An overview of a learning community in regional Tasmania from a third age perspective

June Hazzlewood, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania

ABSTRACT
A study of a group of older adults crossing actual and virtual community boundaries as they learn about and via new technology in retirement, has enabled a picture to be formed of a vibrant multi-faceted learning community in northern regional Tasmania. These third age learners range along lifelong and lifewide learning pathways, which stretch from crystal set byways to crystal chip highways, as they come to terms with yet another of the many changes they have experienced over the past decades. A closer look at their community networks reveals the macro level strategies and visions which established and continue to shape Launceston as a learning city at the heart of a learning community. The paper also touches on some of the varied learning opportunities that are available in the adult community education (ACE) sector. As well as at formal and informal courses and classes, learning takes place at special interest groups, clubs, organisations and associations, through membership of peer networks and service on a range of government and non-government committees and working parties. As the first of the ‘baby boomers’ are adding to the numbers in the third age learning community population, new approaches are called for. Risks and dilemmas facing service providers, policy makers, NGOs and individuals themselves are identified and strategies are sought to match new 21st century needs and interests.

KEY WORDS
Learning communities; lifelong learning; community networks

INTRODUCTION
In this paper, a learning community refers to any group, either linked by geography or interest, which caters in a pro-active way for the learning needs of its members. While lifelong learning is any formal, informal, non-formal, incidental, deliberate or serendipitous learning which occurs at any time, place or pace during the lifespan, the focus here is on adult community education. Community networks link lifelong learners who move freely within and between actual and virtual learning communities. The concept of a learning city or a learning town at the heart of a learning community has been circulating since the 1970s, but an OECD conference in 1992 gave it new impetus, according to an Adult Learning Australia review (2000, p. 24). The review states that a city or town can form an integrated learning system for its inhabitants by embracing community-led learning and by fostering community-based action.

Falk and Harrison (1998) state that a whole community, that displays the characteristics of community learning, is referred to as a ‘learning community’ (pp. 19-20). Faris (2000) suggests that learning communities are off springs of lifelong learning, stating that there appears to be an equally important symbiotic relationship between social capital and lifelong learning as there is between human and social capital (p. xx). Oldenburg (1999) describes the sociable part of a learning community as a ‘great good place’ where informal learning occurs. Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) place the medium sized community organisations and associations in this third place away from home and work at the meso level of social capital resources. They suggest this lies between the wider society macro and the individual micro levels of social capital interaction. Falk, Golding and Balatti (2000) state that “social capital provides the social infrastructure of our lives as we move about in a web of elastic networks connecting home, work, learning, leisure and public life” (p. v).
Community networkers of all ages move within and between the intermediate third places, and as they cross boundaries could be thought of as the filling in the community macro-micro sandwich, as their interactions add to the store of community social capital.

Describing social capital as the “cement of society’s goodwill, creating a cohesive society”, Falk et al. (2000) suggest that adult community education “generates social capital, builds lifelong learning, channels the work of volunteers, augments social cohesion, citizenship and democratic participation and improves the health of individuals and communities” (p. vii). Faris (2002) writes that as we move from resource-based to knowledge-based economies and societies, traditional economic core values are being challenged. Faris further suggests that the new global knowledge-based economy will demand a new model of lifelong learning in which electronic networking will play an increasingly important role. He contends that "land, labour, and financial capital - the three forms of traditional capital - are now being augmented by an understanding of the important role of human and social capital - - the intangible assets of a knowledge-based economy and society”.

LAUNCESTON: A LEARNING CITY OPEN TO THE WORLD

An example of infrastructure support at the local government level is seen in the proactive strategies of the Launceston City Council, which is very conscious of the value of community learning and of the importance of linking networks to form a dynamic learning community. One way the council does this is by inviting both formal and informal input from the community as in the community cross-section future search conference it hosted in late 1998 (Launceston 2010). Search conferences aim to “review the past, explore the future, create ideal scenarios, identify common ground and make action plans” (Campbell and Jones 1999, Deeth 2002). The 1998 search conference was in response to what was seen as a crisis in confidence in the city. The crisis was perceived to be due to:

- a decline in the wealth base, built in the early years of Launceston’s settlement in the early 1800s;
- the loss of jobs due to economic changes eroding a layer of society, middle management, which formerly provided support to voluntary community based activities; and
- a failure to amalgamate small councils to form a local government body large enough to compete globally (p. 12).

Choosing a search conference to confront the crisis was considered at the time to be a high-risk strategy. The faith of the city administration in the ‘inherent wisdom’ of the community to determine its future direction, however, was more than justified as eighty people, representing all sectors of the community were brought together to identify future direction pathways and articulate a vision to develop Launceston as a learning city at the heart of a regional learning community.

The learning city vision is entitled “Launceston, our City of Learning and Innovation Open to the World” and continues to be the central focus of the learning city strategy. The Launceston learning communities case study preamble points out that in order to keep pace with global changes, Launceston needs to move the emphasis from the traditional physical capital provision to the development of social capital through “facilitating networks and aligning the community to a common vision” (Deeth 2002). One of the hard questions asked at the 1998 search conference was how to become open to the world. The tactics suggested were to use information technology to engage with the world and to bring the world to Launceston, and to create opportunities to develop new and innovative ways of thinking.
This strategy saw the signing of memoranda of understanding with sister cities in Japan, USA, Malaysia and China. A partnership between the Launceston City Council and Telstra Research Laboratories (TRL) resulted in the establishment of an online community portal, eLaunceston, and the basing of the TRL Broadband eLab pilot in Launceston. A subsequent tactic was to invite Dr. Edward de Bono, who visited Launceston as a World Education Forum keynote speaker in 1999 to return in 2002 as 'King for a Week'. Objectives for this intensive ‘thinking week’ were to focus on thinking young, thinking prosperous, thinking green, and thinking together. These were achieved as Dr. de Bono, be-gowned and crowned by community college fashion design students, spoke to all ages and all sectors as he used his “innovative learning tools to pose new questions and seek new solutions” (ANTA 2002).

ANTA EVALUATES AUSTRALIAN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In 2001 ANTA, the Australian National Training Authority began its learning communities national project to encourage the development of learning communities and to learn more about them. Launceston was one of ten Australian cities included in the project. Eight themes that are seen as being essential for the sustainable development of learning communities emerged constantly (ANTA 2002, p.15) and have become benchmarks for development and evaluation of both new and existing programs. They are:

- strong leadership;
- vision with linked strategy;
- economic conditions which induce the public, private and community sectors to collaborate and network;
- strategic public, private and community partnerships;
- whole of government approaches and support;
- strong community support and awareness;
- use of technologies to support networking; and
- administrative coordination.

The Learning Cities Audit report (ANTA 2002) covers education, cultural and learning infrastructure, partnerships, flexible and lifelong learning, the inclusion of the disengaged and cultural potential. Launceston’s education, cultural and learning infrastructure is described as having a breadth and depth out of all proportion to its relatively small population base, due in part to the enterprising outlook and commitment of both community and local government supporting building projects. Education is reported to be vertically integrated, in that “quantum leaps from technical colleges to institutes of technology to universities have been achieved without diminution of the strength and relevance of the TAFE sector” Deeth (2002, p.8.). TAFE Tasmania, the Education Department’s post-compulsory training and further education provider, which includes formal vocational as well as informal community education, was named Australian Training Provider of the Year in 2000 and again in 2002.

Two of the aims of a national strategy for vocational education and learning 2004-2010 discussion starter (ANTA 2003), which are of particular relevance to this paper, are “supporting communities and enabling individuals to learn throughout life” (p. 1). An awareness of these can be seen in a number of partnerships, outlined in memoranda of understanding, which are being formed between state and local governments, local government and universities and colleges, and between the city council and non-government organisations. The University of Tasmania’s Strategic Plan 2002-04 states that it will endeavour to put the knowledge it possesses and results of research to good use by transmitting them to government, business, industry and community.
groups. Each faculty is encouraged to consider community interests and opportunities as components of its programming. An example is the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA), which is a well established research centre located within the education faculty of the University of Tasmania in Launceston, engaging in research that includes strategies for building social capital, lifelong learning and leadership in Australia’s regions.

A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES
At the macro level, the big picture parameters of lifelong and lifewide learning communities are delineated with broad strokes, informed by global research and material generated by specifically designated focus international ‘years’ and national ‘days’, documented in federal, state and local government glossy hard copy or electronically available strategic plans, discussion and issues papers and reports. The 1999 International Year of the Older Person (IYOP) was a good year for community learning in general, and third age learning in particular. The theme, which fits well with community lifelong learning was “A Society for All Ages”. In Tasmania, the Department of Premier and Cabinet Seniors Bureau set up a Positive Ageing Consultative Committee which continues to meet and a group of twenty two Tasmanian ‘learning leaders’ met at a search conference to develop a draft vision for Tasmania in 2020 (Tasmania Together). Tasmanian publications in 1999 impacting on learning in later life include:

- A Tasmanian Government close-up look at the seniors market for tourism in Australia, “Not Over the Hill: Just Enjoying the View”.
- A profile by Senior’s Bureau and COTA (Council on the Ageing), “Older People in Tasmania”;

FOCUS ON THE THIRD AGE OF ACTIVE RETIREMENT
IYOP was different from previous years dedicated to older adults. The 1993 European Year for Older Adults, for example, was concerned with how to look after the elderly, while the 1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning was based on involving older people in ‘cradle to grave’ learning to promote healthy ageing. That this shift in focus was overdue, is pointed out by Jones (2002), who contends that government attention and spending has been skewed disproportionately toward the minority fourth age of decline, “smoothing the pillow and easing the passing” rather than funding the “revving up and plugging in” of the increasing numbers in the majority third age (p. 22).

Kilpatrick and Hazzlewood (2001) report that this third age of active retirement gains recruits through redundancies and early retirement and from the fourth age, previously designated as dependency, as advances in medicine and self-regulation of health promote mental and physical ‘wellness’.

The discussion paper, Our Future (1999) acknowledge the advantages of learning in later life, including the benefit of continuing education in helping people adapt to the rapid changes that are occurring in our society (p. 16). Falk et al. (2000) identify reciprocal cost benefits from investment in the education of older people, writing that there are direct savings for individuals, the community and governments from promotion of wellness and from the “direct contribution to society made by people with increased social and intellectual capital” (p.60). Their assertion that many older people
who begin as students in ACE programs subsequently make voluntary commitments to help others is borne out in findings in current research involving a group of third age learners accessing new technology. There are many and varied opportunities for micro transformation through volunteer involvement as individuals move both vertically through the meso level service club and NGO committees to representation in the macro level local, state and federal government reference groups and consultations and laterally in grass roots community service such as telephone counseling, recording books for the blind, mentoring, charity entertaining or presenting community radio programs as well as tutoring in community-based programs.

A substantial proportion of participants in adult learning programs are third age learners who join peer or mixed age groups to learn a range of new skills. These include computing to enable access to the Internet for research or general information, email communication with family and friends or exploration and expansion of hobbies and special interests such as family history or graphic arts. Two adult community education initiatives information and communication technology (ICT) which had their genesis in the IYOP are the Launceston Online Access Centre, which was established as part of the federally funded Networking the Nation Program, and the statewide Linking Tasmanian Seniors, an eBuddy virtual network based on Senior Net.

ACE - ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION
Falk et al. (2000) claim that community learning places demonstrate how ACE "transforms micro human activity into broader community and social outcomes in the [OECD] categories of health, education and learning, time and leisure" (p. 60). They report that "building social capital is not an incidental by-product of the way ACE providers operate [but is] the modus operandi of the sector." Falk et al. state that we “share and help shape a micro identity formation found in one-to-one interactions in which individuals reciprocate through language and communication to construct their sense of self”. They suggest that local identification is clearly a strong influence on people’s contribution to their communities and that the sharing and shaping also occurs at the macro ‘cultural’ citizenship level as well as at the meso community group level. (p. 82).

It is in the many large and small community groups that the transformation of the micro individual identity is seen. In Launceston, the heart of a wider learning community, learning takes place in a wide range of formal classes and informal courses, breakfast, lunchtime and evening special interest groups, at meetings and seminars, in the pubs and clubs, the library, the theatres, the museum and art gallery and at annual and occasional festivals that proliferate in the fertile environment of a pro-active learning community. In church halls, community centres, adult education classes and, for the over fifties, the School for Seniors (the Launceston U3A), adults of all ages listen to or make music, debate, recite poetry, sing in choirs, perform in plays and musicals, paint or pot, play scrabble, square dance, restore trams or drive community trains, ramble or bushwalk, rock climb, pump iron, swim and volunteer to organise or tutor in any of these activities.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE MOVEMENT
A slip of the typing finger resulted in the word ‘neighbourgood’ appearing and this happy accident sums up much of what is most often mentioned in reports on neighbourhood houses, which are typical of the many community learning places in the Launceston region. These community centres are important examples of human capital contributing to social capital by informal learning. Neighbourhood houses have a “caring, warm, non-threatening, non-judgemental, informal atmosphere” (Reason 1992, p. 9). This is consistent with the first attribute of Oldenburg’s (1999) third places, the existence of neutral ground – where no one is burdened by the role of host or
guest; where everyone is approachable; where give-and-take is expected. Families, children and individuals including older people are the target group of neighbourhood houses and take part in a range of activities including crafts, health and fitness, adult literacy, employment related skills updates, preventative health measures and topics relating to children. Formerly, a much higher proportion of women than men took part in neighbourhood house activities, however as women’s needs are escalating, so are those of a newly emerging group of men within the community according to Reason (1992) who reports that the problems facing these groups are “compounded by unemployment and changing roles within the family” (p. 9).

Another trend is the increasing incidence of husbands and wives learning together. This is a feature of the Launceston Older Persons Electronic Network (OPEN) computer program which caters for older people, people with disabilities and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. The OPEN program, which is the site of a participant-observation research project in progress, is organised and staffed by peer group and inter-generational volunteers. The program, initiated and managed by NGO members, provides access to eLearning via the Internet for the target group, many of whom face barriers in accessing and using new technology (Hazzlewood 2001). The program is contributing small amounts of social capital to the Launceston learning community, existing on small ‘antbyte’ grants (Hazzlewood 2002). The participants are building up ICT skills and making virtual global connections as insurance against social isolation, should health or mobility barriers prohibit or limit actual participation in local community activities.

RISKS AND DILEMMAS
One of the Launceston City Council 1998 search conference “hard questions” was how to engage the disengaged. This dilemma continues to be a primary objective of policy makers and service providers to ensure that the learning community is not only a “society for all ages”, but also for all sections of the community. Advances in technology have the capacity to greatly assist in maintaining independence for many older Tasmanians and by increasing their participation in the community, help to maintain their independence and reduce isolation (Our Future p. 17). A dilemma is that new technology brings rapid and repeated change without choice and calls for new strategies to shrink the so called digital divide and involve the economically disadvantaged, the socially isolated and minority groups at risk of marginalisation.

ANTA (2002) report that communities in rural and regional Australia are confronted by many challenges, particularly as we move towards a globalised knowledge economy and that some communities, here and internationally, are focusing on learning to promote social cohesion, regeneration and economic development and have become known as learning communities. Of all the risks and dilemmas facing learning communities as we move into the first decade of the 21st century, however, the greatest is the demise of volunteer involvement as we know it. The arrival of the litigation era places insurance out of the range of community groups and threatens the very existence of the learning community itself. This problem is being discussed at all levels of the community as one by one, activities are cancelled or billed a ‘last time’ event.

CONCLUSION
The Tasmanian Minister for Health and Human Services places older adults in perspective in the learning community reporting that Tasmania is moving towards an exciting future, but warns that with the population of our community ageing significantly, we need to prepare and plan for the many opportunities and challenges this presents (Our Future p.1). The doom and gloom prophecies of the burden to society of the growing number of older people have been largely refuted in the words of
the many publications emanating from the 1999 IYOP. Care is needed, however, to ensure that these words are not filed away in glossy isolation till the next relevant International Year comes around. The key concepts, learning communities; lifelong learning; community networks are the building blocks of the social capital bank needed to keep pace with the unprecedented changes of the 21st century.

Changing lifestyles call for a change in thinking as the first of the baby boomers are already entering the third age and are not automatically accepting the traditional father-son, mother-daughter succession entree into service clubs and community associations. This is resulting in a dwindling band of grey and greying men and women in the community ‘sharing and shaping’ executive roles seeking ways to make their NGOs relevant to the ‘me’ generation. Lateral thinking and action is required at all levels of the learning community from macro policy making and funding to individual micro interaction. As these elements of human and social capital inter-mingle in the meso level great good learning places, they are seeking to fulfill the 1999 IYOP Tasmania Together 2020 vision that “we will be a society with a focus on whole-of-life, whole-of-community learning” (p. 6).

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