

# ADAPTIVE RESILIENCE AND CREATIVITY: LEARNING CITIES MOBILIZING COVID RESPONSES, EXPANDING NETWORKS

**Annalisa L. Raymer, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>**

**Jessica A. H. Hughes<sup>2</sup>**

*ABSTRACT:* Constraints of the pandemic and rolling lockdowns eliminated opportunities to gather in person. Yet, for the learning cities movement, this period of coronavirus curtail was also a time of increased networking and creative collaboration. Where once human energies expended in “process work” left little retrievable trace, now artifacts accumulate apace in electronic clouds. What might a little excavation through material collected since the onset of COVID-19 reveal about ways localities and learning city networks mobilized to address the pandemic? For those on the resourced side of the digital divide, openly available content grants access to a gallery of community responses, transnational strategies, and future forecasting.

*Keywords:* Learning cities, Covid-10 response, mobilization

Note: as this review references many organizations, we provide a list of abbreviations in order of appearance:

- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)
- North American Alliance for Learning Cities (NAALC)
- Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs)
- UIL Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC)
- Place and Social Capital and Learning international observatory (PASCAL)
- Cork Access Network (CAN)
- Irish Network of Learning Cities (INLC)
- Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN)
- Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

## Introduction

Considering the combination of the sustainability crisis, climate emergency, and COVID-19 pandemic, this is a pivotal point for humanity and other occupants of the big blue marble, planet Earth. Concurrently, a learning cities movement is gaining momentum, based upon a concept that posits lifelong learning for all as central to sustainable human wellbeing and planetary survival.

The idea of learning cities (regions, communities, etc.) is gaining renewed traction today, due to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNESCO’s Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). Authors of a recent paper elegantly distilled UIL’s definition of a learning city down to a single sentence: “UNESCO promotes learning cities and lifelong learning to assure sustainable resilience of community in a fast-changing world” (Teeranon, et al., 2021, p. 91).

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<sup>1</sup> Cornell University, Department of Global Development, Senior Lecturer, [alr26@cornell.edu](mailto:alr26@cornell.edu). ORCID: 0000-0001-6459-7385.

<sup>2</sup> Cornell University, Department of Global Development, Research Assistant, [jahh647@cornell.edu](mailto:jahh647@cornell.edu).

According to UIL a learning city is:

a city which effectively mobilizes its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education; revitalize learning in families and communities; facilitate learning for and in the workplace; extend the use of modern learning technologies, enhance quality and excellence in learning; and nurture a culture of learning throughout life (Valdes-Cotera, et al., 2015, p. 5).

The relationship among lifelong learning, learning cities and sustainable development was outlined in a 2017 guide for action on sustainability:

More and more cities recognize the importance of lifelong learning and are reinventing themselves as learning cities. They acknowledge that lifelong learning is the key to developing the resources necessary for building cities which are green and healthy, inclusive and equitable and which strive for decent conditions for work, employment and entrepreneurship... It is a people-centered and learning-focused approach, which provides a collaborative, action-orientated framework for working on the diverse challenges related to sustainable development that cities increasingly face (UNESCO, 2017, pp. 5-6).

With sustainability, equity, inclusivity, and well-being as core aims, a learning city perspective is an apt lens for viewing the contemporaneous climate and coronavirus crises. This current moment brings a sense of witnessing history-in-the-making and an attendant desire to capture some of the developments during this pandemic chapter. The accessibility of information (for literally, the well-connected) is both a boon and a challenge, as the amount of content and the number of opportunities can be overwhelming.

The task of framing any review is daunting. For starters, how to delineate the start of the pandemic? At least one study now suggests the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 was already circulating undetected as early as October 2019 (Pekar et al., 2021). Thus, as an admittedly arbitrary parameter, we use that date as a beginning point for this review. A retrospective session hosted by the North American Alliance for Learning Cities (NAALC) in midsummer of 2021 serves as the closing date.

For the more difficult task of delineating what to include, we elect to organize our account with questions derived from reflection prompts of the NAALC retrospective.

- I. How have learning cities and the learning city movement responded to the pandemic?
- II. What roles have networks and their members played, especially during lockdowns?
- III. With respect to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs), how has the pandemic impacted the sustainability efforts of learning cities?

Histories and literature reviews of the learning city concept can be found among open access resources (Osborne, 2014; Wheeler, 2014; Wilson, 2014). For context, we first introduce the two most pertinent organizations active at the global scale in the current

learning city movement, UIL's Global Network of Learning Cities, (GNLC) and the Place and Social Capital and Learning international observatory, PASCAL. Additional associations will be introduced throughout the paper.

## **UIL GLNC**

The contemporary learning city movement is most closely associated with UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning, UIL. The GNLC

supports and improves the practice of lifelong learning in the world's cities by promoting policy dialogue and peer learning among member-cities; forging links; fostering partnerships; providing capacity development; and developing instruments to encourage and recognize progress made in building learning cities (UNESCO, 2016, p. 4).

New communities are added following an application process involving local governmental commitment and an endorsement from the city's corresponding national UNESCO Commission. Presently there are over two hundred member-cities from sixty-four countries. As the United States is no longer a UNESCO member, American communities are not eligible for membership in the GNLC (Nauert, 2017).

## **PASCAL International Observatory**

PASCAL operates from networked university centers in Oceania, Europe, and Africa. It is described as "a global partnership among policymakers, researchers, analysts, higher education, NGOs and the private sector" (Watson & Wu, 2015, p. 10). PASCAL conducts research, supports communities, collaborates with UIL, and, additionally, coordinates a half-dozen thematic networks of practitioners, scholars, and others interested in different aspects of learning cities.

### **The Three Review Questions**

The three review questions that frame this paper are distilled from a set of prompts addressed in a session hosted by NAALC in July 2021. NAALC began in 2019 with an inaugural convening in Massachusetts organized by John Wooding and his Lowell City of Learning colleagues. The association anticipates the return of the United States to UNESCO and provides a venue for those working to develop learning cities. The fledgling alliance has significantly benefited from the guidance of GNLC members and did so again this summer with speakers from Hungary (Balázs Németh), Northern Ireland (Michele Murphy), and the Republic of Ireland (Yvonne Lane) sharing their reflections.

### **How Have the Learning Cities and the Learning City Movement Responded to the Pandemic?**

Two adverbs serve as a quick answer to the question: promptly and abundantly! As many of us learned to navigate web conferencing tools, reactions and counter-reactions to the pandemic quickly filled the digital platforms. In this section we focus on just two categories of responses, categorized as:

- a) information exchange and knowledge generation, and
- b) expansion of responsibilities and reconfiguration of endeavors.

### ***Information Exchange & Knowledge Generation***

Learning cities were promptly organized for information exchange and knowledge generation as soon as widespread lockdowns began. GNLC launched a series of virtual meetings for cities to share information and pandemic response strategies. Between early March and June 2020, sixteen webinars ensued, beginning with a speaker from Wuhan sharing virus statistics and a plan for maintaining educational programs during the disruption (Huang et al., 2020). Materials from all sessions are available at:

<https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities/gnlc-webinars-unesco-learning-cities-response-covid-19>.

A second series of webinars began soon after the conclusion of the first. This sequence emphasized research applications for learning cities in their post-pandemic recovery. Co-hosted by UIL and PASCAL, the second series ran for a half year and was designed to address the central goal of building the resilience of learning cities. These research-to-practice webinars addressed six different challenges, and materials from this series are available at: <https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/learning-cities/webinar-series-learning-cities-covid-19-recovery-research-practice>.

Beyond these webinars, other kinds of convenings ensued. At the fourth International Conference of the GNLC, held in Medellín, Columbia, in October 2019, the delegates adopted a thematic strategy for advancing collaborative work on the challenges most often cited by member cities. A pair of lead cities stepped up to convene cluster gatherings of multiple GNLC cities for each theme. Since the strategy was adopted, more than a dozen convenings have taken place, each hosted by partnered cities from different countries. For example, Hamburg (Germany) and Shanghai (People’s Republic of China) are the lead cities for Education for Sustainable Development, while Larissa (Greece) and Yeonsu-Gu (Republic of Korea) are the leads for Strengthening Citizenship Education at Local Level, and Cork (Republic of Ireland) and Osan (Republic of Korea) are the convenors of the cluster of member cities focused on Health and Well-being. A complete list of the seven themes and cluster leaders can be found on pages 17-18 of the conference report (UIL, 2019).

### ***Expansion of Responsibilities and Reconfiguration of Endeavors***

The pandemic prompted reprioritization towards attending to immediate community needs. Learning city staff and volunteers took up new responsibilities. In Ireland, for example, COVID-19 Community Response Forums were organized in every local authority area. As government employees, learning city staff members were redeployed to lead and coordinate response strategies. Where learning neighborhoods, defined as an “area that has an ongoing commitment to learning, providing inclusive and diverse learning opportunities for whole communities” (O’Sullivan & Kenny, 2016, p. 2) were already established, those existing social networks and organizational systems readily

served response implementation. According to lifelong learning facilitator Yvonne Lane, some of the insights shared by Limerick and Cork learning neighborhood participants in a 2020 conversation included these:

- Lockdown showed the strength and power of community spirit. Older and younger volunteers worked alongside each other during lockdown, allowing for a greater appreciation for each other.
- While technology does not replace face-to-face interaction, it has been hugely beneficial in allowing people to connect.
- One approach was to use technologies with which people were already familiar so as not to exclude people, e.g., WhatsApp. (Lane, 2020, p. 18).

With exquisite timing, Belfast Learning City and the Northern Ireland Impact Forum on Adult Learning produced a collection of articles exploring the interrelated dynamics of lifelong learning and wellness. In “Learn Well, Live Well: Adult Learning and Health and Wellbeing” (Atkinson et al., 2020), practitioners and academics addressed seven themes (e.g., policy and empowerment) within the context of COVID. The publication is intended to serve as a basis of engagement with multiple constituencies and intersectoral stakeholders and a resource for policymaking.

Other forms of learning city pandemic responses included organizing mutual aid, running health clinics, adapting schooling and non-formal educational programming, and providing access to food and services. Examples of adaptive and creative responses to dynamic conditions in every world region are seen in UNESCO’s set of “snapshots” from GNLC cities (2021) and PASCAL’s recovery program report from nine learning communities (Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns, 2020).

### **What Roles Have Networks and Their Members Played During Lockdowns?**

We turn our attention to types of networks and collaborations at other scales. In this section we highlight examples at two levels:

- a) Local, intra-community networks and
- b) Inter-city associations within a geographic region.

#### ***Intra-Community Networks***

Two examples of expanded local networks come from Cork and Limerick, the Cork Access Network (CAN) and Learning Limerick Ambassadors.

**CAN.** This network was established in 2020 to seek ways toward eliminating educational barriers, i.e., to “mitigate against educational disadvantage in Cork City and region” (Cork Access Network, 2021). The local network includes representatives of Cork City Council, Cork Learning City, and institutions of secondary, vocational, professional, and university education. With a quick start, CAN facilitated a consultative process to formulate recommendations for the country’s “National Access Plan 2022-2026.” CAN’s contribution lays out a farsighted, humanistic vision based on five principles:

- learner-centered
- strengths-based
- whole of education
- whole of life
- whole of society (CAN. p. 3).

**Learning Limerick Ambassadors.** Similar to Cork City, the learning city of Limerick found creative ways to engage their network of learning ambassadors, a body of volunteers who serve as local advocates of lifelong learning. Ambassadors work with Learning Limerick to promote a culture of learning and to encourage participation in the personal and social benefits of educational opportunities. During the lockdowns, ambassadors created video narratives of their journeys and urged others to take part in lifelong learning. The “Learning Ambassadors Videos” are available on the Learning Limerick’s YouTube channel.

### *Inter-City Associations Within a Geographic Region*

Moving up in scale from the local community level to networks covering a geographic region, we turn to societies on two large islands: the Emerald Isle’s Irish Network of Learning Cities (INLC) and on the continent down under, the Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN).

**The Irish Network of Learning Cities.** A partnership among all five GNLC cities from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the Irish Network of Learning Cities (INLC) was launched in 2018 and envisioned as “an all-island network of cities, for support, inspiration, know-how and sharing good practice” (Barrett, 2021, p.2). While the network was quite active when the pandemic struck, COVID-19 prompted additional avenues of exchange, support, and collaboration. In addition to INLC’s core channel of cooperation, a community-of-practice emerged among the learning festival planners. In the fall of 2020, the network inaugurated a five-city Irish Learning Cities Day, and a second one is planned for fall 2021 (Barrett, p. 1).

**ALCN.** Australia has a multi-decade history of learning community initiatives (Cavaye et al., 2013; Wheeler et al., 2015). The Australian Learning Communities Network (ALCN) was founded in 2001 and is affiliated with the GNLC (ALCN, 2020, p. 12). In 2020, the learning cities of Melton and Wyndham, in partnership with ALCN and others, organized the first virtual global learning festival. The project sought to “provide unity and connection to communities all over the world, and to give learners a firsthand experience of the benefits that lifelong learning can bring during uncertain times” (Torres-Gomez, 2020, p. 6). Preparing for a second worldwide festival, the planning committee adopted an intentional approach, explaining, “a partnership that supports solidarity during times of adversity and hardship, as well as in more favourable times of prosperity and peace, needs empathy and compassion as its foundation” (2020, p. 20). Organizers of a workshop on “empathy partnerships” in spring 2021 said of the event:

Transformation requires new ways of working to adapt to uncertainty and achieve success. ... we saw that applying an Empathy Partnership approach could help accelerate in the right direction. It is important to strive to link the SDGs to our work in a more overt way, beyond SDG 4 where ‘education and lifelong learning’ sits, using empathy. It takes more time, but once EPs are set up, we can work smarter, kinder, creatively (Torres-Gomez & Lane, 2021).

On the topic of sustainability, we turn to our final question regarding the SDGs, also known as the UN Global Goals for Sustainability.

### **With respect to the SDGs, how has the pandemic impacted sustainability efforts of learning cities?**

According to the “Sustainable Development Report 2021,” the past year was a net loss for sustainability on Earth.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a setback for sustainable development everywhere. For the first time since the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, the global average SDG Index score for 2020 has decreased from the previous year... The pandemic has impacted all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (Sachs et al., 2021, p. vii).

This is a disheartening summation. Nonetheless, sustainability strides among the members of the GNLC may well comprise foundational work for longer-term benefit. For our scan of learning city sustainability work, we are mindful of the movement’s central focus on learning. Accordingly, we focus on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with examples from Finland and Germany, as well as a commitment pledged at a major ESD conference this year.

### **Espoo, Finland: A Pacesetter in Sustainability**

The SDG report cited above recognizes Finland as the country ranked first for sustainability progress (Sachs et al., 2021, p. 10). The Finnish learning city of Espoo, one of the most sustainable cities in Europe, is committed to being carbon neutral by 2025. Municipal planning is guided by an accessible narrative known as “The Espoo Story,” composed through ongoing community consultations. This participatory approach was undertaken to harness residents’ perspectives and cultivate ownership of the narrative to create an alternative to long, conventional planning documents “written by civil servants with complicated concepts and language” (Erkkilä, 2014, p. 219). When Espoo prepared to become a learning city in 2015, city leaders linked the Espoo Story with SDGs and the GNLC aims (Erkkilä, 2020, p. 91), and Espoo continues to share its process and progress in education for sustainable development with members of GNLC’s ESD cluster. Espoo’s “Voluntary Local Review of the UN 2030 Agenda” is inspiring and practical, laying out the city’s process and strategies for achieving the SDGs. As Espoo Mayor Jukka Mäkelä wrote:

For the City of Espoo the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a way of measuring our sustainability but also language and a way to communicate our visions, actions and dreams with our citizens, other cities, and

with all our partners. We also want to use the SDGs as a way of committing our friends close and afar to the shared journey of sustainable development (Taajamaa, 2020, p. 7).

### **Hamburg, Germany: Hamburg Learns Sustainability and Fights Climate Change**

Another UNESCO-Japan Prize laureate, Hamburg was awarded the esteemed ESD Prize in 2019 for the city’s large-scale, comprehensive initiative to “bring actors from all sectors together to share and promote education for sustainability in the whole city” (UNESCO Education Sector, 2019, p. 7). A pacesetter in German, UN, and transnational sustainability, the city recently adopted the “Hamburg Master Plan: Education for Sustainable Development 2030.” This blueprint was developed through an extensive city-wide participatory process, in the making since the launch nearly 15 years ago of the “Hamburg Learns Sustainability” initiative. As a co-leader of the GNLC’s cluster on ESD, Hamburg shares the theme group leadership with Shanghai, China.

**Berlin Declaration on Education for Sustainable Development.** At the UNESCO Conference for ESD held in Berlin in spring 2021, UIL leaders and GNLC members stressed the vital importance of ESD for all lifelong learners, inclusive of, but not limited to, students in formal schooling. This message is reflected in the closing declaration with a commitment to:

Integrate ESD into all levels of education and training from early childhood to tertiary and adult education, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and into non-formal education and informal learning, so that all individuals are provided with lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities for sustainable development.... (UNESCO, 2021x, p. 2).

### **Conclusion**

*“Resilience in learning cities—particularly resilience in connection with recovery—has taken on a new significance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.”*

Atchoarena & Howells, 2021, p. 176

Across the material examined, we found abundant indications of adaptive resilience and creativity in learning city responses to the challenges at hand. Staff and stakeholders continued to meet the immediate conditions of the pandemic while moving forward on sustainability and climate change mitigation work. Arts Council England defines the term “adaptive resilience” as: “the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances” (Robinson, 2010, p. 14). Demonstrations of this capacity was seen at all levels, from local learning city personnel and volunteers taking up leadership for disaster responses, to global associations rapidly organizing information exchanges and collaborative problem-solving.

Creativity, too, was greatly evinced throughout the content reviewed. In their study of definitions, Puryear and Lamb (2020) recreated and expanded upon an earlier analysis of creativity concepts as found in the peer-reviewed literature of four different fields and found that the definition framed by the researchers in the original study is still widely referenced today: “Creativity is the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context” (Plucker et al., 2004, p. 90). When systems were interrupted in communities and larger society, creativity abounded around connecting and reconnecting, such as connecting individuals and families to food and services, facilitating social connections to counter isolation, and improvising avenues of linking learners with resources, teachers, and fellow learners. Early in the initial lockdowns clips of Italian neighbors on their balconies making music expressed determined resilience, creativity, and joyful camaraderie.

Yet the same period also saw a steep rise in discrimination, rage, and division: anti-Asian hate crimes (Grover et al., 2020), defiant rebukes of public health mandates (Hodge & Piatt, 2022), and drastic vaccine access inequity (Binns & Low, 2021). If recovery only returns to the status quo the gross inequities so harshly laid bare will undermine resilience and creativity. Years before the pandemic, the authors of the seminal work, “Limits to Growth,” published a 30-year update in which they identified two major barriers to bringing human impact into harmony with the carrying capacity of the planet:

Individualism and short-sightedness are the greatest problems of the current social system we think and the deepest cause of unsustainability. Love and compassion institutionalized in collective solutions is the better alternative. A culture that does not believe in, discuss, and develop these better human qualities suffers from a tragic limitation in its options (Meadows, 2006, p. 175).

We can, and must, do better. The Berlin Declaration closes with a call for transformative learning “as a necessity for our survival... The time to learn and act for our planet is now” (p. 3).

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