A US perspective on the Learning City: efforts at lifelong learning in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania


Research background and relevant literature

There has been much discussion in the field of adult education in some parts of the world about the notion of the ‘Learning City’. Originally conceptualized by Norman Longworth (1999; 2006) in Europe as a notion that could guide urban development in a global knowledge economy, this concept has taken root in some places in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, as well as some parts of Asia. There have been some adult learning centers that are funded through national and local governments in these areas, based on these ideas. Developing learning communities is the key to learning societies. The central idea of the concept of the Learning City is the value of social capital in a knowledge economy (Faris, 2005; Longworth, 1999). The basic premise of the Learning City Movement is attention to linkages that can integrate neighborhoods for both social development and economic growth (Duke, 2004; Walters, 2006). The notion of the Learning City emphasizes the fact that we live in a knowledge based economy and that we need to facilitate lifelong learning to contribute to that knowledge economy in a way that it increases social capital, active citizenship, democracy and wellbeing (Doyle, 2007; Longworth, 2006; Field, 2009). Such opportunities need to be built into the infrastructure of the Learning City itself.

The concept of the Learning City has been given little attention in the US and North America, probably because adult education in the US is mostly decentralized and tends not to be well funded by either federal or state governments, but rather through other venues. Canadian adult educators, Plumb, Leeeverman and McGray (2007) in
their discussion of the Learning City and strong support of it overall, suggest that the concept has not taken root in North America to any great degree because it is broad and not quite fully developed. They applaud the attention to linkages and networks inherent in the notion of the Learning City, but they also caution and critique it as a concept, suggesting that there is a danger that those who try to facilitate the development of learning cities could easily be co-opted by neo-liberal learning agendas. Such agendas tend to support learning initiatives that serve the interests of those in power in the knowledge economy, such as instrumental or skill-based learning, rather than learning initiatives that focus on critical thinking or analytic skill development that perhaps focus on how power relations shape notions of learning. Keeping these power relations in mind is important to the analysis of learning networks and how people can or do increase their social capital in lifelong learning endeavors as well as how they impact health outcomes, including well-being, anxiety reduction and emotional health (Field, 2005; Hammond, 2004). These same critiques have been offered about the implementation of UNESCO’s lifelong learning agenda, though the critique is not with the concept of lifelong learning or the Learning City itself. Rather, the critique surrounds inattention to how power relations shape funding for and design of initiatives in so-called ‘learning cities’ or lifelong learning efforts.

These critiques notwithstanding, there is strong support in the US for adult education activities and a lifelong learning agenda and thus, for the basic components of the Learning City, both in theory and practice. Adult education and lifelong learning happens though formal education institutions such as higher education and community colleges, and through nonformal educational activities offered through health organizations, museums, community-based programs that are either nonprofit or entrepreneurial, workplace education programs, and through businesses. The purpose of this paper is to discuss an exploratory study in progress on the adult education offerings in an urban location in the US, the City of Harrisburg, the capital of the state of Pennsylvania. The paper examines the linkages between and among organizations in Harrisburg. Before we do so, however, we provide an overview of the City of Harrisburg, and a brief explanation of the methodology of the study.

**Harrisburg: an overview**
Capital of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg is located in the South Central part of the state. Although it is the capital, Harrisburg is a relatively small city of approximately 50,000 people in 2010; the population of the surrounding tri-county area is about 550,000. Being the capital of Pennsylvania, the largest employer in the area is the government (http://www.city-data.com/us-cities/The-Northeast/Harrisburg-Economy.html). According to 2010 census data, the city is approximately 52% Black or African American, 30% white, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Asian, with some reporting mixed race. The major industries in the state have historically been steel, farming, mining, and to some extent electronics and pharmaceuticals (www.enchantedlearning.com/usa/states/pennsylvania/). Farming continues to be a large industry.

The most prominent businesses in the area are Hershey Foods, various health and medical insurance enterprises, and TE Connectivity. Harrisburg is home to the large Pennsylvania Farm Show and Expo Complex which hosts many events, mostly agricultural, each year that include education programs for adults and children. While the city has a lot to offer, inadequate fiscal management for the past decade or more resulted in the municipal government filing for bankruptcy on October 11, 2011.

In spite of some of the city’s problems, there are fairly vibrant adult learning opportunities in Harrisburg and the surrounding area. Adult learning in the US, and in Harrisburg itself, is ubiquitous. It takes place through formal institutions of higher education, in community-based programs, through government and civic programs, hospitals and wellness centers, and in organizations such as museums and libraries. After briefly explaining our methodology, we will focus on discussion of some of the major providers of adult learning, followed by an in-depth analysis of four specific providers. In the US, most organizations will do ongoing workplace education programs for the continuing education of their employees. This is a given, and we have not discussed employer ‘in-house’ workplace education programs in this paper, but rather focus on those organizations that are offering adult learning programs beyond their own employees.

**Methodology**
This is an exploratory study where the primary sources of data were gathered from Internet sites that relate to the adult education offerings in the City of Harrisburg and surrounding area. Additionally, seven interviews were conducted with adult education providers at various sites to gather more information about their views on the philosophy and mission of their organizations. At this stage, data have undergone a preliminary analysis primarily based on the offerings of various organizations, the linkages among organizations, and where possible, the exploration of the philosophy of adult education inherent in those offering these programs.

Findings

We first discuss the findings by providing an overview of the major providers of adult education in the city, those offered by formal higher education institutions, community-based organizations, health institutions, and then spotlight four particular institutions that either have a key role in adult education in the area, or that offer unique lifelong learning opportunities. There is much overlap between and among these organizations. We highlight these overlaps (linkages) below.

General overview of adult education in Harrisburg

As the capital of Pennsylvania, Harrisburg houses the offices of the state government. The Office of Postsecondary and Adult Education for the state is housed within the Pennsylvania Department of Education (http://www.education.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/Higher_Education/8711 ). The office serves as more of a clearinghouse for information for adult learners who are seeking information about higher education, rather than as a direct provider of services.

Postsecondary and higher education settings

There are numerous higher education institutions that serve the Harrisburg area, though the three that we will mention here are the Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg (www.hbg.psu.edu), a branch of the university that offers bachelors degrees through doctoral degrees (including a doctoral degree in adult education), Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) (www.hacc.edu) and Harrisburg
University of Science and Technology (www.harrisburgu.net). The Pennsylvania State University—Harrisburg offers the kinds of programs typical of a large major research university, so further explanation will not be offered here.

Harrisburg University of Science and Technology, a new institution founded in 2001, is attempting to meet the area’s need for learning related to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. A small private institution located in the city’s downtown, it is not currently a major player in the city. HACC, however, has a powerful influence on the City of Harrisburg, and will be discussed further below.

Health organizations
There are several organizations that offer adult education programs related to health, wellness, and nutrition. Many of these programs are offered through the large network of hospitals in the area, as well as by gyms and fitness centers, and wellness and yoga centers in the community. One grocery store chain (Giant Food Stores) also offers nutrition classes and cooking classes designed for children and adults, and has specifically built educational spaces within these stores for those purposes. Some health food stores and coffee shops make similar efforts and thus, health organizations overlap with community-based organizations.

Community-based organizations
Much of adult education happens in nonprofit as well as for profit/entrepreneurial community-based organizations. Some particularly significant nonprofit community-based organizations are the Tri-County Opportunities for Industrialization Center, Inc. (OIC) and the Center for Employment, Education, and Entrepreneurial Development (CEEED). Both of these nonprofit organizations have links to postsecondary institutions like HACC as well as to some businesses in order to offer programs that better serve adult learners. These organizations are central to adult education in Harrisburg and will be spotlighted below.

Businesses and entrepreneurial ventures also offer adult learning activities to the public on topics related to their businesses. The Midtown Scholar Bookstore, located in the Midtown area of the city is an entrepreneurial venture that is a center of adult
education activity surrounding various scholarly and political/cultural educational opportunities. We further discuss the Midtown Scholar below.

Spotlight 1: Harrisburg Area Community College
Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC), founded in 1964, was the first community college in Pennsylvania (www.hacc.edu). It serves nearly 20,000 students enrolled in for credit programs each year, and has several branch campuses serving four counties, with two campuses in the city of Harrisburg. HACC also offers distance learning and credit-for-life-experience programs, as well as many noncredit programs in personal enrichment and lifelong learning, adult basic education (ABE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs.

Particular to this institution is its subsidy structure. K–12 school districts in the four counties in which the HACC campuses are located partially subsidize tuition for participants who reside in those counties. This structure provides additional support for low-income adults seeking academically based vocational training, as well as continuing and higher education in the Harrisburg metropolitan area. In essence, HACC may be the strongest provider of adult education in the city, particularly as it is linked to community-based programs and businesses.

Spotlight 2: The Tri-County Opportunities Industrialization Centers
Since 1965, Tri-County Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC) (www.tricountyoic.org) has provided education and training to more than 1,200 students every year at 20 sites in Cumberland, Dauphin, Perry and York counties. A community-based, nonprofit, federally, state and locally funded organization Tri-County OIC is part of a greater nationwide alliance of employment and training programs bound together by the goal of serving the economically dependent and the un/under-employed.

Tri-County OIC offers programs to help students attain basic literacy skills, basic workplace foundation skills, family literacy skills, earn the GED® diploma and to acquire vocational skills; as well as tiered instruction for ESOL and several programs that range in complexity for job placement and career readiness and support. OIC classes and services are free to their participants. Adult learners only pay for
auxiliary services such as fees associated with taking the GED® tests or citizenship exams. Academic classes are funded through donations and state and federal grants.

The only holder in Dauphin County of the state and federal contracts from Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE), funds from the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Tri-County OIC supplies and supports adult learning in the Harrisburg area through subcontractors, including HACC (discussed above). Also, acting as a partnering agency is CEEED (discussed below), which receives and provides referrals for various adult learning services. By identifying the needs of the community, aligning them with their services and providing individual education plans (mandated by ABLE), Tri-County OIC creates linkages of services and education for the Harrisburg community.

Spotlight 3: Center for Employment, Education, and Entrepreneurial Development
The Center for Employment, Education, and Entrepreneurial Development (CEEED) is a nonprofit organization that primarily serves the needs of adults and families in the low-income South Alison Hill neighborhood of Harrisburg. South Alison Hill witnesses the densest populations of Black and Latina/o and Hispanic Americans in the City of Harrisburg. The parent organization of CEEED has direct access to policymakers in the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry and the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Division of Adult Education through their joint work with the South Central (Pennsylvania) Workforce Investment Board.

While CEEED offers introductory and intermediate level ESOL programs, its primary function resides in referring adults to the services that its member and partner organizations, such as Tri-County OIC and HACC offer. Partner and member groups of CEEED work independently to increase employment, education and entrepreneurialism opportunities for adults in South Alison Hill. The organizations also collaborate to write grants, which CEEED can then use to support or fully subsidize vocational and academic programs for its clients at HACC and Tri-County OIC.

HACC, Tri-County OIC, CEEED and their linkages to government and public spending most readily underscore the methods of manifesting Harrisburg as a
Learning City. Supporting employability, these organizations also promote communal wellbeing in Harrisburg. The linkages between and among Tri-County OIC, HACC and CEEED make it apparent that the three organizations are the primary brokers of adult learning in the city.

Spotlight 4: Midtown Scholar Bookstore
There are many community-based organizations and businesses that offer adult education activities in the city. Those above more specifically educate adults. The Midtown Scholar Bookstore (www.midtownscholar.com) located in Midtown Harrisburg is an entrepreneurial business—an independent bookstore and coffee shop with a large open space that is used for concerts, discussion groups and political activist groups. It offers a unique adult education venue in Harrisburg. Its primary purpose is to run the business of an independent bookstore. But the bookstore co-owners state on their website that ‘reading and intellectual inquiry are necessary for an informed citizenry and that the bonds of community are immeasurably strengthened and enriched when public spaces are dedicated to artistic expression and the life of the mind’. They combine running a business with enhancing public life, stating that, ‘the sale of scholarly books, while fully compatible with our deeply held ideals of social justice, is ultimately but a means of achieving our larger, transformative goals for society’. They define their vision for the community, in terms of creating a public space where people can come together to discuss everything from political events to environmental issues. They have hosted discussions on a wide variety of political events, including conversations with political figures running for elected offices.

The co-owners see the Midtown Scholar Bookstore as a cultural center and bookstore/coffee shop that is part of the overall resurgence of the Midtown area of Harrisburg. They state on their website that ‘We seek to become the destination-of-choice for prominent authors, progressive thinkers, and African-American and Latino scholars. As a premier acoustic-music venue, the Bookstore is again regularly hosting singer-songwriters and is available to other musical acts, community theater groups, and local non-profit organizations’. Primarily, they provide free space for public events, mostly though not exclusively with an adult education component, as a service to the community offering the Midtown Scholar as the Market Square for
informed discussion and educated action. As such, it is a unique adult education venue.

Discussion and conclusion

There are many lifelong learning efforts in the City of Harrisburg. These opportunities are ubiquitous, sponsored largely by formal institutions of higher and continuing education, health organizations, community-based organizations, businesses as well as business-sponsored education efforts for their consumers. While the government provides some adult learning services through ABLE, it is not the same provider of adult education or promoter of wellbeing as may be the case in other communities that draw heavily on the Learning City model.

The Learning City concept emphasizes the importance of linkages, social capital and democracy (Longworth, 2006). For adult learners, wellbeing is located among these linkages of increasing social capital. The strongest linkages in Harrisburg are those of HACC, Tri-County OIC and CEEED. They are adept at providing ABE and employment skills development, which increase employability, social capital and impact wellbeing. However, learners’ social capital and wellbeing increase ever more if they are taught critical thinking strategies and how social and economic systems work so that they become confident in their abilities to make knowledge through potentially challenging some of those economic or social systems. The extent to which these forms of knowledge are considered in these programs is unclear.

HACC plays a significant role in helping people potentially increase their social capital in larger ways. As a community college that grants associate degrees, its academic programs likely place greater emphasis on critical analysis. Further, HACC has articulation agreements with the Pennsylvania State University and other Pennsylvania higher education institutions. Thus, HACC serves as a link between many ABE and employment programs and more advanced forms of higher education. Further, because of its attention to many important workforce development programs like its outstanding program in Public Safety that trains police officers and firefighters, it helps people become stronger participants in a knowledge economy, impacting individual and communal wellbeing.
There are many community-based programs such as Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) that offer a wide variety of programs to adult learners based on their ongoing interests, such as museums, libraries, nature centers, religious institutions, or community centers. Education for democracy and grassroots community organizing tends to happen through many of the NGOs and community-based programs cited above, but to some extent it happens through entrepreneurial efforts that offer space for public interest programs. Places like the Midtown Scholar Bookstore offer ongoing publically scheduled events such as lectures, book signings and discussions on contemporary political topics. These locations serve as spaces of social integration, which can lead to broad mental and emotional health outcomes.

There is no question that Harrisburg has parts of the infrastructure in place that could facilitate its development as a Learning City. At this juncture, like many cities in the US, there is not a lot of formal governmental financial support specifically for adult learning efforts. Given Harrisburg’s troubled financial state, this is not likely to happen in the near future. However, as consciousness is raised about the need for a lifelong learning agenda in the city that supports adult learning and communal health which makes the linkages among some of the providers more visible, there is potential for Harrisburg to become more of a Learning City. This paper and exploratory study is one step in that consciousness raising process.

References