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Think Piece
Policy Conversation on Community Learning

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Think About It

This think piece asks us to think. About what it means to live in a knowledge society. The challenges of working in a knowledge economy. The importance of learning within the knowledge society and economy. About opportunities for learning – all the time and for everyone. The role of communities in embracing the concept and practice of learning. About how communities deliver learning and how they themselves learn.

There is clearly a lot to think about. And there are no simple guideposts to addressing these issues. But deliberative dialogue may help work through some of these concerns. It can encourage careful exploration of these questions. It can point to some important directions for promoting learning in its diverse forms and varied purposes.

The Office of Learning Technologies at Human Resources Development Canada has launched this policy conversation because it seeks informed opinion about the purpose of learning, the process of learning through technology and the factors that enable this crucial process. It also seeks thoughtful guidance on its own place in these areas – both now and in future.

But this think piece asks us to do more than think. It also asks us to learn. To learn from current and emerging research. To learn from community practice. And to learn from each other. The thinking and learning that we do today are intended to help shape the thinking and learning for tomorrow.

The Knowledge Society

It has become standard practice to begin reports, speeches and even think pieces with the following declaration of conventional wisdom: We live in a knowledge society and economy. While this statement may be considered common knowledge, there is no common understanding of what it means.

In the knowledge society, both knowledge and learning have emerged as the key ingredients to citizenship. They are the foundations for social participation. They are the underpinnings for economic success.

Barely a decade ago, the concept of the knowledge economy was equated with certain sectors, such as information and communications technologies. The knowledge economy also was used as a label for designated regions of the world, such as Silicon Valley in California. We realize today that these interpretations were far too limited. Today's appreciation of the knowledge economy knows few sectoral or geographic boundaries.

We now understand that knowledge and learning shape every sector of the economy. The wealth of nations – and even of regions – no longer depends only upon natural resources in the form of coal, forests or fish. Virtually every community, region and country has the actual and potential assets to succeed in the knowledge economy: its people. But success requires investment in their development – in their basic and ongoing need for learning. This investment is crucial not only for a nation’s economic wealth. Ongoing investment in learning is the basis for human development and community health.

Knowledge and learning are the vital keys that unlock the doors to both economic wealth and social well-being. In recognition of these crucial levers, the federal government launched in February 2002 two separate, but linked, national strategies: the National Strategy on Innovation and the National Strategy on Skills and Learning. Together, these strategies seek to ensure that Canada has the most skilled and talented labour force in the world.

This intent was reinforced in the fall 2002 Speech from the Throne which profiled Canada as “a world leader in innovation and learning, a magnet for talent and investment.” The 2003 federal Budget built on this theme by announcing Ottawa’s commitment to “provide new opportunities to learn and to work for all Canadians.”

The goal of the Innovation Strategy, in particular, is to spark in every corner of the country a culture of excellence, learning and innovation. The Strategy sets out a series of national goals that include federal priorities and complementary action by partners. By 2005, for example, it proposes that high-speed broadband access be widely available throughout Canada. The year 2010 is the target to improve significantly the innovation performance of communities across the country.

The National Strategy on Innovation was designed in tandem with the National Strategy on Skills and Learning. In fact, the process of learning is embedded within and catalyzes innovation. The goal of the National Strategy on Skills and Learning is to ensure that Canada’s current and emerging workforce is highly skilled and adaptable.

Despite their distinct focus, these National Strategies share several common features. Both recognize that skills and learning are the tools to advance economic prosperity and social inclusion. Both strategies seek to strengthen the performance of individuals, firms and economic sectors. And they both acknowledge the central role of communities in translating innovation and learning goals into concrete actions.

Community Learning

But learning and innovation do not simply emerge spontaneously in communities. These processes must be carefully developed and strategically pursued. Communities

need support in respect of these goals and governments, in particular, can enable this enabling role. This is where the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) comes into play.

The OLT was created in 1996 by the Department of Human Resources Development Canada to promote the effective use of learning technologies; support the assessment, research and testing related to the use of learning technologies; and increase the availability and sharing of knowledge and quality information about learning technologies. In recent years, the Office of Learning Technologies has provided support specifically for ‘community learning networks.’ While these networks differ throughout the country, illustrated in the examples that follow, they are also the same in many respects.

Community learning networks are locally controlled structures that support community development and aspire to enhance the lives of their members through lifelong learning. They seek to reduce disparities among community members by encouraging broad participation and inclusion. Many community learning networks help members use various forms of technology, such as educational networking, distance learning and telelearning, to promote learning for work skills and learning for life.

It is clear that the actual and potential scope of these community learning networks is unbounded. This is both a strength and a weakness. The good news is that there is so much to do. The bad news is that there is so much to do.

The challenge for communities is to identify their learning priorities from among a wide range of possible options. The equally pressing challenge for governments – and for the OLT in particular – is to figure out how best to support and enhance these choices. How to help communities recognize and harness their unique assets.

But a community’s assets can be counted only if there is first a clear understanding of ‘community.’ To what does this term refer: a neighbourhood, geographic region or group with similar features or interests? Can it be all of these or even more?

The answer is that there is no single answer. Most people see themselves as belonging to several ? not just one ? community. It may be best to employ a loose definition of ‘community’ so that groups can figure out for themselves what it means in their own context. In some cases, they may be referring to a designated neighbourhood whose boundaries are well defined. It might comprise a set of amalgamated cities and towns. Others use the term ‘community’ to parallel the territory that corresponds to local government.

Community also can be defined as a group with shared interests whose members are not necessarily geographically bounded. It may include persons with common language, values, norms or goals, such as visible minority groups or people with disabilities. Equally important to geography is whether a group shares a common geometry. Communities in this sense come in many different sizes and shapes.

Communities also can take the form of learning networks. The Vibrant Communities initiative, for example, is a four-year national effort to explore promising local solutions to reduce poverty. At the heart of this initiative is a Pan-Canadian Learning Partnership in which selected conveners from 14 cities come together on a monthly basis to share ideas, resources and strategies. They hold one meeting in person and nine throughout the rest of the year via wires, cables and screens.

But the notion of community no longer is bounded even within nations. Information and communications technologies have enabled interaction across borders and oceans. Many global communities, such as the antiglobal community, exchange strategic information on an ongoing basis. They are in continual learning modes as they teach each other about key issues, strategies and events.

The short of it is that the definition of community is long- and getting longer. This reflects the reality of a world changing rapidly through the continual production and transmission of knowledge and through communication links that can bring together new groups of people in diverse ways.

Technology can fashion communities where none existed. Work is under way on the creation of 'virtual clusters' in order to build a critical mass of expertise, capacity or common interest. The University College of Cape Breton, for example, seeks to stimulate regional innovation through the creation of new micro clusters. Information and communications technologies play a central role in effecting the required links.

Multi-community development is another strategy employed particularly in rural areas. They are often at a disadvantage because they have neither the economies of scale to sustain their operations nor the aggregate demand to support their products and services. By working with their neighbours, small towns can increase their store of resources and raise their capacity beyond that of regions acting on their own. They can share not only their hard resources but their equally important soft resources – knowledge and expertise. They can grow together by learning together.

But collaborative efforts, such as those embodied by community learning networks, do not simply happen on their own. Like the learning process itself, they require a catalyst to bring and hold them together. They need a coordinating body? or governance mechanism? to identify and convene diverse players.

The governance mechanisms that currently steer the wide range of community learning networks vary widely. In Nanaimo, British Columbia, for example, there are members from all educational and learning institutes in the region as well as the federal and provincial governments. The Random North Development Corporation in Newfoundland is concerned with sustainable community economic development. Its governance mechanism includes representation from the Economic Zone Board, rural development associations, the College of the North Atlantic, Human Resources

Development Canada and the provincial Department of Industry, Trade and Rural Development and Department of Human Resources and Employment.

Despite their differences, some common principles apply across the board. First, these coordinating mechanisms are multiorganizational. Most are multisectoral. They seek to involve representatives from education and training, government, the voluntary sector and business. The governance mechanism convenes key players, sets out a strategic plan for the community learning effort, and acts as the liaison between the broader community and the learning initiative. While many players are engaged in the overall governance, one organization usually acts as champion for the overall effort and the diverse learning activities upon which the community decides to embark.

Community-based mechanisms naturally raise questions about the appropriate role for governments in the new world of governance. Seed funding of the collaborative process is one important function, which the OLT currently provides in support of community learning networks. While ongoing development work is required to ensure successful partnership, substantial support rarely is available for this purpose. There is also a need for flexible funding to sustain the wide range of programs that community learning networks may wish to undertake. These dollars are few and far between.

In the world of partners, governments need to find ways to enable rather than command and control. The creation of a positive policy and regulatory environment is another vital role. Governments also should explore the range and types of support for community process. For example, a pool of highly trained coaches could help communities develop strategic learning plans with reasonable and relevant outcomes. Learning is not something that merely happens through the simple presence, or receipt, of information.

In fact, the key resource of the knowledge society – widely available information – is also its key challenge. The quantity of information on any given subject has burgeoned in recent years. Investment in research has seen exponential growth in the stock of information housed in organizations throughout the world. Technologies have expedited the process by enabling its *storage*.

But the stock of information is only one side of the equation. The flow is an equally important part of the story. Communication technologies, such as e-mail and personal assistive devices, enable the *transmission* of information. They know no geographic or time boundaries.

While information and communication technologies have opened up new horizons, they also have created new pressures. No human being can possibly keep up with the volume of information enlivening the wires. Beyond a certain level, the flow of information can be debilitating rather than enabling. The volume is simply too loud. This modern-day stress means that it has become increasingly important for organizations and communities to be selective about the amount and types of information they choose to share.

Another challenge arises from the fact that information is available all the time. But we do not require it *all the time* – we need it *just in time*. The question is to how to create awareness of precisely what information exists and where to get it when required. Requiring, not acquiring, is the operative word.

The technological elite will be helped in this process by just-in-time software, which has arrived just in time. New software can be programmed to scan relevant data sources on an ongoing basis and identify useful information without any action on the part of the user. But it will be a while before there is widespread use of this kind of technical aid, with many households and communities still struggling just to board the technology train.

Linked closely to information quantity is the issue of quality. There is information – and then there is information. Some materials are more equal than others. Some of it is qualitatively superior.

The challenge for both individuals and communities is to find ways to distinguish between good and not-so-good information? especially if they do not happen to have expertise in a given field. It is not clear whether governments have a role to play in quality control and who should determine what comprises an authoritative source. These issues have clear ethical dimensions. In the meantime, if communities want to promote learning, they must take steps to protect their members from drowning in the rapidly rising sea of letters and words.

Learning about Learning

We know that knowledge infuses every dimension of our economy and society. But we know little about knowledge. The word often is used as though one size fits all. Yet there are actually several kinds of knowledge – at least four, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Know-what refers to basic factual information, which can be disaggregated into its constituent parts and communicated as data. *Know-why* provides the causal information or explanation that underlies the know-what. *Know-how* refers to requisite skills or the ability to do something. Knowhow is linked closely to *know-who* – who knows what to do and how to do it.

Why is it important to know about these *knows*? The distinction is significant because there are different sources for each category of knowledge. And it is no longer sufficient to understand only the know-what or know-why of a given situation. It is the know-how that usually makes things happen. And this knowhow typically is transmitted through the know-who part of the equation.

Another way of saying this is that there is standard or 'codified' knowledge, which typically takes the form of know-what and know-why. However, this codified knowledge does not become alive or applied until it is combined with 'tacit' knowledge, reflected in know-how and know-who.

These four categories of knowledge have cast a new light upon our understanding of learning. It used to be seen as a one-way process in which information flowed from source to recipient. Learning was deemed to take place by virtue of the transmission of information. But there is no guarantee that learning actually results from this process. In fact, it is incorrect to assume that knowledge transmitted means knowledge received.

All this to say: The simple transmission of knowledge is not sufficient for learning. The knowledge must be worked with in some way for it to have meaning. We now appreciate that learning is the result of active engagement with knowledge in its various forms. The transmission of information is only the beginning of the process.

There is a crucial social component to the application of knowledge. The clear emphasis on active engagement in some mediating process speaks to the social capital dimension of learning. 'Social capital' refers to the networks and associations that enable learning and other interactions. It acts to unleash the tacit knowledge that interacts with codified knowledge to promote learning.

The growing recognition of the foundational role of social capital helps explain the vital function of community learning. Community, broadly defined, provides an important context for the transmission of knowledge. Community learning recognizes that people learn best when others are somehow engaged with them in the learning process. The interaction between and among learners reinforces learning, making it concrete and practical.

But there is more to the knowledge society than the sheer volume and importance of knowledge. We live as well in an electronic society in which technology plays a central role in enabling the transmission of knowledge and the exchange of views. In delivering the CBC Massey Lectures several years ago, University of Toronto Professor Ursula Franklin described the pervasive role of technology:

As I see it, technology has built the house in which we all live. The house is continually being extended and remodeled. More and more of human life takes place within its walls, so that today there is hardly any human activity that does not occur within this house. All are affected by the design of the house, by the division of its space, by the location of its doors and walls. Compared to people in earlier times, we rarely have a chance to live outside this house. And the house is still changing; it is still being built as well as being demolished.

Do we all feel at home in this house? Clearly not. Technology helps create communities but it also can drive them apart. One imperative of the electronic society is to use technology constructively to transmit knowledge but not to replace human interaction.

The challenge for the future is to identify the areas of learning in which communities ideally should engage. A crucial question in the knowledge society and economy is: *Learning for what purpose?* Clearly, there is a need to prioritize among the broad scope of possible purposes of learning. A related challenge is equally important: *How best to enable learning, regardless of purpose?*

While these key challenges reflect the scope of the issues, there are some equally important questions related to the role of communities. How much can community learning networks realistically achieve? What supports do they need— both direct and indirect in the form of an appropriate policy context? And what does all this mean for the Office of Learning Technologies as it seeks to identify changing needs in a world which looks different with each passing day?

The Challenges

#1: Learning for Participation

Learning entails far more than the simple acquisition of basic skills. We also know that the acquisition of basic skills can be far from simple. Basic skills are vital because they comprise the underpinning for all other learning. They are essential for participating in virtually every domain of the knowledge society.

Basic skills are like an architectural foundation. Over time, changes and upgrades can be made to any structure. Indeed, there is no end to possible renovations. But a strong and secure foundation must first be in place.

Many factors have created this requirement for solid foundational skills. Basic literacy and numeracy are essential anchors in a world in which all else is moving at a frenetic pace. And in a knowledge society and economy, basic skills mean more than letters and numbers. They also include keyboards and screens. Computer skills are equally critical to success. Other crucial elements include communications skills, teamwork and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Despite the importance of these foundational elements, many Canadians are not functioning at an adequate level. While the population overall has more formal education than ever before, nearly eight million Canadians— more than 40 percent of working age adults — lack the basic literacy skills required for participation in the rapidly shifting economy. About one in four high school graduates have inadequate literacy skills, effectively blocking them from postsecondary learning.

Children who perform below their potential come from all backgrounds, but low family income is a major risk factor. Almost 20 percent of children 15 years or older live in a low-income household. Access to postsecondary education is more difficult for

lower socioeconomic groups and for people with special needs. The price is high: The poorly educated tend to be marginalized in or excluded from the labour market.

Aboriginal Canadians face unique problems with respect to basic skills. Children of preschool age are the most vulnerable. Rates of fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effect are much higher in Aboriginal communities, dramatically affecting development later in life. Aboriginal school age children and youth typically score lower in educational achievement than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. An estimated 41 percent of 25- to 34-year-old Aboriginal Canadians have not completed high school, compared with 18 percent of non-Aboriginal Canadians of the same age.

These numbers point to serious weaknesses in the education system, particularly for certain populations. Communities and community learning networks can encourage all Canadians to acquire basic skills. Indeed, many communities are already involved in this area.

The Technology Education/Enterprise Development Communications Centre in Russell, Manitoba, for example, provides relevant educational and training opportunities, among other programs, to actual and potential school drop-outs. *NB Branché* in New Brunswick has set up learning centres that offer a range of educational services, including completion of Grade 12 education. It also partners with the University of New Brunswick to deliver first-year university courses in communities, supplemented by part time work and training in information and communications technologies. The Vancouver Community Network, among its many projects, targets individuals with poor literacy skills and low income.

There is no end of interesting examples of communities teaching basic skills. Yet perhaps the issue is not 'can do' but 'should do.' Community learning networks may be well poised to impart basic skills. But is it their role? Is this function more properly seated in the traditional education system that should be more responsive to diverse learners and their unique needs? Yet if basic skills are so basic, then the source of learning may be irrelevant? It is the end results that should count.

2: Learning for Earning

The knowledge society has raised the bar – by increasing the importance and types of basic skills. But the bar also is changing as new technologies continually transform – without end it seems – the way in which work is carried out. Higher levels of skills are required than ever before, even in so-called low-skill jobs of the hamburger flipping variety. The knowledge economy demands a well-educated and skilled workforce – everywhere, all the time.

Since the 1990s, the only jobs experiencing growth are those requiring a postsecondary diploma or degree. By 2004, more than 70 percent of new jobs created in

Canada will call for some form of postsecondary education and 25 percent of new jobs will require a university degree. Far too many workers are excluded from the labour market because they cannot meet these higher levels of skill. Only 6 percent of new jobs will be held by those who have not finished high school.

Skilled trades and apprentices often are overlooked in the need for continual upgrading and training. This is a serious problem in light of labour market projections that anticipate substantial shortages in these areas in the near future.

Another feature of the knowledge economy is that training is no longer a one-shot deal. Fast-paced advances in knowledge and technology mean that it is not just nice—but indeed essential—to have access to continual opportunities for upgrading knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, the practice is out of sync with reality. The training systems currently in place have not yet been designed—at least on a broad scale—to match the learning pace that the new economy demands. The learning system must be far better aligned to meet market needs.

It is also important to acknowledge that there usually is a leakage of learning over time. Knowledge and skills acquired in earlier years can become rusty if not updated at least every few years.

Yet the participation rate of adult Canadians in education and training is less than stellar; it has held steady since the early 1990s. Canada's performance in adult training falls short of international standards. The OECD ranks Canada well behind the UK, the US and Australia in the percentage of adults aged 25 to 54 participating in employer-sponsored job training in 1995.

Here at home, the federally-sponsored Workplace and Employer Survey found that training tends to take place primarily in larger firms. Smaller firms typically do not have the resources or expertise to invest in skills development. Canadians who work for smaller employers generally do not have access to the ongoing training that the knowledge economy requires. With up to 75 percent of new jobs being created by small, community-based enterprises, fewer employees will have opportunities for workplace training in future.

Many communities currently are engaged in some form of training or labour market activity. The Women and Rural Economic Development Network in Ontario has designed training courses specifically for women's unique needs. *NB Branché* in New Brunswick employs young people to initiate digitization projects which create employment and/or small business opportunities for welfare recipients. The Niagara Labour Market Information Network acts as a single source for the provision of labour market information. The North Sydney Entrepreneurial Centre makes available labour market information and services to unemployed individuals in Cape Breton. The

CanLearn Interactive website acts as a one-stop online source of information for postsecondary educational opportunities.

It is clear that learning means earning and that more learning generally means more earning. But it is not clear who is responsible for ensuring ongoing training and upgrading. And what is the role of communities in this equation? Should communities use their limited resources for ensuring a trained workforce? Need their resources for this purpose always be so limited? Community learning networks possibly could work more actively with diverse partners to raise funds for building and rebuilding skills.

Perhaps the problem lies in our current practice. Maybe our workforce is far more skilled than we often acknowledge. Canada has a poor record of recognizing skills acquired outside of the formal education system. Neither have we done well on accrediting skills acquired abroad or overseas.

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment describes its work as the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning acquired through formal and informal study. The recognition of prior learning is based on the premise that learning can occur in many places: in an academic setting, in the workplace, through life experience or in a foreign country. Such recognition of informal and non credit learning would remove for many Canadians a significant barrier to full participation in the labour market. Why has this been so difficult, particularly for a country that depends heavily– and will rely increasingly? upon the skills of new Canadians to fill the wave of vacancies we expect in the coming years?

#3: Learning for Innovation

Learning and innovation are so intrinsically linked that it is almost impossible to know where one begins and the other ends.

Innovation often is defined as the creation or generation of new ideas, products or processes. But this conceptualization is actually too narrow. While innovation *can* entail the creation of new ideas, it also involves the application of existing ideas in new ways or to new fields. Innovation basically means the introduction into the economy or society of new knowledge or novel combinations of old knowledge.

In economic terms, innovation is seen to thrive in so-called industrial clusters. These clusters consist of interrelated, geographically concentrated industries along with their key suppliers and supporting institutions. This model of economic development is consistent with the growing global recognition of the role of local regions as the engines of national economies. The acknowledgment has created pressure for larger cities to become world-class actors on the international stage. In order to survive in this competitive environment, major urban centres need to attract investment and the best possible talent in the world.

Innovation should not be viewed, however, as the sole purview of large centres. Many smaller communities in rural and remote regions of the country have significant knowledge and entrepreneurial resources. They may lack the networks, infrastructure, investment capital or shared knowledge to live up to their innovative potential. But they have the crucial assets for innovation— people, knowledge and the ability to learn.

Innovative capabilities are best sustained through regional communities that share a common knowledge base. The regional level is critical because the factors of space and proximity contribute to the knowledge and capacity for learning that support innovation. Innovation therefore can be understood as a process rooted in local regions. It is spurred by the grouping of selected players within the same region.

Local communities are in a unique position to act as centres of learning and innovation. They can play an important role in helping to meet labour market needs in new and emerging sectors of the economy. They might do this, for example, by partnering with a sector council to identify and meet the human resource needs in these sectors. These networks can help ensure that sufficient training and learning take place to support the activity of that cluster.

Community learning networks can act as the conveners of major sectors – including business, educational institutions, governments and voluntary organizations around the major knowledge requirements of various clusters. Say, for example, that the region had identified biotechnology as an emerging cluster of economic activity. Community learning networks can help ensure that the strategic players involved in the formation and continued development of that cluster come together regularly around a learning agenda devoted to biotechnology.

They may identify current and projected human resource requirements in this area. They could take steps to ensure sufficient baseline training. Community learning networks also might devise a system for how the community can promote upgrading opportunities to meet the shifting needs of the sector. They might seek ways to make certain that members of the community who typically are left out of innovative economic activity are able to find a place— not only at the table, but also in the field.

Community learning networks can do all this? and more. Is it the best use of their time and resources?

#4: Learning for Citizenship

We often talk about learning as if its only value is to ensure income? or raise its level. Clearly, education is essential. But there is more to learning than earning? or even innovation. The International Commission on Education for the TwentyFirst Century, struck by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO), calls learning “the treasure within.” Learning is crucial not just as a ticket to a job; equally importantly, it is a “passport for life.”

The Commission makes an impassioned case for learning as the heart of human and community development. Learning helps foster intelligence, creativity, aesthetic and cultural sensitivity, spiritual values and moral responsibility. The Commission argues that learning is so fundamental to human well-being that it must be recognized as a process which takes place throughout life.

The community learning network in St. Albert, just north of Edmonton, for example, seeks to translate this ideal into practice. Its mission is to encourage community members to become knowledgeable and realize sustained prosperity through continuous learning. The success of the initiative will be measured by the extent to which its residents embrace the pursuit of lifelong learning and whether the region is recognized as a world-class learning community.

Lifelong learning is not intended only for those with already long lives. It actually does and should commence at the earliest stages of life. Both research and commonsense observation show that learning begins at? perhaps even before? birth. The first few years of life are critical for brain development and affect children’s subsequent performance at school and, eventually, in the job market.

There is a need to rethink and broaden the notion of lifelong learning. It should enable people to develop awareness of themselves and their environment and encourage them to be active agents at work, in their neighbourhoods and in their nations. The International Commission sees education as the principal means to foster a deep and more harmonious form of human development, which in turn will help reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war.

While learning is an ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills, it is also – perhaps primarily – an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations. Intergenerational learning is one way to build knowledge and relationships. Seniors can expand the horizons of young people by teaching them about culture and history. Young people can expand the horizons of seniors by teaching them how to use new technologies. Learning can be a mutually beneficial process that helps narrow the intergenerational divide.

Community learning is also a way to build bridges across difference and to create harmonious relations among diverse ethnic groups. It can promote awareness about historic roots. For example, the Lumby Community Internet Access in BC has developed, among its many projects, a digitization project that makes available online an historical and economic account of the Lumby region. Among its many functions, the Vancouver Community Learning Network provides portals for collecting and archiving community stories, histories and art.

But learning is far more than an educational process in which individuals or groups acquire new knowledge. It also is a form of community development in which community members engage actively around issues that affect them. They learn through group activity to define problems, decide upon a solution and take appropriate action.

Community problem-solving is effectively a mode of learning in which members struggle with the possibilities, tradeoffs and options around a given issue. It is a process of finding a reasonable solution or approach acceptable to a broad range of interests. The problem to be solved may be a negative one – such as high rates of unemployment, poverty, domestic violence or crime. But it also may be a positive one, such as promoting appreciation of the arts, beautifying a neighbourhood or developing an ecological plan.

The community learning network in Northern Saskatchewan brings together seven regions to build the capacity for community economic development. This work recognizes the need for Aboriginal community members to enhance skills for their own development. Learning Link in Edmonton is an association of organizations and individuals working together to promote a culture of lifelong learning. It includes learning circles that help adults learn about issues that are critical to the community and contribute to the development of ideas that may influence the course of these issues.

The Community Education Initiative in Port au Port, Newfoundland, has a wide range of objectives around various dimensions of learning. Among its diverse efforts, the Initiative has set up preschool enrichment programs, family resource centres for parent education and support, and play programs for parents and children. The Parents as Teaching Partner Program attempts to break the cycle of low family literacy. Young people are being trained to work as part of the community literacy teams.

Community learning networks not only catalyze the problemsolving capacity of communities. They also can introduce new technologies to provide information and increase citizen participation. Networking technology is a potentially revolutionary tool to rebuild communities, strengthen local relationships and mobilize joint planning and community action. It can help build links within and between communities at home and throughout the world.

La Société pour l'apprentissage à vie in Quebec City brings together groups from across Quebec that are committed to using information and communication technologies as a training and organizing mechanism to solve common problems. In Prince Edward Island, *La télécommunauté insulaire francophone* employs technology to keep community members informed of changes in government programs and promote community development efforts throughout the province. The Chebucto Community Net in Halifax enables communication and supports community groups in professional development, outreach and community service.

Learning for citizenship is an important means of enhancing inclusion. It can help engage citizens as meaningful actors in their communities. Should this take precedence

over learning for earning? As we have learned, social capital forms the basis for human capital development and so it may be the prime ingredient in the learning recipe. On the other hand, if less learning means less earning, then a focus on work skills should take priority. Or perhaps these questions create a false dichotomy. Depending upon the design of the community learning initiative, one choice need not preclude the other.

#5: Learning for Excellence

The notion of learning for excellence means that individuals, groups and even communities continually must assess performance and how it might be improved. It is essential to embed the concept of learning into all dimensions of work– and play. This is a challenge; in the past, most community projects were not encouraged to learn. They were supported to do whatever it takes to succeed and meet identified targets and measurable results.

Evaluation typically is undertaken to determine whether certain interventions worked or not – whether there were positive or negative results. The pervasive concern with ‘what works?’ helps drive this obsession. While this information is important, it may not be the most critical. Perhaps the central question is not so much what works, but rather what did we learn from this effort? What appears to have been a successful intervention and why? What factors contribute to its success? Why do certain interventions appear not to work effectively? What could be done differently to ensure better results?

Moreover, evaluations typically begin *after* the key foundations of a project have been laid and the work is already under way. It would be far more helpful to have feedback about performance on an ongoing basis so that interventions which appear to be less than effective might be identified and shifted. Or perhaps the process by which a program has been set up is not operating appropriately or is far more problematic than originally intended. It would be important to know this information earlier rather than later. Later often means too late.

Traditional learning and evaluation have taught us to look back and assess the difference from where we were to where we are now. The new thinking on community learning pushes us to do more– or at least to think about more. It challenges us to ask whether what we are doing now will have an impact upon investing in the future. Just like reading, writing and communication skills prepare us for survival in the knowledge economy, community learning may prepare us for the ups and downs of the knowledge economy.

The Manitoba School Improvement Program is an example of an initiative that seeks to translate into practice the principle of learning for excellence. The program provides multi-year grants to a network of about 30 secondary schools for the purpose of self-directed improvement. For example, they may implement career portfolios or

timetable changes in order to create longer blocks of learning time. Funds also are made available to help schools enhance their capacity to engage in planning, problem-solving, connecting with community-based resources, and measuring results and evaluation? in short, to support the search for continual improvement along the road to excellence.

Learning provides the mechanism for something to happen- for the community to enhance the skills of certain populations, invest in early childhood development, encourage literacy, deal with conflict, provide employment opportunities, tackle crime and family violence, clean the environment or any other goal. Is learning assumed to have taken place by virtue of the end results? Through the outcomes of the community process? These are not simple questions.

Perhaps the process of learning has been successful but the desired outcomes of the community learning process have not been achieved. A given community, for example, may have undertaken extensive learning about various methods to reduce poverty. It may have learned as much as possible about training, community loan funds, entrepreneurship for young people, supports for designated populations and the removal of barriers to work.

But the major employer in the community, such as a car manufacturing plant, may have shut down. Or the primary economic base of the region, such as the fishery, may have collapsed, throwing thousands out of work. The learning process may have been successful but the goal of the community process that employed community learning as its methodology failed.

In these examples, the inability to achieve the desired outcomes was due to factors beyond the control of the community learning network. Nonetheless, significant 'process outcomes' may have been achieved in terms of clarifying community goals, encouraging citizen participation and building community action. Individual community members may feel less socially isolated, may have improved their skills and may feel more confident about learning. Does this count?

Another factor is relevant. The poverty rate in a given community may have risen despite a successful learning process. But perhaps the learning process will have a positive long-term effect by contributing to the resilience of this community. Maybe the fact that the community has engaged in discussions regarding the scope and spectrum of poverty reduction will help protect it against total collapse. It will be able to rebound sooner and faster as a result of this learning. But how to measure the impact of this 'immunization'? How to know that the current investment is serving a protective function for the future? We rarely think about resilience? let alone how to assess it.

Learning for excellence shifts the focus from one of judgment to continual improvement. It sees the world not in after-the-fact black or white but in varying shades of gray. Learning for excellence also assumes that mistakes will be made and that a shift in course may be required.

In fact, no shift in course may be a sign that there has been little self-critique – or even fear to take bold steps. Either way, the message is not good for communities engaged in ‘learning.’ The problem is that most funders, including governments, typically require the development of a cast-in-stone strategy that must be followed to the letter. This hardened path presumably eases monitoring and helps promote accountability. But the path of least resistance may also be the path of least learning.

Factors That Enable Learning

We have a better understanding today of the dynamics of learning? what it is. But ‘what it is’ is not sufficient. We also need to appreciate ‘what makes it happen.’ We need to know more about the factors that enable learning – the antecedents to learning.

Information and communications technologies are high on that list. In fact, they have revolutionized the learning process. Yet while they enable, they also can disable. There is a large and growing digital divide? a term typically used to characterize global inequities between the North and South. The developing world falls well behind in its capacity to generate and apply information.

But there is a digital divide not just between have and havenot nations. A large gap also exists between the information rich and information poor within developed nations themselves. Many individuals do not have access? either regularly or at all? to basic information and communications technology. The National Broadband Task Force notes, for example, that 75 percent of Canadians, but only 20 percent of communities, have access to high-speed computer networks.

Between 1999 and 2001, Internet usage throughout the country increased from 59 percent to 69 percent. Yet low-income households remain on the wrong side of the divide. Low literacy skills continue to contribute to the barriers of the digital divide, and technical barriers remain a serious obstacle, particularly for certain groups such as seniors.

Sometimes there are barriers in access to copyright; it costs money to purchase and update computer software. The choice between paying for food and paying for software licenses is not a difficult one for most low-income households. Neither can they afford to keep up with the latest equipment, such as personal assistive devices, and their endless upgrades.

The commercial ownership of copyright and software licensing also can be a barrier to groups and communities using information and communications technologies to promote learning and economic development. One solution to this barrier that has been developed is known as ‘open source software,’ referring to software for which the source code is freely and publicly available.

Many individuals do not yet have the skills to engage comfortably with the new technologies, which change more quickly than the capacity of most people to learn how to use them. Often the hardware and software to a given program are not user-friendly, adding considerably to discomfort with the technology.

It also is assumed that people will engage actively in the opportunities afforded by information and communication technologies. Participation in web-based discussions is a case in point. The theory is that the very presence of web-based discussion groups will stimulate their active use. The reality proves otherwise.

Most individuals do not join electronic discussion groups simply because these exist. There usually needs to be a designated convener who 'seeds' the discussion? asking questions, making comments and providing overall direction. An active online host generally is required to ensure deliberative dialogue rather than the streams of consciousness that often arise in electronic discussions. The passive approach typically does not generate thoughtful learning.

Learning requires substantial support, which can take the form of coaching on a one-on-one or group basis. It also means training the trainers who, in turn, teach relevant skills to community members. There is a need for professional development at many different levels in order to ensure the process of community learning? though this has become more complex given the blurring of the traditional distinction between teachers and learners.

While technology is a crucial enabler of learning, a screen is no replacement for a human face. At the end of the day, information and communications technologies can complement but never replace human contact. Even community learning networks, which are often technology-dependent, recognize that there is no substitute for a supportive personal learning environment.

As noted, there is an important social capital dimension to the learning process: Relationships and direct contact *do* make a difference. At the same time, it is essential to encourage learning through the use of technologies so as to encourage flexibility, minimize time and travel costs, and maximize access to information. There is a fine balance between personal engagement and self-directed learning.

But there are many examples in which technology, far from isolating members of the community, effectively have acted as a window on the world. Rankin Inlet, for instance, is a community of about 2,000 people, about 80 percent of whom are Inuit. It is located 1,000 kilometers north of Winnipeg and is accessible only by air. The community learning network is housed in a centre known as 'Iglaaq,' located in the computer room of the local elementary school. It provides Internet access to staff and students during school days and to community members during evenings and weekends. The Centre has created links to communities both within and beyond Canadian borders. It has helped reduce the community's isolation and created a feeling of pride in its culture, language and special place in the world.

Sometimes the factors that enable learning actually have nothing to do with learning. They are the *supports* that are required in order for community members to participate actively in any learning process. The lack of financial assistance for learning and training or even transportation to these opportunities is often a barrier to participation. Persons with disabilities may require accommodation of their special needs ? they may need assistance, for example, in getting ready for or simply getting to learning opportunities. The Women and Rural Economic Development Network in Ontario has established a Rural Enterprise Loan Fund for new entrepreneurs who typically find that they are ineligible for traditional forms of credit.

Quality child care is another essential antecedent to learning. It is vital to promoting women's equality by enabling them to train for paid work, find work and keep working. But it is also crucial for early learning. Countless studies conducted both in Canada and elsewhere have documented the value of good child care for the healthy growth and development of children. Quality child care enables learning by parents and contributes directly to learning by children.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation in Toronto recognized that many prospective participants would not be able to partake of its programs – be they language, skills training or job search– unless they had access to affordable, high-quality child care. In response to this need, the Foundation set up its own network of child care centres and currently operates 13 licensed centres throughout the city for about 650 children. The program also trains participants as early childhood assistants.

But how much – and how much more – responsibility can community learning networks realistically assume? Perhaps it is someone else's job to ensure that the enabling factors are in place. Yet some would argue that the opposite is actually the case – the appropriate enabling factors are a musthave for the success of any community learning process.

A related challenge arises from the fact that funds rarely are available for the wide range of supports that enable learning. Funds typically are earmarked for targeted purposes rather a spectrum of needs. Rural and Aboriginal communities also have noted that integrated and holistic approaches that take into account diverse needs work best for them. But dollars hardly ever come in untied packages.

The Last Word

It is clear that we live in a world guided and infused by learning. There is virtually no limit? nor should there be ? to what can be achieved. But how to make difficult choices in a world in which the need for more and better learning never ends? but appears only to grow? Define community more narrowly? Identify priority 'targets'

for learning such as new Canadians, young mothers, Aboriginal Canadians or persons with disabilities? Narrow the scope of learning? perhaps focusing only upon technology use, basic skills or employment upgrading?

None of these choices appears to be satisfactory, especially in light of the enabling factors that communities have identified. Perhaps the option is not to narrow the scope of learning but rather to prioritize the investments. Another possibility is to grow the 'pie' by expanding the pool of funds available for learning. This may mean seeking money for community learning from private sources such as foundations and individual donors, private corporations, and the voluntary sector such as community foundations and the United Way.

Yet another option is to acknowledge that the substance and process of community learning will always vary widely across the country. 'Asymmetrical' learning is not only communitydriven but is quintessentially Canadian. The common bond could be a set of clear outcomes. The route to their achievement would be left up to communities. The destination would be clear? though the travel routes and transportation modes could vary. Others might object, arguing that the true essence of Canada is a set of common standards for learning that allows flexibility but not too much variability. Learning and its outcomes are far too important to leave to chance.

What about resources? Yes, there is a need for more funding. More flexible funding. And more longterm funding. But money is not the only significant factor in this equation.

Perhaps the crucial factor is knowledge. Coaching for the many areas in which communities must engage including partnership development, governance and use of new technologies. Support for learning between and among communities. At the end of the day, a pool of knowledge and opportunities for communities to acquire the skills of learning may be worth as much as a substantially larger pool of funds. Investing not just more but better.

Maybe the last word is the most important word: learning.