# DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING NEIGHBORHOODS OF LEARNING IN CORK'S UNESCO LEARNING CITY PROJECT

Séamus Ó Tuama, Ph.D.[1]
Siobhán O'Sullivan, Ph.D.[2]

*ABSTRACT*:  Cork, the Republic of Ireland's second most populous city, is one of 12 UNESCO Learning Cities globally. Becoming a learning city requires a sophisticated audit of education, learning and other socio-economic indicators. It also demands that cities become proactively engaged in delivering to the objectives set by the *Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities* which was adopted at the first UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities in Beijing (2013) and the *Mexico City Statement on Sustainable Learning Cities* from the second conference in Mexico City (2015). The UNESCO learning city approach lays heavy emphasis on lifelong learning and social inclusion. In addressing these two concerns Cork city is piloting the development of two Learning Neighborhoods. The pilots are a collaboration between the City Council, University College Cork and Cork Education and Training Board who will work with the learning and education organizations and residents in each area to promote, acknowledge and show case active local lifelong learning. This paper looks at the context and design of these Learning Neighborhoods.

*Keywords*: Learning City, Neighborhood Learning, UNESCO, Cork

## Cork: A UNESCO Learning City

Cork City was granted the UNESCO Learning City Award at the second UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico City in September 2015. A total of twelve cities were granted the award viz. Melton (Australia), Sorocaba (Brazil), Beijing (China), Bahir Dar (Ethiopia), Espoo (Finland), Cork (Ireland), Amman (Jordan), Mexico City (Mexico), Ybycuí (Paraguay), Balanga (Philippines), Namyangju (Republic of Korea) and Swansea (United Kingdom). The Mexico conference was a follow-on from Beijing in 2013 at which the *Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities* was adopted. That declaration promotes inclusive learning, family, community, and workplace learning. It advocates the extension of learning technologies, excellence in learning and lifelong learning. It also addresses citizen empowerment, social cohesion, economic prosperity, cultural promotion and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2013).

The *Mexico City Statement on Sustainable Learning Cities* renews the Beijing agenda and emphasizes harnessing lifelong learning for citizen empowerment and solidarity; safeguarding the environment; citizen health awareness; inclusive economic growth; promotion of social, economic and political inclusion; and encourages cross-sectoral and cross-community engagement (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 3-4).

---

[1] Director, Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE), University College Cork, Ireland, ACEDirector@ucc.ie

[2] Researcher, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland, siobhan.osull@ucc.ie

In the bidding process University College Cork became one of the four key partners in the Cork learning city initiative. In line with the requirements of the UNESCO process Cork City Council is the lead, but in July 2015 it signed a memorandum of understanding to advance the UNESCO Declaration on Building Learning Cities with University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology and Cork Education and Training Board. Cork City began the formal process towards becoming a learning city through its 2014 decision to formally adopt the UNESCO Beijing Declaration. Soon after a Steering Group was formed, called Growing Learning in Cork (GLiC) which includes representatives of the signatories of the memorandum and a range of other public and civil society partners, including private citizens. Cork City had initiated processes going back to its 2002 adoption of the *Imagine Our Future* strategy and the establishment in 2004 of Cork's Lifelong Learning Festival, which is run annually and now has more than 500 individual events. Progress towards becoming a UNESCO Learning City was greatly enhanced through Cork's membership of PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE). Through its engagement with PASCAL it became an active adopter of EcCoWell (Ec = ecology and economy; Co = community and culture; Well = wellbeing and lifelong learning), which is a flexible, reflexive platform that allows cross-community engagement over wide diversity of fields. The EcCoWell approach is similar to some of the key sentiments of the Mexico Statement and complements the objectives of the Beijing Declaration.

Within the UNESCO Learning Cities project University College Cork through the Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) entered a partnership with Cork Education and Training Board, with the support of Cork City Council to engage with and support two city neighborhoods to develop 'Learning Neighborhoods.' This is aimed at supporting residents in local communities, to award good practice in promoting learning and to provide incentives for neighborhoods to improve and develop learning. Cork City launched its participation in Learning Neighborhoods at the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival in March 2015.

**Learning Neighborhoods**

The first case studies/pilot projects in Cork will involve Knocknaheeny on the northside of the city and Ballyphehane on the southside of the city.

Knocknaheeny is one of the most deprived city communities, in an area of the city with persistent socio-economic issues. The extent of educational disadvantage on Cork's northside has been the subject of multiple reports over an extended period. As recently as 2014 the *Cork City Profile* states that there is a "distinct spatial component to educational disadvantage in the city" (Kelly & Hayes, 2014: p. VII). Across the northside of Cork City, a significant part of the population has no formal education beyond primary or lower secondary levels. Although proportions of those educated to upper secondary are generally on a par with both Cork City as a whole and Ireland nationally, education at technical, vocation and certificate levels and degree level are far lower. For example, in Cork City, 15.2 per cent of the population have a technical, vocational or certificate

qualification, which is more than double the proportion in several northside electoral divisions such as Farranferris B (7.3 per cent), Gurranabraher A (7.4 per cent), and Fair Hill B (7.9 per cent). There are particularly low levels of the population aged 15 and over educated to degree level or higher in Farranferris B (3.5 per cent), Knocknaheeny (4.7 per cent), Fair Hill B (5.2 per cent) and Gurranabraher A (5.3 per cent). This is far lower than Cork City and national averages of close to 25 per cent or of more affluent areas in Cork city centre and the southside of the city such as Knockrea A (part of Blackrock) and Bishopstown A, where half of the population have a degree.

Historically Ballyphehane was also a community with significant socio-economic and educational disadvantage. It is now a more stable and settled community, with a higher than average rate of older people compared to Cork city as a whole. However there are still persistent issues. Edwards and Linehan (2005) report that it was among a cluster of communities in the south side of the city with 50 per cent rate of the population "whose education has ceased, left school at 16 or under" (p. 40), and it is also comparable with Knocknaheeny and other deprived areas of the city where "a quarter to a third of the population in these areas over the age of fifteen finished their education at Lower Secondary Level" (p. 38). Ballyphehane however, has stronger community networks, a more mature community infrastructure and is making significant educational advances.

The Learning Neighborhoods project officially began in September 2015. It will test ways of building sustainable Learning Neighborhoods that could then be applied in other neighborhoods of Cork, with potential replication in other cities. It will report on progress mid-way through the first year pilot at the 2016 Cork Lifelong Learning Festival.

The Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE), University College Cork and Cork Education and Training Board operate in partnership to coordinate the Learning Neighborhoods award/program. They will assist the two community education networks to apply to become Learning Neighborhoods and support their projects. This involved modest funding to develop promotional material, handbooks, flags/signs/stickers; the appointment of a staff member based in UCC to coordinate the award/program, support the networks, and assist in the evaluation of the action plans.

In designing the model of delivering Learning Neighborhoods the team drew from the *Schools for Health in Ireland* program: *Developing a Health Promoting School*. This program is inspired by global trends including "the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, UNESCO, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE)" (Health Service Executive, p. 3). The model also took cognizance of the success of the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival, which through its open approach to learning activities has built a vibrant program that gets engagement from grass roots levels up to major institutions like University College Cork and Cork Institute of Technology. Thus, the definition of a Learning Neighborhood is broad and aims to facilitate an ongoing process that is sustained over time. The working definition adopted by the Cork team is:

> *A Learning Neighborhood is an area that is constantly strengthening its practice in learning, providing a diversity of learning opportunities for the whole*

*population through partnership and collaboration.*

The team consulted with Peter Kearns of the PASCAL International Observatory, and incorporated a number of specifics based on that consultation that will require the attention of these neighborhoods during the first year.

1. *Partnership*: The success of the pilots will depend substantially on the range and quality of the partnerships that support these projects.
2. *Co-ordination of effort*: Success will also depend on how well the contribution of partners is coordinated, across a range of dimensions including health and well-being, learning, culture, environment, creativity and so on.
3. *Communication:* This will be fundamental. Residents in the pilot neighborhoods should be encouraged to participate and contribute and kept informed throughout the year such as through a newsletter and social media. Regular progress reports also given to all the partner organizations; an example of good practice is provided by the Hume Global Learning Village.
4. *The hub role:* Much can be gained if a well-located institution takes on the hub role as the centre of promotion, development, and assessment of the project. This is being filled by ACE at UCC.
5. *Learning audit:* An initial activity of the directing group will be to undertake a "quick and dirty" learning audit to gain an overview of the learning resources and needs of each neighborhood. This is likely to depend on inputs from the relevant parties although there could also be value in holding several community forums where community member could bring forward their views.
6. *Objectives for the pilots:* The learning audit and associated consultations and research should enable the directing group to set some specific objectives for the pilots, desirably with key performance indicators where appropriate. The objectives should be things that are achievable in the time frame of the pilots although longer-term objectives could also be identified. It is suggested some relatively small projects that could be part of the pilot stage e.g. an intergenerational learning activity; innovative learning for pre-school age; innovative learning example from second level; new learning project in the community in a non-traditional context e.g. a supermarket, an open green space etc.
7. *Assessment of outcomes:* Planning for the pilots should also include how the outcomes of the pilots will be assessed. This should include the community role, the views of partner organizations, and the report of the directing group to Cork City Council.

**Learning Neighborhoods Model**

There are several parts to the model of *Developing a Health Promoting School* that will be drawn on for Learning Neighborhoods and it is proposed to develop a Handbook to outline the process in a clear and accessible way, addressing the following aspects:

1. Introduction to Learning Neighborhoods:
   - What are Learning Neighborhoods
   - What are the aims and benefits
2. The Learning Neighborhoods model:
   - Key areas and themes for action
3. The Learning Neighborhoods process:
   - The stages involved in becoming a Learning Neighborhood
   - How long the process takes
   - How the network should be constituted, how often they should meet etc.
   - How is recognition granted and what happens afterwards
4. Appendices:
   - Criteria
   - Agreement form
   - Action plan guidelines and template
   - Application form for recognition
   - Self-reflection template

In the program/award documentation, the broad-based definition of a Learning Neighborhood will be followed by a definition of learning (e.g., all forms for all ages) and the context for the program. This will include giving the neighborhoods a sense of connection with the wider city and also with the global context of Cork as a UNESCO Learning City. The aims and benefits of engaging in A Learning Neighborhoods could also be broad and should highlight why it is important for an area to engage. Examples are provided below.

Possible Aims:
   - Foster learning in the community
   - Celebrate, highlight and showcase activities in the community.
   - Raise awareness of opportunities for learning in the neighborhood
   - Develop new initiatives, e.g., including those hard to reach

Possible Benefits:
   - Better learning outcomes
   - Enhance networking and support among those active in learning in the neighborhood.
   - Support planning, implementation and evaluation of action plans

A Learning Neighborhood handbook will outline possible areas for action. For example, the Health Promoting School model outlines four key areas for action including environment (physical and social), curriculum and learning, policy and planning, and partnerships. They state that whatever health-related topic or theme that a school decides

to work on, which will be determined following a period of consultation, should then be related to each of the four key areas. This gives schools a set of criteria for their action plan, which is implemented over an agreed timeline.

There are eleven stages in becoming a Health Promoting School, not all of which would be applicable to Learning Neighborhoods, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The handbook for Learning Neighborhoods will include an action planning template. In the Health Promoting School Model, they ask that the plan include the following:
- o The themes that the team will work on, the main aims and what is hoped to be achieved
- o Why this is important and which aims are prioritized
- o The tasks/actions that will be carried out under the four key areas, who will carry them out, when, and what resources are needed

Following the implementation, there is quite a detailed application form for recognition as a Health Promoting School.
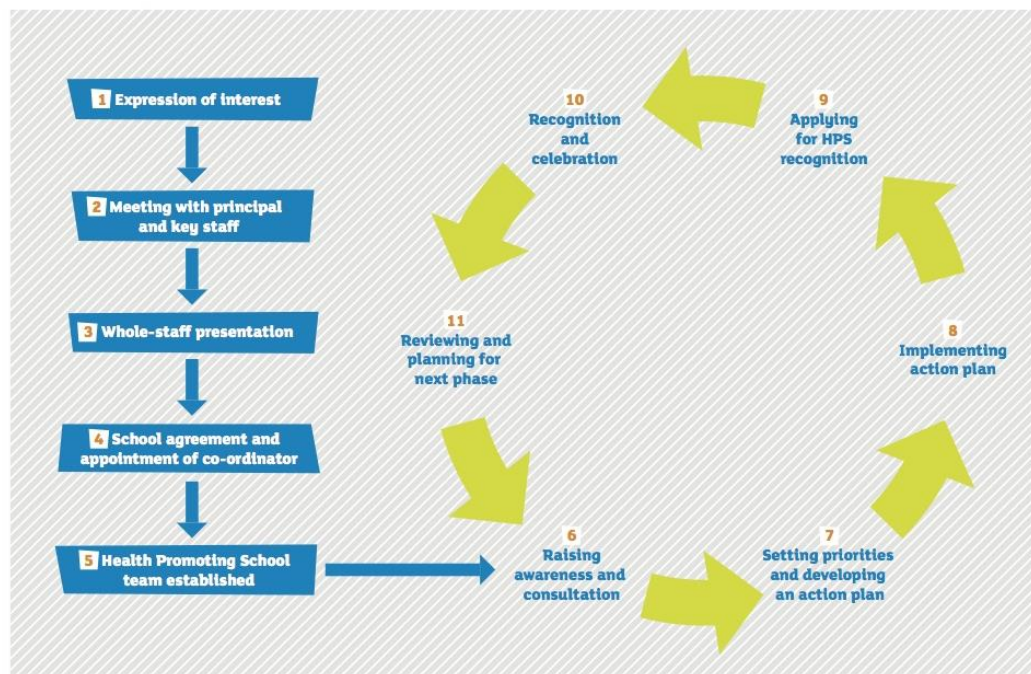


*Figure 1, Stages in the health promoting schools process (Health Service Executive).*

As this is a Case Study, it is the team's intention to learn from each step during the year and from the experiences of the two communities. The Learning Neighbourhoods process and documentation will involve the communities developing an action planning template that will include:

- The themes/focal points for the plan, based on the groups experience and their brief evaluation of learning in their neighbourhood (the 'quick and dirty' learning audit advised by Peter Kearns).
- The aims (what is hoped to be achieved and why) and actions (when, who, what resources are needed) for the year.
- The plan for monitoring throughout the year and at the end of the process.

At the end of the Learning Neighborhoods process, the networks/groups will reflect on what worked well, what could have been done differently, and actions to continue the work and to share best practice with other communities.

The coordinator will support the networks/groups that apply to take part in Learning Neighborhoods at all stages of the process: from initial involvement, development of action plans, through to evaluation (e.g. site visits and meetings with the neighborhood teams) and recognition as a Learning Neighborhood.


**Conclusion**


The Cork team faces significant challenges in developing a model of Learning Neighborhoods. There is strong commitment at community level for the initiative, but there is a strong disparity between the capacities of the two neighborhoods. Ballyphehane has a stronger base and longer history of community level success than Knocknaheeny. Statistically both communities seem similar, but there is a far higher level of population transition in Knocknaheeny and it is a much newer, younger and less settled community. It will be important that the communities can learn from each other, try to achieve their goals, but not to engage in negative or competitively driven comparison. It will be important to emphasize that the neighborhoods can both achieve success, while not being carbon copies of each other.

Another level of challenge will be to get engagement between different education and learning actors in the communities. The school system can be quite formal and at second level can become focused on the state exam system. Other actors, including libraries and community centers, while having an outward facing ethos are very often operating with very constrained resources. Pushing the concept beyond the formal and informal learning community will also be a challenge. However, both communities have networks/groups in place that are enthusiastic about engaging in the process. These groups support the Learning Neighborhoods program as vehicles to make the Learning Cities commitment more local and more beneficial for citizens. These groups also hold that rewarding good practice will revitalise learning in their communities towards building a culture of lifelong and lifewide learning.

# References

Edwards, C., & Linehan, D. (2005). *City of difference: Mapping social exclusion in Cork*. Cork City Council, Cork.

Health Service Executive. *Schools for health in Ireland: Framework for developing a health promoting school.* Retrieved from (http://www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HPM00839.pdf) (Accessed October 4, 2015).

Hume Global Learning Village. Retrieved from http://www.hume.vic.gov.au/Libraries_Learning/Hume_Global_Learning_Village (Accessed October 4, 2015).

Kelly, T., & Hayes, P. (2014). *Cork City Profile 2014: A statistical and geographical profile of Cork City Local Authority Area focused on health and social inclusion.* Cork, Ireland: Health Service Executive and Cork City Council.

UNESCO (2013). *Beijing Declaration on Building Learning Cities: Lifelong learning for all: Promoting inclusion, prosperity and sustainability in cities. Retrieved from* (http://learningcities.uil.unesco.org/fileadmin/content/Publications/Conference/Beijing_Declaration_EN.pdf) (Accessed October 4, 2015.)

UNESCO (2015). *Mexico City Statement on Sustainable Learning Cities* [DRAFT 23 Sept. 2015]. Retrieved from http://learningcities.uil.unesco.org/fileadmin/content/Pictures/ICLC-2/Special_Issue_Newsletters/MexicoCityStatement_draft150923.pdf (Accessed October 4, 2015).