CORK LEARNING CITY: TOWARD A COMMUNITY WIDE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction: Cork's Learning Environment both Societal and Educational

Cork has had a wide learning agenda for several decades. As early as 1911 the university was already offering extra mural education. A few years later it was engaging with trade unions offering courses for working men, through the support of the City Corporation (City Council). That tradition took off in earnest in 1947. In Cork throughout the 20th century there were experiments around broadening education and the development of new educational models. From this base the city, through the Cork City Development Board, engaged in a two-year consultation ahead of launching a vision for the city over a ten year horizon called *Cork 2002-2012: Imagine our Future. Imagine our Future* included a *theme* on *Cork as a Learning City*, with an orientation towards an all encompassing flexible learning model: "We see learning as a life-long activity for all our citizens and not as something to be pursued only by young people" (Cork City Development Board, 2002; p.91). This plan established a Cork City Learning Forum representative of a wide range of stakeholders. However its most significant legacy was the establishment of the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival. This festival was launched in 2004 and steadily grew in scale and reach into the community to a point where there are now in the region of 500 discrete activities offered by all types of providers non-formal, informal and formal in an annual week long festival. All activities are free and are open to the public. The participation of ordinary citizens during the festival is impressive. The idea of developing a festival was prompted by key educational influencers. It emerged into a very fertile environment in a city that was already extensively networked and became an instant success. It mobilised and animated a wide range of actors and provided the context through which the subsequent Learning City project blossomed. The idea of a learning city became embedded in public consciousness, there was buy-in for the concept from a wide range of stakeholders and it gathered momentum with the growth of the festival and through international engagement with PASCAL International Exchange (PIE) which also delivered the EcCoWell concept and ultimately opened the doors that led to a 2015 UNESCO Learning City Award. The community wide learning environment is an exciting mix of local innovation and participation and engagement with global networks of cities who are developing their own learning environments under a number of learning cities umbrellas.

Cork's Learning Environment: Four Circles of Learning

The Cork learning environment is one that is solidly embedded in the community, with both strong local resonance and with global reach through its connection with both the UNESCO learning cities network and its ongoing engagement with PASCAL International Exchange, which has both online and real time dimensions. The environment can be seen as having four actively engaging circles that overlap with each other, yet accentuate different dimensions of a learning city. The four circles are the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival; the UNESCO Learning City Award and GLLiC (Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork) its interagency committee that also has private citizen membership; Learning Neighbourhoods which is a pilot project of UNESCO Learning City, but very much influenced by and connected into PASCAL International Exchange (PIE); and EcCoWell which is a concept emerging from PIE that endeavours to extend learning cities to include environmental, economic, health, wellbeing and lifelong learning to achieve and maintain good societies. Cork is an early adopter of EcCoWell.
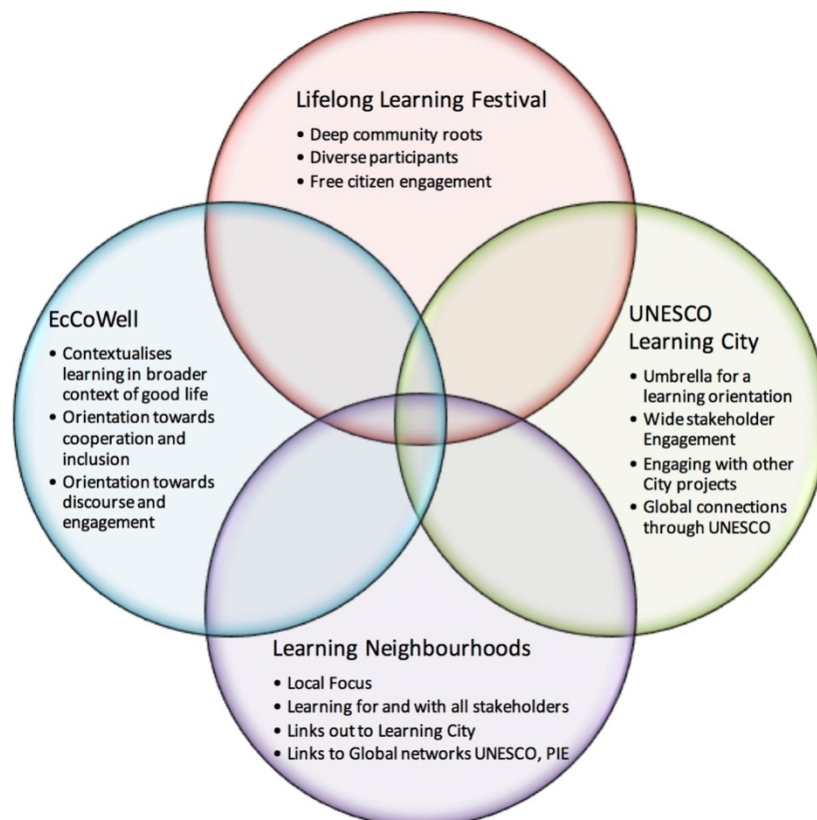

Figure 18. Cork Learning Environment – deep community glocal model

Lifelong Learning Festival

Deep community roots

The lifelong learning festival is premised on principles that encourage and enhance community participation. The success of this commitment across the community is demonstrated by the inclusion of about 500 events each year. Additionally the festival links in with Cork's ten Community Education Networks which were established following the Irish Government's *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (2000). Eight of the networks are based in disadvantaged communities. Each network in encouraged to offer activities. This gives the networks an annual impetus to engage with their own communities and helps them to remain active. The stakeholders within these networks include "Family Resource Centres, Home School Community Liaison teachers, the Travelling Community, Adult Basic Education & Literacy Services, Third Age Learning Groups, Disability Groups, and others" (Kearns, Lane, Neylon, & Osborne, 2013; p.92).

Diverse participants

The festival is promoted through posters in all kinds of public buildings from ones like schools and libraries to cafés and pubs. This often captures members of the public that are less conversant with online modes of communication, but it also brings the event to the attention of citizens as they go about their daily lives and in social contexts. This approach has a significant impact in capturing members of the public who may not be consciously currently engaging with learning. A brochure with all the festival activities is distributed widely through engaged stakeholders. This also brings the festival to sectors of the population that might not be actively engaging online. It also raises the visibility of the festival and is a useful companion for those who visit several events during the week. The festival has a special relationship with the *Evening Echo*, a daily Cork newspaper, and gets coverage in other local newspapers and radio. It is promoted on Cork City Council public banners in the city centre. It is also promoted online through a webpage and social media. The success of this determined outreach focus is that the range of providers is extremely diverse and the participation of citizens of all ages is very high. The festival has firmly established itself as one of the major annual events in the city. To grasp the full canvas of activities and providers it is necessary to browse the programme of events, which can be seen online, the link to the 2015 festival is: http://issuu.com/learningforum/docs/lll_prog_2015_full.

Free citizen engagement

The ethos of the festival is to actively encourage as wide as possible engagement by citizens. This point is eloquently emphasised in Neylon and Barrett's description of the festival as being "about equality and inclusion – about giving everyone the opportunity to engage in learning" (2013; p.125). This is echoed in the 2015 programme, Ted Owens, Chair of the Cork Learning Forum and chief executive of Cork Education and Training Board (a joint-lead sponsor), makes a statement typical of those involved with and committed to the festival since its inception:

> *"The festival has always prided itself on being inclusive, giving everyone involved in all forms of learning in the city the opportunity to celebrate and to showcase their activities, and to encourage others to take part and go further in their learning." (Cork Learning Festival, 2015; p.3)*

Inclusiveness, free entry and open access to all are consistent themes of the festival. Some events are naturally limited by the size of venue etc. but the focus in nonetheless inclusion rather than exclusion. The festival is also about accessibility so there are no preconditions for attending events and "as many events as possible are hands-on, allowing the public to join in as well as watch" (Kearns, Lane, Neylon, & Osborne, 2013; p.94).

UNESCO Learning City

Umbrella for a learning orientation

Imagine Our Future put the goal of making Cork a learning city very much on the agenda: "The city will have a flexible and accessible learning system for all" (Cork City Development Board, 2002; p.92). Both the creation of the Cork City Learning Forum and the initiation of the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival put real impetus into this project. The Learning Forum enabled dialogue across the full educational canvas of the city. The festival provided a public tangible demonstration of what a key element of a learning city might look like. It also became the vehicle through which the concept could be elaborated across the full spectrum of learning in the city. It became Cork's flagship lifelong learning event, attracting the attention of PASCAL International Exchange (PIE), which helped Cork engage with the UNESCO agenda on learning cities. Cork City Council's commitment to the learning city idea, is demonstrated by its ongoing support of the festival, the adoption of the Beijing Declaration by the elected members in April 2014 and in 2015 the generation of a Memorandum of Understanding between Cork City Council, University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology and Cork Education and Training Board to drive Cork's UNESCO learning city agenda.

Wide stakeholder engagement

The Lifelong Learning festival provides both a stage for the concrete realisation and celebration of learning and platform off which it can grow. It also provided an existing core network for both EcCoWell and subsequently the Learning City. In both cases additional stakeholders were able to engage, with the confidence that the learning festival was a vibrant and successful model. Through the Lifelong Learning Festival's engagement with the Community Education Networks and with its 500 annual events it already had established a very deep rooted learning environment across the entire city. The level of engagement with the economic sector was not as robust. However, given the Beijing Declaration's second commitment: "Enhancing economic development and cultural prosperity", which envisages that "In developing learning cities, we will enhance economic development and cultural prosperity" (UNESCO, 2013; p.3) the Learning City committee, GLLiC (Growing Lifelong Learning in Cork) coopted a representative of industry onto the committee in 2015, with the intention of enhancing participation of the economic sector.

Engaging with other City projects

The Cork Learning City project is already connected to many other city level programmes as many share a common link with Cork City Council. In line with the EcCoWell philosophy the GLLiC committee reaches out to sister programmes, there are significant network shares between the groups. Among the significant other city level programmes are Cork SMART Gateway, Cork Healthy City initiative, Towards Cork as a European Green Capital, Towards Cork as an Age Friendly City, IT@Cork, and Cork Innovates. From the very beginning it was envisaged that there should be complementarity and synergy between all of these types of initiatives. *Imagine Our Future* for instance made an explicit connection between the learning city agenda and Cork as European City of Culture in 2005 (Cork City Development Board, 2002; p.95)

Global connections through UNESCO

UNESCO provides a network through which it is possible to engage globally. Cork has close links with Swansea, which also received a 2015 UNESCO Learning City Award, as they have a twinning agreement since 1991. It has connections with Melton in Australia on addressing common approaches to developing aspects of learning cities and has informal links to other cities through UNESCO, many of which have not yet received a UNESCO award. Through the PASCAL Internal Exchange network it also collaborates with a number of cities including Glasgow, Hume, Wyndham and Vitoria-Gasteiz.

Learning Neighbourhoods

Local Focus

Two Cork city neighbourhoods are included in a pilot phase under the framework of Cork Learning City. Both are neighbourhoods that experience high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, though they have different demographic profiles. Knocknaheeny in the north-west of the city has the higher levels of exclusion, has a lower age profile and is a newer community. Ballyphehane is on the south side of the city with a much older age profile and a longer established community. In both cases the emphasis has been to encourage a bottom-up approach and as wide as possible neighbourhood reach. Public engagement exercises have been conducted in both localities and the agenda for activities for the first year of the project has been primarily shaped by local inputs.

Learning for and with all stakeholders

The definition adopted by the Cork team is:

> *"A Learning Neighborhood is an area that is constantly strengthening its practice in learning, providing a diversity of learning opportunities for the whole population through partnership and collaboration"* (Ó Tuama & O'Sullivan, 2015; p.3).

The intention is to include as wide a range of stakeholders as possible. In the initial consultation invitations were sent to all types of statutory, voluntary and community groups not just those ostensibly involved in the educational sphere, for instance those involved in sports, cultural, hobbies, health, disability, social services, the credit union. It was made clear that private citizens were also welcome. Neighbourhoods are strongly encouraged to include local enterprises, shops, etc. in order to be as inclusive as possible and to capture the cross-community scope envisaged by EcCoWell. Both neighbourhoods are committed to public branding, use of direct citizen engagement through a public poster campaign called *faces of learning* and given the reach of the Lifelong Learning Festival in both areas there is already an orientation towards inclusivity.

Links out to Learning City

The Learning Neighbourhoods are represented on the GLLiC committee through three of the four Learning City MOU partners: University College Cork (the Hub for Learning Neighbourhoods), Cork Education and Training Board and Cork City Council. The joint-Chair of GLLiC, who is also Chair of the Lifelong Learning Festival, is a member of the Learning Neighbourhoods Steering Committee. The Coordinator of Learning Neighbourhoods is a designated member of GLLiC.

Links out to Global networks UNESCO, PIE

Peter Kearns of PASCAL International Observatory is an honorary adviser to Learning Neighbourhoods. His advice was instrumental in the design phase. This has the impact of bringing inputs from PIE to the project and also bringing learning from the Cork project to a global community. Through Cork's engagement with UNESCO dissemination of progress in the Learning Neighbourhoods will continue to feed into the global sphere. The project is also engaging in bi-lateral learning with three Australian cities Melton (another UNESCO award city), Wyndham and Hume.

EcCoWell

Contextualises learning in broader context of good life

"Achieving environmental, social and economic sustainability is central to the future of learning cities" (Osborne, Kearns, & Yang, 2013; p.416) and addressing this challenge is the raison d'être of EcCoWell. Translating the concept into reality is relatively new "a few cities, led by Cork in Ireland, are starting to address the question of how an EcCoWell approach can be implemented" (ibid.). Peter Kearns is the chief architect of the concept of the EcCoWell city. He describes this category of city as:

> "… *a new generation of Learning Cities that reach out and connect up to address environment, health, cultural and well-being issues while continuing to address the lifelong learning, social justice, equity and community building initiatives that have been the traditional territory of Learning Cities" (Kearns, 2013; p.40).*

He holds that *silo policy* is obsolete and thus highlights the necessity for approaches like Learning Cities, Healthy Cities and Green Cities to converge into a common synergistic approach to deliver better outcomes for citizens. An EcCoWell city brings all of these dimensions into communion generating a city that is "inclusive, sustainable, and fundamentally democratic, and which foster the well-being of all" (Kearns, 2013; p.44)

Orientation towards cooperation and inclusion

Barrett and Neylon (2014) propose that five precursors enabled the EcCoWell idea to gain traction in Cork. The first they term *networks*, which includes pre-existing networks onto which the idea was grafted following an initial introduction of EcCoWell at the 2012 Lifelong Learning Festival. They speculate that the networks were particularly effective given the size of the city and an ethos of solidarity. The second precursor was *an underlying or overarching strategy* which was enabled by the *Imagine Our Future*, which highlighted the benefits of cross-sectoral engagement. The third precursor they term *trust* which exhibits as a solidaristic culture nurtured by the Lifelong Learning Festival's emphasis on parity of esteem among participating partners. The fourth they term as *freedom*, this is about participants being less focused on their affiliations and more oriented to engaging because they want to contribute. The fifth is *inspiration*, this is about the external recognition that Cork received from PASCAL and subsequently from UNESCO for its model of lifelong learning and cooperation.

Orientation towards discourse and engagement

The EcCoWell approach is oriented towards discourse and seeking to promote dialogue beyond silos and vested interests. This orientation has been strongly advocated in Cork and has worked remarkably well in helping individuals see past their own patch and consider a wider canvas. One of the significant reasons why this has been possible is that most fora are organized using *Open Space Technology*. In brief this is a method that facilitates open exchange in non-hierarchical groups, with a high degree or flexibility and with more emphasis on keeping the process open than sticking to rigid agendas. In the words of Owen Harrison, who pioneered the method, it as anomaly that works, especially "in those situations where highly complex and conflicting issues must be dealt with, and solved, by diverse groups of people" (Harrison, 2008; p.7).

Conclusion

Longworth has been one of the influential figures in promoting the idea of learning cities, interestingly he frequently uses the term community, which gives the concept a sense of being grounded at a human level. He sees the potential for "a new world of linked Communities of Learning in which knowledge and expertise and talent are shared with each other through electronic links" (Longworth, 1999; p.7). This captures well the learning environment emerging in Cork. There is a very strong sense of local grounding through the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival and Learning Neighbourhoods, but there is also an overriding sense of being outwardly connected in both of these and also in the other two circles, the UNESCO Learning City Award and EcCoWell.

This environment has been evolving over an extended period, but it went through three moments of change that are leading to significant individual and collective possibilities within the city itself and in other communities and cities through mutual learning.

In Cork's case the big shifts came through *Imagine our Future*, which gave a structure for a process that was already emerging. It established both the Cork City Learning Forum and the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival and it gave an official stamp to a new era of livelong learning in the city. The Lifelong Learning Festival delivered a significant, tangible and community based realisation of the new learning agenda. It produced a sort of snowball effect, which in turn linked in with PASCAL International Exchange and the adoption of EcCoWell as way of shaping lifelong learning and extending its meaning to capture a more holistic society wide set of dimensions. These moves pushed the agenda towards a more formal recognition of Cork as a learning city. This was expressed in a motion of the city council, the coming together of the city with three of its most significant educational stakeholders in a memorandum of understanding and the pursuit of the UNESCO Beijing Declaration. This is a constantly evolving landscape, with a whole range of potential futures, however the period between 2002 and 2015 has been an exciting and innovative period for the creation of a new type of learning environment in Cork.

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