



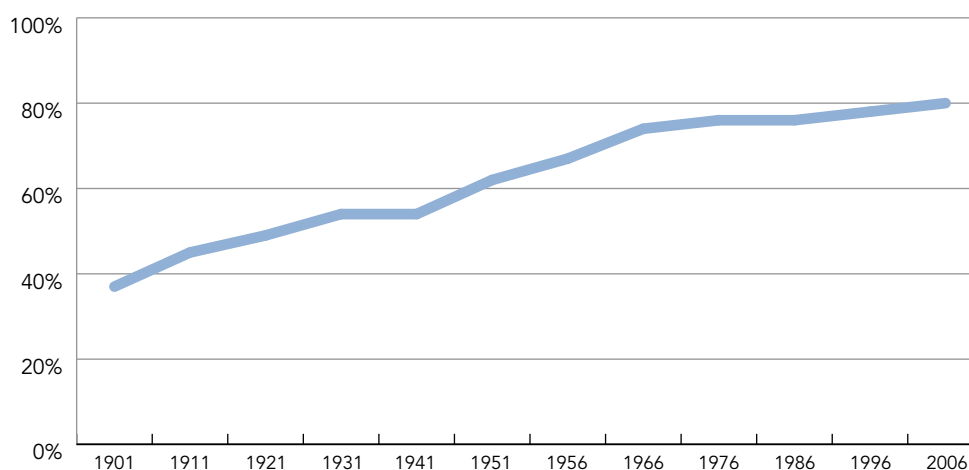
LESSONS IN LEARNING

Learning cities: Optimizing economic and social well-being through lifelong learning for all

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Cities are a magnet for Canadians and immigrants, who stream into them in ever-increasing numbers (See Figure 1).¹ The swelling population of urban centres—now home to 80% of Canada’s citizens²—reflects the economic, educational and cultural opportunities offered by cities. At the crossroads of people, ideas, and capital, cities are the engine of innovation, knowledge and national prosperity.³ But Canadian cities currently face a number of important challenges, including: income inequality, integration of newcomers, maintenance of social cohesion, and civic engagement.

Figure 1:
Proportion of the Canadian population living in urban regions



Source: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1901 - 2006

Economic disparities are growing in Canada. In 1984, families in the top 10 wealth percentiles held 52% of all Canadian household wealth: by 2005, they held 58%.⁴

In Canadian cities, these disparities are particularly sharp. Among urban Canadians, the wealthiest 30% of families saw their incomes rise between 1990 and 2000. For all other families, incomes stagnated or declined over the same time period.⁵ Disparities between vulnerable groups and the general population are also growing. For example, in cities that attract a large number of immigrants (e.g., Toronto, Vancouver), the incomes of recent immigrants declined during the 1990s. Aboriginal people in most cities also experienced declining incomes over the same period of time.⁶ These disparities prevent many individuals from fully participating in and contributing to their communities.⁷ This, in turn, undermines social cohesion and overall quality of life.⁸

The polarization of wealth—and the attendant social fracturing that accompanies it—is a widespread phenomenon around the world. In response to this situation, many European and Australian cities and towns have taken steps to become learning cities where “lifelong learning is explicitly used as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal to foster safer, healthier, more inclusive, better educated and creative cities.”⁹

One approach to managing the opportunities and challenges of the modern city is the creation of *Learning Cities*. Pioneered in Europe and Australia, this strategy recognizes that optimal social and financial well-being occurs under conditions that favour lifelong learning for all.

Learning Cities embrace an understanding of learning as multi-dimensional and comprehensive; they devise ways of bringing learning and people together, in order to develop the social and economic fabric of the community.¹⁰ Learning cities that have emerged in Europe and Australia have adopted some common principles:

- Learning is both an individual and collective responsibility;
- Social harmony and economic prosperity are key over-arching goals in identifying collective learning goals and projects that will benefit the city residents;
- Learning is defined broadly, and is accomplished by working with a wide range of partners, both formal and informal;
- Innovation is embraced;
- Learning projects are identified and implemented through consultation and collaboration among the general public, community groups, educational institutions, unions, cultural organizations, advocacy groups, and employers;
- Learning should be readily accessible regardless of financial circumstances or education;
- Learning should be inclusive and respectful of diversity; and
- Learning projects are subject to evaluation.¹¹

The city of Jena, nestled against the forested hills of the Saale River valley in central Germany, is a Learning City success story.¹² After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, this city of 100,000 faced economic collapse when its largest employer, a branch of the Carl Zeiss optics factory, laid off 90% of its staff.¹³

To manage this economic blow, the city adopted an array of Learning City strategies. First, it took stock of its assets—largely an educated, skilled workforce and a rich history of intellectual and technical excellence—and used them to forge a new future. Jena had been a centre of optics and technology since the mid-19th century when a collaboration between Carl Zeiss, a pioneer in precision mechanics and optics, Otto Schott, a glass chemist, and Ernst Abbe, a physicist, led to a series of significant scientific and technical discoveries as well as to companies that manufactured products based on them. The companies these men established have continued to exist, in one form or another, for over 150 years.

Building upon the abundance of local talent—about one-third of Jena’s citizens had an academic degree, the highest proportion in Germany¹⁴—politicians, employers and community members worked to reinvent the city as Germany’s “knowledge marketplace.”¹⁵ This has included investments in infrastructure, such as the creation of new research institutes, such as the Max Planck Institute of Economics (opened in 1993), the Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry

(1997), and the Leibniz Institute for Age Research (1999). Believing that the concentration of scientific talent would lead to new spin-off companies, the city constructed the Technology and Innovation Park Jena, now home to 60 new high-tech and bio-tech companies.¹⁶

Jena's corporations and government partnered to adopt innovative strategies to resuscitate the city's economy. The land once occupied by the Zeiss factory in the centre of town was used to build a shopping centre and new home for the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena. Meanwhile, Jenoptik, a successor to Zeiss, re-hired laid-off workers, allowing them to use the company's facilities to explore ideas for new companies, producing many start-ups.¹⁷ In view of these and other developments, Jena was cited as Germany's most promising business location in a 2004 study.¹⁸

Jena has also made early childhood and K-12 education a collective priority. When financial circumstances threatened pre-school programs for the city's children, teachers agreed to work part-time in order to keep it open. In keeping with a tradition of liberal, innovative education established centuries ago by the University of Jena, the city offers a range of schooling choices for children, including Montessori, bilingual, sports, and alternative schools known as 'Jenaplan'.¹⁹

The recent history of Jena's transformation into the "Silicon Valley of the Saale" occurred through the efforts of its citizens, but also thanks to the infusion of two billion dollars of private and public money: 500 million dollars in private investment funded the redevelopment of the downtown core, while Jenoptik received \$1.5 billion in government aid.²⁰

The Learning Cities movement is beginning to take root in Canada. In 2003, Victoria began the process of becoming a learning city with the goal of being known, by 2020, as "a leading learning community." In service of this goal, Victoria has identified a number of specific objectives to transform downtown Victoria into a Place of Learning by 2020. These include:

- Quality early childhood learning for the children of downtown workers and residents;
- Individual learning plans for at least half of downtown workers;
- Elder college participation among at least half of downtown seniors;
- Increased cross-sector initiatives related to the arts and learning; and
- A two-fold increase in educational tourism²¹.

In June 2006, Vancouver designated itself a Learning City²² and embraced the following principles: equitable access to learning, inclusivity and collaboration—all seen as essential precursors to greater prosperity and collective well-being. Vancouver's Guiding Principles: Competitive Business Climate notes that the "Learning City is a vital element of a healthy business climate."²³ The city's *Learning City Proclamation* reads, in part.

Whereas many cities worldwide are using lifelong learning as a framework to capitalize on the opportunities and address the challenges of the emerging knowledge-based economy and society, these cities are strengthening the social settings that foster literacy and lifelong learning [...] This is contributing to effective parents, family members, active citizens and community members, environmentally conscious consumers and productive workers.

And whereas Vancouver, to enhance its status as a world-class city, as one of the best places to live, will need to ensure access to lifelong learning [...] It will also need to acknowledge the contributions of Aboriginal, ethnic and immigrant communities to the learning fabric, while recognizing and supporting their rich culture of learning.

And whereas Vancouver, through collaboration and partnership, has developed a lifelong learning strategy [...] This strategy builds on the capacities of individuals, groups and organizations [...] while addressing barriers and gaps which inhibit learning from occurring.²⁴

An ambitious *Lifelong Learning Strategy*²⁵ supports Vancouver's aspirations to be a Learning City. This document is the product of collaboration among a wide range of civic, educational and community organizations; the general public also had a voice in shaping the strategy, through focus groups and public meetings. The desired outcomes established in the *Strategy* are intended to contribute to the city's "triple bottom line," i.e., its social, economic and environmental health,²⁶ and include:

- Enhanced access to learning opportunities for at-risk, disadvantaged and marginalized community members and groups;
- Higher enrolment and completion rates for students at all levels;
- Higher rates of literacy and numeracy;
- Increased access to and use of learning technologies;
- Greater citizen engagement and social inclusion;
- Increased recognition and support for Aboriginal and ethnic communities and their rich culture of learning;
- More collaboration among educators and trainers—the creation of a seamless system;
- Stronger partnerships between business, labour and education.²⁷

Lessons in learning: The future of learning cities

As more cities adopt their own Learning Cities strategies, they can benefit from the lessons learned in other communities. Researchers have identified three key areas that require attention in creating optimal conditions for the success of a new learning city.²⁸

1. Partnership. It is crucial to build real partnerships between all sectors (civic, economic, educational, public and voluntary) and to mobilize their shared resources.
2. Participation. A successful learning city must foster conditions in which citizens increase their participation in lifelong learning, but learning cities must first ensure that their citizens participate in the process of policy development for learning city initiatives.
3. Performance. Learning cities must learn to assess their progress, document good practice, and measure impact.

The concept of Learning Cities has achieved great success as measured by the popularity and acceptance of the approach: in 2005, over 300 cities and towns had adopted learning cities strategies.²⁹ However, measuring and documenting the impact of the approach remains an important challenge. In some cases, clear indicators of success have been identified. For example, in Hume (Australia) the Learning Towns Initiative resulted in a 50% increase in library memberships and circulation over the first two years of the project.³⁰ In Birmingham (U.K.), learning city initiatives resulted in a 25% increase in parental involvement in school curriculum activities, a massive increase (from 30% to 70%) in the proportion of 11-year-olds with good skill levels, and a reduction (by 25%) in the number of adults with poor basic skills.³¹

While these indicators are promising, learning cities are designed to foster change and improvement on a much larger scale—to foster conditions that allow all citizens to participate in lifelong learning and to achieve a “triple bottom line of sustainable economic, environmental and social conditions.”³² Measuring impact at such a high level is notoriously difficult, but measuring a city’s progress toward achieving lifelong learning goals is now possible using the Canadian Council on Learning’s Composite Learning Index (CLI).

The CLI considers four dimensions of learning:³³

- Learning to Know: The development of skills and knowledge needed to function in the world, including literacy, numeracy, critical thinking and general knowledge;
- Learning to Do: The acquisition of applied skills that are often used in the workplace, e.g., computer training, apprenticeships;
- Learning to Live Together: The development of values of respect and concern for others, social and inter-personal skills, an appreciation of diversity; and
- Learning to Be: Cultivation of body, mind and spirit.³⁵

The CLI's learning indicators will rarely align perfectly with any particular city's specific lifelong learning goals, but can provide a valuable measure of general progress toward them. In Vancouver, for example, progress on the city's pledge to increase enrolment at all levels of education, improve learning for the marginalized, achieve higher completion rates for students, and boost literacy can be assessed by the *Learning to Know* measure. *Learning to Do* encompasses the acquisition of skills that can improve occupational competencies. This indicator relates to Vancouver's goal of increasing bonds between business, labour and education, as well as its aim to expand access to learning technologies.

The economic success of cities like Jena suggests that the Learning City strategy holds promise for other cities that adopt it. However, a number of outstanding research questions remain. As established and emerging learning cities strive to realize the benefits of lifelong learning for their residents, they will have to find ways of addressing these questions:

- Which types of projects are most likely to result in raising levels of lifelong learning?
- How can marginalized citizens be engaged in a culture of learning?
- How should resources be allocated for maximum effect?
- Who funds Learning City initiatives: the private sector, community organizations, private citizens, and/or the various levels of government?
- Who is accountable for the gains or losses in lifelong learning?
- Given the broad sweep of goals usually tackled by Learning Cities, what process will be used to prioritize them?
- What is the relationship between the Learning City's goals and infrastructure development (e.g., school construction, technology acquisition, early childhood development centres)?

While the concept of learning cities holds promise for helping urban centres to meet the challenges that face them, it must also engage and sustain citizen support and have the capacity to document and monitor progress.

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