

The Learning Festival: Pathway to Sustainable Learning Cities?

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Abstract

Cork and Limerick have conducted Lifelong Learning Festivals, Cork for ten years and Limerick for the past three years. This paper reviews aspects of this experience and considers the question of whether successful Lifelong Learning Festivals can be seen as a pathway to building sustainable learning cities. Discussed in the context of an initiative by Cork, we examine how Cork has adopted an international development by PASCAL to reconceptualise learning cities as broadly based sustainable opportunity cities, and action by Limerick to extend its city experience to the whole county following the decision to amalgamate city and county.

Key Words: (lifelong learning, learning cities, learning festivals)

Introduction

Lifelong learning festivals are an emerging feature of the Irish scene to promote learning throughout life for all and build community, social capital and identity. Festivals in Cork, Limerick, and Waterford illustrate the potential of this approach, with the pioneering Cork Lifelong Learning Festival having reached its tenth anniversary in 2013.

Learning festivals have intrinsic value and may also be a catalyst and framework to build an inclusive and sustainable learning city, combining local and global perspectives in addressing the challenges and opportunities of a dynamic and unpredictable globalised environment, the so-called “a runaway world” (Giddens, 1999).

This question was addressed during the Tenth Cork Lifelong Learning Festival within a seminar¹ which explored the relevance to Cork of ideas developed

1 Cities of the future: the EcCoWell Approach

under the PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE) about more holistic and integrated approaches to city development entitled, *EcCoWell*. This approach is set out in a paper, written by one of the authors of this paper (Kearns, 2012).

This article provides an overview of the development of the Cork Lifelong Learning Festival over the past ten years and the more recent Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival, and then asks whether a Lifelong Learning Festival should be seen as a catalyst and platform to build a sustainable opportunity city that progresses key social, environment and economic aspects of development in holistic and integrated ways. In commenting on this question, the paper draws on insights from the Cork seminar and discussions with the steering group for the Limerick Learning Festival.

The Cork Lifelong Learning Festival

The Cork Lifelong Learning Festival aims are to promote and celebrate learning in all its forms, and to encourage take up among all age groups, particularly those who may not usually participate in learning. Reflecting those aims, the festival's motto is: *Investigate, Participate, Celebrate!*

Its guiding principles, agreed in 2004, remain unchanged:

- all events take place under the Lifelong Learning Festival banner – the focus is not on individual providers
- it is not aimed at recruitment but on demonstrating what can be done
- all events are free
- as many events as possible are hands-on, allowing the public to join in as well as watch.

The first Festival in 2004 was organised as a pilot project, and ran for three days with over 65 events, by 2013 that had increased to about 500 activities over a week.

Events range from performances to information sessions, guided tours and nature walks to exhibitions, demonstrations, workshops, with plenty of opportunities for people to try something new. They take place in venues all over the city. The emphasis is on fun - showing that learning is always enjoyable, whatever your age. Many community and educational organisations involved in for-

mal and non-formal learning take part. The Festival is inclusive, encouraging marginalised groups to participate by not only attending events but also organising events themselves.

Many events are regular classes which invite the public to come and watch and often to take part; others are organised specially for the Festival. Organisations planning an event – for example, a presentation of certificates, the final of an annual competition – are encouraged to time it to coincide with festival week.

Where possible, events are taken into the community: shopping centres, library branches, the streets & on the water. The Festival's Patron is the Lord Mayor, which is a recognition of its civic role.

Community Education Networks.

At the core of the festival are Community Education Networks. They were established as a response to the government's 2000 *White Paper on Adult Education: Learning for Life*. Membership of a network is open to all education providers in the defined locality, bringing together diverse organisations, among them: Family Resource Centres, Home School Community Liaison teachers, the Travelling Community, Adult Basic Education & Literacy Services, Third Age Learning Groups, Disability Groups, and others. There are 10 networks in Cork. While most networks are based on districts, there are also two interest based citywide networks: Disability Education Network (DEN) and a Community Music Education Network

In Cork, it is believed that the Festival gives each network a focus, as it helps members to connect with each other, as planning and running an event provides a sense of common purpose. Each network is unique, with a local identity, and the events they organise reflect that membership varies, depending on the part of the city in which the network is located. As well as helping organise a network event, members often also run their own events.

All the networks are in areas of disadvantage, mostly within RAPID (Revitalising Areas through Planning, Investment & Development), a government programme aimed at targeting disadvantage and integrating services locally.

In 2002 Health Action Zones were piloted and have since been established across the three northside RAPID areas by the Health Service Executive. Several practical on-the-ground actions are carried out with the support of local advisory groups, for instance, walking groups, health checks, healthy eating courses.

In a sense, they are a step on the path to integrating Learning & Healthy Cities.

Challenges and lessons

Securing reliable sources of funding has always been a challenge and continues to be so. The festival does not have an income, as all events are free. Costs are kept to a minimum – around 25,000 – a modest sum, considering the people of Cork are offered a week long event with around 500 free events for all ages and abilities across a wide variety of interests.

The Festival builds on the success of previous festivals; often an organisation starts with one event, and many have gradually increased the number. That gradual growth is to be recommended from the experience of Cork. It can be discouraging if an event has a low attendance; so it is best to start small and build up, as the festival has done.

Participation is voluntary – and no fee is charged to take part. It is important that people ‘buy in’ to the idea of being involved. Such enthusiasm gives the Festival its atmosphere, and has contributed to its growth and success. Corporate branding and marketing is provided, but most participants have learned over the decade that they need to publicise their individual events.

The Festival exists in uncertain times. The Cork City Development Board will be disbanded under plans announced by government. The Cork City and Cork County VECs are being amalgamated into the Cork Education and Training Board this summer. Where the Festival’s ‘home’ will be in the future and how it will be financially supported are two future challenges. At the same time, the EcCoWell seminar included in the 2013 Festival raises broader questions relating to the role of the Festival in the development of Cork as a sustainable and inclusive learning city.

The EcCoWell question

The ideas set out in the EcCoWell approach drew on the experience of cities participating in PIE, and ideas from several East Asian cities, especially Taipei. These ideas were brought together by Kearns (2012).

The EcCoWell approach was a response to a landscape of partial and fragmented responses marked by a plethora of sectoral responses such as Healthy City, Green City, Learning City, Creative City, Culture City. As Kearns (2012) affirms: “there is much that could be connected across the plethora of segmented ideas to build creative partnership responses to the spectrum of challenges confront-

ing them”. The question of social, environmental, and economic sustainability is central to the EcCoWell argument.

The EcCoWell aspiration initially is conceptual: the challenge is now to find strategies, in a range of contexts, to foster integration and holistic strategies in city development to bring together learning, health and well-being, environment, culture and place making. This quest has been taken up in discussions in Cork and Limerick.

The Cork Seminar

Following a keynote presentation by Kearns, 80 participants divided into four groups to discuss how the EcCoWell agenda could be advanced locally. The groups were: Environment, Health, Economic Development and Learning. Each sought to focus their ideas in a single project that would benefit the future Cork. Some interesting cross-sectoral ideas were advanced in these discussions, such as music education for social inclusion.

The seminar was an initial step in examining how EcCoWell ideas could be adopted in Cork in facilitating integrated, holistic and sustainable development. It will be followed by an international seminar in September 2013, which will explore the subject *Cities for the Future: Learning from the Global to the Local*.

Limerick City of Learning

Limerick City of Learning Steering Group promotes the value of learning in Limerick, in all settings and across all stages of life cycle. It was established by the Limerick City Development Board in 2002. The group launched its strategy document, *Limerick City of Learning: Together for a Brighter Future - A Collaborative Framework for Progress*, in 2008. This Framework puts learning at the heart of the development, renewal and regeneration of Limerick and outlines strategies to support its citizens to cope with the challenges of globalisation and concomitant technological, social, economic, environmental and cultural change.

Over the last three years the project has evolved while still keeping its roots in that visionary document. In 2011 the Steering Group was reconstituted around key sectoral networks, partnerships & fora rather than specific institutions or individuals, in order to promote recognition and integration of all learning opportunities and activities whether formal, non-formal or informal. The

Steering Group supports the range of sectoral networks and groups in their efforts to engage people in positive learning experiences.

In 2011, the Limerick City of Learning group also partnered with Nexus Consulting on the *EC-funded R3L Grundtvig 'Quality Indicators for Learning Regions'* Project. The final outcome of the project, Eckert *et al.* (2012) includes many references to the work of the Limerick City of Learning Steering Group, the Irish case study site.

Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival

The annual Limerick Lifelong Learning Festival is now established as an important flagship project for Limerick City and County, with the third festival held in March 2013.

It plays a strong role in furthering the specific objectives for the Limerick City of Learning Project: -

- *Enhancing the profile of Limerick as a Learning City/Region* - The Festival is a celebration of learning in all its forms and for all ages across the region. By showcasing a wide variety of enjoyable and informative events, it aims to promote Limerick as a superb location for social and work-related learning and development.
- *Developing the concept of the Learning City into that of a Learning Region* - The pilot Festival in 2011 had 70 events, growing to 200 events in 2013. Over the last two years, it has worked with County Limerick partners to expand the range of events. This year's Festival was organised by the Limerick City of Learning Steering Group with Limerick Communications Office, Limerick County Council, County Limerick Vocational Education Committee, West Limerick Resources and Ballyhoura Development Ltd.
- *Increasing awareness and uptake of the range of learning opportunities in communities experiencing disadvantage* – a key goal for the Lifelong Learning Festival is to engage communities and individuals experiencing exclusion from learning opportunities. It does this through the activities and contacts of key Community groups such as the Limerick Community Education Network (LCEN); ensuring maximum exposure to those least convinced of the value of learning.
- *Further developing the Framework of the Learning City/Region to ensure the*

inclusion and participation of all key stakeholders - The theme for the festival in 2013 was 'Learn Your Way to the Future'.

The growth and success of the Festival must be attributed to the effort, creativity and commitment of many partners who promote and support learning for all ages.. The network of partners, event organisers and learners are brought together three times throughout the year, reviewing, evaluating and planning for the next Festival. These meetings are an opportunity to share ideas and experience, and collaborate on joint events.

PASCAL International Exchanges (PIE)

Peter Kearns visited Limerick during the Lifelong Learning Festival and discussed the current development of PIE and some ideas developed on integrated city development with members of Limerick City of Learning/Learning Region Group. Participation in this initiative would enhance the work of the Limerick Learning Region by offering the opportunity to share experiences, learn from others and develop international networks. This exchange and sharing information on initiatives may further help develop the sustainable Learning Region and perhaps provide opportunities for action research.

Developing into a Wider 'Limerick Learning Region'

The Limerick City of Learning Steering Group will now work to expand the group to include partners across the wider Limerick Region. This work has already started at the Festival Organising Committee level, where County Limerick Partners are represented and have been actively involved in the Lifelong Learning Festival.

Limerick City and County Councils are in the process of amalgamating into a new single local authority structure seeking to meet some of Limerick's challenges in a more integrated way. The Vocational Education Committees in Limerick City, County, and County Clare are also amalgamating to become the single Limerick Clare Education and Training Board (ETB). These developments provide an automatic platform for creation of integrated development strategies, regionally and sectorally, and for the creation of shared vision and identity, under a lifelong learning framework. There are slightly different approaches in Cork and Limerick to the various rationalisations. The local authority structure is amalgamating City and County in Limerick; whereas Cork City Council remains separate from the County. The rationalisation of the VECs however has an impact on both cities, with the Cork City and County

VECs amalgamating under one Education and Training Board.

Some of the practical steps and initiatives in developing the Limerick Learning Region will include: -

- The present City of Learning Steering Group will re-configure to become a broader 'Limerick Learning Region' Group. Consultation and planning will be undertaken as part of this reconfiguration.
- The networks already formed through organisation of the 2013 Lifelong Learning Festival will form the basis of new opportunities for networking and partnership development across the Learning Region agenda. These networks and partnerships will undertake a range of lifelong learning initiatives during the year and will not be solely concerned with the annual Festival.
- Existing initiatives in both rural and urban locations will be identified and extended to create partnerships across the region, thus contributing to the development of a sustainable learning region.
- New pilot projects/initiatives will be developed that demonstrate active involvement and partnership of two groups/networks from the City and County. These initiatives will in turn foster increased participation, partnership and engagement in the lifelong learning Initiative.
- In 2014, particular efforts will be made to collaborate with, and link to, "Limerick City of Culture" planning and promotion activities.
- Extending the branding of the Lifelong Learning Festival to learning initiatives going on at other times.
- Expanding the branding into other areas of work that would not normally be associated with Learning; e.g. where there is change happening driven by the desire to do things better; learning and development is taking place.
- Link with Cork for their September flagship event '*Cities for the Future: Learning from the Global to the Local*'.

Conclusions and the way forward

The experience of Cork over ten years, and the emerging experience of Limerick suggest that a successful Lifelong Learning Festival can provide a stimulus to

building a learning culture in a city as a platform for a sustainable learning city.

While these are tentative observations that will need to be tested by the outcomes of the initiative Cork is taking to build a sustainable opportunity city, and the success of Limerick in extending its City of Learning and Lifelong Learning Festival experience to the whole of Limerick County, there are grounds for taking the view that successful Lifelong Learning Festivals can, over time, build the conditions, understanding, and support to open pathways to developing a sustainable learning city.

The experience of Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, demonstrates that a learning culture evolves in a community over a considerable period of time as an institutional framework, customs and habits, and a shared vision foster the values that are given expression in a learning culture, and reflected in the social, cultural, and economic experience of the community in adapting to changing conditions (Kearns and Papadopoulos, 2000).

In the case of Sweden, for example, the founding of folk high schools, open air museums in rural areas, and the overall building of a strong adult education system can be seen as steps in this process of building a vibrant learning culture. (*ibid.* 2000).

In a similar way, Lifelong Learning Festivals in Cork and Limerick can be viewed as steps in a pathway towards building sustainable opportunity cities well adapted to the conditions and challenges of the twenty first century. The way in which the Cork EcCoWell seminar emerged from the experience and networks built by the Lifelong Learning Festival suggests this process, with the critical role of leadership and vision evident in the collaborative effort to mount the seminar and plan international follow up.

Lifelong Learning Festivals can, over time, build up awareness and understanding of the value and benefits of learning throughout life in many contexts, both for individuals and communities. They foster broad coalitions of organisations with an enhanced awareness of common interest in building an inclusive, sustainable city, underpinned by an evolving learning culture.

It may be that the Lifelong Learning Festival has a distinctive value in the process of building a necessary learning society in Ireland. In Cork and Limerick, while much remains to be done in following through on the foundations laid, a platform exists for future strategic action. The Cork initiative with its EcCoWell

seminar and the future international seminar planned, illustrates a city progressing towards a sustainable future as a liveable, inclusive, and competitive city, while the success of Limerick in progressing from a City of Learning, with a successful Lifelong Learning Festival, to a region where these initiatives support strategic social, economic, and cultural development will provide a test of the relevance of this approach to Irish needs.

While the jury is still out, there are grounds for taking the view that successful Lifelong Learning Festivals open a pathway towards building sustainable learning cities in Ireland.

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