



## Learning cities and implications for adult education research

Sue Webb , John Holford , Steven Hodge , Marcella Milana & Richard Waller

To cite this article: Sue Webb , John Holford , Steven Hodge , Marcella Milana & Richard Waller (2020) Learning cities and implications for adult education research, International Journal of Lifelong Education, 39:5-6, 423-427, DOI: [10.1080/02601370.2020.1853937](https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2020.1853937)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2020.1853937>



Published online: 17 Dec 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 815



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

EDITORIAL



## Learning cities and implications for adult education research

Sue Webb , John Holford , Steven Hodge , Marcella Milana  and Richard Waller 

Monash University; University of Nottingham; Griffith University; University of Verona; University of the West of England

Writing this editorial whilst many people are experiencing a second wave of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is interesting to reflect on learning and the role of education providers. Arguably, in some countries such as the UK, the media has constructed a bad-news story about online learning in these times. Rather than discuss areas of community and adult education provision that have been neglected or the potential of formal, informal and non-formal learning – as a means of recovery – learning has been ‘mediatised’ – online learning in schools, colleges and universities has become the dominant problem (Rawolle & Lingard, 2014). Undoubtedly there are difficulties: online learning exacerbates existing inequalities in people’s access to technologies and the spaces to study in homes, and parents working from home have to juggle the expectations of their employers with supporting the learning of their children, and perhaps also their own needs as adult learners. Yet constructing the focus on online learning as the main bad-news story neglects the gaps that are opening up in learning opportunities as adult education provision is being marginalised (see UIL blog, 2020). In adapting to working from home many adults may need to engage in fresh areas of professional development, whilst others are having to consider engaging in new learning or retraining as their jobs change or disappear. Moreover, comparative research of catastrophes and major disasters in five different countries has highlighted the centrality of adult education concepts, such as transformation learning and role of adult educators in helping communities learn to navigate change, reframe their thinking, and organise and develop resilience for disaster preparedness and recovery (Preston et al., 2015).

It is in the context of this research knowledge that the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is claiming that participation in their Global Network for Learning Cities can help cities and regions develop more resilient education systems that will be essential for dealing with the pandemic (UNESCO, Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). Throughout 2020, the secretariat of the global network, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning along with other organisations, for example, the PASCAL International Observatory Learning Cities Network (LCN), have stepped up their activities and held a series of Webinars on Learning Cities and COVID-19 recovery in recognition of the role that learning and adult educators can play in responding to disasters.

The Global Network of Learning Cities was set up to share ideas and build more inclusive education and learning systems to increase learning participation across all age groups and improve the quality and effectiveness of formal, informal and non-formal learning (Nemeth, 2020). Since the launch of the network in 2013, UNESCO have led the agenda by organising activities and conferences to exchange ideas and practices to promote the following: inclusive learning from basic to higher education; sustainable growth of workplaces; revitalise communities; nurture a culture of learning through life; encourage local, regional and national partnerships; and fulfill environmental obligations (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2013). Since more than half the world’s population live in cities, in 2013 the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) made the establishment of learning cities central to

---

**CONTACT** Sue Webb  [susan.webb@monash.edu](mailto:susan.webb@monash.edu)  Monash University

John Holford, Marcella Milana, Richard Waller and Sue Webb are Editors, and Steven Hodge is Review Editor, of the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*.

creating the affordances for learning for the 2030 agenda for education to meet the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Initially implemented mainly in developed countries with the encouragement of the OECD and the European Union, rapid urbanisation in developing countries has encouraged more regions to participate in the movement (Osborne et al., 2013). By September 2020, 54 new cities from 27 countries were accepted to the network bringing the total number of cities to 229 in 64 countries (UNESCO, Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). In focusing on widening the range of agencies that should provide education and engage all citizens in learning across their life course, learning cities are reminiscent of policies for lifelong learning and education from the past 40 years. Frequently associated with the idea of the learning society as set out in the Faure Report (Faure et al., 1972) and developed further by the Delors Report (Delors et al., 1996), learning cities usually promote learning at all stages of life, and recognise all types of learning and the places in which this can occur.

More recently, learning cities have also contained an economic imperative to stimulate regional growth and solve environmental concerns, although most learning cities contain elements of all three purposes: economic growth; social development; equity and inclusion and environmental sustainability (Longworth & Osborne, 2010). The so-called 'smart city' movement that promotes the use of information technology for urban growth being just one example of the latter with a twin fold expectation that citizens are likely to engage with new forms of learning and the adoption of new technologies will enable the city (or at least those that have power to influence its infrastructures), to learn for growth, social inclusion and sustainable development (Borkowska and Osborne 2018). Indeed, whether or not learning cities have conceptualised learning widely in the spirit of the reports on lifelong education or more narrowly following the precepts of the OECD and 'motivated by the smell of money' as Boshier asserts (Boshier, 2018, 419), is an open research question. The conceptualisation may also depend as Boshier (2018) suggests as to whether or not learning cities are a 'place where citizens have access to a broad array of learning materials and opportunities – at all stages of their life ... or a process (or set of processes) deployed to expedite the learning of residents'. As a place, a noun, Boshier (2018) demonstrates that the activities undertaken by a learning city might vary considerably given different starting points and goals. He suggests, for example, that Beijing, China has a narrow scope of learning means compared with Suwon, South Korea which has adopted a wide scope encouraging a large variety of participatory learning activities. Equally as a verb, Boshier (2018) argues that learning cities adopt varied processes for achieving their goals depending on the political orientation of the city/region, with Beijing being identified as on the neo-liberal continuum with a focus on 'performance, accountability, economic competitiveness, profit and big data in a globalizing context' and Suwon focusing more on the 'humanistic social democratic influence of the Faure (1972) and Delors (1996) Reports and the lingering influence of influential UNESCO leaders'. Clearly, learning cities vary enormously and within a learning city different goals and processes will take precedence at different times. Therefore, according to Boshier (2018, 432) their 'conceptual and operational issues' should be of more interest to lifelong learning advocates and adult education researchers than they have been hitherto.

With a reach into many policy communities, arguably up until now the UIL global network has had a powerful influence on the learning cities' research agendas and the types of data collected and shared to indicate progress towards a learning city's goals. Yet, given the diversity of contexts and countries engaged in this movement, reaching global agreement on the quantitative and qualitative measures of progress, which are considered appropriate and relevant to cities in very different socio-political and economic contexts, has been fraught (see for example, Boshier's 2018 account of the debates and attempts at agreement on indicators at the three international conferences held since 2013). Noticeably, as others have argued, 'learning cities have generated tensions because of their political, economic, and societal aspects and in terms of global, national, and local/regional views on the roles, aims and choices of learning cities' (Nemeth, 2020, 3). These are tensions that have come increasingly to the fore as population movements highlight diverse interests, experiences, capacities and resources and exacerbate political differences about how to support social inclusion, equity and equal opportunities in learning for all.

Research on learning cities has been as diverse as the cities themselves, emphasising different facets depending on the positional perspective of the researcher's field of interest and the intended audience since the cities can be found on every region of the world, except North America. Those concerned with community engagement scholarship in universities (sometimes called service learning) have highlighted the interconnectedness of the characteristics of their practices and intents with the goals of learning cities. In the USA, Fitzgerald and Zientek (2015) draw connections between Boyer's ideas of engaged scholarship and the centrality of learning cities' concern with system change through the four helixes of a regions' system, that is the civil society, the business community, higher education and state and regional government. Community engagement scholars argue that this activity is central to a learning city because it provides a framework for structuring lifelong learning or transformation learning and a model for developing partnerships for social and economic development and change. Community engagement (a term more frequently used in the UK and which in the past was linked to the work of university extra-mural departments and Further Education colleges) or third mission service work (in Australia and Italy for example) have also been identified as important activities which link universities and their local regions or learning cities, including the business communities. In this regard, research has suggested that universities should recognise the importance of this role and reward staff better for these activities (Kyle, 2003), while Neary and Osborne (2018) question the extent to which universities are actively engaging with other actors in the helix of change (that is civil society, the business community and state or regional government) contending that more often universities act locally outside of these other networks.

Some scholars drawn together through the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities and the PASCAL Observatory (UIL/PASCAL, 2020) promote research to develop systematic analysis and benchmarking tools to raise participation or support the quality of formal, non-formal and informal education and develop quantitative and qualitative indicators, as well as international exchanges to encourage local data collection and analysis (Osborne, 2014). However, in light of the recognition of local differences in learning city project activities and objectives (narrow versus wide) in relation to the political orientation (for example, neo-liberal versus socio-cultural) of the planners or some combination of each of these (Boshier, 2018), researchers are recognising that learning cities need to develop their own capacities, datasets and measurements that build on local engagement to reflect contextual responses to the challenges they face. Drawing on adult education concepts, such as public pedagogy and intertwining data collection about education and learning with research on other aspects of social behaviour and infrastructure, learning city researchers are encouraged to consider novel data sets to appreciate how, for example, physical mobilities or transportation patterns might affect access and participation in learning (Lido et al., 2019). More practitioner-inclined researchers have focused on encouraging and exploring community-led actions and practices to understand how learning for individuals and organisations can be advanced through 'co-creation' (see for example, Nemeth, 2020 collection of papers on in the Special Issue of Studies in Adult Education and Learning 2020). Nemeth (2020) argues that many of the examples in this collection present a critical perspective on the learning city notion and its economic focus as developed by the OECD. Instead of focusing on indicators of success, attention has turned to research about processes that enable participatory concerns and inclusive learning environments to be addressed by exploring the civic movements and actions and the ways that public spaces can be places of learning where diverse communities can feel a sense of ownership (Nemeth, 2020). These examples bring to mind that researching learning cities as a process of co-creation could involve exploring the ways that cities and their institutions, their public statuary and street or building naming have been brought to the fore for public debate in many countries in light of the Black Lives Matters movement.

Although it might seem commonsensical that learning is central to the concept of learning cities, if these cities are to achieve the sustainable development goals in a post COVID-19 context, attention needs to be given to the 'city' or spatial aspect of the task. Researchers recognising this complexity are encouraging interdisciplinary work. For a journal such as ours, the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, this means encouraging more submissions from research teams drawn from not only adult education and learning backgrounds, but also other areas of education and learning and different fields

of interest, such as urban studies. For example, Facer and Buchczyk (2019) offer a framework of theoretical and methodological tools drawn from adult education where they highlight the work of Sandlin et al. (2011) on public pedagogy as a way to understand non-formal learning theory and bring this into dialogue with concepts and metaphors from urban studies and engineering. Their specific contribution to understanding how the learning infrastructure of a city may be made visible is to explore the way that people and their communities interact and learn as they engage with those that have responsibility for the arrangements of places, in other words, responsibility for the infrastructure such as roads, transport systems, Wi-fi networks and buildings or resources, including the offerings of adult education providers and their connections with formal education institutions – schools, colleges and universities. Drawing on ethnographic work that developed the concept of ‘lively infrastructure’ to explain how people’s engagement in struggles over resources can lead to social transformations (Amin, 2014), Facer and Buchczyk (2019, 171) call for a focus on learning cities as places in which education and learning should be understood ‘as a dynamic practice’ inculcated with the trajectories and networks of different sets of people and the materials or infrastructures of places. Interestingly though, and perhaps because these authors are located in urban studies, they make no reference to the work of adult educators and the concept of transformation learning even though they recognise the importance of understanding the role of public pedagogy (Redmon Wright & Sandlin, 2017).

Arguably, as learning cities are crucial to the achievement of sustainable development goals, the post COVID-19 recovery of cities and to the challenges posed by increased mobility, diversity and inequality, research is needed that can explore and understand these issues. Equally, since learning cities are located in many different socio-political systems, their approach to goal setting and researching their effectiveness will of necessity vary and reaching international agreement on progress measurements will be difficult, as UNESCO have found (Boshier, 2018). Whilst this latter comment suggests a retreat into relativism, the overall argument suggested here is that interdisciplinary research adopting concepts and methods for data collection and analysis that recognise local conditions, whilst generating findings that have more general relatability to improve practice are necessary (Bassey, 1981) and not a retreat to relativism. The example provided from Facer and Buchczyk (2019) shows how interdisciplinary study of a learning city can uncover the dynamics framing learning as ‘lively infrastructure’. Facer and Buchczyk (2019, 185) show also that such research can reveal ‘how cities themselves respond to these interventions with new and potentially resistant learning practices, how new patterns of inclusion and exclusion are formed through these interventions, and what new trajectories may be opened up in these processes’. Arguably, adult education and learning researchers might find that being open to this interdisciplinary approach would help develop a research conversation with others who are exploring the meaning and relevance of learning cities.

## ORCID

Sue Webb  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3068-3530>  
 John Holford  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1666-4525>  
 Steven Hodge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1194-5208>  
 Marcella Milana  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0833-959X>  
 Richard Waller  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0697-3183>

## References

- Amin, A. (2014). Lively Infrastructure. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 31(7–8), 137–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414548490>
- Bassey, M. (1981). Pedagogic research: On the relative merits of search for generalisation and study of single events. *Oxford Review of Education*, 7(1), 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498810070108>
- Borkowska, K., & Osborne, M. (2018). Locating the fourth helix: Rethinking the role of civil society in developing smart learning cities. *International Review of Education*, 64(3), 355–372. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9723-0>
- Boshier, R. (2018). Learning cities: Fake news or the real deal? *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 37(4), 419–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2018.1491900>

- Delors, Jacques, Al Mufti, In'am, Amagi, Isao, Carneiro, Roberto, Chung, Fay, Geremek, Bronislaw, Gorham, William, Kornhauser, Aleksandra, Manley, Michael, Padrón Quero, Marisela, Savane, Marie Angélique, Singh, Karan, Stavenhagen, Roberto, Myong Won Suhr, Zhou Nanzhao. (1996). *Learning: The treasure within*. UNESCO.
- Facer, K., & Buchczyk, M. (2019). Understanding learning cities as discursive, material and affective infrastructures. *Oxford Review of Education*, 45(2), 168–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1552581>
- Faure, E., Herrera, F., Kaddoura, A.-R., Lopes, H., Petrovsky, A. V., Rahnema, M., & Ward, F. C. (1972). *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow*. UNESCO.
- Fitzgerald, H. E., & Zientek, R. (2015). Learning cities, systems change and community engagement scholarship. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 145(Spring), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20120>
- Kyle, K. (2003). Editorial: Glocalisation and the learning city. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 22(5), 443–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260137032000116585>
- Lido, C., Reid, K., & Osborne, M. (2019). Lifewide learning in the city: Novel big data approaches to exploring learning with large scale surveys, GPS and social media. *Oxford Review of Education*, 45(2), 279–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2018.1554531>
- Longworth, N., & Osborne, M. (2010). Six ages towards a Learning region – A retrospective. *European Journal of Education*, 45(3), 368–401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2010.01436.x>
- Neary, J., & Osborne, M. (2018). University engagement in achieving sustainable development goals: A synthesis of case studies from the SUEUAA study. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 58(3), 336–364. <https://www.ajal.net.au/downloads/university-engagement-in-achieving-sustainable-development-goals-a-synthesis-of-case-studies-from-the-sueuaa-study/>
- Nemeth, B. (2020). Learning cities – An influential topic for adult education and learning, drawing attention to inclusions, collaboration and innovation. Editorial. *Studies in Adult Education and Learning*, 26(1), 3–13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4312/as.26.1.3-13>
- Osborne, M. (2014). Learning cities 2020. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 4(3), 2064–2199. <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/97445>
- Osborne, M., Kearns, P., & Yang, J. (2013). Learning cities: Developing inclusive, prosperous and sustainable urban communities. *International Review of Education*, 59(4), 409–423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-013-9384-y>
- Preston, J., Chadderton, C., Kitagawa, K., & Edmunds, C. (2015). Community response in disasters: An ecological framework. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 34(6), 727–753. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2015.1116116>
- Rawolle, S., & Lingard, B. (2014). Mediatization and education: A sociological account. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatization of communication* (pp. 595–614). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Redmon Wright, R., & Sandlin, J. A. (2017). (Critical) learning in/through everyday life in a global consumer culture. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 36(1–2), 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2017.1270068>
- Sandlin, J., O'Malley, M., & Burdick, J. (2011). Mapping the complexity of public pedagogy scholarship: 1894–2010. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(3), 338–375. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311413395>
- UIL blog September 24 2020 COVID-19 It's time to prioritize adult education. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <https://thelifelonglearningblog UIL.unesco.org/tag/learning-cities/>
- UIL/PASCAL 2020. UNESCO/PASCAL observatory webinar 'learning cities' COVID-19 recovery: From research to practice – The challenge of measurement, planning and evaluation. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities/unescopascal-observatory-webinar-learning-cities-covid-19-0>
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. (2013). *Beijing declaration on learning cities – lifelong learning for all: Promoting inclusion, prosperity and sustainability in cities*.
- UNESCO, Institute for Lifelong Learning. (2020). *The UNESCO global network of learning cities welcomes 54 new member cities from 27 countries*. 23 September 2020. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <https://uil.unesco.org>