

Learning City-Regions Revisited: A New Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Research and policy linking learning with place has been used widely over the past two decades to describe strategies which enable communities, cities and regions to reinvent themselves in the wake of industrial or other decline. When faced with significant economic and social challenges, this has been a way of encouraging stakeholders to rethink the resources and opportunities available to invigorate the local economy and, in particular, to promote employment growth. 'Learning' has been recognised as a critical element of the processes through which key organisations and people invent new responses to the local challenges.

However, after a decade or so of great activity, use of the concept of the learning 'place' (city-region, as it is identified here) has become less common, and theoretical critique of the concept has become stronger. Yet it is readily apparent that the fundamental interest in knowledge and its application in place continues apace, such that we now find literature engaged with 'knowledge cities' and 'smart' cities coming to the fore.

This paper reviews the 'learning city-region' concept, and the implications of current debates. While the conceptualisation has been problematic, it continues to offer important insights into the ways in which economic development depends on knowledge and learning, well beyond a narrowly construed individual skills formation agenda.

Introduction

Research and policy linking learning with place has been used widely over the past two decades to describe strategies which enable communities, cities and regions to reinvent themselves in the wake of industrial or other decline. When faced with significant economic and social challenges, this has been a way of encouraging stakeholders to rethink the resources and opportunities available to invigorate the local economy and, in particular, to promote employment growth. Various scales of geography have been identified as sites of 'learning': communities, towns, cities and regions, for example. All of these have found some resonance in Australia over the past years, as well as in other parts of the world. In each case, 'learning' has been recognised as critical element of the processes through which key organisations and stakeholders invent new responses to local challenges.

However, after a decade or so of great activity, use of the concept of the learning 'place' (city-region, as it is identified here) has become less common, and theoretical critique of the concept has become stronger. Yet it is readily apparent that the fundamental interest in knowledge and its application in place continues apace, such that we now find literature engaged with ideas such as 'knowledge cities' and 'smart' cities coming to the fore.

This article will review the trajectory of the 'learning city-region' concept, its value in understanding place-based economic and social development, and the implications of current debates. This has several layers, as the concept has been enunciated as theory, developed as policy, and implemented in practice. However, while its conceptualisation has been problematic, it continues to offer important insights into the ways in which economic development depends heavily on knowledge and learning, well beyond a narrowly construed individual skills formation agenda. The article concludes with policy and practical implications for Australian governments and regional authorities.

Impetus to Promote 'Learning' City-Regions

Learning cities, learning regions, learning towns, learning communities, sometimes linked with knowledge cities and regions, are all concepts or programs, which have been applied over the past two decades in policies in many different countries, predominantly in Europe and North America but also in Australia, Africa and Asia. While economic development, or redevelopment, has been the principal objective of these initiatives, many have encompassed a more comprehensive agenda of social or cultural change.

In an economic and social context in which knowledge has become more important, and new information and communications technologies have become more and more pervasive, at least three kinds of impetus for a focus on learning in place can be identified:

- a) an emphasis on *lifelong learning*, perhaps better described as 'life cycle learning', in recognition that both formal and informal access to knowledge and new skills is critical to individual achievement, to community development and to maximising the capacity of cities and regions to participate in the new economic environment;

- b) recognition that how knowledge is generated and shared in a particular locality could be very important in driving industry restructuring and economic vitality when increasingly global processes of investment and production are reshaping dramatically the circumstances of different city-regions; and
- c) commitment to investment in the physical infrastructure, skills and resources needed to enable people and businesses in a particular location to take advantage of new information and communications technologies.

Learning, as the generation, comprehension and application of knowledge and insight, matters because of the distinctive role of knowledge in this era. Knowledge and information have always been important in economic production in any era, but Castells (1996: 17) has argued that they now have extra significance because the specific characteristic of the contemporary mode of production is 'the action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity', with consequential impact on the other elements of the production process and on their Interrelationship. This is demonstrated through the way in which diverse new technologies become integrated and rapidly diffused, themselves dependent on the recent advances in the ability to store, retrieve, analyse, design and communicate information. The implications for organisational processes have been articulated very clearly in Nona and Takeuchi (1995).

It is policy, however, rather than theory, which has driven the widespread interest in 'learning' as a driver of change. From the mid-1990s, both the European Union (EU) and the OECD committed major resources to trialling various kinds of projects designed to understand the meaning of 'learning' city-regions, and their potential to contribute to economic, social and environment development. The OECD interest has been through various iterations, beginning with work led by the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation on lifelong learning and learning regions (which culminated in a conference in Melbourne in 2002), followed by the Institute for Management of Higher Learning which has conducted three iterations of its 'Higher education in regional and city development' project, exploring how universities contribute to regional development (see <http://www.oecd.org/edu/imhe/highereducationinregionalandcitydevelopment.htm>). More recently, Public Governance and Territorial Development has reported on detailed analysis which suggests that regions should support their own growth, seeing human capability and learning as a key part of this strategy (see OECD, 2009).

The EU, in turn, has sponsored a series of projects such as TELS (Towards a European Learning Society, 1998-2001), PALLACE (Promoting Active Lifelong Learning Links between Australia, Canada, China and Europe, 2003-05) and LILARA (Learning in Local and Regional Authorities, 2005-07), each of them exploring how inter-organisational and individual learning in place occurs, and trying to understand the kinds of leadership, infrastructure and resources necessary to deliver the anticipated benefits.

Norman Longworth, a key proponent of learning cities, has captured the essence of the approach in his observation that,

The learning region goes beyond its statutory duty to provide education, and training for those who require it, and instead creates a vibrant, participative, culturally aware and economically buoyant human environment through the provision/justification and active promotion of learning opportunities to enhance the potential of all its citizens. (Longworth, 2006: 23).

While local and city governments have often taken lead roles, national and state governments have been instrumental in linking initiatives to promote informal and public learning with place. Victoria initiated its 'Learning Towns' initiative early in the 2000s, while the United Kingdom Government's Department of Education and Skills hosted a network of learning towns and cities. Perhaps the most significant initiative at this level has been the German Government, which launched its program on 'Learning Regions – Providing Support for Networks' in 2001. It aimed to facilitate structural progress in lifelong learning networks.

Continuing interest in the importance of knowledge and the opportunities arising from new technologies drives innovative initiatives. Considerable work has focused on the application of these resources in pursuit of solving major urban and regional problems. In Europe in particular, the concept of 'smart' cities has become more common. Most recently, the 'Initiative on Smart Cities' is aiming at using new technologies to better implement more efficient energy and transport systems. Lim and Liu (2010) have used the same idea in proposing more thought about how agricultural practices can be reintroduced to urban environments.

The various threads in the perspectives on learning processes and place have been brought together recently by Tim Campbell. Drawing on a range of case studies, Campbell has summarised much of thinking about learning in an organisational, city and regional context. He draws the clear conclusion that cities where collective learning occurs effectively benefit from a planned and institutionalised approach which supports collaborative spaces and networks. He explores varying learning styles which have been developed in different cities, and how they have emerged under specific conditions. He concludes that while new technologies are deeply enabling in terms of their capacity to understand city-region processes, effective city-regional learning depends on a social milieu which facilitates cross-sectoral networking and collaboration.

One of the chief aims of this book is to bring this learning side of urban development into the open... Proactive learning cities have a much thicker and better-connected institutional character. Gathering and managing new knowledge in this way is an important aspect of urban development which has been largely overlooked (Campbell, 2012: 183).

Despite the apparent decline in interest in some countries, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) worked with the Chinese government to launch a global network of 'learning cities' in Beijing in October 2013. It was supported in this by the PASCAL International Exchange (PIE) project (see <http://pie.pascalobservatory.org/>) which linked cities and communities with a specific mission to promote innovative learning processes. Fourteen cities, from Africa and Asia, as well as Australia, Europe and Canada shared 'stimulus papers' each of which outlined a city's approach to being a learning city, and indicated the challenges which they are facing, illustrating the diversity of cities that saw the potential of 'learning' strategies.

'Learning', or Stumbling?

Over the last two decades, progress has been uneven. While new initiatives appear constantly, others fade away. Many of the more than 50 cities and regions which identified as 'learning' in 1998 no longer continue their activities in this field, nor do they use this language. Yarnit (2011) has suggested that the idea is as 'dead as a dodo' because the language and practice of 'learning' places has limited appeal beyond educationalists, and has become an end in itself, rather than a resource for focusing on fundamental issues related to urbanisation, carbon dependency and equity. He identifies several cities where commitment to investigation, collaboration and generation of new insights remains central to public policy, yet the language of learning is not used.

Part of the problem is that much of the writing on place and collective learning reflects diverse and confused approaches. Furthermore, policy initiatives undertaken in relation to formal educational activities (investment in vocational skills formation, for example) have been typically quite distinct from the action to support learning in industrial clusters and regional development, let alone in community networks. This separation has been accompanied by ambiguity in the language of 'learning', in the different kinds of knowledge and practice which are emphasised, and in the relationships amongst formal institutions and enterprises and communities which aspire to build city-regional learning.

As a general proposition, and notwithstanding the volume of activity, policy-makers have demonstrated relatively little understanding of the processes through which learning is entwined with innovation and can be seen to contribute genuinely to improved economic and social outcomes. While there is recognition that knowledge transfer and application are critical to the innovation process, and that the spatial, regional context can matter, the dominant pattern is still for policy and resource allocation to give priority to programs which focus on specific constituencies and narrow agendas, rather than bringing collective learning to the fore. While discussion about learning and innovation often presumes an industrial or otherwise competitive context, it is applicable also to community settings.

Castells' insights into the informational mode continue to be important in making sense of this: knowledge takes on extra significance because of its role in generating new knowledge which has impact not only on productivity, but also on the renewal and elaboration of the production, service and governance processes themselves. How is this kind of knowledge best conceptualised and understood? One of the difficulties is that this kind of knowledge is 'abstract' and can be difficult to recognise without explicit opportunities for systematic reflection and analysis.

Similarly, the notion of place itself generates ambiguity. While there is widespread recognition, particularly through the research on industrial clusters, that proximity has significant implications for collaborative action and collective learning, understanding about the processes themselves remains wrapped in an extensive series of case studies rather than well-elaborated theory. Place matters, is the main conclusion. Yet, as was listed at the beginning of this essay, place might be conceptualised as learning community, town, city, region or city-region. Are the collective learning processes similar, irrespective of the scale of place? How does city-regional learning differ from rural regional learning? These questions remain to be explored more fully.

A New Way forward?

Some of these questions have been addressed in a major critique of the learning regions concept published recently by Rutten and Boekema as editors of a special issue of the British journal, *Regional Studies*. They argue that the early promise that 'learning regions' could offer a more integrative explanation of regional development has been undermined by an ongoing confusion between its use as a policy program and as an analytical research concept. These difficulties have been exacerbated by a fundamental shift in the nature of the 'knowledge economy' between the early 1990s and the circumstances in which we now find ourselves, typified by integrated web-based communication, and economic liberalisation. Drawing on other papers in the special issue, Rutten and Boekema offer four insights into how the idea of the learning region might be rethought.

1. Firstly, they note the fuzziness which has arisen from two distinct views on the learning region: as a new form of regional innovation *policy* where local knowledge drives innovation, and regional learning capacity is built through forging linkages; or, as a focus on regional innovation *networks* of firms and knowledge centres, as they are shaped by regional characteristics.

Both views of the learning region share a focus on intra-regional learning as the principal means of developing innovations from indigenous knowledge in order to strengthen competitiveness. However, the existence of two different views on the learning region has prevented consensus-building on the seemingly innocent question: what is a learning region? (Rutten & Boekema, 2012: 985).

2. The challenge of industry restructuring in western Europe and North America led to regional innovation policy which aimed at building improved knowledge-based economic performance. Policy development was supported by case studies of regions in which knowledge and learning had been exploited successfully. This led in turn to an unwarranted presumption that learning networks had to be embedded regionally. However, as has become apparent increasingly, successful regions have strong global connections, which include knowledge transfers.
3. In contrast to earlier explanations which suggested that the importance of regional learning lay in its emphasis on localised assets, networks and close proximity enabling informal sharing and reflection on 'tacit' knowledge, Rutten and Boekema suggest that regional learning should be seen as the practice of individuals in social contexts which might or might not be spatially embedded. They suggest that a focus on learning in socio-spatial context enables a more sophisticated analysis, recognising that regions might have several social contexts, not all of which are supportive of learning. This approach also enables more specific analysis of global interaction.
4. Furthermore, notwithstanding that much of the learning city-regions work has emphasised the role of trust, shared values and cultural practices, they suggest that a relational approach towards understanding the economic (and social) interaction amongst actors will be more useful. Their actions and interactions, how they are structured and power is exercised, should be the focus of consideration, rather than spatial categories. Yet they recognise that place (space) will continue to shape economic and social relations, which leads to two questions: why are agents and their relations spatially sticky? What is the spatial envelope of learning?

Other authors in the special issue (Regional Studies Vol. 46, No. 8) highlight and draw out the complexities in the research and policy initiatives which have been undertaken in the past 20 years. The development of their analyses demonstrates the complexity in these debates, often stepping across the different boundaries noted by Rutten and Boekema and drawing on economic geography and territorial innovation writing, some of which is now quite dated. Asheim (a significant contributor to the general literature) draws on the critique of the learning region concept, on the one hand, and a distinction between different types of knowledge, on the other, to argue for a view of learning regions which sees them as offering a context which supports a more nuanced balance between STI (ScienceTechnologyInnovation, relying on codified knowledge) and DUI (DoingUsingInnovating, relying on tacit knowledge). He steps away from simple distinction between codified and tacit, suggesting that the modes of innovation draw as well on different types of knowledge.

Several authors attempt to develop frameworks which can support more systematic research agendas on learning regions. Healy and Morgan (2012) suggest that if the 'learning regions' concept is to have any future value, three key issues must be addressed:

- a) the interplay of geographical proximity and other forms of relational learning in shaping the spaces of learning, recognizing that the regional place still shapes the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning process;
- b) the need to engage with broader forms of innovation including social innovation; and
- c) the increasing role of regional governance authorities as 'reflexive facilitators' in the regional learning process.

Notwithstanding the critique of fuzzy conceptualisation, and the challenge of increased mobility and online communication, place matters, at least as a context for learning and knowledge application. The strongest recent expression of this in policy terms has been in EU Regional Policy. Regional Policy Funds are amongst the largest of the EU's budget commitments. In the 2014-2020 period, EU regions are required to develop Smart Specialisation Strategies as a precondition for receiving innovation funding. 'Smart Specialisation' involves a cross-section of regional stakeholders coming together in process of 'entrepreneurial discovery' to identify how a region's knowledge asset can drive new innovation opportunities (see Foray, 2014).

Continuing Significance of Learning and Place

Both the OECD and the EU continue to emphasise a focus on place, typically city-regions, as a key element of innovation policy, even as theoretical issues remain. Several issues arise from the preceding analysis:

- a) Careful discussion about learning city-regions has been undermined by the inherent fuzziness of the key concepts, and about who is doing the learning – the places, key firms or organisations, or individuals. While this ambiguity might remain, the important insight is that 'learning' in this context is a collective process. In one respect or another, it is people as citizens, employees or managers, or as regional decision-makers connecting to generate knowledge and frame its application in particular settings;

- b) While the overlap between policy and research might have contributed to some fuzziness, their interrelationship is crucial to the improved understanding about learning in place: the point of good research is to inform better policy and practice, on the one hand, while policy-makers and practitioners want some confidence that the logic on which they base their decisions is legitimate and reliable;
- c) Interest in learning and place is not an end in itself, but a means. Its ends clearly include economic competitiveness (satisfaction of wants), but also the fundamental challenges of the moment: health, wealth-poverty, well-being and environmental balance;
- d) Learning processes themselves are poorly understood. We know that they are embedded in social relations, but this has not helped in understanding the learning itself, what is distinctive about regional network learning, as opposed to global network learning. There is also limited understanding of the implications of power differences in regional settings;
- e) Regional governance issues remain fundamental in both theory and practice. Institutionalised arrangements are necessary in many settings to support network formation and development, yet appropriate governance structures rarely match the scope required for regional networks to be framed coherently;
- f) Methodologically, case studies have been very important in illustrating what's possible but have been found to have little transferability to other regions. This reflects fuzzy concepts, but also methodological and data limitations. As well, the OECD work has demonstrated, regional growth depends on the region's specific competitive advantages;
- g) The particular role of knowledge centres (universities, for example) in regional learning has been poorly understood, and frequently neglected.

Most importantly, despite the uncertainties, learning does matter. As Castells' concept of the informational mode indicates, the distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary mode of economic activity is the abstract action of knowledge upon itself as the source of productivity; learning, in terms of knowledge generation, knowledge co-production and knowledge transfer, must be integral to the processes of this mode.

So, also, is place. There continues to be a wealth of evidence, not least that provided by other authors to the *Regional Studies* special issue, which indicates that a capacity for face to face interaction does facilitate the kinds of innovation which lead to improved economic performance, as well as social and governance innovation. Healy and Morgan (2012: 1045) conclude that,

After more than a decade and a half of research it does seem that geographical proximity (and so territorial space) remains important to learning (and to the exploitation of the resultant knowledge). The evidence suggests that it is within the territorial space that knowledge (from near and far) is combined most effectively, but only if efficient inter-organisational relations are constructed.

In exploring the implications of the new 'ecological turn', Healy and Morgan advocate a more inclusive approach to innovation system change which encompasses the broader context, and the importance of public sector and societal capacities as well as those of companies.

Regional Policy and Human Capability

Clearly, both policy and research in this field will benefit from more refined and coherent conceptual and methodological frameworks. An important yet perhaps neglected aspect of these frameworks is the recognition of the importance of current and prospective human capability in a region. Effective learning in city-regions depends heavily not only on immediate policy actions, but also on the underlying level of capability developed over time.

Castell's insight into the significance of abstract knowledge in the informational mode, coupled with the pervasiveness of integrated information and communication technologies and the importance of networks reinforces the importance of human capability in all economic sectors, and in broader arenas of civil society and governance. The kind of human capability that is implicit in the informational mode goes well beyond a labour force that has a large proportion of its members with graduate or postgraduate qualifications. Certainly, formal education and the access to codified knowledge and technical expertise is important. So also is the wider network of knowledge centres and learning organisers that dynamically provide new insights, expertise, professional development and a wider network of perspectives. In their regional context, they can facilitate processes for sharing 'implicit' knowledge in a context of problem-solving and innovation.

However, the contemporary learning region depends also on the informal and dynamic, often hidden learning, which occurs in convivial settings, often driven by interpersonal networks and occurring in unexpected places. It includes that driven by professional associations, by negotiations between contractors and clients or suppliers, or efforts to establish collaborative partnerships, formal or informal. It encompasses also that exchange of insights, information and expertise which occurs online, whether in support of interpersonal exchanges or quite independently in virtual space.

This kind of human capability requires a longer term view. It presumes that a regional/local authority has a view about the future, and the kind of development which it wants to promote. The implication for policy-making is having a framework which can see over the time how different components of a 'learning system' can support the growth of capability throughout its region. One way to think through this would be to undertake a mapping of key knowledge and learning facilities and resources available within and to the region, explore the longer term implications of the current pattern of availability, and identify key points where intervention might be required. If the mapping begins with the formal facilities and resources, it might consider:

- Early childhood. There is now substantial research which demonstrates that the likely outcomes for entrants to the workforce can be identified from by third grade, and that investment prior to this point has much greater impact on enhancing the preparedness of the labour force than at any other time, particularly in the post-compulsory years;
- Primary and secondary schools. Clearly there are a variety of ways in which learning occurs in schools to support labour force participation and wider civic engagement. A broader contribution is made still through the participation of school communities in other aspects of economic and social life;

- Universities and TAFE Colleges are key institutions for enhancing post-secondary preparation for economic participation, in addition to their research and problem-solving roles. The OECD has addressed this question directly through projects conducted in the 2000s (see the link on p. 2). Typically, their contribution to innovation is only partly research and development; the contribution to human capability, new graduates and facilitating collaborative learning can facilitate learning in both a localised and more global context.;
- Other knowledge centres (libraries, research agencies) and learning resources or facilities (for example, laboratories, consultants, advisory services);
- Infrastructure available for planned and serendipitous encounters where dialogue, exchange of information and perspectives, and incipient collaboration might occur (possibly business incubators or hubs, or as simple as coffee shops); and
- Infrastructure to support communication and collaboration beyond the region, perhaps nationally or globally. Sometimes, this will be provided indirectly, through government or corporate resources; typically, libraries have played a key role in this regard, but nationally available broadband is regarded as being increasingly important.

A second phase of mapping might pay attention to:

- How regional/local authorities initiate or foster strategic learning processes to enable themselves and other stakeholders to understand their context, the kinds of possibilities for development, and opportunities for intervention;
- The governance mechanisms for linking learning partners, and connecting them with the strategic directions identified by the regional/local authorities;
- The capacity of various kinds of public and private organisations to support networks and build partnerships both within their region and with collaborators elsewhere.

The analysis of the mapping would enable regional authorities to identify opportunities for longer term investment and capability building, possibly focused on the current and prospective industry sectors important already in the region. How might their current and future capability requirements be addressed, given the resources available within the region. Alternatively, there might be evident gaps in the kind of knowledge expertise (analytic, synthetic or symbolic, in Asheim's terms) available in the region and its relevance to development possibilities. A third priority could be enhanced understanding of how well existing processes link key partners with shared interests, both internally to the region and with external collaborators.

Australian Prospects?

How might a focus on 'learning city-regions' be relevant at this stage of regional policy formation in Australia? The evidence suggests that successful initiatives in this regard will be driven from the ground, rather than federal or state government policy. There are extensive examples of local government, either alone or with others, demonstrating that it can play a critical role in supporting regionally-based networks of organisations and residents who share interests in a particular issue or sector. Networks do not form easily, and can be very demanding of time and resources. Across

quite different kinds of political settings, local government can make a significant contribution to the viability of networking, to supporting its contribution to policy development, and to facilitating grounded action to implement new initiatives, including sponsoring new innovations. G21, Northlink and Leadwest are very odd recent examples of this kind of development. Given the importance of place, the emphasis on informal learning, the associated relationships and the less formal aspects of networks, there is more to be done to explore the role of local government and its potential importance.

Higher education institutions can also exercise leadership in enabling learning as a critical element of partnership development. While much of national innovation policy has focused on research and development that is science and invention-oriented, there is considerable evidence that the contribution of universities to city-regional learning and development is inconsistent and poorly supported (see Duke et al., 2013). Frequently, the kind of support required by both industry networks and communities is more related to process and logistics, rather than new inventions. Where universities and city-regional authorities are able to align their strategic directions and capability, significant benefits for the development of learning city-regions can be realised.

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