

Learning Communities: Indicators for measuring societal progress at the local level Canadian Council on Learning

The Composite Learning Index (CLI)

The Canadian Council on Learning understands the importance of lifelong learning and its significance to Canada's future. In 2006, CCL developed the first index of its kind in the world, the Composite Learning Index (CLI), to provide an annual measure of Canada's performance in a number of areas related to lifelong learning. The index is comprised of 17 indicators that track information about the many different ways Canadians learn—in school, in the home, at work and in the community[1] .

The CLI is a community-level index that allows communities to examine their strengths and weaknesses in the area of learning. When communities understand the factors that contribute to their success and those that pose challenges, they can better undertake strategies to maximize their strengths and effectively address their weaknesses.

As a way of reflecting the full spectrum of lifelong learning, the CLI organizes its learning indicators into four categories, or learning pillars: *Learning to Know*, *Learning to Do*, *Learning to Live Together* and *Learning to Be*. These pillars are based on an internationally recognized model, developed by the former European Commission President [Jacques Delors](#), and first appeared in *Learning: the Treasure Within*, a 1996 UNESCO report prepared by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century.

The four pillars are described as:

Learning to Know

These are the indicators that track the development of skills and knowledge such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. Participation in post-secondary education is an example of an indicator in this area.

Learning to Do

These are the indicators that track the acquisition of applied skills; these are closely tied to occupational success, such as workplace training.

Learning to Live Together

These indicators track the cultivation of respect and concern for others. These indicators tend to measure social cohesion; an example is involvement in clubs and organizations.

Learning to Be

These indicators track areas of learning related to creativity, personal development, and health in the physical, social and spiritual senses. Access to broadband internet is one

example.

The CLI brings together data and indicators across the full spectrum of learning, from early childhood to the workplace and beyond, to help over 4,700 cities, towns and rural communities across Canada ‘connect the dots’ between learning and social and economic success.

“I am convinced that your Composite Learning Index will make it possible to chart progress in learning, allowing your country to identify improvements that are required to maintain its leadership in this area.”

— Jacques Delors, former president of the European Commission

The value of lifelong learning

Canadians benefit personally from lifelong learning through higher wages, better job prospects, improved health and a more fulfilling life. Consequently, Canada stands to gain through a more robust economy and stronger bonds within and between communities. Though these benefits are evident to most Canadians, until the CCL created the Composite Learning Index, there was no means to measure how Canada and its many communities perform across the full spectrum of learning.

Lifelong learning is an approach to learning that encompasses far more than what happens within the traditional classroom. It is a philosophy that involves the development of knowledge, skills and values throughout all stages of a person’s life—from early childhood through active seniors’ learning.

The concept of lifelong learning also recognizes that learning is not solely an intellectual process, but one that involves all aspects of people’s lives, including their role in the community, performance in the workplace, personal development and physical well-being. As explained by Longworth and Davies[2], “Lifelong learning results from a continuously supportive system which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, understanding and values they require throughout their lives.”

In fact, recent research from the Australian National Research Authority points to the conclusion that the best way to implement lifelong learning is through the development of learning communities [3].

What are Learning Communities and why are they important?

The concept of “Learning Communities, Cities and Towns” has been around since the 1970s, but came to prominence in 1996 when both the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) released their major reports on lifelong learning. A recent review found that there are now over 300 “learning communities” across Australia, Europe and Canada[4].

The term “learning community” has been used in many ways, covering activities ranging from virtual cities, academic learning communities, communities of practice, or learning towns and cities[5]. The operational definition used in this paper cites [6] and depicts learning communities as:

“Neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities or regions that explicitly use lifelong learning as an organizing principle and social/cultural goal in order to promote collaboration of their civic, economic, public, voluntary and education sectors to enhance social, economic and environmental conditions on a sustainable, inclusive basis.”

Learning communities are a sustainable form of community development in which local people from all parts of society come together to enhance the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions of their community. The key thread throughout learning communities is that lifelong learning is explicitly used as a key source of economic regeneration, democratic participation, social inclusiveness and cohesion.

Learning communities celebrate and align both formal and non-formal learning by individuals and groups so that learning is systematically fostered to enable sustainable economic development, promote social inclusion and cohesion, and encourage civic and social participation.

Learning communities often deploy three key success areas[7]:

1. **Partnership** - learning to build links between all sectors and mobilize their shared resources;
2. **Participation** - learning to involve the public in the policy process as well as learning opportunities;
3. **Performance** - learning to assess progress and benchmark good practice.

Today there are a growing number of learning villages, neighbourhoods, towns, cities and regions across the world consciously preparing for the knowledge-based economy. Although the majority of learning communities are found in Europe and Australia, learning community developments in Canada commenced in the late 1990’s in Western Canada and have gradually spread eastward.

In 2003, Victoria began the process by setting the goal of becoming “a leading learning community” by 2020[8]. To reach this goal and to transform Victoria into a place of learning, Victoria has identified a number of specific objectives, ranging from quality early childhood learning to individual learning plans for workers.

In 2006, Vancouver proclaimed itself a learning city and embraced the following principles: equitable access to learning; inclusivity; and collaboration[9]. Today, cities and regions from coast to coast, including Edmonton, St. John’s and the Township of Fort Erie, have either commenced, or are exploring, learning community initiatives.

Learning communities in Canada have taken up the model of including a vast array of community partners, including locally elected representatives from civic government and school boards, leaders from the public sector (e.g. libraries, social, recreation, and health agencies), business and economic generators, post-secondary institutions, and voluntary/community sectors.

CLI and Learning Cities, Communities and Regions

Despite the many Canadian and international successes of learning communities, measuring and documenting the impact of the learning communities approach remains an important challenge. In many cities, towns and regions, various indicators of success such as increased library memberships, growing parental involvement in schools, or significant improvement in adult literacy rates, have been realized[10].

While such individual successes are promising, learning communities are designed to foster change and improvement on a much larger scale – to foster conditions that enable all citizens to participate in lifelong learning and “enhance the social, economic and environmental conditions”[11].

Before the CLI was introduced in 2006, there was no means of measuring progress in lifelong learning. By utilizing the CLI model and framework, it is now possible for cities, towns and regions to measure the impact of their learning community strategies and policies. In fact, CCL has been working with the cities of Vancouver, St. John’s and Edmonton to use this holistic measurement tool to measure the progress each city is making in achieving their learning community goals and objectives.

For example, CCL and Vancouver have been working to create an evidence-based “Community Learning Strategy” for the City of Vancouver since 2007 – a partnership that developed in response to the city’s June 2006 Learning City proclamation, that reads in part:

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

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

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

One initial outcome of this partnership is to provide municipal government and community partners with a detailed assessment of community strengths and weaknesses in the area of learning and specific recommendations on activities that could be pursued to improve learning conditions. The community partners in this initiative are broad and include:

- City and regional government;
- Economic Development;
- School boards, colleges, universities;
- Regional health authority;
- District social service board;
- Community leadership groups;
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit organizations;
- Board of Trade;
- Community foundation;
- Libraries and library boards;
- Police;
- Museum boards;
- Immigrant Settlement Societies;
- Literacy groups;

This analysis will be used to outline the specific actions that can be taken by stakeholders (i.e. what could the municipal government undertake; what could the library board do; what could the school boards do; etc.) and in partnership with others to improve the

identified learning conditions – ultimately providing the components of a Community Learning Strategy.

Eventually, by using the CLI as the underlying framework, a Vancouver-specific CLI will be developed that utilizes locally relevant indicators. The resulting index and underlying indicators will help measure progress of the components of the Community Learning Strategy, and the broader goals of the learning city that aim to identify the learning conditions needed to maximize social, environmental and economic well-being.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, the “learning communities” approach to community development offers tremendous potential return on investment for Canadian communities. The impetus for community change comes from grass-roots level ideas and projects. Learning communities are communities that recognize and celebrate the importance of actively supporting and promoting learning opportunities for all citizens, facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills throughout ones life.

Learning occurs at all ages and in many places— in school, in the home, at work and in the community. With the development of the Composite Learning Index in 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning has provided the multitude of diverse cities, towns and rural communities across Canada with a tool to measure progress in lifelong learning. The Composite Learning Index is proving to be an innovative and effective tool for learning communities to evaluate how their lifelong learning goals and policies are impacting their overall well-being.

Learning occurs in every community but the explicit, systematic mobilization of a community’s learning resources is the definition of a learning community. Whether the objective is a “safe”, “vibrant”, “creative”, “healthy”, or “resilient” community, sustainable success is possible when community members and organizations acquire and engage the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values – the learning – necessary for new policy, practice and progress.

Countries around the world have identified lifelong learning as a strategic priority, and the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) has developed a series of tools that assesses the state of lifelong learning over time, for individual communities and across the country. The [Composite Learning Index \(CLI\)](#) was developed with a view to be useful and accessible to a wide audience, including policy-makers, education researchers and practitioners, individual students and parents at the community level. The conceptual framework for the CLI (Cartwright et al., 2006) is based on the UNESCO's International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors et al, 1996) and the four major dimensions of learning identified: *Learning to Know* ; *Learning to Do*; *Learning to Live Together* ;*Learning to Be* .

These four dimensions are not simply a conceptual framework, but a broader approach to measuring prosperity in a knowledge-based society and economy. The CLI combines 17 major indicators and 24 specific measures of lifelong learning (based upon national data surveys) available at the regional or community levels. These indicators reflect a wide

range of learning activities, including literacy skills, postsecondary attainment, job-related training and community engagement through volunteering, sports or cultural activities, among others.

Being a community-level index, the CLI allows communities to examine their strengths and weaknesses in the area of learning. When communities understand the factors that contribute to their success and those that pose challenges, they can better undertake strategies to maximize their strengths and effectively address their weaknesses, while providing a framework for tracking progress and change.

Acknowledging that several policies or programs related to learning and wellbeing are developed at the regional or municipal level, the CLI methodology can also be adapted to complement the index with more local community data. In Canada, the CLI is being used to support the 'Learning Cities' initiatives. *Learning Cities* are a sustainable form of community development in which local people from all parts of society come together to enhance the social, economic, cultural and environmental conditions of their community. The key thread throughout learning communities is that lifelong learning is explicitly used as a key source of economic regeneration, democratic participation, social inclusiveness and cohesion. CCL is currently working with several cities in Canada to use this holistic measurement tool to measure the progress each city is making in achieving their learning community goals and objectives. A city-specific CLI will be developed that utilizes locally relevant indicators. The resulting index and underlying indicators will help measure progress of the components of a Community Learning Strategy, which includes a series of learning conditions needed to maximize social, environmental and economic well-being.

Based on the CLI-methodology, [Bertelsmann Foundation](#) is currently developing an easy to use interactive online instrument in Europe called '[European Lifelong Learning Indicators](#)' (ELLI). It is currently developed to provide citizens, communities, politicians and academia with a tool that will make Lifelong Learning more tangible. Its open data approach is aimed to foster further the active involvement of all user groups.

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