

**Learning Communities:
Strengthening lifelong learning through practice**

Local Organisations and community learning

Background Paper

Learning communities: the secret to their success

By Martin Yarnit, January 2001

Learning Communities: the secret to their success

Introduction

Creating thriving local communities is crucial to achieving a wide range of public policy objectives. Which is why David Blunkett has given a clear remit to the Learning and Skills Council ~~to~~ support and sustain neighbourhood renewal and to work with local partners - voluntary and community sectors - to target help where it is needed most¹ This is a tall order: the reality is that systematic connections between learning and community activity are still rare, and the very people who could benefit most from lifelong learning are often not engaged with it. Symptomatically, fewer than 50% of the new Learning Partnerships have thought fit to extend membership to a representative of the community or voluntary sector.²

This paper

- Provides some examples of best practice in developing learning communities
- Analyses the key factors in their success
- Considers the implications for providers and partnerships
- Considers the lessons for a reformed national lifelong learning system.

But first, it attempts a definition of learning community and how success can be measured.

What is a Learning Community?

Faris and Peterson's definition provides a useful starting point:

*Any city, town or village, and surrounding area, that, using lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social goal, promotes collaboration of the civic, public, economic, educational and voluntary/community sectors in the process of achieving agreed upon objectives related to the twin goals of sustainable economic development and social inclusion.*³

In this definition, the emphasis is on learning as a means for achieving the social and economic objectives of a community. For the purposes of this discussion, there are aspects of the definition, which need to be made explicit, and aspects, which require amplification. Faris and Peterson's comparison of the characteristics of Learning and Traditional Communities is helpful here:⁴

¹ DfEE Press Release, 16 November, on Urban White Paper.

² According to a paper presented to the second National Partnerships Forum convened by DfEE.

³ *Learning-Based Community Development: Lessons Learned For British Columbia* - A Report submitted to the Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers by Ron Faris and Wayne Peterson, April 2000, page xi.

⁴ Op.cit., p. 2.

Table1: Learning and Traditional Communities

Learning Community	Traditional Community
uses both formal and non-formal sector learning resources	the education system has few links to the non-formal sectors, particularly the community
economic and education partners share their training resources	companies and education often compete: there is often limited community access to either
social/intellectual capital is valued, added to, and used for comparative advantage	social/intellectual capital is unrecognized and largely untapped
learning is seen as investment	education is seen as a cost
learning is seen as a social process that results in a comparative community advantage for economic development	learning is viewed as an individual activity for individual benefit
thrives on decentralization	dependent upon centralized policies
innovations are supported by interactive learning among learning organizations within the community	innovations are isolated and viewed as competitive threats by other in the community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ local lifelong learning strategy developed including individual learning plans for economic enterprises and learner smart cards to promote learning for all ◆ universal local access to learning technologies for networking within and among communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ incoherent, sporadic, and unequal learning opportunities are provided with chief benefits to an educated elite ◆ limited access to learning technologies with little networking beyond the community
❖ the development of a lifelong learning culture is a community goal	❖ some individuals promote lifelong learning values

What needs to be made explicit in this definition is that

1. It encompasses learning in three senses
 - a. Formal
 - b. Informal
 - c. Reflexive (i.e. reflecting on and learning about individual and social activity like government, wealth creation, and community safety)
2. Since it is about learning as a means to various ends, participation in learning should lead to various outcomes . *objectives related to the twin goals of sustainable economic development and social inclusion*

3. It implies a process of intervention, which can promote the connection between participation and those outcomes, which includes an element of self-management: leadership, management, and partnership.

The definition also needs amplification.

First, the territorial issue: a broader view is needed of community than a simple geographical definition to take account of

- The development of networks
- The decay of traditional community organisation in many areas
- The workplace as a learning community
- The community of interest represented, for example, by black and ethnic minority organizations.

Second, lifelong learning needs to be understood as comprising pre-school, school and post-school. Post-school learning can be broadly categorised in three ways:

- Learning in and for the workplace
- Learning in and through formally organised further, higher and adult education and training
- Community-based learning.

A Learning Community will need to mobilise all these types or sectors and to integrate what I have referred to elsewhere as the old and new learning systems. (see table in Appendix: *Learning Systems: Old and New*). The old or established system, which takes the bulk of mainstream public funding, is characterised by separate provision, usually in schools, colleges and universities, formal learning with curricula and qualifications. The new system has grown up at its margins, reflecting new learning needs, and characterised by short-term project funding (SRB, Europe, Lottery, Standards Fund), integrated facilities and all age, all year round access. The boundaries between the two are often less clearly drawn that this suggests: many colleges, for example, are striving towards all year opening for a mix of courses and learners, closely linked to HE and to schools. Schools are increasingly throwing open their resources to their community, encouraging close links with pre-school and adult learning.

Success Criteria

What, then, are the criteria that would help us to determine whether a learning community is achieving success?

The starting point is to set a baseline and target for increasing participation as the basis for assessing effectiveness. The next step is to consider the impact of participation on outcomes. The third is to examine the processes, which promote lasting benefits for the community. This gives us the formula: Inputs + Processes = Outputs where

- Inputs correspond to investment in staff, resources, facilities
- Processes are about engagement mechanisms and organisation of delivery
- Outputs may be enrolment rates among other things, but how do we get to the lasting benefits referred to in the Faris and Peterson definition?

A value added chain provides a more sophisticated framework for understanding these complex social processes. The main components are the three already mentioned, plus two more: *outcomes and benefits*

Starting with the investment of resources, the chain traces the effects of a given set of processes in terms of immediate impact. But it goes beyond the simple equation to consider the wider, medium term effects (the outcomes) and the long-term benefits. *Implicit is the hypothesis that self-management and partnership are vital to turning a growth in participation into lasting benefits.* The table in Appendix 2 develops each of the five components of this value added chain.

The value added chain enables approximate judgments to be made about quality, value for money and benefits. In short it enables us to evaluate success.⁵ For example,

- Improvements in participation rates can be set against inputs to assess value for money
- A qualitative balance can be struck between impressive outcomes and poor processes e.g. low level of community involvement in management
- A qualitative assessment can be made by comparing improvements in participation with medium or long-term outcomes in terms of individual or social benefits.

Another benefit of this approach is that it provides a constant reminder that we need to be clear about our long-term goals if we are to make useful judgments about value added.

Elements of this approach are built into the FEFC inspection regime and into the system used for assessing SRB-funded learning programmes, but both

⁵ See a more detailed account of this approach in *Practice, Progress and Value ó Learning Communities: Assessing the Value They Add* (1998) Learning City Network and DfEE, pp.37-39.

are hampered by a definition of outcomes . e.g. qualifications gained - which can only be a crude proxy for the purposes of measuring progress towards a learning community. The key issue for a learning community, it could be argued, is how the learning input feeds through into qualitative changes in the lives of individuals and the community in the long run. Or to quote Faris and Peterson again, learning is seen as a social process that results in a comparative community advantage for economic development

Although there is plenty of scope for debate about the precise meaning of terms like social capital and social cohesion, isn't this exactly what we are looking for as the outcome here?

So, finally, what can be said at this stage about evaluating success? First, that evidence of direct outputs is necessary but not sufficient. What is also required is evidence of the sort of medium term outcomes set out above, and perhaps also signs of the more profound but long term benefits of learning for cohesion and economic strength. Second, that a value added chain offers a more balanced assessment of the lasting impact of given inputs and processes than a focus on output measures. It enables us to track, for example, the impact of more responsive approaches on the part of mainstream providers, or innovative forms of organisation and delivery, and to test out the value of community engagement and control as ways forward. In short, a learning community organisation or partnership that generates a rise in enrolments is making progress, but it is the longer-term benefits that are of real interest.

Now that the returns to learning have been calculated for individuals, for companies and for economies, the next step is a programme of research and action to operationalise the returns to learning for cohesion.⁶

Best Practice: The Case Studies

But in the meantime, we have to have a means of selecting the case studies used in this paper. I have used a modified form of the value added components referred to above to arrive at a set of criteria that have guided the selection and writing of the case studies.

Table 2: Simplified Value Added Table

Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget, staffing, facilities
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community stake • Partnership and collaboration • Innovation in organisation • Inclusiveness
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation in delivery • Enrolments

⁶ See Mike Campbell's *Learning Pays and Learning Works* (1999) for National Advisory Council for Education and Training Targets. The ESRC Learning Society programme has commissioned research on the broader aspects of returns to learning.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs created • Facilities created
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community assets created • Community stake in management and governance • Local people into employment
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic base • Learning culture • Social cohesion

On this basis, I have selected four very different case studies to illustrate the key categories of learning community

- Royds Community Association serving a geographical community on Bradford's southern edge
- SPELL-NE serving a geographical community in Parson Cross, Sheffield
- Community Learning Network serving a community of interest in Liverpool
- BLINK (Black Information Link) a website serving the needs of a black and ethnic minority virtual community of interest

These case studies exemplify the connecting thread that turns participation into lasting benefits although they are at different stages in the life cycle of a learning community. Royds, for example, can trace its start back to 1995, whilst SPELL-NE is still appointing its key workers. Although very different, these four organisations demonstrate

- A rising trend of participation in learning
- The vital role of self-management and partnership
- Lasting benefits
- Effective engagement with their constituency

Case Study 1: The Royds Community Association

Although they might not think of themselves in this way, the Royds is a learning community. They are teaching themselves the art of self-government.

The quotation is from an account of the Royds Community Association I wrote last year that provides a broad view of its history and activities.⁷ Rather than re-cover old ground, I want to focus here on three issues that are germane to this study:⁸

- Forming equal partnerships
- Learning for self-government
- The basis of their success.

Forming equal partnerships

Community organisations often find themselves trusted by their local population but unable to convert that into a source of legitimacy with officialdom. Royds CA is in many ways the voice of the people. More people vote in the annual elections for their Board of Directors than in the local elections. This gives the Association a certain authority in its dealings with agencies like the local authority, the police and the housing associations. This helps to explain why the police have been persuaded to change the way they police the Royds area, and why the youth service agreed to provide local detached youth workers. There is another factor: the Association has arranged from the beginning to draw on the expertise of professionals such as architects and solicitors, so that it was not at the mercy of one set of opinions.

Local support is built on three factors above all:

- The Association is widely viewed as effective in getting things done . since its formation, it has helped to transform the physical face of the Royds, refurbishing more than 350 homes, getting 70 new homes built and improving the environment beyond recognition in many areas
- There is face to face contact through a variety of means
- A majority of the Board of Directors are local people who understand local concerns.

Learning for Self-Government

Very little of the Royds activity is about learning *per se*. 80% of the budget goes to the physical and housing programme, much of the remainder is devoted to employment creation. Only a tiny amount supports adult or children's learning in the narrow sense. The main learning activities are

- Capacity building for community management
- Problem solving
- Healthy living.

⁷ See p.66, *Towns, Cities and Regions in the Learning Age: A Survey of Learning Communities*, Learning City Network (2000).

⁸ Based on interview with Social Action Programme Coordinator, 14 January 2001.

All Directors of the Association take part in management committee training, as do the members of the committees that run the local community centre and healthy living centre. These and the residents who take part in consultation and attend management meetings are also involved in problem solving, learning the most effective approach, for example, to crime prevention, debating the optimum housing mix for the area. A major activity of the healthy living centre is learning about health promotion that touches on all the other activities of the Association including employment creation and environmental improvement.

The Basis of their Success

Four points seem to summarise the basis of the Royds Community Association's success in engaging effectively and consistently with its residents.

1. Keep in constant touch with local people; seek them out, on the doorstep or at the luncheon club to maintain face to face contact
2. Recognise that change is a constant challenge and that getting things right is a long haul
3. Build partnerships with official agencies from a position of strength
4. Develop vision and a responsive outlook in the management committee and the staff

Case Study 2: SPELL-NE⁹

Of the four case studies, SPELL is the closest to the conventional notion of a community-learning project. Funded by SRB and ERDF, SPELL-NE was set up to widen participation in a large area of council housing in North East Sheffield. SPELL, which stands for Sheffield Partnership for Education and Lifelong Learning, arose out of the Learning City initiative in the city and was initially funded on a trial basis by DfEE. Organisationally, it is the learning arm of a community trust that takes in a large part of the Secretary of State for Education's constituency. Its aim is to engage local people in learning by creating a wide range of opportunities in partnership with other providers including Sheffield College and the WEA. These include vocational courses and informal courses in non-traditional settings such as a local workingmen's club. SPELL has also taken on a key role coordinating local provision.

The challenge to SPELL is profound¹⁰:

- Its area includes the 14th worst ward in England for levels of adult literacy
- Out of an adult population of about 36,000, hardly 5% were enrolled on courses with Sheffield College that has a major centre at one end of the area.

An important characteristic of the SPELL approach is that it employs local people to promote learning opportunities door to door, and to organise and deliver programmes. Employing local people as outreach workers has been very effective. They have credibility, act as ambassadors for SPELL and provide a living incentive for engaging in learning by demonstrating that learning can lead to jobs. Local people have initially been appointed to training posts which provide a bridge to better paid work with SPELL or elsewhere. 80% of them are locally recruited and around 50% still live there, drawing on a variety of local networks including tenants associations and healthy living projects.

A door-to-door survey by the four outreach workers of 2000 households or 10% of the adult population, suggests that the College enrolment level could be more than doubled. Surprisingly, people have been willing to sign up for basic skills courses on the doorstep, although very few overall have identified themselves as having basic skills needs.

Key to Success

SPELL has only been in existence for two years so it is hard to point to a great deal of evidence of impact. At this stage, it can be said, though, that it has the feel of a project which has already won a great deal of local support and is also seen by the main agencies as the key to a coherent plan for local learning. Several factors underlie that positive start:

⁹ Interviews with Project Manager on 1 December 2000 and 13 January 2001.

¹⁰ Data from the SPELL SRB5 Business Plan

- The vision, skills, commitment and local standing of the staff
- The commitment to outreach and face to face contact with residents
- Creating a range of learning opportunities, vocational as well as non-accredited, in line with the local people's requests, in accessible and sympathetic settings.

Case Study 3: Community Learning Network¹¹

CLN grew out of the decline of traditional community organisation and community work in Liverpool in the mid-1990s. It sprang up as an attempt to reconnect with individuals who wanted to continue to be active in their communities but who were sceptical about the value of the existing organisations. It also reflected the jolt to the community scene caused by the start of the large Objective 1 programme, bringing with it the promise of significant resources for capacity building (although CLN has received very little European funding). The founders of the project, ex-community workers in the main, believed that they were not alone in feeling that there was a need to reconnect local or neighbourhood organisation with the big picture (act locally, think globally). Above all, they were convinced that they had to feel their way towards a meaningful programme of activity through a series of explorations.

The core activities of the Community Learning Network are

- Exploratory events
- Short courses about Europe.

From these have developed some far-reaching types of activity that have demonstrated an ability to reconnect with concerned individuals.

Exploratory Events

Just Imagine was a conference designed to provoke debate about the sort of society participants wanted to help to shape. It brought together members of community councils, (a long established type of community forum in Liverpool which has seen better days and is sometimes reduced to being the property of a family clique) and individuals, including people from a wide range of ethnic groups. Somalis, Yemenis are amongst the city's ethnic communities as well as African-Caribbeans and, more recently, refugees from Africa and the Balkans. The event provided the basis for a new network which have taken part in a variety of programmes, including *You at the Heart*, a Freire-inspired transformatory learning scheme which explores the connections between self, the group and the world outside.

A more recent exploration of a different sort was inspired by the Moser report on basic skills. To draw attention to the report's findings about the scandal of illiteracy, CLN organised in collaboration with Liverpool Dyslexia Association a march from the outskirts of the city during Adult Learners Week to collect signatures for a petition to the City Council calling on them to act. A concrete outcome of the march is a new initiative linked to an education action zone centred on an area of the city where, according to BSA data, one in five adults has a serious literacy problem. This initiative involves the trial of a computer-based programme, *touchõ typeõ readõ spell*, in a primary and a secondary school and a community centre. Key figures in this initiative are a local community leader and a leading member of the labour movement, both active

¹¹ Interview with one of the tutor-organisers, 14 January 2001.

in the community council for the area. Liverpool Hope University is another member of this new partnership for basic skills.

Short Courses about Europe

One of the outcomes of *Just Imagine* is a unique programme of ERDF-funded 10 day study visits to Brussels and Paris to experience at first hand how the rest of Europe lives and to confront the reality of the European Union. The Cicero citizenship programme that CLN also participates in inspired this. The Cicero experience has demonstrated the remarkable impact of the study visit, especially for those who have never been abroad before, and this shorter version extends that opportunity to 100 people every year in Liverpool.

Engagement

CLN lacks the tidiness or clear focus of many community-learning projects. It is trying to engage a less easily identified 'community', mainly concerned individuals - in grappling with difficult issues such as asylum seekers, fear of writing and the nature of the European project. It is also exploring new ways of creating collective action in the community. Statistics about impact are hard to come by, but it is clear that CLN is barking up the right tree: it is managing to engage hundreds of people in a learning process in a way and about a content that no other organisation does.

CLN is also about developing new forms of organisation that are better suited to the times. It provides a range of way of getting involved, which reflects a widespread aversion to heavy commitment. People can serve on the management committee, or they can just come along to events, or to a new monthly lunchtime discussion.

How does it succeed? There are a number of factors:

- 1 The content enables people to make sense of their own lives in terms of a broader reality
- 2 It explores new ways of working and networking at a time of the decline of traditional community organisation
- 3 It is responsive with activities generated by need and interest
- 4 It operates informally, face to face on a human scale, relying heavily on the ability of the small staff team to provide a supportive and stimulating learning environment
- 5 It provides the incentive of trips to Paris and Brussels.

Case Study 4: BLINK

BLINK is an extraordinary success as an information centre with around 1.5 million hits per month. The brainchild of the 1990 Trust, it has played a key role as a conduit of information and opinion between the black community and policy makers. Set up in 1995 with Lottery funding, it shares the 1990 Trust's mission to

- to promote good race relations;
- to articulate the needs of the Black community from a grassroots Black perspective;
- to ensure that all issues affecting the lives of people of African, Asian and Caribbean descent are addressed;
- to engage in policy research and development which will further the above.

In addition, it has a specific role to ensure that the black community sidesteps the digital divide. The evidence on this score is sparse, as the PAT Report on ICT found, with probably a significant disparity in access reflecting class differences.¹²

Its activities can be summarised as

- Providing information for its users
- Supporting campaigns in line with the Trust's mission
- Enabling community organisations to access the Internet through connections and email.

BLINK provides access to a comprehensive range of information with special pages for women and young people. Key issues include health education (particularly sickle cell anaemia) and campaigns against racism. It has helped to shape government thinking about the new Race Relations Act, especially the provisions about public service, and it has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the Mal and Linda Hussein, a couple who ran a shop on an estate in Lancashire besieged by racist gangs. BLINK is fundraising £120,000 to enable them to move out.

A key role of BLINK has been in promoting networking amongst community organisations, to strengthen their voice and to improve understanding between sections of a very diverse community. Enabling community groups and organisations to access the Internet has been an important contribution to this end.

So what has helped BLINK to establish itself as perhaps the country's most important black information network? How does a virtual network engage effectively with thousands of people, at a distance? Its establishment was timely, as campaigning against racism began to make headway in the mid to

¹² See chapter 5 in *Closing the Digital Divide ó Information and Communication Technology in Deprived Areas*, Policy Action Team Report 15, DTI, 1999.

late 1990s. The Stephen Lawrence Campaign created an enormous demand for information, and BLINK was able to respond to what its users wanted. It was, it needs saying, trusted because it was a clearly recognisable black voice, with a forthright tone which reflected the political approach of its founders, including Lee Jaspers, a black community activist who has recently been appointed the Mayor of London's adviser on race and policing. BLINK is managed by the Trust that is itself managed by black community representatives and national figures.

BLINK was timely in a second sense. It provided access to the Internet at a time of growing interest in things digital, a trend that included the black community. Black Internet users are a significant group in many areas. Over two-thirds of the users of INNIT, a UK-Online pilot centre in Kilburn, West London, for example, are drawn from ethnic minorities, most of them black and many of them refugees.¹³

A network, and especially a virtual network has a more attenuated relationship with its community than a territorially based project, but the growth of BLINK suggests that it has developed a vital relationship with its users. Being there at the right time, being trusted and learning to respond to need seem to be the keys to BLINK's success in community engagement.¹⁴

¹³ Interview with Centre Manager, 15 January 2001.

¹⁴ Interview with Information Manager, 15 January 2001.

Engaging the Community: The Success Factors

The case studies point to six types of success factors. Not all of them exhibit all six, and the combinations are different in each case. However, the first three are present in all four cases.

1. The right people: Attitudes, skills and relationships
2. Responsive and Learner focused
3. Community stake or ownership and Partnership
4. Innovation or re-invention
5. Outreach
6. Incentives to take part

Lessons for Providers and Partnerships

So how can providers and partnerships build on these examples of good practice? There are a number of lessons to derive from this analysis.

1. Partnership

No one organisation has the skills or resources necessary to support the development of successful learning communities. What is required in every case is a combination of the resources and expertise that a number of organisations can bring to bear. The difficulty is that partnerships tend to be top heavy, dominated by large mainstream agencies such as colleges or local authorities, risking the exclusion of voluntary and community sector organisations. Financial and regulatory frameworks compound the imbalance.

The answer may be threefold:

1. Frameworks which facilitate joint working, for example through funding agreements which favour the community
2. Skills and attitude: the right people and skills are critical, and are in short supply, but they can be developed . big agencies are not inevitably incapable of collaboration on other people's terms
3. Brokers: Nottinghamshire's Learning Community Operations Groups are the most developed example of a partnership between communities and learning providers facilitated by the local authority that holds the ring to ensure that learners needs are met.

The Royds Community Association has demonstrated another approach. It has been able to adjust the balance of forces in its favour by delivering practical and sustainable benefits and by tapping the expertise of its own professionals.

2. Responsiveness, Ownership and Learner Focus

It is easy to see why locally based projects can sometimes be more effective than big institutions in engaging people. There is no substitute for face-to-face contact, for getting to know people and adjusting to their changing needs.

Hence the surprisingly positive responses to Bradford's home care managers when they went out to meet community care users in their own homes.¹⁵ But it is also a case of demonstrating a commitment to the community, which is true of all four case studies.

3. Local Investment

Resources are an issue in developing learning communities. SPELL can improve the quality of college provision by subsidising smaller classes. SRB and European funding enables it to run an outreach programme that the College cannot afford. Creating a learning culture is inevitably costly.

4. Innovation and Invention

ICT is fundamental to BLINK but it figures surprisingly little in the other cases. There are undoubtedly lost opportunities here. On the other hand, there is a commitment to innovation and invention of other kinds, including CLN's European study visits or SPELL's outreach and local employment initiative.

Conclusions

1. The State of the Nation

Bromley by Bow (London), Balsall Heath (Birmingham) and the Royds Community Association (Bradford) : these award-winning cases are prominent amongst a rather short list of examples of holistic community development. There is a similarly short list of communities that have begun to assume control of their own learning. The cases of best practice cited earlier do not stand alone but they are unusual.¹⁶ More typical are cases of partial community engagement, usually around a specific project or initiative. The annals of SRB can provide dozens of examples of this kind.

The paucity of examples is not surprising. Community engagement goes against the grain of institutional management of learning resources and social structure. It challenges long-established notions of what works and who has power, clashing with systems of control and finance run by professionals. To compound the problem, the attempt often takes place in the most hard-pressed neighbourhoods, where expectations of the practical benefits of learning are low. To succeed, it requires local leaders with enormous resilience, determination and substantial organisational resources. And even this is not enough. For as Frank Coffield, a sceptic about the all curing powers of lifelong learning, has argued,

*Policies, which concentrate on widening access, are likely to have limited impact unless they are integrated with wider, well-resourced strategies to combat poverty and social exclusion.*¹⁷

¹⁵ Kendra Inman, 'Down your way' in *Guardian Society*, 10 January 2001, p.144.

¹⁶ A rich source of data on community learning is the Adult Learners Week Group Awards which have provided examples every year since the scheme's inception in 1993.

¹⁷ 'Poverty won't be beaten so easily' by Professor Frank Coffield in *Times Educational Supplement*, 8 December 2000, p.34.

A recent study underlines the difficulty of reversing decline in the poorest neighbourhoods. Michael Carley, in his summary document (December 2000) for a forthcoming report *Regeneration in the 21st Century+* (which summarises lessons from Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Area Regeneration Programme), suggests five key areas to which attention needs paying: understanding urban disadvantage; developing robust and innovative partnerships at local level; developing neighbourhood governance structures to empower communities; developing not only city-wide but also regional regeneration strategies; and finally a national plan for cities and regions which responds to regional economic differences, acknowledges the vital role of cities and strengthens the role of regions in co-ordinating the economy, transport and planning.¹⁸

2. Lessons for a Reformed National System of Adult Learning

There are a number of lessons for the national system, many of which have been highlighted elsewhere, for example, by FEDA and by the Policy Action Team on Skills.¹⁹ Its report, *Skills for Neighbourhood Renewal*, concluded that there were three main reasons for the persistent lack of basic skills in many disadvantaged communities:²⁰

- The education and training system does not adequately address people's needs
- Local capacity is too weak to support improvements
- People do not believe that acquiring skills or qualifications will make any difference to their employment prospects.

These are not the only problems, as the report noted, but they are fundamental. The lessons that follow are intended to address these three issues.

3. Meeting People's Needs

Much current education and training provision is characterised by a provider-led mentality, reinforced by a curriculum, staffing and funding infrastructure, which slows down the shift to a more responsive, learner-focused system. Further education has been debating roll-on roll-off provision for two decades, yet most enrolments still take place in September. Innovation is held at a safe distance at the margins, largely dependent on short-term funding, while the great engine of the mainstream service rolls on majestically.

¹⁸ Carley Michael et al (December 2000) *Regeneration in the 21st Century: Policies into practice* JRF/Policy Press

¹⁹ FEDA (2000) *Local Strategic Partnerships and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund*; DfEE (2000) *Skills for Neighbourhood Renewal: Local Solutions*, Policy Action Team on Skills. See also the policy pointers in *Towns, cities and regions in the learning age ó a survey of learning communities* (2000) by Martin Yarnit for LCN, LGA and DfEE, pp 82-86.

²⁰ DfEE (1999), p.10

It is too soon to say whether the new LSC framework will promote a new balance in favour of learners at the expense of providers, which it must if today's needs are to form the basis for planning and funding. Learning Partnerships are expected to shoulder the responsibility for feeding back learners' expectations and experiences to the LSC, yet

- Learners or even voluntary and community organisations, which may be closer to them, are noticeable by their absence from the Partnerships
- Since Learning Partnerships are not mentioned in the Learning and Skills Act, it is unclear to what extent the LSC will take any notice of the feed-back they offer
- The practice of garnering learner feedback is largely confined to consultative fora and satisfaction surveys.

Sturdier accountability tools are required if we are to see a shift in the power balance:

- LSC should ensure that learner fora are properly set up and funded in every area so that they can survey and report authoritatively on a wide range of learner views
- These bodies should be equipped for constructive scrutiny and able to carry out detailed audits of need and provision
- Demonstration projects should be set up to test the feasibility of delegating significant amounts of funding to properly set up bodies representing local interests.

These proposals, which sound radical or worse in the education context, are, of course, par for the course for SRB and New Deal for Communities programmes.

4. Joined Up Government to Address Learner Needs

The value of partnership in promoting learning communities is clear:

FEDA's research and development work . for example, in the area of widening participation and meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups . demonstrates the value of co-ordinated working across sectors. Joint decision-making and sharing of information can strengthen the support available to learners; create pathways between different types of provision and help put new learning opportunities in place. By working with a range of organisations with functions relating to education, social welfare and economic development, learning providers can better identify and respond to the needs of local communities.²¹

The planning framework over which the Learning and Skills Council will preside is designed to promote collaboration and to minimise unhelpful competition between providers. This is a major advance but it is not enough. It is clear that we are at a crossroads. Partnerships are seen by the Government as an essentially voluntary compact, yet, as FEDA observes,

²¹ FEDA, op. cit., p.1.

The ability of Learning Partnerships to deliver agreed strategic objectives depends in large measure upon the commitment of individual partners to meeting these objectives through the organisations they represent. The absence of legal duty and accountability may constrain the influence of partnerships and limit their ability to fulfil their responsibilities.

The creation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), of which Learning Partnerships are likely to become ~~the~~ learning arm, creates another voluntary relationship to further obscure accountability.

Set against the ~~organic~~ evolutionary process which is favoured by Government, it could be argued that we have reached the point where we need a new form of local governance of learning to correspond with the LSC and other statutory agencies, on the one hand, and with learners and communities, on the other.²²

Existing arrangements are unable to support the shift required from a voluntary and unsystematic approach to provision to a systematic approach to service planning. Imagine if the school system or antenatal care were run on the same basis as post-16 education and training. At best, schools in a given locality would collaborate to advertise themselves to the parents of rising fours, but which social groups would ensure that they took advantage of this offer? Or, you can imagine the situation if antenatal care was provided by word or mouth or on the basis of leaflets in doctors' surgeries rather than through a systematic process of invitation supported by a community health outreach service. Instead, there is a growing mismatch between the unplanned pumping of resources into the creation of UK Online learning centres and the failure to engage the very people who could most benefit from neighbourhood provision.

The new strategy for basic skills, however, marks a shift towards systematic provision and service planning, a reflection of the heroic efforts by the Basic Skills Agency to promote a targeted approach. The same approach must be extended to all post-16 education and training. But that will mean a shift from voluntary consortia of providers to a statutory planning and finance framework in which clear responsibilities are allocated to providers, backed up by a shared infrastructure for identifying consumers and for tracking their progress. Accountability to the funding bodies will be in the first instance contractual, but what is also required is a greater element of public participation and scrutiny through the democratisation of the Learning Partnership with some form of election.

²² Organic is the term used by a senior DfEE official at the Learning Partnerships Conference in Coventry in October.

4. Strengthening Local Capacity, Creating a Stake

A fundamental feature of a reformed system is that it builds on, wherever possible, local community organisation, rather than supplanting it with a new burdensome bureaucracy, convinced it alone knows best.

Discussion about ownership rarely extends as far as practical proposals about devolving resources to poor neighbourhoods, yet this is what is required.

There has to be a means by which community management can be exerted. Community trusts show some success in providing a local system of governance and accountability, in the case of the Manor and Castle Trust in Sheffield or the Royds Community Association, Bradford, acting as the lynchpin for a thriving business park with mainstream and community businesses. The urban community trusts common in the Netherlands provide a more ambitious model. A trust serving Feyenoord, a low-income neighbourhood in Rotterdam, employs 256 people providing social and educational services including well-equipped community learning centres.²³ In other EU countries, other forms of organisation such as cooperatives fulfil a similar function.²⁴

Trusts provide a vehicle for the management of devolved local services, including education, as well as for the ownership of assets and equity. I have proposed elsewhere the creation of Enterprise Learning Centres.²⁵ The Centres, which would combine learning, training and wealth creation on one site, open to all ages, all year round, would be jointly owned and managed by voluntary and community organisations and education providers. They could be run as non-for profit enterprises in their own right.

5. Resourcing Engagement

The volunteer principle is sound but limited especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In those settings, volunteers need well resourced and organised support systems if their engagement is to be sustained and they

²³ See the Rotterdam case study in Yarnit, M. (2000) *Towns, Cities and Regions in the Learning Age: A Survey of Learning Communities*, LCN 6 The Network of Learning Communities for DfEE and LGA, IdeA Publications, London.

²⁴ The most comprehensive account is by Jordi Estivill et al (1997) *Las Empresas Sociales en Europa*, Barcelona: Editorial Hacer.

²⁵ Unpublished paper for South Yorkshire Objective 1 Education and Training Priority Group, 2000, available by email from the author ó martin.yarnit@virgin.net:

The Enterprise Learning Centre is not to be confused with the image of a bank of computers increasingly conjured up by the term Learning Centre. Of course, it will be a UFI centre but more than this it is a centre for learning the knowledge and skills which regenerate communities: social and economic enterprise, public, private and third sector. They will tap into the resources of higher education through micro-business incubator units and SME cluster focused research and development units, developing spin offs from main research programmes. They will generate new forms of community enterprise and assets, providing jobs, products and services. They will provide a single gateway to re-connect unemployed and under-qualified workers to training and employment opportunities. They will provide guidance and counselling for all ages.

are to progress to new and perhaps more responsible roles. Above all, there has to be a properly planned and resourced career structure, enabling people to move from volunteering through part-time or short-term employment and on to more responsible and better-paid positions. ILM programmes are effective in moving people out of benefit dependence but careful planning is needed to take them to the point where they can apply for and hold down the growing number of jobs funded by regeneration programmes.

6. The Importance of Informal Learning to Building from the Bottom

"The major conclusion from this survey is that our organized systems of schooling and continuing education and training are like big ships floating in a sea of informal learning. If these education and training ships do not pay increasing attention to the massive amount of outside informal learning, many of them are likely to sink into Titanic irrelevancy."

This is the view of David Livingstone, a Canadian investigator who carried out a survey of 1500 adults in 1998 designed to establish the extent of adult learning, the existence of social barriers to learning and more effective means of linking learning with work.²⁶ The extent of engagement in informal learning is naturally hard to pin down, but there is evidence of enormous potential on the rare occasions when it is systematically tapped.

According to the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania, 70% of skills are learnt outside formal institutions. For example, non-formal learning is the main source of skills acquisition for small business.²⁷

7. Learning Pays

Adult Learners Week has taught us a lot about how to promote the value of learning. One of the major spin-offs is the permanent national help line, **learnirect**, which has been very effectively advertised to unemployed people through a message distributed with giro. Other successes associated with the Week include Channel 4's *Brookie Basics* and BBC's *Webwise*, which have demonstrated the vast potential audience for well designed and promoted learning. The lesson is the need to build on this experience to create an articulated approach to promotion: all year round, linking local, regional and national media and initiatives.

²⁶ See: Lifelong Learning Profiles: General Summary of Findings from the First Canadian Survey of Informal Learning
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/sur_res.htm

The National Research Network on New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) at OISE/UT was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)

²⁷ *Re-focusing on learning regions: Education, training and lifelong learning for Australia's wellbeing*
See URL: <http://www.crla.utas.edu.au/sumpap99.shtml>

ALW will remain a high point of the calendar, but there will need to be others, perhaps in July-August (coinciding with summer activities in schools), in September (traditional recruiting time for adult and further education), in November (linked to the nation's pre-Christmas shopping spree) and at the beginning of the spring when people are more inclined to venture out again.

Careful planning and coordination will be essential to ensure that the message conveyed by the national media finds a reinforcing echo where people live, play and work. That is a vital job for the LSC supported by RDAs. Webwise proved that it is possible to create a national network of centres able to support a series about ICT. Learning towns and cities and learning partnerships have a crucial role to play to ensure that the national message is reinforced at (sub-) regional and local level. The case studies demonstrate the value of proximity, although BLINK's experience suggests that shared values are just as important.

8. An Integrated Approach to Tackling Social Exclusion

Finally, learning must be seen to be part of a comprehensive plan to improve the conditions of living, especially in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Coffield's argument poses the first conclusion: policies to strengthen learning communities must form part of an integrated attack on social exclusion and poverty. But this makes sense from a second point of view, and this is the second conclusion, that learning should be seen in the main as an instrument of social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal, rather than a good in itself. It is the tool for improving people's powers of critical analysis as well as their capacity for managing health, housing and other services or setting up businesses. Yet, for the most part, learning stands alone from other community activities. From school onwards, the curriculum and the way people learn is abstracted from the real business of life surrounding them. The Royds points to another way of learning.

Locally led learning community organisations can turn the tide, engaging people in learning and bringing about concrete and lasting benefits but they need help:

- Partnership, planning and funding arrangements must be rejigged to favour the development of learning communities
- Local capacity must be invested in so that it can respond to local need and provide leadership in partnerships

These changes are vital to bringing about sustainable and visible benefits and persuading people in the most hard-pressed neighbourhoods that their efforts will be rewarded.

Martin Yarnit, January 2001

Appendix 1: Learning Systems: Old and New

	Old	New
Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal • Informal • Reflexive
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream budgets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative + project driven - funded by SRB, Europe, NOF
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provider-driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners/Business/ • Neighbourhood
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Segmented, • Competition • Age driven • Elitist - Oxbridge effect • Majority leave by 18 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embryonic, small scale • Integrated, • Collaboration • Partnership • Connected communities • Lifelong learning
Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Segmented: separate facilities for schools, colleges, libraries, businesses • Teachers-Taught • Classrooms • Schools closed 75% of the year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated facilities • Autonomous learners • Learner advocates • Networked learning centres • All age, open to all • RO-RO (finally) • IAG on tap
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Segmented, academic-vocational divide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convergent - core skills and competences • Enterprise, wealth creation
Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learner leverage + • accountability
Who Pays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School leavers subsidise HE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bigger tax base, • Charitable status for learning centres, • Workplace learning incentives

Appendix 2: Value Added Chain

