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Learning cities: Developing inclusive, prosperous and sustainable urban communities

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This special issue of the *International Review of Education (IRE)* has been stimulated by the initiative of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in developing the International Platform of Learning Cities (IPLC). UIL's plans to facilitate the establishment of such a platform are now well advanced and it will be launched in Beijing in October 2013. The platform has the overall aim to create a global network to mobilise cities and to demonstrate how to use their resources effectively in every sector to develop and enrich all their human potential to foster lifelong personal growth, the development of equality and social justice, the maintenance of harmonious social cohesion, and the creation of sustainable prosperity (UIL 2013).

The underpinning ideas of the IPLC and the development of learning cities are not new. As has been suggested elsewhere (Longworth and Osborne 2010), the idea of learning being place-based and focused on the region, city, town or community has existed for a long time. The notion of a learning city can be traced back to ancient Greece some 2,500 years ago, although it was not labelled as such until the late 20th century.

The modern concept of a learning city/region originated from that of a “learning society”. In 1972, the report of the International Commission on the Development of Education to UNESCO – *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (Faure et al. 1972) – put forward the concept of a “learning society” and

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appealed to UNESCO Member States to re-organise their educational structures on two basic premises: (1) all agencies become providers of education; and (2) all citizens are engaged in learning, taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by the learning society:

All sectors – public administration, industry, communications, transport – must take part in promoting education. Local and national communities are in themselves eminently educative institutions. As Plutarch said, “the City is the best teacher”. And especially when the city is capable of remaining within human proportions, it does indeed contain immense educational potential – with its social and administrative structures and its cultural networks – not only because of the vitality of the exchanges that go on, but also because it constitutes a school for civic sentiment and fellow-feeling (Faure et al. 1972, p. 162).

In 1996, the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century – *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al. 1996) – further argued that the concept of learning throughout life leads straight on to that of a learning society which offers many and varied opportunities for learning, both at school and in economic, social and cultural life:

The concept of learning throughout life is the key that gives access to the twenty-first century. It goes beyond the traditional distinction between initial and continuing education. It links up with another concept often put forward, that of the learning society, in which everything affords an opportunity of learning and fulfilling one’s potential (Delors et al. 1996, p. 38).

Therefore, more collaboration and partnerships with families, industry and businesses, voluntary associations and people active in cultural life are needed. In order to build a learning society and make lifelong learning a reality, it is important to embrace and connect all learning stages, types and places.

In the building of a learning society, national governments have a major role in setting the agenda and the vision. However, a country is, in essence, the sum of all its regions, cities and communities, and it is in the regions, cities and communities that the real action takes place. Therefore, a country’s learning society can only be built province by province, city by city, community by community (UIL 2013). In recent years in fact, in parallel with a wide acceptance in many countries of the concept of lifelong learning being a guiding principle for educational development and reform, some pragmatic and operational approaches have been adopted to implement lifelong learning.

There have over time been a number of terms referring to “a geographically-based learning concept” (Longworth and Osborne 2010, p. 369), including “Educating Cities” used since the First International Congress of Educating Cities organised in 1990 in Barcelona,¹ “Cities of Learning” (DfEE 1998) and the more generic “Learning Communities of Place” (Faris 2005). A majority of publications on the subject now tend to use the term learning city/region, with city and region often interchangeable in meaning. Whatever term is used, it essentially refers to a means to build a “learning society”.

¹ For more information, see http://www.bcn.cat/edcities/aice/estatiques/angles/sec_jaec.html.

In practice, the concept of learning cities has been implemented mainly in “developed” countries, growing initially out of initiatives by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) from the 1970s onwards and the European Commission (EC) in the early part of this century.

We can observe, for example, that the study entitled *City Strategies for Lifelong Learning* by the OECD (1993) reviewed the promotion of the concept of learning cities in seven cities in its member states: Adelaide, Edmonton, Edinburgh, Gothenburg, Kakegawa, Pittsburgh and Vienna, building on earlier OECD work on lifelong learning and recurrent education. These cities placed education at the forefront of strategies and policies to improve economic performance, and to foster sustainable economic development and better living for citizens. This OECD work over some years also contributed to the aspiration to “promot[e] a ‘learning city’, in which communities attempt to learn collectively as a means of changing their own futures” (OECD 1993, p. 10) and the creation of the International Association of Educating Cities (IAEC) in 1994.

In 1996, in addition to the report entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al. 1996) published by UNESCO, the OECD published a report titled *Lifelong Learning for All* (OECD 1996). Both documents emphasised the multiple contexts of learning and firmly linked the concept to the economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges that societies and communities face. In the same year, the European Union proclaimed 1996 as the “European Year of Lifelong Learning”. These somewhat synchronised international efforts highlighted the importance of learning for the society of the future and provided a further significant impetus for the development of numerous initiatives in the world aimed at promoting the learning city and the learning region (Yang 2012).

The OECD (2000) subsequently supported further work with the implementation of a project concerned with learning regions at five European sites: Andalusia, Oresund, Jena, Thames Gateway and Vienna.

Also in Europe, as one response to the Lisbon Agenda, which aimed to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (Commission of the European Union 2000, para. 5), the European Commission put increasing emphasis on lifelong learning and the region as a vital site for that learning (Commission of the European Union 2001). One specific initiative was the Regions of Lifelong Learning (R3L) programme (Commission of the European Union 2003), and there have been a number of other developments funded within the aegis of the EC’s Lifelong Learning and predecessor programmes, including TELS (Longworth 2000), Lilliput (Longworth and Allwinkle 2005), Pallace (Longworth 2006), Lilara (Doyle et al. 2007), PENR3L (PASCAL 2008), EUROlocal (Hamilton and Jordan 2010), R3L+ (Eckert et al. 2012) and MASON (2012).²

² TELS stands for Technology Enhanced Learning in Science; Lilara stands for Learning in Local and Regional Authorities; PENR3L stands for PASCAL European Network of Lifelong Learning Regions; EUROlocal stands for European storehouse on the local and regional dimensions of lifelong learning; R3L+ stands for Regional Networks for Lifelong Learning (often abbreviated in the acronym LLL) – the plus at the end refers to its building on PASCAL’s R3L programme; and MASON stands for Mainstream Socio-cultural Dynamics to enhance NLLS (National Lifelong Learning Systems).

There have also been a number of national initiatives in Europe, for example in Germany (Thinesse-Demel 2010), the United Kingdom (Hamilton and Jordan 2011) and Italy, as well as regional and city initiatives, also outside Europe, in countries that include Canada (see Faris 2005), South Africa (Walters 2009) and Australia (see Kearns 2011).

However, there is considerable evidence that many of these initiatives have not been sustained due to the exhaustion of their seed funding. This is certainly the case for most of the 17 projects funded under the R3L programme, and the national initiatives in the United Kingdom and Germany (see for example Souto-Otero and McCosham 2006).

As reported in a recent paper on “The rise and fall and rise again of learning cities”, the reason for the lack of visibility of learning cities may in some cases be that [the concept]

has been absorbed or mainstreamed into strategic policy and as a consequence may not necessarily be evident through labelling as such. For example, Glasgow in Scotland, which had previously strongly promoted the learning city, now argues that, whilst learning is still at the core of their work driving policy and practice forward, the banner of ‘learning regions or cities’ is no longer the preferred current terminology (Jordan et al. 2013).

Hamilton and Jordan (2011) suggest in the case of Scotland that the principles of learning cities are embedded in a different rhetoric of partnership and regional development. However the development of learning cities is now rapidly gaining momentum in *developing* countries. Based on figures documented in recent research findings (Yang 2012), it is reasonable to estimate that there are more than 1,000 cities in the world that have already become or have promised to build learning/educating cities. Such new developments are predominantly located in Southern Europe and Latin America where educating cities predominate, and in East Asia; particularly in China, the Republic of Korea and Japan as described in the paper of Han and Makino in this special issue. This clearly shows that the building of learning/educating cities has become a considerable worldwide phenomenon.

In earlier literature on the subject, certain aspects of learning cities and learning regions have been covered rather well. In particular, starting in 2005, a series of books from the PASCAL Observatory has demonstrated, in a wide variety of settings, new initiatives to create learning cities and regions.³ Most of these and other existing publications focus on the development of learning cities/regions in Europe and North America (see for example Hirsch 1993; Gustavsen et al. 2007). However, in the face of fast-growing urban communities in developing countries, particularly in Africa, Asia, the Arab Region and Latin America, it is timely for cities in these regions to anticipate the learning needs of citizens. Therefore, this special issue of the *IRE* provides an opportunity to shed light on the development of learning cities in these particular regions, and to provide some international perspectives to illustrate broad trends and challenges in all regions.

³ See Duke, Osborne and Wilson (2005), Duke, Doyle and Wilson (2006), Doyle et al. (2008), Longworth and Osborne (2010), Schuetze and Inman (2010) and Preece et al. (2012).

Addressing the big challenges confronting cities

Cities almost everywhere in the world are challenged by a broad spectrum of issues. These include the impact of rapid urbanisation with mass migration from rural areas, addressing environmental challenges, and responding to human rights issues and growing inequality in many cities, accompanied by social fragmentation and the loss of community and a sense of a shared identity.

A key question for the future of learning cities is the extent to which the learning city strategy can serve as a vehicle for cities to address these issues in a strategic way that builds inclusive, sustainable cities, able to adapt to 21st-century conditions.

Several papers in this issue provide insights into this question, although from different perspectives. These include the paper by Graciela Messina and Raúl Valdés-Cotera on “Educating Cities in Latin America”, the paper by SoongHee Han and Atsushi Makino on “Learning cities in East Asia: Japan, China and the Republic of Korea”, the paper by Idowu Biao, Josephine Esaete and Joseph Oonyu on “The role of building learning cities in the rejuvenation of Africa”, and the paper by Osman El Hassan M. Nour on “Building Child Friendly Cities in the MENA region”. A common feature of the development of educating/learning cities analysed in these papers is that educating/learning cities are addressing fundamental challenges confronting cities.

Latin America

In the Latin American contexts, Graciela Messina and Raúl Valdés-Cotera show that the notion of an educating city is related to the democratisation of social life and to the possibility of creating a community from or within an urban space. Hence it corresponds to political proposals that defend the notion of a community of individuals, whilst talking and negotiating as equals. The educating city first of all promotes an extension of the fundamental right of all people to education, including education and training to achieve diversity, understanding, cooperation and dialogue between generations. Second, it encourages people’s relationship with their natural environment, considering the huge impact of the urban environment in the development of all individuals, and guaranteeing a good quality of life of its inhabitants. And third, the educating city promotes participation and association, enabling people’s integration both socially and in the workplace, and being aware of the mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation which affect them, and of the methods that will develop the policies required for positive action.

East Asia

In their paper on learning cities in Japan, China and the Republic of Korea, SoongHee Han and Atsushi Makino investigate these three countries’ various experiences of a learning society, of community education, and the profiles of the people who participate in programmes. These learning city experiences show distinctive as well as collective characteristics. The Japanese experience shows that the concept of learning cities brought on by the bubble economy was merely a

surface phenomenon, under which a real stream of community activities, which can be re-conceptualised as an origin of learning cities, have always been supporting the cities as learning organisations. With some contrast, the Republic of Korea's learning city experience shows that it can be ignited by state initiatives, allied with active reformation of individual cities with local autonomy and regional politics. The rapid adaptation of learning city policies in China shows new possibilities of developing learning cities as cultural interventions in managing urban administrations and maintaining social stability. In all, the policies of learning cities in the three countries were shaped to meet profound social changes.

Africa

Idowu Biao, Josephine Esaete and Joseph Oonyu are direct in their assessment of the dysfunctional state of African cities, with the learning city approach almost unknown in Africa:

Although Africa has been home to famous ancient cities in the past, its modern conurbation areas are poor living spaces characterised by squalor, poor planning, and human misery (Biao, Esaete and Oonyu).

They bring historical perspectives to their paper in contrasting ancient African cities, controlled cities of the colonial era, and the post-independence cities beset by rapid unplanned growth and a wide range of consequent problems. While they regard the learning city approach as being relevant to African conditions, they put this in the context that it must address the particular ailments of African cities. In adopting this approach, they go back to the concept of conscientisation advocated by Paulo Freire (1973) and seen as the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action (Biao, Esaete and Oonyu). In this process, they envisage lifelong learning policies and strategies as having a key role.

A critical question from their point of view, in the light of the barriers and history they discuss, is the "take-off platform" from which to initiate and advance their vision for the future. In their view, this requires the building of demand from city-dwellers in a deliberate process of conscientisation to awaken the consciousness of city-dwellers towards action to transform their physical, social and psychological environment. The authors suggest that fostering extensive public discussion of what might be called "fleeting themes" is a key part of this process (Biao, Esaete and Oonyu).

While lifelong learning strategies are clearly important in the development process envisaged by Biao, Esaete and Oonyu, a need for action is also recognised in the area of governance with a proposal that African legislatures enact laws directing city councils to take steps to build sustainable opportunity cities with integrated policies to advance health, social, environmental and economic development (Kearns 2012). Biao, Esaete and Oonyu also envisage a stronger role for institutions of higher education.

Although they offer an attractive vision for African learning cities of the future that merits extensive discussion, questions remain as to how their "take-off platform" can be set in motion and sustained.

Middle East and North Africa

The paper by Osman El Hassan M. Nour provides an illustration of an approach to regional cooperation in advancing a human rights vision for Child-Friendly Cities (CFC) that could offer insights relevant to fostering learning cities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Nour's contribution has two key themes relevant to consideration of the future of learning cities. One is an approach to strengthening human rights in the area of the protection of children, and the other is a strategy for regional cooperation among cities in the MENA region in building child-friendly cities. The concept of child-friendly cities was initially developed in 1996 during the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements with the support of both United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) (Children's Environments Research Group 2008).

Nour discusses two approaches to CFCs a "rights perspective approach" and an "environment approach". The rights perspective approach points to the importance of values in sustaining learning cities, an aspect which is also recognised in other papers in this special issue. Nour further offers local government authorities engaged in building child-friendly cities nine steps for implementing the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN 1989), pointing out that these steps are interconnected and mutually supportive.

While the rights perspective approach of this paper is relevant to learning cities, there is particular value in the strategy adopted for promoting CFCs in the MENA region, based on regional collaboration, as discussed by Nour. This approach initially involved the convening of a consultative meeting in Amman in 2007, with an expert group drawing up recommendations to provide a regional child-friendly cities initiative in the MENA region.

The agreed approach then involved the establishment of a regional network to encourage a dialogue with common understandings of the meaning of children's rights, and the implications for implementing them in the region. This was to be supported by a regional network of mayors, while standards were to be developed for planning and service delivery. These initiatives were to be supported by a secretariat in the region to assist MENA CFC networks.

Nour further explores the key role of the MENA Child Protection Initiative (CPI) in promoting awareness and understanding of the concept of child-friendly cities. Tasks included the preparation of materials including a resource book, training manuals and brochures. He then discusses CFC activities in a number of MENA cities, including Beirut, Amman, Sana'a, Khartoum, Gaza, Al-Madinah and Alexandria.

Altogether there is much in this paper which is relevant to future approaches to extending the concept of learning cities across the world, especially in areas such as Africa and South Asia, where learning cities are little developed, or do not exist at all. Linking collaborative action to promote human rights with a concerted regional partnership strategy is worthy of further consideration in the search for ways to extend the idea of learning cities into areas where there has been limited development of this concept.

From local to global orientation and development

Consideration of the papers on Africa and the MENA region together points to the lesson that learning cities should be both local and global in their orientation and development. It is evident from both papers that to be successful in Africa, learning cities must be responsive to the distinctive needs and conditions of African cities. They must also function in a competitive, global and interdependent context where human rights and social justice objectives are balanced with economic objectives. In doing this, cities should adopt learning strategies to foster sustainable development.⁴

In addition to the paper by Biao, Esaete and Oonyu, other papers in this special issue also point to the significance of heritage and culture in the way learning cities develop and are sustained. The paper by Han and Makino is particularly instructive in this respect with its analysis of development in Japan, the Republic of Korea and China.⁵

In this context, the paper by Nour on child-friendly cities in the MENA region suggests the potential value of regional collaboration as a mediating level of partnership that brings together both local and global objectives, and is responsive to aspirations and objectives in both domains. There could be much value in testing a similar regional partnership strategy in the development of learning cities in Africa that is responsive to the conditions identified by Biao, Esaete and Oonyu (in this special issue), Kane (2011) and Kearns and Ishumi (2012), while also being global in orientation.

Following the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UN Rio+20 Summit), the spectrum of emerging new initiatives such as the World Bank's Eco2 Cities programme, the European Union's Green Capitals, as well as the PASCAL Observatory's EcCoWell concept⁶ for developing Sustainable Opportunity Cities are markers of the growing interest in the international community. Achieving environmental, social and economic sustainability is central to the future of learning cities. This will require progressing beyond silo development to a more holistic and integrated strategy, an approach advocated by PASCAL in its EcCoWell development (Kearns 2012). While EcCoWell has been developed under the PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE) project at a conceptual level, a few cities, led by Cork in Ireland, are starting to address the question of how an EcCoWell approach can be implemented. It is probable that sustainability will be at the core of future learning city strategies in responding to the challenges of 21st Century conditions.

⁴ Papers published on the PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE) website include discussions of a number of African cities and support the general analysis of Biao and his colleagues (www.pie.pascalobservatory.org). Among them is a paper by Lamine Kane (2011) on Dakar, which argues that development in African cities should harness the traditional collective ways in which Africans learnt. Kearns and Ishumi (2012) took up this theme in their assessment of prospects for learning cities in Africa.

⁵ Some of these issues involving the influence of culture on development are also explored in a PASCAL report (Kearns et al. 2011).

⁶ The term EcCoWell is a conglomerate: Ec = Ecology & Economy, Co = Community & Culture, Well = Well-being & Lifelong Learning. It refers to "cities that aim for integrated development across the landscape of ecology, culture, community, well-being, and lifelong learning objectives and strategies" (Kearns 2012, p. 2).

In addressing the challenges, such as sustainability and social justice, discussed in the papers, fostering and connecting networks of learning cities at both global and regional levels should be seen as a necessary response to a world of global interdependence, a need articulated in *Learning: The Treasure Within*:

One of education's essential tasks is to help to transform de-facto interdependence into a solidarity freely entered into. To that end, it must enable people to understand themselves and to understand others through better understanding of the world (Delors et al. 1966, p. 49).

Assessing and evaluating learning cities/regions

Since a learning city/region aims to facilitate lifelong learning for all and realise the universal right to education, building such a city/region has a far-reaching appeal. However, developing a learning city is a continuous process, and there is no magic line over which a city/region will pass in order to become known as a learning city/region. But to find out if a city/region is on a path of building a learning city/region, we need an appropriate evaluation mechanism. Furthermore, the construction of a learning city/region is not an abstract theory, and it entails an operational and pragmatic approach to the implementation of the concept of lifelong learning for all.⁷ If a city/region has the political will and commitment to build a learning city/region, it will also need a set of indicators by which it can measure and monitor its performance and progress.

In recent years, some new initiatives and studies on the assessment and evaluation of learning cities have been providing the potential to enhance the quality and sustainability of learning cities. The following section presents a few examples, with two of these approaches included in this special issue.

The Composite Learning Index (CLI) developed by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL)

As described by Paul Cappon and Jarrett Laughlin in this special issue, the Composite Learning Index (CLI) was developed in Canada by using the conceptual framework of lifelong learning put forward in *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors et al. 1966). The so-called Delors report organised lifelong learning into four pillars: Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together, and Learning to Be. The statistical indicators used in the CLI were chosen to best reflect the full spectrum of learning as proposed by this four-pillar framework. The 2010 CLI, comprising 17 indicators and 26 specific measures, generates numeric scores for more than 4,500 communities across Canada (CCL 2010). A high CLI score means that a particular city, town or rural community

⁷ The concept of "lifelong learning for all" refers to the creation of learning opportunities in all settings or delivery modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) for people of all ages (infants, children, adolescents and adults whether girls or boys, women or men), meeting a wide range of learning needs.

possesses the kinds of learning conditions that foster social and economic well-being. A low CLI score means that a community is under-performing in certain aspects that are key to lifelong learning. It is important to note that these scores are not meant to single out “winners” and “losers,” but rather to help Canadians understand the state of lifelong learning in their communities and to encourage them to think of concrete ways through which they can improve these conditions. Using the CLI results as a building block, people can begin to develop and enhance their own neighbourhoods towards becoming thriving learning communities. In the words of Cappon and Laughlin, the benchmarking may “permit cities to assess their current strengths and weaknesses”, but “it also engenders a dialogue within and between cities/communities on the means of enhancing learning conditions”.

The European Lifelong Learning Index (ELLI) and the *German Learning Atlas*

Drawing on the work of the CLI in Canada, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German foundation, developed the European Lifelong Learning Index (ELLI) to make lifelong and life-wide learning in Europe more tangible and measurable. The index was intended to connect the dots between different facets of learning to produce a picture that is both understandable and reliable, and thus able to have a positive impact on the decision-making process. In addition, as a comparative measurement resource, it has the potential to showcase examples of good practice that harness the Delors report’s four pillars of learning as a means of widening quality participation in specific contexts (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2010).

Since 2001, through the Learning Regions Promotion of Networks programme and the Learning on Place programme funded by the German government and the European Union (EU) Social Fund, many cities and regions have actively promoted lifelong learning for their citizens (Reghenzani-Kearns and Kearns 2012). Against this backdrop, *The German Learning Atlas: Making lifelong learning tangible on a regional level* (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012) is based on a composite index that allows observation and comparison of the conditions for lifelong learning in all 412 German administrative districts and cities, as well as in the federal states. To develop the index, more than 300 measures were tested in a neutral statistical-econometric process for their value in explaining the quality of regional learning conditions, and were then weighted according to a “Well-Being Index” created for the purpose. At present, the *German Learning Atlas* combines 38 factors into an overall index and four partial indexes. Because the *German Learning Atlas* makes it possible to compare learning conditions in different regions, the results form an on-site starting point for critical evaluation of learning conditions. Many cities and regions in Germany have taken the results as a basis for looking closely at their own regional educational conditions, and they are increasingly recognising the importance of a holistic, indicator-based, regional educational monitoring system.

Analytical quality framework for learning cities and regions

The final paper, by Randolph Preisinger-Kleine, provides an analytical quality framework for learning cities and regions. Building on previous work including criteria laid down by Sue Cara and Stewart Ranson (1998) in the United Kingdom, and drawing inspiration from practices in eight European regions/cities which participated in the R3L+ project supported under the European Commission's Grundtvig (adult education) strand of the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007–2013, the proposed analytical quality framework addresses four quality areas. They are partnership, participation, progress and sustainability, and learning culture. For each of these, the framework sets out quality criteria and indicators, which can be used to determine and improve quality in these areas. Moreover, the paper provides a quality cycle, describing the practical use of the measuring instruments. A very important lesson learned is that without evaluation and quality assurance mechanisms, local authorities do not have the means to examine their strengths and weaknesses.

To summarise, practice has shown that developing and implementing an evaluation mechanism for learning cities/regions makes it possible to:

- transform the vision of a learning society and lifelong learning for all into operational policies, strategies and approaches;
- determine up to a certain level how much progress is being made in the implementation of lifelong learning for all in the cities/regions;
- enhance the openness and accountability of local authorities in their efforts to provide learning opportunities for their citizens;
- compare in a meaningful way the development of lifelong learning within and across learning cities/regions; and
- facilitate international comparative analysis, exchange of experience and mutual learning among learning cities/regions.

Finding an appropriate set of indicators of the learning society for a community, a city, a region, a country or even the world is not an easy task. As Preisinger-Kleine argues in his paper on “An analytical quality framework for learning cities and regions”, existing learning cities/regions are dynamic and open systems. They function in context, such as local traditions, learning cultures, institutional setups and belief systems. Thus, a solution found in one place might remain rather meaningless in another, and innovative solutions in one city might be mainstream practices elsewhere. Therefore, any international framework for evaluating learning cities needs to be “generic”, “indicative” and “adaptive” in nature, rather than imposing some rigid one-size-fits-all solutions.

Towards a new morality of learning

A further important theme emerging from Nour's paper in this issue exists in a new morality of learning that will illuminate and advance fundamental human rights and

social justice objectives. This concept should influence how learning cities are developed at all levels. It is well articulated in a recent report by CISCO Systems:

As a consequence [of a particular form of “climate change”, which the world of education is experiencing], there is a new morality of learning. Whereas in the past, learning was competitive, coercive, and paternalistic, the new ethic of learning is collaborative, global, and universal. It is collaborative in that learners need to work with each other. It is global in the sense that every society has a contribution to make and a responsibility to each other. And it is universal because every part of society must invest in learning and participate (CISCO Systems 2010, p. 1).

This is an epic, but necessary, challenge. The papers in this special issue suggest that the learning city approach, by whatever name, can be harnessed in a range of ways to progress towards a universal learning society as it was conceived in the work of UNESCO in the 1970s and underpinned by this new morality of learning.

In this journey the city, as the historic engine of civilisation, has a special role, with networks of interactive learning cities a contemporary vehicle for this necessary progress towards a universal learning society. As Edward Glaeser puts it:

We build civilisations and culture together, constantly learning from one another and from the past (Glaeser 2011, p. 269).

While the barriers and challenges to be met and overcome in the progress of learning cities are well articulated in this special issue, the dominant message that emerges is an optimistic one. It points to a strengthened international discourse on learning cities, seen as a catalyst to a revitalised humanism and civic awakening, and as a path towards a universal and humane learning society. In the words of Han and Makino:

Learning in a city is like breathing in a body: it is a core activity that brings a city to life ... In the same way that a human body is alive with the “activities” of respiration, digestion, circulation, etc., a city is alive with various activities including learning, which cause a city to be changed, renovated, and always young in adapting to new ways.

And this is not just a utopian vision.

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