Learning as a Driver for Change

Learning Community Framework

ACELG Australian Centre of Excellence for **Local Government**

Australian Learning Communities Network Inc

GLR Training

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Learning as a Driver for Change:
Learning Community Framework

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Learning Community Framework

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG), the Australian Learning Communities Network, Hume City Council and the Shire of Gwydir have commissioned this work to develop a common language that builds on practitioner-based work of those communities which have used a learning community approach to drive change. The framework provides a diagnostic planning tool for use by groups or communities which are considering this approach. It is also useful for those developing or reviewing a community learning plan. It includes reflective questions as part of a monitoring and an evaluation process.

A learning community which is place-based can have limited or plentiful resources, and can be metropolitan, rural, regional or remote. There is no "one size fits all" approach and as Gejel (2012, p. 12) notes: "the point is HOW the resources are used, HOW organisations collaborate, HOW citizens' needs are met at a given resource level."
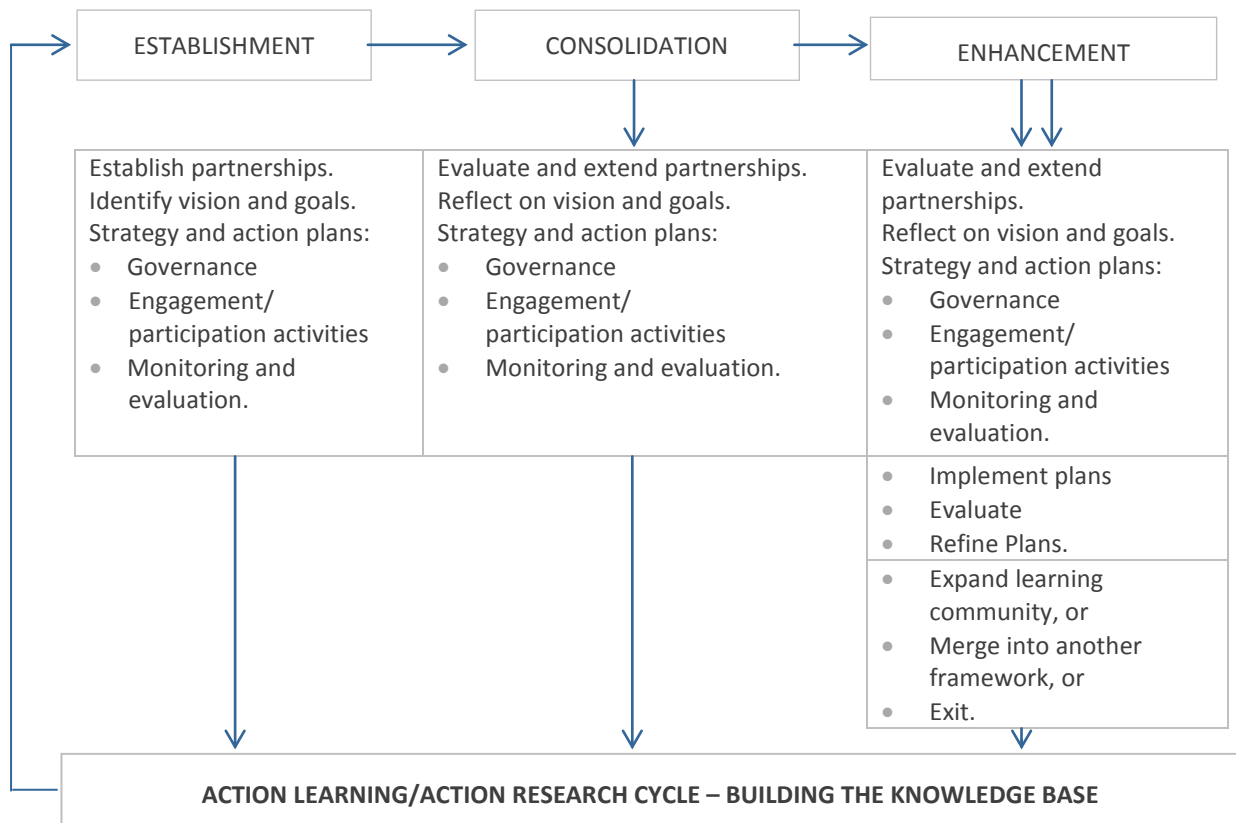
Even though learning communities are, and should be different, they can have shared values and principles. The difference comes in the implementation of the approach to suit the local context. Drawing on innovation research, practitioner researchers also identify a life cycle approach to the implementation of such community engagement programs (Wheeler 2004; Shiel 2000; Beilharz 2002). Evidence of 10 years' experience in the development of mature learning communities such as the Hume Global Learning Village and Gwydir Learning Region suggest the following phases:

- Establishment
- Consolidation
- Enhancement.

The cycles follow an action research spiral of plan, act, observe and reflect over the life of a learning community. Participants collectively learn to build a local knowledge base aimed at working towards a long-term sustainable framework. **Figure 1** outlines the phases and the overall elements that should be considered. It is assumed that each phase would usually last for a period of three to five years; based on practice this seems to be a suitable time period to follow an action learning cycle in this area.

'Learning communities are an approach to describe how places respond to emerging challenges by bringing key organisations and people together to **learn** how to **invent** new responses to challenges their communities face' (Wilson 2012).

Figure 1. Life Cycle of an operational framework for a learning community

ESTABLISHMENT	CONSOLIDATION	ENHANCEMENT
Establish partnerships. Identify vision and goals. Strategy and action plans: • Governance • Engagement/ participation activities • Monitoring and evaluation.	Evaluate and extend partnerships. Reflect on vision and goals. Strategy and action plans: • Governance • Engagement/ participation activities • Monitoring and evaluation.	Evaluate and extend partnerships. Reflect on vision and goals. Strategy and action plans: • Governance • Engagement/ participation activities • Monitoring and evaluation. • Implement plans • Evaluate • Refine Plans. • Expand learning community, or • Merge into another framework, or • Exit.

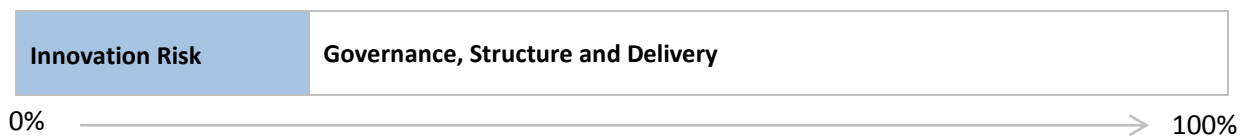| ACTION LEARNING/ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE – BUILDING THE KNOWLEDGE BASE |
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Adapted from Wheeler 2004

Table 1 expands on this idea. In the establishment phase the emphasis is on innovation and engagement activities. The consolidation phase is a time to ensure a robust governance structure and successful delivery of key programs and engagement activities. Once these are embedded in the learning community, the focus is on generating new ideas so a second wave of innovation will reinvigorate the activities.

Table 1. Innovation cycle of a learning community

Establishment Phase

Innovation Risk	Governance, Structure and Delivery

0% ⟶ 100%

Consolidation Phase

Innovation Risk	Governance, Structure and Delivery

0% ⟶ 100%

Enhancement Phase

Innovation Risk	Governance, Structure and Delivery

0% ⟶ 100%

Adapted from Wheeler 2004

Diagnostic tools for monitoring and evaluation

The following Critical Success Factor Checklist was developed after a review of the literature and consultation with key stakeholders involved in developing the Hume Global Learning Village and Gwydir Learning Region, and with members of the Australian Learning Communities Network. The Checklist also builds on the work of Gejel (2012) and provides monitoring and evaluation review questions for the establishment, consolidation and enhancement phases. In addition, it provides for crisis questions that can be asked at any stage of development, if necessary, based on the vagaries of life – political cycles, drive by funding, lack of succession planning and so forth.

The tools are designed to be used by practitioners and should be a living document, so feedback and enhancements should be shared with the Australian Learning Communities Network.

Critical Success Factor Checklist

Key Criteria for a Learning Community	Indicators	Evaluation? Yes/Date Conducted No/Date Scheduled	Progress: Scale 1-5 1=Establishing 3 = Consolidating 5 = Enhanced
Goals and Vision	- A long-term vision for the integration of learning in all its forms within a place has been developed. - The key challenges/drivers for the development of the learning community have been identified through community consultation and debate. - Goals and vision articulate a strengths-based approach. - Values and principles that underlie the learning community are established through community consultation and debate. - A strategy and action plan with clear responsibilities, priorities, time-frames and evaluation criteria has been developed for a three-year period.		
Leadership	- Passionate leaders from the community with the right skills are actively working to drive the learning community. - High profile champions from within the community and/or government are working to advocate and link to funding opportunities. - While partners are responsible for the leadership and delivery of the project, there is delegated accountability for outcomes. - A succession plan is in place.		
Strategic Partnerships	- The partnerships formed in the establishment phase are represented from across sectors – business, education, government, community and residents. - The partnerships have a clear purpose, add value		

Key Criteria for a Learning Community	Indicators	Evaluation? Yes/Date Conducted No/Date Scheduled	Progress: Scale 1-5 1=Establishing 3 = Consolidating 5 = Enhanced
	to the work of the partners, and are carefully planned and monitored. • There is transparency in the decision-making process, including policy making. • The partnerships allow for diverse thinking and values to lead to better outcomes. • The partnerships are able to respond in a timely manner to new or changing circumstances.		
Learning	• Learning to empower people to take control of their lives, raise aspirations, enhance employability, and build active citizenship and quality of life. • Learning opportunities are provided for all age groups. There will also be opportunities for different cultural groups. • All types of learning from formal to non-formal and informal learning are seen as valuable and enriching to the community. • Learning is enabled by all kinds of technology from the formal classroom to the internet and mobile devices. • Learning programs and activities are funded from a number of funding bodies. • Learning institutions work in partnership to provide equitable access and pathways for residents. • Residents are included as a key valuable resource base in the community for developing new and innovative learning opportunities. • The learning community learns from its own experiences and makes changes accordingly, so that it continues to improve the quality of life for residents.		
Innovation	• Innovation is valued and implemented at a strategic level and within each community or neighbourhood. • The community has a strong focus on children's and young people's innovative capacity, and nurtures engagement and consultation with young people from a very early stage of life. • The community builds on the experience and wisdom of older adults and supports intergenerational innovation. • An environment is created through partnerships that allows for risk taking over time and the		

Key Criteria for a Learning Community	Indicators	Evaluation? Yes/Date Conducted No/Date Scheduled	Progress: Scale 1-5 1=Establishing 3 = Consolidating 5 = Enhanced
	development of new service models.		
	• The partnership is able to respond to new circumstances.		
Building community capacity	• Each partner and other stakeholders have input into the operation of the learning community.		
	• Partnerships build the capacity of their members.		
	• There is equity of opportunity to participate.		
	• A diverse community is participating.		
	• There are strategies for providing information and promoting awareness of the learning community.		
Connecting community and social infrastructure[1]	• Integrated planning addresses the challenges identified, which result in activating high priority programs.		
	• The social infrastructure ensures a long-term, systematic approach to residents' learning for employment, health and well-being, and cultural understanding.		
	• Infrastructure and programs are value adding to the community rather than duplicating.		
Integrated Governance Structure	• Local government adopts a collaborative approach to allow local communities to make decisions about their place and play a direct role in delivering services and undertaking projects to achieve desired outcomes.		
	• A community governance structure has been developed that will deliver increased collaboration to maximise participation in employment, education or public life.		
	• Responsibilities are clearly allocated to each partner.		
	• There is a shared understanding of the objectives and management of the partnership.		
	• All projects and programs are delivered legally and ethically.		
	• A way forward is established that monitors progress systematically.		

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[1] Social infrastructure refers to key community facilities that provide places to meet, interact and undertake activities (Sunshine Coast Regional Council 2011).

Diagnostic Reflective Tools

The following questions are to be used as a reflective tool for learning community development. It is assumed that the development follows an innovation life-cycle approach and that there are different phases with each typically having a three year time-frame. The phases are named:

- Establishment
- Consolidation
- Enhancement.

The enhancement phase is a reinvigoration phase and implies sustainability. Any phase can have problems and so 'Crisis Dialogue Questions' have also been included.

Ten reflective questions when establishing a learning community and/or community learning plan
(Adapted from Gejel 2012)

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
1. What are the community challenges that are **drivers** of your learning community or community learning plan?	• *What are the most important desired outcomes over a 10- to 30-year period?* • *What are the priorities for action over the next three to five years?*	
2. What are the **values** and **principles** that consultation and debate will be based on?	*Things to consider include:* • *Valuing learning for the purposes of raising aspirations, employability, health and well-being, and active citizenship.* • *Promotion of learning, collaboration, access, leadership, contexts of learning (formal educational institutions, workplace, home, sporting fields etc.)*	
3. How are, or will people and organisations from the community be **included** in discussions about what learning should look like in practice?	• *Reflect also on how you might go about consulting people and organisations in the next phase.*	
4. How will you undertake an analysis of learning programs and facilities to identify gaps?	• How will you use this analysis for integrated planning? • *(Consider all learning programs, providers and facilities for learning delivery within your community.)* • *(Consider programs from across age groups: early childhood, children and young people, adults, older adults.)*	
5. What specific initiatives will be launched to involve **less active groups** of residents in the establishment phase?	• *What is practical and will lead to early success?* • *What is better to consider for long-term success?*	

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
6. How will **different communities** and **different cultures** be included in the planning of the initiatives?	• *Reflect on what has worked in the past and how this could be improved?*	
7. How are the innovations underpinned by new technologies?	• *Are there plans to maintain, enhance and embrace technologies?*	
8. What are the **governance arrangements** of the new initiatives?	• *Who will be communicating and collaborating?* • *Will you establish a governance structure or build on an existing partnership structure?* • *Reflect on ways to ensure that strategic community and political leaders are involved and that this involvement is effective.*	
9. How will partners capture the **stories of successful learners** across age groups to communicate to residents to encourage participation?	• *How will you make it easy for partners to collect stories?* • *Reflect on effective ways to ensure you incorporate this in the next phase.*	
10. How will the ongoing learning community initiatives be **visible** to people and organisations in the establishment phase of the community learning plan?	• *Reflect on your use of a communication strategy which includes media (eNews, local newspaper, websites etc.)* • *Reflect on your message. Is it clear? Can it be improved?*	

Ten reflective questions to ask at the consolidation or enhancement phase

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
1. What were the community challenges that were the **drivers** of your learning community or community learning plan?	• *How did you identify the long-term outcomes?* • *How did you identify priorities for action over the last three years?* • *What will change in the next three years?*	
2. What **values** and **principles** worked for you in the last three years?	• *Will you add any?* • *Will you remove any?*	
3. How did you establish a	• *If you did, what worked and how could it*	

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
governance structure of partners from across sectors to ensure integrated planning and ongoing evaluation?	*be improved?* • *If you did not, identify how you might go about developing appropriate governance.* • *How are you reinvigorating the learning community to keep people and organisations engaged?* • *How have strategic community and political leaders been involved? Is this effective?*	
4. How did you undertake an analysis of learning programs and facilities to identify gaps?	• *How did you use this analysis for integrated planning?* • *What could be improved?*	
5. What specific programs and initiatives identified in the last three-year plan were implemented?	• *Which ones were successful? Why?* • *Which ones were not successful? Why?* • *(Consider programs from across age groups: early childhood, children and young people, adults, older adults.)*	
6. How were different communities and different cultures included in planning of the initiatives?	• *Reflect on what worked and how this could be improved.*	
7. What specific initiatives were launched to involve **less active groups** of residents?	• *Were they successful? Why?* • *If not, why not? How could they be improved?*	
8. What specific initiatives have been, or will be launched which demonstrate innovation and renewal of the learning community?	• *How have you nurtured and consulted children and young people to gain new ideas?* • *How have you tapped into the knowledge and wisdom of residents, especially older adults?*	
9. How are the innovations underpinned by new technologies?	• *Are there plans in place to establish, maintain and enhance technologies?*	
10. How were the ongoing learning community initiatives **visible** to people and organisations in the previous three years of development?	• *Reflect on your use of communication media (eNews, local newspaper, websites etc.)* • *Reflect on your message. Was it clear? Could it be improved?* • *How did you communicate the stories of successful learners across age groups to*	

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
	residents?	
	• *How were strategic community and political leaders involved?*	

Ten crisis dialogue questions to ask

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
1. How did you utilise the visions and actions to meet community **challenges?**	• *What actions have been taken to ensure the objectives are clearly specified and their relationship to local government or other coordinating organisations are clearly stated and explained?*	
2. How will you identify and build on the key drivers that will enable you to achieve your long-term vision and goals?	• *Identify how to build on strengths and reduce weaknesses.*	
3. How have you identified the risks that are barriers to achieving your long-term vision and goals?	• *How will you put a risk mitigation strategy in place to minimise these risks?*	
4. How will you identify overlapping partnerships within your community that duplicate some of the activities?	• *Reflect on ways to build collaboration and reduce duplication.*	
5. Reflect on whether the key messages you are providing to residents about your learning community are clear and simple.	• *What can you do to improve this?*	
6. What processes have you established to ensure effective interaction and feedback between stakeholders?	• *Reflect on whether you need an agreement that includes conflict resolution strategies.*	
7. How have you selected and utilised problem solving and decision making techniques and processes within the partnership?	• *Reflect on ways to improve this.*	
8. What have you done to ensure effective monitoring and evaluation?	• *Reflect on how you are presenting information on the impact of your partnership to key stakeholder groups,*	

Key Questions	Reflection Points	Response
	for example councillors within local government.	
9. How have you adapted your programs and activities to accommodate different communities and different cultures?	• *What could you do to improve this?*	
10. How have you recognised and publically acknowledged the work of key people and organisations in the development of the learning community?	• *Reflect on the best methods of keeping key people engaged.*	

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Australian Centre for Excellence for Local Government (ACELG)

ACELG is a unique consortium of universities and professional bodies that have a strong commitment to the advancement of local government. The consortium is based at the University of Technology, Sydney and includes the UTS Centre for Local Government, the University of Canberra, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Local Government Managers Australia and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia. In addition, the Centre works with program partners to provide support in specialist areas and extend the Centre's national reach. These include Charles Darwin University and Edith Cowan University.

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