A LEARNING COMMUNITY TWO YEARS ON: REFLECTING ON SUCCESSES AND FRAMING FUTURES

Catherine H. Arden; T. Cooper; K. McLachlan & S. Stebbings
University of Southern Queensland, Stanthorpe Shire Council,
Community Development Services Inc & Stanthorpe Shire Library

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a participatory action research (PAR) evaluation conducted with the members of the Granite Belt Learners Group in their rural 'learning community' in South East Queensland, and presents an action research and evaluation framework to guide the community on the next stage of its journey.

KEYWORDS

Learning communities – lifelong learning – participatory action research – evaluation

INTRODUCTION

The learning communities movement emerged during the 1970s in response to a perceived need for rural and regional communities across the western world to adapt to significant changes in the structure of their economies as a result of globalisation, the impact of technological innovations, and changing demographics (Longworth, 2006; Candy, 2002). Learning communities, cities, towns and regions "explicitly use learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development which involves all parts of the community " (Yarnit, 2000, p. 11, as cited in Kilpatrick, Barrett and Jones, 2003, p. 2). The so-called 'wider benefits' of this increased participation in learning are often defined and described in terms of enhanced human, social and economic capital as well as improved health and wellbeing (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Bassett-Grundy and Bynner, 2004).

Stanthorpe Shire is located on the Granite Belt of South East Queensland approximately two-and-a-half hours south west of Brisbane near the border with New South Wales. The population is 10,600, of which two-thirds live in the town of Stanthorpe with the remainder dispersed throughout the fifteen villages and surrounding farm properties covering a geographical area of 2669 square kilometres. Typical of smaller, rural communities west of the 'great divide', the town has an ageing community, a low median income, a lower proportion of the population with post-compulsory education qualifications and lower use of information communication technologies (ICT) in comparison with Brisbane metropolitan and larger coastal centres in Queensland (ABS, 2001, 2006, cited in Cavaye, 2008), all of which are considered risk factors in terms of the community's continued prosperity and longer term sustainability. Having identified these risk factors and explored the opportunities presented by the learning community concept adapted for the Australian context, the Stanthorpe Shire Council declared Stanthorpe a learning community during the Adult Learners' Week celebrations in September, 2005.

Adopting Yarnit's abovementioned definition of a learning community and building on models developed by Kearns (1999) and others, a number of learning community projects, initiatives and strategies were formalised by local learning community 'champions' that aimed to build the learning community by taking action on a number of fronts including the formation of a community learning 'action group' that would promote the importance of lifelong learning to the broader community. This action group, which calls itself the "Granite Belt Learners", is comprised of local community members who are passionate about the value of lifelong learning for the continued well-being and prosperity of their community.

This paper reports the results of this group's engagement in a participatory action research (PAR) evaluation process two years on from Stanthorpe's official declaration as a 'learning community'. Through this reflexive engagement, the group revisited the original 'learning community' vision with a view to evaluating progress and framing possible lifelong learning futures. As well as highlighting identified benefits and opportunities for individuals, groups and the broader community, the report gives consideration to risks and challenges inherent in both the implementation and evaluation of their 'learning community' initiative, and presents recommendations for an action research and evaluation framework that can be used to guide the community on the next stage of its journey.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of and rationale for the learning community of place, or geographic learning community (as distinct from online learning communities, communities of practice, communities of interest) draws on a number of theoretical constructs that are inextricably linked: firstly, the *meso* level concept of community, as a subset of society differentiated from both the *macro* perspective of the nation state or region on the one hand and the *micro* perspective of the individual on the other (Kilpatrick, 2000), which provides the context for living and learning (Williamson, 1998) and which is closely related to notions of 'place', 'place management' (NIACE, 2005), community development and renewal, individual and community capacity, active citizenship and civil society (Longworth, 2006; Williamson, 1998; Candy, 2002); secondly, the various forms of capital available to individuals in society classified by Schuller et al (2004) as human, social and identity capital, and how processes of building and drawing on these forms of capital by individuals within communities – particularly through participation in formal education and informal learning – can be linked to achievement of economic, social, cultural, and environmental outcomes for those individuals and communities (Kilpatrick, 2000; 2005); and finally, understandings of learning and related concepts of lifelong and life wide learning, the learning society, formal and informal learning, adult community education and social justice, which have emerging and ever-increasing connections with information communication technologies (ICT) through community informatics, networked learning and social action initiatives aimed at bridging the so-called 'digital divide' through universal access to ICT skills, infrastructure and connectivity (Knox, 2005).
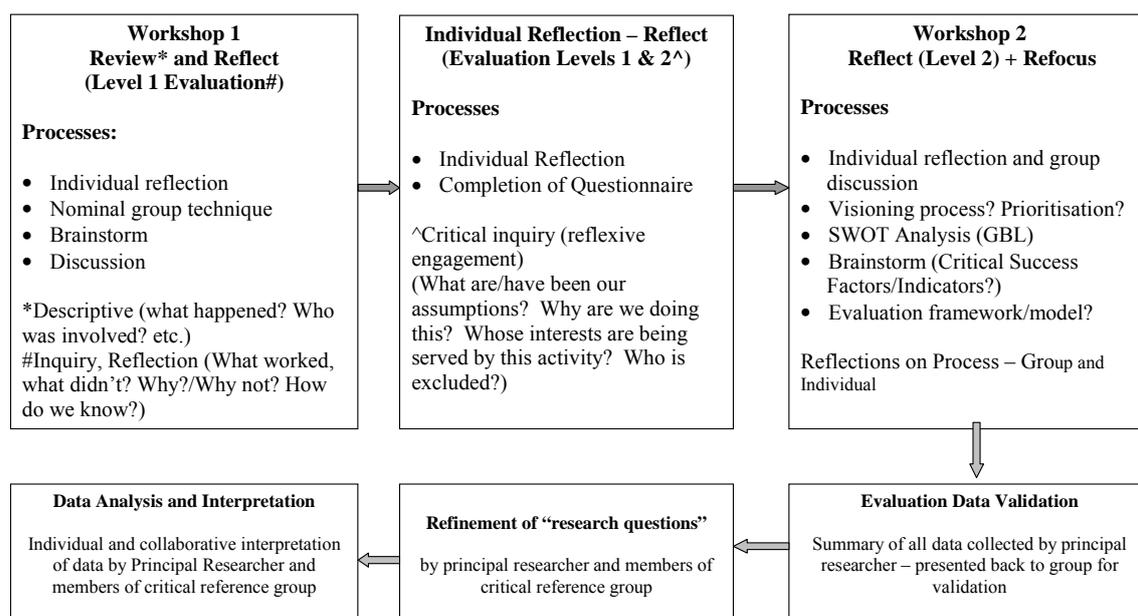
A review of key concepts underpinning the Stanthorpe learning community initiative articulated in "Learning for life on the Granite Belt: A community learning strategy for 2003-2008" reveals the premises underpinning the Stanthorpe learning community initiative to be firmly located in this theoretical framework. This paper will draw on the research findings to explore, among other things, the extent to which theory has informed practice in this learning community and how these findings can in turn inform the development of an evaluation model that can serve to strengthen the links between theory and practice.

METHODOLOGY

In dealing with a level of social reality focussed at the interface between the *meso* level of the learning community and the *micro* level of the individuals who are actors within that community, the evaluation is firmly located in a paradigm that values and seeks to understand relationships among people in communities and between people and the "formal and informal infrastructure" of their communities, as well as the nature of actions and interactions that are conducive to achieving positive outcomes for individuals and communities through civic engagement, participation in lifelong learning and the building of social capital (Kilpatrick, 2000, p. 4). The evaluation methodology adopted draws on models of participatory action research and evaluation (Wadsworth, 1997, 1998; Elden and Levin, 1991; Adult Learning Australia, 2005) designed to model as well as foster effective community engagement practices (see AUTHORS, 2007) by actively involving the Granite Belt Learners as research partners and "*critical* reference group" (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 6 [emphasis in original]) moving through three phases of an evaluative process that align with the project's title 'Review, Reflect, Refocus' (RRR). The evaluation framework or schema, which utilises a layered process of review and evaluation to answer a series of broad evaluation questions, is outlined in Figure 1 below. The three-tiered evaluation logic is designed to guide respondents through a process of reflection and critical enquiry as outlined in Figure 1.

Two facilitated focus group workshops led by the principal researcher with eight participants, combined with questionnaires completed by the same eight individuals, served as the primary data collection techniques. Analysis of relevant documentation – such as group and organisational policy documents – also contributed to the data gathered. Three of the participants (acting as the 'critical reference group' for the evaluation and co-authors of this paper)[1] then participated in a process of data analysis that involved refinement of research/evaluation questions to guide data analysis; individual and collaborative review and interpretation of the data in light of the three identified research/evaluation questions; and presentation of evaluation 'findings' to the broader group membership and broader research community.

---

1 The three GBL members self-selected for this role in the sense that they had problematised the group's role as learning community catalyst and sought assistance from the principal researcher to develop and facilitate the evaluation. Wadsworth (1998, p. 10) maintains that "members of critical reference groups who have problematised a situation are in the most strategic position to work on its improvement".

Figure 1: Outline of evaluation process as first cycle of PAR

Workshop 1 Review* and Reflect (Level 1 Evaluation#)	Individual Reflection – Reflect (Evaluation Levels 1 & 2^)	Workshop 2 Reflect (Level 2) + Refocus
Processes: • Individual reflection • Nominal group technique • Brainstorm • Discussion *Descriptive (what happened? Who was involved? etc.) #Inquiry, Reflection (What worked, what didn't? Why?/Why not? How do we know?)	**Processes** • Individual Reflection • Completion of Questionnaire ^Critical inquiry (reflexive engagement) (What are/have been our assumptions? Why are we doing this? Whose interests are being served by this activity? Who is excluded?)	**Processes** • Individual reflection and group discussion • Visioning process? Prioritisation? • SWOT Analysis (GBL) • Brainstorm (Critical Success Factors/Indicators?) • Evaluation framework/model? Reflections on Process – Group and Individual

Data Analysis and Interpretation	Refinement of "research questions"	Evaluation Data Validation
Individual and collaborative interpretation of data by Principal Researcher and members of critical reference group	by principal researcher and members of critical reference group	Summary of all data collected by principal researcher – presented back to group for validation

Figure 1: Review, Reflect, Refocus PAR Evaluation Process

The eight respondents participating in the evaluation represented the foundation membership of the Granite Belt Learners Group described in the introduction and one new member who had only recently joined the group. Demographic characteristics of the respondents have particular relevance for the study and are included in the discussion of findings.

Acknowledged strengths of the methodology include:
- Fitness for purpose (that is, the approach partially achieved what it set out to achieve taking into consideration the below constraints and with modification has the potential to achieve its intended outcomes)
- High levels of participation by respondents and members of the critical reference group in a collaborative and potentially transformative learning process
- Active involvement of members of the critical reference group in data analysis, interpretation and reporting increases the trustworthiness of the findings and minimises researcher bias.

Acknowledged limitations of the process that impact on the quality and potential utility of the data include that:
- The small number of participants involved in the evaluation limited the broader impact and applicability of evaluation conclusions
- A reliance on individuals' perceptions with limited reference to 'objective' supporting data affected the legitimacy of some of the evaluation conclusions
- Time constraints impacted on the group's ability to fully explore the broader implications of their reflective and reflexive process as well as to effectively engage in the 'Refocus' component of the evaluation process.

DISCUSSION

The data gathered from this project have been analysed using three broad research questions that seek to inform the Review, Reflect, Refocus evaluation process:
1. To what extent is the group realising its stated vision?
2. What are the risks and challenges for the group in implementing and evaluating learning community initiatives?
3. What are the opportunities and possibilities for the group in their future work supporting the development of the learning community?

The documented vision of the Granite Belt Learners group was "To be a catalyst for lifelong learning on the Granite Belt". Examining personal definitions of learning, lifelong learning and learning communities through the RRR process enabled respondents to go to a deeper

level and identify assumptions that may be impacting on the achievement of this vision. The data indicate that the members understand 'learning' and 'lifelong learning' as complex concepts and see the 'learning community' initiative linked to enhancing opportunity for and wellbeing of individuals and the broader community. Although the data reflected a general consensus regarding the value of all three concepts for individual and community prosperity and wellbeing, it also clearly showed, in the words of one of the members of the critical reference group, "that we are all at different places on the path". This awareness of the diversity of members' understandings of key learning community concepts and constructs – particularly in relation to the original conceptual framework underpinning the learning community initiative – and the implications of this for the capacity of the group to realise its stated vision, emerged as one of the key learnings from the RRR process.

A learning community is defined as any group of people, whether linked by geography or some other shared interest, that addresses the learning needs of its members through pro-active partnerships, with participation and celebration being key elements for success (Kearns, 1999; ALA, 2005). The group set objectives and utilised a number of strategies to achieve its mission of promoting lifelong learning as a key principle in the establishment of a learning community. The events and programs conducted by the group such as the annual Learning Expo were perceived as successful, which indicates a certain legitimacy of the shared vision, however, the ability of the group to engage others in the concepts of lifelong learning and the learning community is seen as problematic. The data suggests that people will need to see or be able to recognise the benefits of learning for them. While tangible benefits are easy to convey, less tangible outcomes of learning are harder to articulate. It could be related to a sense of fun, achievement, recognition, reward and the idea that the means are as important as the ends.

If learning communities are seen as a community development process designed to build social capital through a learning approach, then it is imperative to understand the community which one is trying to engage. It became clear to the respondents through the RRR process that the group's knowledge and understanding of the needs and characteristics of the community was lacking. The findings also showed that a lack of diversity in the group's membership was potentially impacting negatively on the group's ability to engage the broader community. Issues

of communication and language were identified as barriers, suggesting that the approaches that have been made have not been reaching the desired audiences. Golding (2007) reminds us that bonding social capital or bonding ties within and between homogenous groups is not as useful for learning as bridging social capital, which connects dissimilar groups and, although harder to create, is more valuable in enhancing learning.

The group also identified, through questioning their own assumptions, behaviours and actions that may have been contrary to what was trying to be achieved. For example, it was identified that the group was not 'cohesive' and therefore not encouraging its own developmental learning, and that despite promoting a learning community, which implies participation, the group may appear elite. As Argyris and Schon (1974) assert, people hold maps in their heads about how to plan, implement and review their actions. They further assert that few people are aware that the maps they use to take action are not the theories they explicitly espouse. Also, even fewer people are aware of the maps or theories they do use (Argyris, 1980). The scope of the research was such that this question was not fully explored, however it is fair to say that the process undertaken has the impact of raising the awareness of the group to some of its blind spots.

Looking ahead, the respondents identified the following actions that they believed would take the group forward:

- Revisit and workshop the vision and goals, document policies and procedures, develop a strategic plan
- Expand the group's membership targeting 'missing' sectors of the community; survey community members for their ideas and develop more partnerships
- Improve marketing, promotion and communication; make links with other learning communities to enhance externality and knowledge-sharing
- Identify members' skills gaps and training needs; develop an induction and orientation process for new members; have regular learning events for the group to enhance knowledge and skills; ensure evaluation is a key component of monitoring the effectiveness of group activities as well as regular challenging of assumptions and expansion of knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has sought to evaluate the work of The Granite Belt Learners' group, using a participatory action research (PAR) approach, in order to determine the progress of the groups' learning community initiative over a two year period. Data collected was analysed to build a view of the members' understandings of where it started, where it was currently and the barriers that needed to be addressed for it to achieve its objectives. Through this process, key themes of *diversity, participation and engagement, language and communication*, and *learning* emerged as integral to the group's ability – or inability – to achieve its mission and respond effectively to current and future challenges.

One of the clear challenges for the group is to engage in critical dialogue, aimed at surfacing assumptions, so as to increase the understanding of both the implicit and explicit factors impacting on the group. Maintaining a participatory action research and evaluation model allows for critical reflection as a means of inquiry for identifying and exploring assumptions, surfacing power relationships, developing shared understandings and ensuring that learning community activities are informed by established theoretical frameworks that are subject to ongoing practice-based inquiry. The 'Review, Reflect, Refocus' process utilised for this study provides a model of participatory action research and evaluation for the Granite Belt Learners Group to adapt and utilise on an ongoing basis. Adaptations to the model based on identified limitations as a result of this research would include:

- Ensuring that all learning community activities and initiatives incorporate data gathering for evaluation purposes to answer the questions relevant to the Review phase (What did we do? Who was involved?) as well as the Level 1 Evaluation in the Reflect phase (Did we do what we said we would do? What worked well and what didn't? Have the desired outcomes and objectives been achieved? How do we know?)

- Providing adequate time and leadership through partnerships with educational and social researchers and community development practitioners to facilitate regular engagement in Level 2 Evaluation that utilises the original learning community conceptual framework as well as current learning communities research to model a cogenerative learning approach to community development that supports

ongoing critical questioning of the group's membership, structure, vision, values, objectives and activities, underlying assumptions and power relations.

The model can also be adapted to draw on and incorporate the key themes emerging from this PAR process – *language and communication, diversity, participation and engagement, and learning* – so that each of these themes serves as a focus for review, reflection and evaluation as well as informing the PAR process itself.

REFERENCES

Adult Learning Australia. (2005). *Hume global learning village evaluation report.* Retrieved November 12, 2007 from http://www.ala.asn.au/news/HumeEvaluationReportfinal2005.pdf

Arden, C., Cooper, T & McLachlan, K. (2007). Evaluating community engagement: Lessons for an Australian regional university. *Australasian Journal of University Community Engagement (2)*1. Spring.

Argyris, C. (1980). *Inner contradictions of rigorous research.* New York: Academic Press.

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Candy, J. (2002). Planning learning cities. Paper presented to the *39th ISoCaRP Congress 2003 Addressing Globalisation Locally*

Cavaye, J. (2008). *Stanthorpe 2020: Your say our future community plan.* Cavaye Community Development.

Elden, M., & Levin, M. (1991). Cogenerative learning: Bringing participation into action research. In W. Foote Whyte (Ed.), *Participatory action research* (pp. 127-42). London: Sage Publications.

Golding, B. (2006). Getting connected: Insights into social capital from recent adult learning research. Paper presented to the *Adult Learning Australia Conference, Melbourne 24 November.* Retrieved 20 February, 2008 from http://www.ala.asn.au/conf/2006/papers/refereed%20papers/ALAPaper06%20B%20Golding_KS06_.pdf

Longworth, N. (2006). *Learning cities, learning regions, learning communities: Lifelong learning and local government.* London: Routledge

Kearns P. (1999). *VET in the learning age: The challenge of lifelong learning for all: Volume 2: Lifelong learning.* Leabrook, S.A: NCVER

Kilpatrick, S. (2000). 'Community learning and sustainability: Practice and policy'. *Keynote Address to First Conference on the Future of Australia's Country Towns,* LaTrobe University, Bendigo, 29 June

Kilpatrick, S., Barrett, M., & Jones, T. (2003). *Defining learning communities* CRLRA Discussion Paper Series Discussion Paper D1/2003. Launceston: University of Tasmania

Knox, I. (2005). Winning ways: Online regional communities that click. Paper presented to the *2nd Future of Australia's Country Towns Conference, Bendigo, 11-13 July.*

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. (2005). *Rebalancing the social and economic: Learning, partnership and place.* Leicester: Author

Schuller, T., Hammond, C., Bassett-Grundy, A., Preston, J., & Bynnet, J. (2004). *The benefits of learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital.* London: Taylor and Francis

Wadsworth, Y. (1997). *Everyday evaluation on the run, 2nd edn.* Sydney: Allen and Unwin

Wadsworth, Y. (1998). *What is participatory action research? Action research international paper 2*. Retrieved February 12, 2007 from http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html

Williamson, B. (1998). *Lifeworlds and learning: Essays in the theory, philosophy and practice of lifelong learning.* Leicester: NIACE