

Coming Up to Speed: Investigating a learning community for the Peel region, Western Australia

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Introduction

In 2001, The Peel Education and Training Campus, which includes the co-location of Challenger TAFE, Mandurah Senior College, a senior high school, and Murdoch University, applied to the Australian National Training Authority for funding to investigate the relevance of a learning community model to the Peel region. The project nominated the City of Mandurah as its first area of focus but indicated that the whole Peel region was of interest. The Peel region also includes the shires of Boddington, Serpentine-Jarrahdale, Murray, and Waroona.

The aim of this project was to identify characteristics of a learning community and the type of vision, and values, that have been associated with effective lifelong learning, and to consider how these might enmesh with existing planning and priorities of the City of Mandurah and the wider Peel region. A second feature of the investigation was to identify how the Peel Education and TAFE Campus could value-add to existing goals and initiatives in the region so that it effectively supports regional development, and industry and community effort. For the purpose of this project "community" was given a broad definition to include service organisations, voluntary groups, indigenous people, other ethnic groups, arts and music groups, as well as a collective term for citizens within the region. The title for the case study, *Coming Up to Speed*, was intended to convey the high level of positive and focused activity, already present, in the City of Mandurah and the Peel region, that was consistent with the goals of a learning community and with the level of energy already manifest in industry and the Peel community.

On the downside however, economic and social indicators applied to the Peel region and the City of Mandurah show the region is a relatively poor performer. The task for the Peel Education and TAFE Campus was to therefore identify how it could add to the existing positive energy by establishing suitable networks and planning mechanisms, incorporating learning community goals, values and strategies to contribute to improving social and economic outcomes.

Using the opportunities presented through the project, the Peel Education and Training Campus developed a set of proposed strategies that each of the three member institutions could implement, taking account of economic and social conditions in the region and supporting learning community values. The strategies the campus developed were intended to foster lifelong learning whether the learning community initiative for the City of Mandurah or the region went ahead or not (Peel Education and TAFE Campus, 2001).

A Learning Community

A learning community links and integrates economic, social, educational and cultural development activities for a nominated group, to maintain or improve the quality of life for its members. It seeks economic growth, social cohesion, and personal fulfillment for the membership. Building an effective learning community relies on members undertaking a series of consultative and planning activities. These include establishing a core, planning group with cross-sector representation from local government, all education sectors, employers, community

representatives and economic development agencies, with other groups or individuals added to reflect the community involved.

A second phase in the process is, using a consultation process, for the community to develop its vision of what it wishes to become. Strategies are then identified and a set of community priorities established. At this point, working groups need to take responsibility for developing particular aspects of the vision and its accompanying strategies. Success for a learning community is through building strategic partnerships so that learning is fostered in its many forms i.e. formal, non-formal and informal, and in many contexts. Building effective partnerships is critical for the success of a flourishing learning community. Moving towards becoming a learning community is an important process and requires effective public relations and marketing so that the community will see the benefits and results of its efforts.

The Peel Story

After consultation with community, government and industry representatives in the Peel region, the story of learning within the City of Mandurah, as the region's largest population group, has been developed. The Peel region has experienced considerable population growth within the last twenty years. The process of change and consequently the impacts on learning have been closely related to demographic, economic and social changes within the community.

The City of Mandurah, and the Peel region itself, has one of the fastest population growth rates in Australia yet displays one of its lowest *lifelong learning indicators*, (Gallagher, 2001). Based on the *YourPlace* database of 100 communities within Australia, (Future Perth Project, 2000) with a score of 100 being the highest rating in terms of preparedness for lifelong learning, The City of Mandurah rated as only 15. Murray and Waroona, other localities in the Peel region that were also included in the YourPlace evaluation, rated even lower at ten and four respectively. In addition, the ratings from 1991, 1996 and 1998 showed a continuing decline in score over the last seven years.

Concerning features of the Peel region had prompted the Peel Education and TAFE Campus Board to undertake activities beyond the usual responsibilities of education and training providers. For example, Mandurah's unemployment rate was higher than average for both the state and national rates and within the Peel region, there was the highest instance of youth unemployment in WA, (Harvey, 2001) reported to be 39% (Martin, 2001). These were concerning statistics that influenced the mandate of the campus, opened in November 2000. The campus was aware there needed to be innovative solutions and community and industry coordination if social and economic factors were to improve. One campus initiative was to therefore work with the Dusseldorp Skills Forum to develop a *Peel Regional Youth Commitment*, with a particular focus on improving success rates for transition of young people into the workforce. There was plenty of energy to look for opportunities for improvement. It therefore seemed wise to ensure the campus was enmeshing its efforts with the aspirations and initiatives of other sectors of the community.

The Peel Education and TAFE Campus therefore needed to establish effective links to the various community interest groups and to people grouped by their geographic locations and their cultures. The intention was to connect the campus with existing effort, rather than to seek to control or unduly influence community direction. The formal process of developing a relationship with local industries started with the formation of an Education Development Unit and the appointment of its manager as 'pathways development officer'. The campus, in

collaboration with the City of Mandurah, the Peel Development Commission, the Peel Chamber of Commerce and a range of regional interest groups, has become one of a number of stakeholders working cooperatively on forming a learning community.

A number of key factors defined the pace and direction of this project. First, timing is critical to the success of any project. In this case, we found that the values and concerns of a learning community fitted well with the concerns and aspirations for the region. It was an idea whose time had come. Secondly, extensive work had been completed by the Peel Development Commission to draw local and state awareness to the economic potential and current social and economic shortfalls in the region. The Commission's recently published work, *Peel Away the Mask*, provided evidence to support underlying community concerns on declines in social conditions in the region. Because a learning community seeks economic growth, social cohesion and personal fulfilment for its membership, these aspirations sat comfortably with the existing Peel region goals. A third feature of the project was a 'Ready, Fire Aim!' approach, as described by one of the stakeholders. The plan, when we started, was open to negotiation and shaping by the planning group. By the project conclusion, the planning group's direction was very clear. It would conduct a learning community forum to attract interested stakeholder groups to provide input on the what was required next.

Learning Audit

A learning audit was conducted to identify the current stakeholders in formal, non-formal and informal education and the services were currently available. The purpose of the audit in this format was to document details on agencies likely to have a lifelong learning mandate within their local sphere of activity. The activities and resources the agencies had available if cross-sector cooperative planning were to be initiated at a later stage was a particular area of interest. It was to the project's good fortune that the Peel Development Commission had started the process of establishing business, industry and community networks.

The audit therefore concentrated on documenting areas where there were known to be gaps in the Commission's data. It supplemented existing information on services, agencies and contact people within their local government locations. It took account of public and private pre-school and special unit facilities and primary schools, secondary schools, shared campuses and senior high schools. It documented the locations and contact people for registered training organisations. It recorded the location and contact details for libraries, tele-centres, community education programs and learning programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. It listed learning programs for parents, for seniors, the locations for University of the Third Age, business enterprise centres, community and learning centres and spiritual and health retreats. It also covered rural technology centres, coastal and land preservation groups, progress associations, other environmental groups, and community and health support groups.

Methodology

To undertake the audit, the task was subdivided into three areas of learning activity – formal, non-formal and informal learning, and the project allocated agencies to one or more of these categories. To simplify the process, large providers provided a raft of information about facilities within their portfolio of responsibilities, often in the form of a guide to local government services. For very small agencies that would fit in the non-formal learning activities, the project used data already collected and collated on the Peel Development Commission web site SISTEM database which can be accessed by Peel community and industry users.

Main Findings

Because much work had already been done on establishing networks and interest groups, and investigating the capacity for sharing resources, the next step for establishing a learning community will be to gather interested parties to develop some shared values and goals and to develop on-going trusting relationships. This will occur in May 2002. The current plan is for the City of Mandurah to start and they have taken the first step by declaring themselves a learning community. The adjoining shires will be encouraged to participate in Mandurah's planning process and access the resources developed so that they, in turn may progress towards learning community status. Because, numbers of agencies and volunteer groups operate across the region, the feeling is very positive and there are energetic and focused people willing to lend their energy to a common cause.

Positive Learning Experiences and Opportunities

The Peel community, including the Peel Education and TAFE Campus has an increased awareness of the particular social and economic needs of the region. *The Peel Away the Mask*, the *Youth commitment* and this regional audit have helped to identify learning needs and focus local service providers on where effort should be targeted. The Peel Education and TAFE Campus has been able to compile a list of strategies it could incorporate in its planning to ensure local requirements are being appropriately addressed (Peel Education and TAFE Campus, 2002).

Partnerships

Already there is a spirit of community members and social and economic planning groups working towards agreed outcomes. One indicator of the level of cooperation and shared understanding is the number of initiatives that have been lodged under joint sponsorship and have been funded.

A growing population

The value of a growing, rather than declining, population is that there is the potential for a vibrant community to build. While the population increases in the region have brought challenges to the region in meeting increased demand for community services with limited resources, there are advantages as well. Many other regional localities in W.A. are struggling with outward migration, especially of their young people. The City of Mandurah has an increasing number of young families. At present, some young people leave the area to seek further education and employment opportunities but will be likely to stay in the region if better opportunities can be provided locally.

Volunteer networks

There is a range of peak voluntary groups in the Peel region that already carry a mandate for lifelong learning. These include youth organisations such as the Peel Community Youth Committee, the Youth Advisory Councils and the Peel Development Commission VOYCE sub-committee. As well, because, Peel is a popular destination for retirees there are skilled, willing and creative seniors available to undertake voluntary work. Many seniors have become computer literate through a range of local initiatives designed by and conducted for seniors.

Learning Constraints

The City of Mandurah was traditionally a holiday and retirement haven. That view of the area has been at odds with changes in demographics that have occurred in recent times. The region has a noticeable split in community sub-groups. One is well-resourced and high profile, with waterfront homes, access to country clubs and boating past times. The other has limited work possibilities and low levels of resources and limited access to existing resources for a range of

reasons. The popular perception of the Peel region hindered recognition of the actual needs of a growing and changing region. Formal education facilities have recently expanded to cater to a wider spectrum of needs of the increased population but there is plenty of work required in designing programs to suit the community. The infrastructure for the non-formal and informal education sectors, the full extent of demand and the opportunities available are not clear. The extension of the learning community project to undertake a forum should provide further details in these areas of community need.

Support services

For the community to maintain or improve the quality of life for its members and seek economic growth, social cohesion, and personal fulfillment for the membership, a range of support services will need to be boosted. For example, health support services such as counselling, mental health professionals and drop-in centres are limited in the region and creating change requires the population to be operating at an optimum level. Poor public transport services available to and from learning institutions has meant that some people from low socio-economic backgrounds are unable to attend school/TAFE/university on time or on a regular basis. Currently, the transport facilities in the region are under government review.

Personal and economic circumstance

The Peel region currently offers low level of employment opportunities, and, as a historical consequence, numbers of families have considered achieving well in formal learning was of no direct benefit. Some young people and unemployed people have not placed a high value on education, particularly because they do not see meaningful employment as a current outcome. Mandurah has a pool of unskilled, unemployed people. Some parents, who are unskilled and unmotivated to learn, transfer that view on to their children. Change therefore has to occur across generations and at a number of levels.

Future Directions

It was indicated earlier that timing is critical to the success of any project. Establishing a learning community to focus attention on lifelong learning was an idea whose time had come. Secondly, the Peel Education and TAFE Campus needed to adopt the stance of a 'new kid on the block'. The project therefore provided opportunities for discussion to occur but it was decided that it should not take a directive role because there was the danger that this could be perceived as campus self-interest rather than an effort to understand community and industry needs. Because formal and non-formal education are the main activities of the Peel Education and TAFE Campus it was also important that the learning community vision was not dominated by campus activities and views which could have created an imbalance.

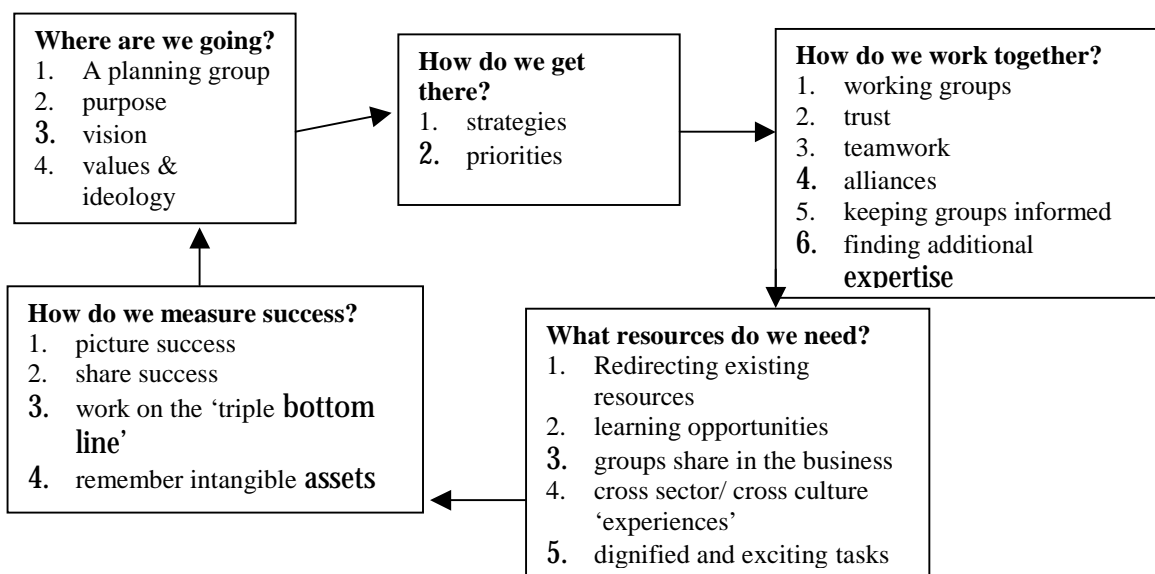
At the same time, a lead agency required the resources to sustain learning community effort. The planning group debated the issue, particularly considering whether to target their resources and therefore have a greater chance of producing a positive outcome or whether spread the resources more widely, in a spirit of fairness. Two large agencies were willing to support the initiative and the decision was to locate the project with the City of Mandurah. The planning group was aware that other local government areas could feel neglected and this was to be addressed by including sub-regional groups in all planning sessions and to offer all purpose developed resources to these sub-regions. As many agencies have an across the region portfolio of responsibilities, they would be implementing learning community initiatives for all their client groups.

The third aspect of the project that ultimately became its rescue was the ‘Ready, Fire Aim!’ approach, that the project had inadvertently taken. The project was initially developed under the auspices of the Peel Education and TAFE Campus but the process for continuing to pursue learning community goals was unclear. Because of the planning group’s strong will to get the learning community up and moving, at the third and final project meeting, what should occur next, who would do it, and an appropriate timeframe were agreed on.

Next stage

The working group is now assisting the City of Mandurah in planning a community consultation forum, using the planning framework below as a guide.

Table 5 learning community planning document



Progress and Performance Monitoring

The learning community project will now focus on improving these six areas of activity:

- to develop and extend the network of working partnerships in the region;
- to gain insight into the current demands for learning in its various forms and for various population segments and geographic sub-regions;
- to adequately resource lifelong learning through a cross agencies and sectors cooperative approach to planning;
- to facilitate access to learning opportunities for all sectors of community
- to take a cooperative approach to creating a learning culture by promoting consistent messages about learning in all sectors and sub regions, and
- to strive for excellence in the provision of lifelong learning.

The final local meeting of the project adopted the *YourPlace*, Lifelong Learning indicators for the Peel region, as a benchmark for measuring improvement to the six areas outlined above. These will be monitored over a five-year period. The *YourPlace*, Lifelong Learning indicators were widely publicised through the report on social conditions, *Peel Away the Mask*, released by the Peel Development Commission in February, 2002. The indicators are set out below.

Table 6 – Lifelong learning indicators*

These indicators are drawn from the Future Perth Project: South-west Urban System Economic Study 2000, based on the *Yourplace* analysis from the ABS statistics

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Peel</i>
Household Prosperity Potential : incidence of high income/ high spending households	Very Good
Job Readiness : Unemployment levels	Very Poor
Resilience: debt exposure and economic sensitivity measure	Poor
Wealth: unencumbered asset holding	Very Poor
Low Skills Indicators: incidence of process/clerical workers	Poor
High Skills Indicator: Incidence of C21 better paid/skilled occupations	Very Poor
Knowledge Driven Growth Potential: proportion of high technology or business service industries.	Very Poor
Global Knowledge Flow: presence of key brokerage, command and control industries	Very Poor
Lifelong Learning: Rate of on-going training for workers	Very Poor
Labour Utilisation: ratio of available paid work to utilisation.	Very Poor

Note: The hidden condition of some less well-resourced members of the community was disguised in the Household Prosperity Potential where a very positive outcome was registered.

It is unclear whether there will be any additional resources to implement the learning communities project for the City of Mandurah and across the Peel region however agencies will be encouraged to implement a range of strategies in their organisations that will sit within their existing mandate and budgets. If the will of participants remains strong then the region can look forward to celebrating improved lifelong learning indicators for Mandurah, and perhaps for Murray and Waroona, by 2008.

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