

Learning communities strengthening lifelong learning through practice

**A DEMOS/
LEARNING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
SEMINAR SERIES**

This paper sets out details of work being carried out by Demos and the Learning and Skills Development Agency to examine how new institutional structures for supporting lifelong learning can develop in ways that best support community-based learning activities.

The paper aims to stimulate interest and contributions in the form of papers and examples of practice to inform the work.

Introduction

Education is now the UK's highest public policy priority. Its role in achieving economic prosperity and social inclusion is undisputed. Alongside the 'standards' agenda and the modernisation of the school infrastructure, the British government has committed itself to making lifelong learning a defining characteristic of national life. *The learning age* and *Learning to succeed* set out ambitious objectives for raising participation among adult learners, and new institutions and policy instruments, from learndirect to individual learning accounts, are being developed to underpin the new learning culture.

The missing link: community

Stimulating a national culture of lifelong learning, however, also depends on a dimension still largely neglected in national policy-making and implementation. Learning is essentially an activity embedded in a social context. Its contribution to other social goods (thriving families, local economic regeneration, civic renewal) depends on the capacity of organised learning activities to connect in meaningful ways to local community contexts. To be sustained and successful, learning must reinforce and renew the ties of social capital and collaboration that underpin civil society.

Policy context

In this context, UK learning policies are at a crucial point. Public spending on education will rise significantly over the next three years. The institutional infrastructure for expansion and reorganisation of lifelong learning is being put in place, largely through the new learning and skills councils. In other policy areas, from neighbourhood renewal to crime prevention, early years provision to public health, there is an unprecedented level of local experimentation and innovation. Creating thriving local communities is paramount to achieving a wide range of public policy objectives.

However, there is little evidence that central policy and funding frameworks are capable of supporting and responding to community initiative or need. The achievement of national policy objectives, and the design of new institutions and layers of governance, is not yet systematically grounded in any real understanding of how community participation is developed and strengthened in practice.

Those who might benefit most from participation in lifelong learning are often those most distanced from national or regional institutions. Also they are often unlikely to respond simply to economic incentives to participate. Too often, community involvement in local policy initiatives is restricted to formal representation on partnership boards, which continue to be dominated by mainstream public sector institutions. The governance structures, accountability systems, and control bias of central and regional institutions too often militate against the forms of participation and community engagement which we now need.

This presents a huge challenge to every area of education policy, but especially to the work of the new learning and skills councils. They will be responsible for co-ordinating lifelong learning provision, but also for helping to stimulate demand for learning services and activities among key sections of the population.

The seminars

To develop a better understanding of these issues, the Learning and Skills Development Agency and Demos are collaborating to organise a series of seminars. We aim to bring together a combination of leading researchers, policy-makers and practitioners.

Each seminar will address a major strand of the debate.

SEMINAR 1

Communities, learning and contemporary society

*What are the fundamental dimensions of community that underpin learning activity?
Is there a workable definition of 'community capacity'?*

This seminar will draw together leading edge thinking and practice on contemporary definitions of community and their relevance to education policy. It will examine different practical definitions of community, and ask why many past efforts to build 'community capacity' have been unsuccessful. It will ask how community is defined in practice, and compare these working definitions against the principles and criteria used by central government and policy-makers. It will also explore in more detail the forms of community that might best develop a lifelong learning agenda in ways that can tackle deprivation.

SEMINAR 2

Local organisations and community learning

What is the role of local organisations in stimulating and developing community-based learning?

This seminar will examine examples of best practice and innovation in engaging local communities. What role do colleges, schools, local government, voluntary, community and private sector providers play in stimulating and shaping community-based learning activity? How does responsiveness to community fit with their core objectives and statutory responsibilities? Do new technologies offer new possibilities for outreach, provision of learning opportunities and community-based decision making?

SEMINAR 3

Learning communities – a framework for funding, planning and accountability

How should Learning and Skills Councils, local authorities and other bodies support community-based learning?

The final seminar will address the role of local and national frameworks for funding, planning and accountability, and seek to identify key strategic priorities for policymakers. It will ask what role these structures play in blocking or stimulating community-based learning, and seek to identify connections between education and other key areas of local and national policy. How should evaluation and accountability regimes record and monitor community participation? Are there tensions between national coherence and local effectiveness?

The seminar series will run between January and May 2001 and will bring together leading researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners from all sectors, to identify ways of rooting lifelong learning in thriving communities. They will be chaired by Tom Bentley, Director of Demos and Chris Hughes, Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Development Agency. The aim is to explore institutional and funding structures that will support community-based learning. There will be briefing papers prepared prior to the seminars, which will be followed by a joint publication setting out the key issues and conclusions of the series.

In addition to the events themselves, which will have an invited audience, we should like to encourage broader participation in the debate. **We welcome research papers, or short contributions raising key questions or illustrating pertinent developments in the field. We would also welcome details of any readily available case studies or good practice in local communities.** These will inform the seminars as well as the published outcome, which will be widely published. If you would like to be involved in this programme of work, please contact:

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ISBN 1 85338 591 3