

Dublin, Ohio: A Learning City

“Access to knowledge is the superb, the supreme act of truly great civilizations.”

Toni Morrison

We are all lifelong learners. Well before and long after our formal school years, all people seek to learn and understand their place in the world and their relationship to all it holds. Lifelong learning is by nature learner-driven – personalized, activity-based and self-motivated. It is best supported by an environment rich with learning opportunities, committed to enabling all individuals to achieve their fullest potential. Such an environment may well be the most important emerging hallmark of great cities and flourishing communities.

This brief paper suggests a new vision for creating and assessing the quality of our cities, using Dublin as the test bed for exploring and understanding potential impact. This project would be especially applicable to Dublin which has consistently invested in its quality of life and its high regard for accessibility to learning. As an international “intelligent city,” Dublin has already claimed learning as a core civic value.

Designing a “learning city” is a new concept among American cities. It has some precedents in Europe and the United Kingdom, but none that build learning around a nexus of both formal and informal learning institutions. This new vision is led by a few provocative questions.

- What if American cities used their support of lifelong learning as a measure of civic quality?
- What if they demonstrated that a city’s greatness can be measured both by the excellence of its formal educational institutions – schools and universities – and by the active presence of a continuum of lifelong learning opportunities?
- What could be gained by providing a city’s residents with ease of access to trusted learning resources as a part of the city’s services?

Our communities are already filled with an amazing array of learning resources: libraries, museums, community centers, public broadcasting, parks, festivals, neighborhood organizations and environmental centers – many, many institutions with public learning at the heart of their mission. In the case of Dublin, even its business enterprises have incorporated ongoing learning. What most cities have failed to do is recognize and organize the collective power of these resources as a connected learning industry. While it is common for cities to point with pride at their “cultural institutions,”

how many cities point to these same assets as indicators that the city embraces lifelong learning as a core value?

With these questions in mind, I am proposing that the city of Dublin Ohio, pilot the process and impact of creating a true “learning city.” Such a city would provide widespread, integrated, and systematic access to learning resources and skills. It would recognize that the required resources are already embedded in the life of the city, though functioning individually and separately. The city would explore ways to move its cultural resources into collaboration with its formal learning resources, its business community and its city leadership to build a connective learning infrastructure in the city. It would further activate the capacity of cultural agencies to build social capital, creating new levels of trust and reciprocity, shared information, and civic responsibility.

Such a shift in focus would be a daring enterprise. It would require bold new ways of thinking and operating. It would begin with the idea that access to lifelong learning is a civic virtue and a shared value. I believe that Dublin has already asserted its commitment to such a goal. It would begin with identifying and bringing together leadership from the city’s critical stakeholder groups. The people at the helm of these groups would themselves have to be very special people. They would need patience to work through the messy process of shaping a collaboration. They would need tolerance for uncertainty and experimentation. Most importantly, they would need vision, passion and a commitment to learning together. Such a profile is the core reason I believe Dublin may be the ideal laboratory for such an undertaking. It has all of the ingredients -- including the leadership that can stamp the process with commitment and imagination.

Civic Innovation: An Active Enterprise

Across the country, cities are seeking to re-brand themselves, to revitalize urban centers with new identities. *Cool Cities*, *Great Places* and *Creative Economies* are just some of the new images emerging from these efforts. At the heart of each is the growing understanding that the national economy is increasingly knowledge-oriented. Cities seek to establish environments that attract a creative and energetic workforce, build a sense of community pride, and boost economic development.

Alongside these efforts, another movement is building – emerging from the concern about diminishing social capital – those stocks of social trust, norms and networks that everyone can draw upon to solve common problems. Cities are exploring how to bring their neighborhoods together and to support more participatory government. Building social capital is seen as a critical component of creating such safe, vital, and livable cities. Alongside of becoming more “cool,” therefore, cities are also trying to become more neighborly and engaged. “Better Together,” an initiative of the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University, asserts that, “We will become a better place when assessing social capital impact becomes a standard part of decision-making.” The same report notes that the arenas of education and arts and culture offer an important intersection for building

social capital. The paper you are now reading concurs that the interface between our existing urban assets and our new urban goals is rich with such potential.

Imperatives for Change

What is the source of the need and desire for a civic renaissance? Why should the cultural, educational and administrative leadership of a city undertake change – specifically toward becoming a “learning city”? What would be the benefits to the public, the city, and the collaborating institutions? The answers begin with a very brief overview of the seismic changes of today’s world.

From Industrial Age to Knowledge Age: The once familiar territory of an industrial age has dramatically yielded to a knowledge age, one in which access to information, global understanding, facility with new technologies, and the ability to assimilate change is essential for survival and success. Success and leadership in such an environment requires new learning and the creative application of new ideas. We are bombarded with information, but we need the ability to approach it critically and thoughtfully and to be supported in our learning by trusted sources and vetted authorities.

Formal education ends for many people at age 18. Even where it continues through higher education, classroom learning is only a small portion of the lifelong learning enterprise that is at the heart of being human. Our informal learning experiences are continuous. They are as commonplace as picking up a recipe in a grocery store to listening to the car radio on the way home. Daily learning may serve practical needs, such as medical advice, or spiritual needs, such as revisiting a favorite work of art. Much of what we learn outside of school is self-motivated, driven by our own interests, and either supported or limited by our access to quality information and experiences. It should be supported by access to trusted and vetted sources of information.

Our information-rich society is at once exhilarating and threatening. It provides an unprecedented variety of experiences, but it is also accompanied by serious questions. Will access to important information be equitable? Will formal education provide the tools for new thinking skills? Will the tools of information isolate us even further from one another? How will civic life change? Will our overly busy lives further erode social capital, or are there new opportunities to create social bonds and build civic responsibility? How can society recognize and address these changes – and build them thoughtfully into our urban settings?

As cities increasingly recognize the need to attract younger, creative thinkers into their midst and to rebuild the bonds that support a true sense of community, they acknowledge that the quality of urban life needs to change. Our urban centers need to become catalysts for energy, fresh ideas, and deeper experiences. Fortunately, they do not need to begin anew. They are already filled with institutions with all-encompassing learning missions.

Building From Strength: Great cities large and small have a plethora of learning resources functioning in their midst – even if they often fail to define them as such. Our anchor cultural and educational facilities – museums and science centers, libraries and archives, parks and zoos, theaters and concert halls, public radio and television entities, girls and boys clubs, recreational centers -- all could well be thought of as a city-wide, richly-varied campus of learning opportunities. Typically, cities tout such resources as tourist attractions, economic engines, or cultural “amenities” – failing to recognize their greatest strength and urban asset. They are first and foremost extraordinary centers of learning.

Where else can you visit an Egyptian temple? See the full size of a giant squid? Demonstrate a lightning strike? Create a miniature tornado? Hear African instruments? Compare forms of dance? See the brushstrokes on a Monet painting? Where else can you browse through objects from across time and cultures? Find points of connection to every place and every era today and before human existence? How else can you first read about a piece of music and then hear it performed live by a professional orchestra? Read about animals of the world and then visit them at the zoo? Listen to a broadcast, follow it up online, and even seek out its subject in a city museum? Connect your American identity with another country across the ocean? Where can you do all of this and talk about your experience with your family, others in the gallery, experts on the topic? Such experiences make up the essence of lifelong learning. Imagine if they were linked by their ideas or their location or their current programs – inviting you to move seamlessly from one to the next?

Museums, libraries, performing arts, regional festivals, and other informal learning experiences expand human knowledge in countless ways. They use all mediums – arts and exhibits, programs and lectures, dance and drama, encounter, experience, and media – to connect us to the richness of human life. They include amazing expertise – grounding all of their work in scholarly expertise and creative talent. Not only do they offer us new discoveries, they provide us with the tools for self-discovery. These are the places that open up other cultures for us as well, helping bridge differences. They offer safe and supportive environments and community gathering places. They celebrate high art and folk art, classical ventures and music of the people. They already comprise a great and unparalleled learning campus. Now is the time to build on these remarkable urban assets, connect them, market them and assure that they are accessible to all. Imagine, then, how our cities would be redefined.

Creating such an urban environment would benefit individuals and the civic spaces in which they learn and work together. The more supported our citizens are in their quest to be full participants in this new age, the more likely cities are to reap civic benefits. Well-informed citizens, whose diverse interests, talents, and needs are recognized and valued by their communities, are likely to become better decision makers, civic participants and active voices in creating optimal social conditions. “Better Together,” the report referred to earlier, states that the arts (and I include the full range of related venues) “...inspire a raft of civically valuable dispositions – trust, openness, honesty, cooperativeness, tolerance and respect.” The section of the report titled *The Arts and Social Capital*

further notes that research “suggests that the arts can be a valuable engine of civic renewal.”

Moving Ahead

What would a learning city look like? Who would be part of a city-wide learning collaborative? What would be the challenges and barriers for creating a campus-like system? How can such a collaborative enterprise move beyond a series of partnerships to become a systemic part of the city?

These are the critical questions that must be considered by a strong group of community leaders. If this project is to work in Dublin, it must reflect the specific nature of the city and its mix of institutions. The project would build a unique form from the strengths and identities of each institution and the power of a regional vision. Even though this paper is not meant to be proscriptive, it suggests some of the necessary components and some frameworks to begin a conversation.

A Dedicated Steering Committee: Every valuable project needs leadership and vision. The Steering Committee must be at the highest level. Its composition must include both city leadership and the key leaders of the pillar cultural/educational institutions. The economic and business leadership of the community must also be represented so that there is clear alignment with the long range goals for the city’s welfare. The arts and educational institutions represented must work directly with civic leaders. They must be at the table of policymaking if they are to be viable in the long run. The members of the steering committee also have to be critical decision makers in their own organizations. They must have the authority to commit their individual institutions to remain actively engaged with the development process and to commit to the goals that emerge from the group’s deliberations.

Expanded Working Group: As the project takes shape, it will need to engage other institutions from “second and third tier” organizations and institutions that will be a part of the overall project. Not only will these include institutional directors, but also representatives from related community organizations, festival heads, etc.

Research and Asset Mapping: One of the initial steps will be to develop a full picture of the “learning campus” of Dublin, identifying current institutions and programs, existing partnerships, and a comprehensive listing of exhibits, programs and events presently offered by these institutions. Subject matter, expertise, community affiliations and target audiences also need to be defined as part of this initial process. This phase will also explore barriers to access and other issues that will need to be addressed through policy considerations to move the project forward. Geographical links, potential public spaces, and opportunities to create group experiences will also emerge.

Connecting the Assets/Defining the Campus: Research will identify existing links, overlaps, and complements between programs. It will explore relationships to city

concerns and goals as well. This phase will include a deep consideration of how the various institutions and program entities fit into learning frameworks. This phase also includes identifying audience needs. Throughout this process, and, indeed, the project as a whole, audience research is essential to assure that audience needs and interests are integral to planning.. This is the ideal time to find natural connections between the whole network of learners and teachers that make up the informal educational fabric of the city.

Identifying Portals for Shared Information: Also inherent in the mapping and connecting phases is planning for the ongoing exchange of information between the learning campus, the city and the public. *Connecting Communities*, a publication of the Benton Foundation in 2000, suggested that public broadcasting and its digital assets might be ideal portals. All possibilities need to be studied.

Defining the Message and Articulating the Value: Clearly, the success of this enormous undertaking requires a strong and well-articulated message. It must be well defined and widely used. Not only must the process of forming the message be integral to the entire project, it also must be strategically used. A comprehensive marketing plan is an essential component of launching the “learning city.”

If one considers the metaphor of a learning campus, then there are many related messages that could be useful. For example, if you begin by identifying all the available subject matter in the region, just imagine what could emerge – from all of the sciences to art and technology, music and dance, drama and festivals, cooking and creativity at many different venues. The campus would not be a university; it would be the city of Dublin! Different audiences could be addressed at different times. One season, the city could become a teen campus (The connections with service learning would be great). In another season, it could become a lively pre-school learning center or a city-wide version of elderhostel, or a campus that catered to families learning together. The potential is enormous. What must tie all projects together is the repetition of the learning theme and the connection between the project and the unique aspects of daily life in Dublin.

Evaluation: Ongoing evaluation of this project is essential. It must identify what works, what doesn't work, and what can be improved. The entire process will be carefully documented to create a clear record of this totally new project. Its learning experiences and its successes will combine to become a powerful example of a city addressing the challenges of this century in new and highly personal ways.

Dissemination: All of the participants in so expansive a project will provide multiple opportunities for sharing the impact of a “learning city.” If such a powerful realignment of cultural and educational entities is to work effectively, it will support the on-going branding of Dublin as a vibrant and progressive city. The tools are all in place. All that is needed now is the commitment, the imagination, and the excitement of launching a whole new concept.

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