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**Advancing Scotland as a
Learning Society: A
Community Learning and
Development Contribution**



**The Standards
Council for
Community Learning
and Development for
Scotland**

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Advancing Scotland as a Learning Society: A CLD Contribution

This short paper is a straightforward affair. It is a concise record of a series of conversations and dialogues that took place across Scotland and across a wide field of Community Learning and Development activists and practitioners. It is written with good faith and belief and is intended to be considered sincerely and with gravitas.

Its general implication is that our nation has not completed its journey towards a cohesive and all impacting learning society... it remains fragmented, a touch narcissistic in places and falls short of being able to claim that we have a learning culture in Scotland for all.

Despite noble attempts, this must be acknowledged.

We have, this paper suggests, lost some of the meaning behind education for all, a term that has been hijacked by media and some of our influencers so much as to throttle its potential.

Yet there is much dialogue about and around learning for all, support for all, change, change for the better, for all of our citizens who are all learners all of the time and, on occasion when they choose, in life changing circumstances.

This paper suggests that we need to raise the bar through debate and conversation. Those who operate in silos, national and local must change their approach to develop our services in the interest of the learners and communities. This requires some seamless joining of the current high quality delivery so that wherever and whenever we participate in our community life we are part of a learning culture and the consequent opportunities this gives us. Whoever we are.

Community Learning practitioners must assume their responsibility for a contribution to this dynamic.

To continue this dialogue we urge you to begin to ask the questions implicit and explicit in this paper... of yourself and colleagues, of partner agencies, and consider what contribution you are making to a learning society that will benefit Scotland.

The Enlightenment in Scotland and Europe in the mid 18th Century was described also as the Age of Reason. This wasn't to find compromise but to effect and influence change for the better for the people of our country and beyond. These conversations took place when chaos reigned in other parts of our nation, when war prevailed. Yet the conversations continued.

Perhaps the greatest strength in the summary of the Conversations is the high level of consensus shown across Scotland. With this comes the possibility of establishing a foundation for a powerful, united voice; a more confident and higher profile and a call to restate both purpose and direction.

A choice has to be made.

Rory Macleod
Director

The Conversations Project

Between January and June 2011 we held a series of 15 Conversations across Scotland. Four were large open gatherings, held in Glasgow, Inverness, Dundee and Edinburgh, and eleven were smaller gatherings with invited participants from a range of arenas directly or indirectly related to CLD. A total of 209 people accepted our invitation to share their views.

The Conversations began with an analysis of the current socio-political context. Then three core questions were asked of all participants:

- a) What would be the definitive characteristics of a Scottish Learning Society?
- b) What are the obstacles that might get in the way of this type of society being created?
- c) What are the first steps that should be taken in order to build such a society?

The level of consensus demonstrated in the responses was remarkable: a firm belief and affirmation of the CLD process – which is not necessarily the same as the CLD profession. The approach and values base are seen as key to a people-led transformation of public services.

In what ways do you identify yourself as practising in a CLD context?

The Context

At a time of increasing need, current financial restrictions present a huge challenge:

- The requirement to maintain mandatory services, particularly within Local Authorities, has increased pressure on non-mandatory services which are arguably better positioned to respond flexibly and effectively.
- Reduced direct assistance, including grant-aid to the voluntary and community sectors, has had a significantly detrimental effect on many front-line services.
- Uncertainty over future funding has had a negative impact on strategic planning, staff morale and the security of support for the most vulnerable.

How do you deal with this uncertainty? What keeps you going?

The societal challenges are also considerable – inequality, poverty, unemployment, alcohol/drugs abuse, depression – and are too often met by crisis interventions driven by a short term fire-fighting approach. The focus is on fixing a wide range of specific problems now, when what we need is a longer term vision adopting a more holistic approach. The emphasis, perhaps unintentionally, is on ameliorating the effects, often perceived by some workers as ‘keeping the lid on it’.

Do you feel like you are simply ‘keeping a lid’ on the challenges in your communities? How would you tackle these challenges differently?

Communities need to take ownership of their issues: there is an imperative to widen participation and build and release capacity. Growing engagement must also lead to social action and to a different relationship with authority structures. But while these authority structures adopt the rhetoric of a people led, community involving approach, there is a view that they are finding it difficult to really change the way they relate to communities and free themselves from traditional practices.

Do you involve your community in shaping your work?

From a more specific CLD viewpoint there is evidence of a service in an extremely vulnerable position. It is felt that there is not enough understanding of CLD – its approach and contribution – particularly from politicians. This is seen to be true particularly in the fields of community based learning and ‘soft’ skills development. Self critical comments were made around the responsibility of workers and the profession in this regard. It was felt that, as workers, we should stop being ‘the chameleon service’ that changes its colour in order to fit in better, secure funding, protect its existence.

Do your colleagues understand what CLD is? What your values and principles are?

Characteristics of a Learning Society

Across Scotland, CLD practitioners offered a practical and optimistic vision of a better future which they thought was possible and which they wanted to work towards.

Fundamentally it was stated that a Learning Society would value learning for its own sake; it would place emphasis on learning about self, relationships and community.

A Learning Society:

- would be challenging, questioning, creative, curious and risk-taking
- would be compassionate, collaborative, caring and playful
- would promote social justice, be open to change and have an international perspective

A Learning Society would be open to all. There would be access for everyone with a spectrum of opportunities, entry points, locations and routes and it would not necessarily be about formal recognition, qualifications or be institution based.

The learner would be at the heart of such a society with the natural human desire to learn acknowledged, affirmed and nurtured.

The Learning Society would be aspirational, inspirational and courageous; invest in individuality, in being in community, in persons in relationship, both with each other and the world.

Are you clear about your contribution to a Learning Society? What will you do today / next month / next year to start a culture change?

Obstacles

If people are willing, what is preventing us from creating this society today? Reasons included:

- A lack of visionary thinking and leadership, both from politicians and professionals
- A political agenda driven by short termism, quick fixes and a search for popular solutions.
- A lack of policy coherence; silo mentalities are too evident and there is little holistic thinking
- A culture fixated on inspections, risk-aversion, certainty chasing and protection of territories, professions and institutions; a competitive mindset purporting to promote co-operation
- A focus on individualism – the ‘me’ before ‘we’ society – which is more destructive of aspirations than the current financial challenges
- Learning is not valued. There is a lack of space, in daily life and increasingly physically, for opportunities to think creatively and reflect profoundly
- No collective voice exists for the CLD approach and there is little understanding of its processes

Are you leading? What is your vision for CLD, for communities in Scotland?

The First Steps

All the conversations were completed by considering ‘first steps’. What needs to be done – what could be done nationally and locally – today?

- Open up the debate and develop dialogue. An emphasis should be placed on a promotion of both a public and professional discourse with a particular focus on the governance of all public services. We should be developing, and trusting, what was referred to as ‘the collective intelligence’.

Have you started a dialogue in your community? In your partnerships?

- Intentionally build and release local capacity and leadership, particularly amongst children and young people. We should not be afraid of ‘the community’. We should emphasise the necessity of ‘soft’ skills development. We need to ‘walk the talk’, specifically in the promotion of democratic literacy.
- Even more critical encouragement of partnership and consortia working. The development of multi-disciplinary teams and integrated workforces should grow alongside budget sharing and allocation on the basis of who is best able to undertake the task rather than the traditional lead service group.
- Culture change in organisations to the ‘we’ not ‘me’ emphasis. Co-operation, collaboration and building trust need to underpin the rhetoric and practice of partnership and co-production.

How can you encourage co-operation, collaboration and trust in your organisation? In your partnerships?

Conclusions

Finally, the Conversations produced a remarkable level of consensus on what the Standards Council should do to support CLD practitioners in advancing Scotland as a Learning Society. We want to work in partnership with you to pursue these nationally identified priorities.

- **Clearly define the purpose, nature and uniqueness of the CLD approach.** The conversations were not focussed on protecting or defending a CLD profession. They focussed on defining what was particular about an approach that was increasingly being used and developed in the fields of social enterprise, health initiatives, arts work, library and information services as well as adult education, youth work and community development, and across many departments of local government and voluntary and community sectors.
- **Empowerment.** If empowerment is to lead to power sharing then structures must be designed to support this. The opening-up of existing structures to enable wider attendance will not be enough if final control of the decision making processes and mechanisms remain largely in the same hands. Can CLD assist with the design of alternative, authentically involving, models?
- **Community led approach.** There was much discussion around community capacity building and capacity releasing. The movement from Local Authority towards local authority must involve a substantial investment in community focussed, neighbourhood based adult learning. The opportunity for a life related, issue centred Scottish adult learning initiative led by local people and supported by community learning workers – including health professionals, youth workers, community arts specialists amongst others – was felt to be overdue.
- **Partnership.** The support for partnerships and partnership working was clear. There was, however, a feeling that much more could be achieved and even closer working relationships established. Given the focus on the reform of public services, the engagement of local people, the need for tighter financial controls and the potential for 'co-production', how can we support practitioners to create and engage in effective partnership working?
- **Schooling.** There are many possibilities heralded in Curriculum for Excellence and many practitioners are enthusiastic about integrating it into their practice. But many also spoke of schools, particularly in the secondary sector, disconnected from the community and of an exploitation of youth work approaches to the detriment of effective impact and worker/young person relationships. How can we support colleagues to explore the threats and opportunities for schools and youth work in order that a more productive dialogue takes place?
- **The centrality of the belief in humankind.** The positive responses to human beings and to their struggles and achievements were powerful. These feelings were not expressed by naive dreamers but by practitioners in the front line, in community, in contact. This response is not very evident in policy reactions to our current social context, particularly with regard to young people. How can we help to place the belief in humankind at the centre of policy making?

AN INVITATION TO ACTION

We can't plan our way into the future; we need to learn our way into the future.

We are starting a national dialogue with this paper. Will you work with us?

**The Standards Council for Community Learning and Development for Scotland,
November 2011**