**The Learning City:**

**Questions that citizens ask about Learning and Teaching and Working in a Democracy.**

**Ted Fleming**

Allow me begin by saying a word of congratulations and appreciation to the many many people who have worked to suggest, create and put in place this Learning City Citizens’ University. Though they are far too many to mention it is impossible to go any further without mentioning your Mayor and Deputy Mayor, your organizers and hosts in the city and in this moment the translation staff:

I also want to say a personal word of thanks and amazement that I have been invited back to Larissa again and now again. I am honoured and flattered and want to support your Learning City in every way I can.

**Story 1: What is a City?**

Henry Lefebvre’s *The Right to the City*

* That right was a cry and a demand;
* Cry: a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city;
* Demand: To look the crisis in the eye and create an alternative urban life that would be less alienating, more meaningful, more playful,
* Open to becoming, to encounters and the perpetual pursuit of novelty.
* The city offers much that is disturbing and uplifting:
* Poverty, noise, traffic, demolitions, reconstructions, demonstrations, refugees.
* Opportunities for taking care of well-being, hospitals, schools, families, learning in schools, universities, theatre.
* From the very earliest cities, business, trade, commerce, manufacturing on large and small scale defined an important aspect of city – but this is only one aspect;
* There is always a struggle over who gets to own, design, demolish, reconstruct, pay for facilities (Tax), benefit from expenditure
* Religion(s), conflicts, movements (immigrations & emigrations).
* Traditionally cities have been dismal places as well as uplifting.
* BUT they are always liminal, transitional, opportunities, magnetic, attracting.
* The City as a built place is basically a designed way of living together in search of a better life.
* We can only do this by learning how to build a community of care, of justice, of concern, of peace.
* Without learning the City has no future.

**Story 1: The City and Crises**

Greece and other countries have been the subject of two great crises in recent years. First the austerity and second the arrival of refugees that continues to this day. Italy has refused access.

~~Austerity describes the economic and political climate in which we live~~. Austerity is first and foremost a transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to the classes above them. This is a capitalist class project and is part of the system we call neo-liberalism (Watson, 2015). The rules of the neoliberal game are about making sure that if conflicts arise between collective well-being and saving feral banks, the banks are saved. But these problems could have been resolved differently by first saving those who were lower down the social ladder by providing homes, health care and education and then go on to address financial problems. That did not happen. This is what happened: loads of money was given to Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Italy and it was sent straight back to the German and French banks. The German banks were saved by their government and the cost was paid by poorer nations and peoples. These ideas are worked out in greater detail in the work of Harvey (2005, 2008, 2015), Piketty (2014), Sen (2015), Giroux (2015) and Watson (2015). According to Harvey neoliberalism is

A theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.

(Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Neoliberalism does not aim to increase the well-being of everybody but increases social inequality and this in turn drives a more competitive society and economy. In this environment education is tasked with producing resources for the workplace and through a leaner system of education it is required to meet the needs of the economy for skilled workers. It also attempts to re-focus the educational curriculum to be more business friendly and produce graduates who are more ‘work-ready’.

As cities increasingly become economic entities in their own right (partly because the nation state is in decline as such around the world), the city is ‘constructed as an entrepreneurial rather than a social democracy’ (Harvey 2005, p, 47). Cities have then been convinced that they ought to value, train and support learning for working in this new economy. This is the overall notion of the learning city. The learning city comes from the same background as lifelong learning (CERI, 1992).

But today I want to argue for a bigger dream and a bigger vision of Learning in a Learning City.

**Story 2: Adverse Childhood Experiences Study**

I want to introduce you to something a long way from a Learning City. The *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study* (Chapman, et al., 2004; Felitti, et al., 1998). This study came up with a ten point list of adverse childhood experiences and the more of these one experiences the greater the likelihood of having ill health (physical or mental) later as an adult. The ACE Study is based upon data collected from over 17,000 adult participants. You might want to ask yourself these questions too and see how you score. [give a 1 for each yes]. The experiences in summary are:

**1.** Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?

**2**. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?

**3.** Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever...Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?

**4.** Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn’t look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

**5.** Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn’t have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?

**6.** Were your parents ever separated or divorced?

**7.** Was your mother or stepmother: Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?

**8.** Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?

**9.** Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?

**10.** Did a household member go to prison?

The key concept underlying the ACE Study is that stressful or traumatic childhood experiences can result in social, emotional, and cognitive impairments. Examples: Increased risk of unhealthy behaviors, risk of violence or re-victimization, disease, disability and “early death.” As many people will find themselves saying ‘yes’ to one of two of these I am suggesting these are useful predictors but I do not want to see them as a form of recipe. These outcomes are predictive in statistical terms and I am not saying if you have these experiences you will have negative outcomes.

Breakthroughs in neurobiology demonstrate that fear-based childhoods disrupt neurodevelopment, and can actually alter normal brain structure and function. Fear during infancy and early childhood has a cumulative impact on childhood development. Results of the ACE Study link the exploding rates in America’s physical, mental, and social pathologies with national failure to strengthen families and protect children.

The young brain is especially vulnerable to stress. When prolonged stress occurs during infancy and childhood, the stress hormone cortisol is released throughout the young brain and body. These stress hormones compromise normal brain development and the immature immune and nervous systems. The ACE Study demonstrates that early stress is a strong factor for developing many health problems either in young people or later in life. Sustained stress in children has serious long term impact on well-being and health.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Many of the people we work with in social care and unfortunately many children have such a set of childhood experiences. Many of the people you work with will have an equally wide range of positive childhood experiences. Though this is the research project I am quoting I think you would want me to make a more positive statement and this is indeed more appealing to most people. If we have positive childhood experiences of being cared for there is an increased likelihood that in the long term one’s health and well-being will be better. In any case, whether the experiences are positive or negative the outcomes will not only have huge implications for the individuals but also major implications for the families, communities for the country. I do not think this has been quantified or calculated but you can imagine it is possible to do so. We already know the cost to the state of smoking or of drunk driving so we can imagine it is possible to calculate the cost and the benefit of good or bad care.

Child care is the most important activity in a society – bar none! Education for young children, parenting programmes, training for childcare workers and childrens’ teachers can all lead to long-term benefits especially if the economy and the environment can also be enhanced through learning.

**STORY 3: The Story of Attachment Theory**

There is one set of ideas from the many available that I am going to highlight and call your attention to – knowing that some may teach this or know about it already.

The work of John Bowlby is gaining significant traction in the world of the academic, teaching, research and in practice. Putting it in a few sentences the Bowlby story goes like this:

When an infant appears to be nervous of a new situation or appears to be afraid the carer normally responds by providing a safe secure place in which the child/infant can retreat and when ready venture forth again with increased confidence. What is hugely important about these moments is that the child is heard, their fear, loss or anxiety is heard and responded to with understanding and the provision of a safe haven. Too many do not have this experience in a way that provides consistent and predictable safety in order for the infant to grow in confidence that their feelings are heard. In either case it is the always the child who adapts and introjects or in ordinary language takes on board the way the carer sees the world of relationships. If the carer is supportive, the child sees the world as a positive place to be explored securely and confidently. These internal working models are like our mind maps of how the world of relationships operates. It can be either secure or insecure. The insecure models can be anxious, avoidant, or even in some cases chaotic.

One can only speculate at this stage what kind of childhood experiences Donald Trump may have had to lead him to have such a deep seated sense of mistrust (or maybe hatred) of people who are different to him – I’m assuming I understand him correctly as xenophobic, racist and misogynistic. There goes my visa! The emphasis on special pleading, and other indicators of authoritarian dictators lead me to suggest: If you want to watch a fascist authoritarian system unfold in real time then we must study very carefully what is happening in USA and other places and find answers through education to combat racist and other exclusionary ideas and thoughts.

Why am I so focused on children, on rearing children and childcare? For two reasons:

If we get that right so much becomes possible and if we do not get it wrong so much becomes impossible (almost);

The second reason is equally important and suggests that this process of caring for people continues and must continue throughout life.

The key idea in this understanding of taking care of children is reacting appropriately to the experience of a child for protection and for security when the child feels a threat or fear.

The key insight for me is the huge amount of research that shows that:

1. The respect and recognition received by a child is developmental;

2. It is this recognition/respect that characterizes all relationships;

3. Adults too throughout our lives seek out, need and treasure this recognition;

4. This is developmental for adults too;

5. The pursuit of attachment and respect is developmental and lifelong.

In family

In community

In workplaces

It is a precondition for engaging in democratic practices as the threat of new ideas is lessened.

6. It is a pre-condition for being able to engage in a democracy

This is a big ask!

As I indicated earlier the moment of recognition by the parent (in the video) is a key developmental experience for the child. What we often do not understand is that this struggle to be recognized; this struggle to have our experiences and feelings addressed as a child does not end in childhood. This struggle continues throughout our lives. It happens for children in the family. It happens for adults in their intimate relationships, in their work and in the community.

If one is fortunate to have these work and relationship experiences the child and adult will grow and develop. But we also know that if the opposite – misrecognition – the very identity and development and self-confidence of the adult is undermined and potentially undermined and destroyed. One’s identity can be undermined.

One further piece of this story: Adults look for and achieve this in education and for adults in adult education. This pursuit of recognition (that I have a brain, that I am may be intelligent…) drives adults to join and persist with learning programmes.

This is also a way of supporting the learning adult or indeed the learning child. So many have had experiences at school that frustrate the struggle for recognition.

This struggle for recognition and the response to it by supporting it through scaffolding is also a precondition for democracy. Democracy like learning requires the teacher the provider to be able to engage in activities that recognize….

**How is this possible at all?**

Many critical theorist will alert us to the impossibility of achieving any of this.

*The threat:*

Neoliberalism is a political economic paradigm that refers to the policies and processes whereby a small number of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profits. Neoliberal initiatives are characterized as free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, reward personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiatives, and hold the view that everyone has equal opportunities if they are willing to work hard. Central to this thesis is the belief that the market should be the guiding force for all political, social, and economic decisions of a nation state. From this market-driven perspective, according to Giroux (2008), profit making and the exchange of capital take precedent over social justice, the development of socially-responsible citizens, and the building of democratic communities.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If you like what this does to the health system, you will just love what will be done to the education system, including adult and higher education. Again privatization, commercialization, individualization and for-profit colleges will thrive.

Neoliberalism is not just an economic policy designed to cut government spending and … free market forces from government responsibilities; it is also a political and philosophical ideology that effects every dimension of social life (Giroux, 2004). Citizens are defined as consumers, customers, clients. There is no future outside the market. There is only the sovereignty of the market and no political sovereignty. Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within the institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. It places the onus on the individual rather than the state to take care of social welfare and education. It is not about improving the conditions for all (Harvey, 2005, p. 9) but only for economic elites. It attempts to control the wealth of an increasingly global elite. Inequalities are structural in the neoliberal world (Harvey, 2005, p.16).

We could also show how other sectors are implicated in this project. So too education is implicated. Everything is for sale. Only what can be bought or sold or so valued is worthwhile. However what is valued in education can neither be bought nor sold. Freedom, care, justice, fairness are traditionally the values of education.

If this an all too brief statement about why so much we want to achieve then there is an increased responsibility on us as educators to provide an antidote to all this.

Or to put it another way. Our ability to care is a powerful antidote.

**The Learning City**

Two OECD Conference on Educating Cities in Barcelona (1989) and again in Gothenburg (1992) led to the OECD Report *City Strategies for Lifelong Learning* (CERI, 1992).[[3]](#footnote-3) It found that success resulted when cities integrated the work of local governments, private enterprises and educational institutions to meet the human resource needs of the local economy.

A vision for a Learning City might include: Democratic controls over all the resources! Local government to redistribute wealth to favor not capital or private developers but to favor inclusion, equality, fairness and an increased capacity to care for people, communities and the learning needs of all. There must be a reclaiming of the city, its space, its planning and its ability to make itself (again) in the interests of all. Establish a Right to the City (Harvey 2008, p. 53; 2013, p. xii).

Many cities have declared themselves to be Learning Cities and formed associations such as the Learning Cities Network or The Right to the City Alliance that support a notion of lifelong learning that enables people compete in the global economy. The notion of the Learning City enables urban governments to promote the learning of their citizens and also to connect citizens to the educational services that best meets the labor needs of the city. Without requiring them to provide any additional educational service, the learning city, then, allows urban governments to play an active role in the learning of their citizens. In the OECD model, however, this learning is almost exclusively directed towards improving the economic productivity of individuals.

I am both skeptical and deeply suspicious of forms of education that reduce learning to the instrumental, that reduce cities to economic entities and learners to consumers and/or workers. I am not a believer in the idea that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ in the economy. In fact relative poverty has increased each time the economy has progressed (boomed). Poverty is not the same in rural and urban areas though they are connected as rural departures increase urban arrivals. Cities have been particularly vulnerable to inequality and poverty, more so now as half the world’s population lives in cities.

Neoliberalism is now so wide spread that it is not easy to imagine a way through these challenges. The task of a conference such as this is to do exactly that – do the hard thinking, the difficult imagining so that all can benefit from the inventions of science, the opportunities of living in wonderful cities without the disastrous losses of modern urban decay. The learning city should be tuned to enhancing our understanding of the tremendous costs and downside of economic development and how to grow more sustainable ways of living and reduce exploitation. The main task is to imagine and work toward the creation of a learning city that is for all its citizens and not just the concentration of more wealth in the hands of few.

**Larissa is Different**

It is clear that in Larissa things are different. The City Council and the participating educational institutions have together taken on a view of education that is expressed in a language infused with democratic imperatives. All the officials and elected representatives give priority to citizens, encouraging citizens, learning citizens, engaged citizens. This is important as the language captures the values of the city and its learning projects.

This is a task for the local council, the citizens and the educational system. And with this mind I want to propose some ideas that might be informative. And then present a number of insights from adult education (I will focus on the transformative learning of Jack Mezirow) that are tried, tested, used and effective in informing community development and community work and community education.

**What do we know that may be of assistance in supporting a properly functioning Learning City?**

The city allows kinds of learning to take place that may not be possible in other contexts and opens the possibility that together the citizens and the institutions may make the place a better environment in which to live, rear children, and work and enjoy living. With this in mind the city needs to be investigated, studied, understood, explored, saved from its worst possibilities…and created in the interests of its dwellers rather than in the pursuit of profit and land exploitation.

**What is Adult learning in the Learning City?**

Wealthy classes are able and mostly succeed in taking advantage of learning and educational opportunities in ways that is out of proportion to their numbers in society, e.g. fee support, grants, or even free education either at secondary or third level education.

The built environment of a city is planned by authorities, designed, constructed and maintained differently in proportion to social class. Ghettos are built. The built environment influences how people act and behave.

New ways of living in the built environment have to be learned (and previous ones unlearned).

Internet infrastructure is not only for business communications and working class entertainment (sales and soccer) but needs to be a super highway with easy access for all and not just a way of making money. A role for government here.

Learning is too often seen as unquestionably good, assumed to be virtuous, and in the interest of everybody. Some learning is not good? Some learning is not in the interest of the learner. All learning and all knowledge is problematic, partial, temporary, for now, open to be abused, bought, sold, and exploited.

What is adult learning, when it is not a neoliberal construct?

Is there more to learning than the transmission of knowledge, skills and information?

Learning is not an individual pursuit but a social phenomenon.

Social learning should deliver social justice, care, inclusion and prosperity for all citizens.

What then in the context of the learning City do we mean when we speak of learning? We know a great deal about learning already having spent, each one of a great deal of time learning at school at college, from life, at work as members of communities and organizations and from involvements with church and other worthy institutions in society. We also live in an age when some of the greatest contributors to our understanding of learning have been writing, e.g. Paulo Freire and Jack Mezirow.

A number of things are worth saying here. Firstly, some distinguished educators will say adult education is different to other forms of education/learning. Others equally distinguished will say they are similar or continuous. Let me say that there are both similarities and differences. And in moment I will look at what distinguishes adult learning from other forms of learning.

*What is learning?*

But the most important and third question I want to address is: what is adult learning? In this I want to turn to just one key thinker: Jack Mezirow and here I need your help……

[We then engaged here with an exercise that tried to demonstrate how each individual imposes meaning on a fairly simple situation in a large variety of different ways.] Some interpreted the exercise as an exchange of symbols and gestures of openness (or of being closed). Others took a different stance and began to think this might be about collecting points and maybe winning the most points (or the least number of points or even the same number of points as their partner). In these cases and in all the range of meanings that one can impose on this exercise each and every meaning is a result of two processes (they may be connected).

What kind of learning is appropriate:

1. Skills: Jobs, plumbing, astronomy, plastering,….cooking
2. Understanding other people: Psychology, counselling, parenting
3. Critical learning through discussion that is infused with efforts to change they system that cn be so racist; sexist; disabilities, social class, religious intolerance

DEMOCRACY MAKES PEOPLE BETTER: THERE IS A DEVELOPMENTAL DIVIDEND

I am reminded of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* where Claudia is explaining how she hates Shirley Temple dolls. These dolls are a representation of the world of things to be possessed and a reminder of how white dolls are given as presents to black children. She destroyed these dolls:

…nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfil my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been ‘Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?’ I could have spoken up, ‘I wanted to sit on a low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.’ The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of peach, perhaps, afterwards. (Morrison, 1990, p. 15)

In contrast, other writers…..

Patrick Kavanagh

Remember well your noble brother  
Whose constant heart embraced no other  
But you, and when love's arteries harden  
Evoke the image of the Front Garden,  
Yellow with sunlit weeds, and there  
You are the hound and he the hare,  
And round and round you run and laugh.  
This moment is immortal stuff.  
Name his name, beloved name Peter  
And only regret that words must fail  
To tell that marvellous brotherly tale….

1. <http://www.acestudy.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alfred, M. (2016) Creating Space for Social Justice Education in an Era of Global and Neoliberal Capitalism: An Imperative for Adult Education, Dialogues in Social Justice: An Adult Education Journal 1(1), 31-34.

   Mary V. Alfred [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These notes are based on and reconfigure the insights of David Harvey on both neoliberalism and the learning city. He is currently at the Department of Geography & Anthropology, New York University. See <http://davidharvey.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)