quality social, economic, cultural and physical environments, lead to better health. The argument, for which there is good evidence, is that good places contain healthy people, who are more likely to enter learning, gain qualifications, enter employment and become more civically-minded engaged citizens. And just as healthy people are more likely to be learners, engagement in learning is associated with improvements in health and other outcomes such as life-satisfaction and psychological wellbeing.

The learning city concept

Clearly, not everywhere has the attributes of a 'good place', so a further strand of policy is devoted to securing stronger communities through community planning and community capacity building. Government policies can recognise the importance of the provision of appropriate learning opportunities to place. For example, in Scotland, Higher Education institutions are required to develop regional outcome agreements, and regulations require local government education authorities to initiate and maintain a process for community learning and development. Research has demonstrated the importance of statutory underpinning for delivering partnership working and engagement with communities in decision-making that affects the delivery of public services and community planning (e.g. Sankey and Osborne, 2006).

It is a short step to link emphasis on the requirement for community planning to the more ambitious notion of the learning city. Whilst there may not be a single universal definition of a learning city, what learning cities and regions have in common is an explicit commitment to putting learning and innovation at the centre of their development process. 'Learning' in a 'learning city' refers to both individual and institutional learning. Individual learning embraces not only initial schooling and training but also participation in lifelong learning, and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding through both formal and informal channels. It is a challenge for learning cities to link opportunities for individual learning to the larger city-wide context in which institutions, both public and private, recognise that they have a need to learn and to innovate, if they are to develop the capacity to compete in the knowledge-based economy.

In short, adult education therefore is a fundamental building block, not only of efforts to enable individuals to overcome disadvantage and to strengthen capacity within communities to participate in local development, but also one which enables employers and civic authorities to build the future of towns, cities and regions.

Policy drivers

So what does research identify as the key drivers towards such a notion of the learning city and the place of adult learning within it?

Statutory underpinning

We have already pointed to the importance of a suitable strategic framework embedded in statutory regulation. Scotland provides one example of such a framework involving requirements on education providers and local government, although it has to be recognised that a framework on its own, without adequate resources, is not a sufficient condition.

Networks and Partnerships

There needs also to be a clear, sustained commitment on the part of a wide range of partners, including public authorities, private enterprises, education and research institutions, civic authorities and key individuals, to placing learning and knowledge dissemination at the centre of development processes. A sense of common purpose, local identity and mutual trust is a driving force. Networks to sustain continuous exchange and flow of information are vital.

Local capacity for learning

Development is more likely to succeed if strategies are based on the local capacity for learning, innovation and change across the life course. Lifelong learning lies at the heart of formal and informal learning and training and in a way which is socially inclusive, recognising that people are starting at different levels and with different priorities, and sustainable.

Flexibility

Each city needs to take account of its own socio-economic circumstances, reflecting differences in history, culture and inherited economic circumstances. Learning policies need to be able to connect this inheritance with emerging opportunities in the wider society in a tailored 'local mix'.

Cutting –edge communication technologies

Accessible information and communication technologies are important facilitators of processes of learning, knowledge exchange and innovation.

Embedding learning in the local consciousness

Place underpins the concept of the learning city. It is increasingly clear that geographical and local dimensions are important in securing a position in the wider globalised economy.

Storper (1995), for example, has described the region as a key element in the 'supply architecture' for learning and innovation processes for participation in the knowledge economy. Proximity encourages the frequent, easy and informal exchange of information.

But this will only happen if there is a determined effort to build an understanding of the importance of a culture of learning across all the diverse contexts within the learning city, and a fundamental building block for achieving this objective lies in the promotion of opportunities for adult, lifelong learning. Cities need to make major efforts to embed learning into the local consciousness: some cities are already embracing this through learning festivals and science festivals, and through promotion as 'learning towns' or 'cities of ideas'. Some countries such as Korea have encouraged such approaches through awards for city initiatives.

There is growing experience from which others can draw. Cities need to prioritise measures which will involve citizens and create a sense of achievement in the benefits that learning brings to individuals, to communities, and to the economic and cultural fortunes of the city. And adult education opportunities lie at the centre of such endeavours.

References and further reading

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