CoLab Exeter

URBAN LEARNING ACADEMY

Contents

The Problem

> **"The UK is one of the most centralised states in the Western World, with fewest powers decentralised to regions and communities. It is no coincidence, then, that the UK is also one of the most spatially unequal economies in the Western World, regionally and sub-regionally."**
> **- Andy Haldane, 2021**

Britain's "Levelling Up" Agenda

In recent years, trends such as digitalisation, gentrification and globalisation have all contributed to the fraying of communities across Britain. "Levelling up" is the governmental response that aims to reduce societal imbalances, primarily economic, between areas and social groups across the United Kingdom. However, in order for the government to achieve these economic gains, evidence has indicated a need for a holistic approach with many factors such as institutional, human and social capital being required to work together simultaneously to enable positive impacts (Slocock, 2018). Any missing factor will constrain a community's economic potential and resilience to social problems. Only when all types of capital are present and strengthened can we begin to see progress in reducing inequality.

Bell and Plumb (2021) specify the importance of social capital here, describing how its deficit compounds many issues that levelling up intends to address, such as economic decline and regional health inequalities. Social capital focuses on connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putman, 2001). Connected communities create cooperative and trusting environments which inadvertently produce more fulfilled and productive people. Conversely, the absence of social capital generates feelings of isolation and insecurity, negatively impacting life satisfaction. For example, government reports have demonstrated that people living in deprived areas are more likely to experience loneliness than those who live in wealthier areas (GOV, 2021).

Such reports further indicate that a lack of social integration makes it more challenging to reduce long-term unemployment and strengthen community health and wellbeing. For example, a report for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) estimated that disconnected communities could be costing society a potential welfare improvement valued at £32 billion, and about £12 billion of this could be realised as a net economic gain through improved productivity. This information is

particularly significant considering that in 2010, 40% of jobs in the UK were found through personal connections (Bell & Plumb, 2021). Consequently, social capital is strongly linked to GDP growth at the macroeconomic level.

This information demonstrates the importance of facilitating opportunities for interaction between groups in the community. Consequently, enabling people in disadvantaged places to meet, mix and develop social capital should be a key objective to levelling up. High levels of social capital can positively influence people's health, educational and workplace performance, socioeconomic circumstances and tendency towards criminality. One poignant way we can achieve this is by creating social infrastructure that enhances adult education.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is the process by which individuals acquire and improve their skills, knowledge, and competencies from various formal and informal learning activities throughout their life course, from pre-school to post-retirement, for personal, social, or professional reasons (Allmendinger et al., 2011; Kristenson Uggla, 2008). Though there are obvious economic and productivity advantages to lifelong learning, The Social Market Foundation (2020) revealed many other advantages. These included improved well-being, life satisfaction and self-confidence in skills which could be applied to day-to-day life outside of work.

Our current learning systems are built on a model that expects the population to complete their formal education by age 21. However, as the labour market changes and develops, maintaining one job for life no longer seems attainable, and the skills we need to excel in a career are changing more rapidly. Around the world, population ageing, technological change, and labour market transformations are leading to an increased mismatch between the skills and credentials held by workers and those required by their jobs (Kosyakova & Bills, 2021). Moreover, it is estimated that the average person will have at least 12 jobs in their lifetime, with an average of 3 jobs per year (Kenyon, 2022). Therefore, our approach to learning must be ready to adapt to the radical changes in our future, which exceed the capabilities of the current linear model. Consequently, Kenyon argues that our educational systems need to account for a lifetime of learning through access to various formal and informal courses to suit individual needs tailored to different sectors.

Response at the National Level

In response to this, the government has established an initiative to offer free Level 3 courses to adults. This is undoubtedly a step in the right direction for encouraging lifelong learning following public spending on adult learning being cut by 50% in the last decade. Nevertheless, the 'lifetime skills guarantee' advertised does not commit to consistent access to skills training but free access to one of the 400 government-approved Level 3 courses. Consequently, there remain significant

barriers to accessing this education. Those struggling with literacy, numeracy or digitalisation cannot access the training needed to enter these relatively demanding qualifications. In addition, many adults with negative educational experiences will not feel prepared for entry.

Another caveat to offering these courses to individuals who do not have these qualifications yet is that adult education tends to be more accessible to those already in privileged educational or labour market positions (Kosyakova & Gerber, 2019). Learning requires time, structure and support; this is found in a work environment for many people. Therefore, the benefits of adult education seem to be disproportionately captured by those already advantaged. This suggests that those who may benefit most from education and training - the low-skilled, low-income, unemployed and vulnerable - receive less of it (Bhattacharya, Corfe & Norman, 2020). The 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey found that 53% of those who left school aged 16 have not taken part in any learning since, a figure significantly higher than those who remained longer in education. In addition, adults in lower socio-economic groups are twice as likely not to have participated in learning since leaving full-time education than those in higher socio-economic groups. Global Reports of Adult Learning (GRALE; 2019) suggest that people living in poverty or under other restraints such as unengaging work may be unable to contemplate participation in adult learning and believe they have nothing to gain from it.

The information presented demonstrates the gaps and limitations in the government's approach to encouraging lifelong learning. Maintaining a centralised and competitive approach to levelling up will continue favouring communities with the foundations and skills to respond to government schemes aimed at improving lifelong education. There is a huge difference between ensuring the supply of schemes and ensuring their take up.

So Where Can We Go From Here?

This report will frame learning in the context of communities. I will clarify the nuances between education, skills and learning, explaining the theories behind how adults learn successfully. Real-world examples of skills academies and lifelong learning from around the globe will then be discussed with the relevance of how CoLab could apply their successes moving forward.

Adult Learning in Theory

To understand how we can supply the infrastructure needed to support learning and motivate those in the community to use it, we first need to understand how adults learn. Plentiful theories about adult learning are scattered through the literature. Here, I will outline a few.

Andragogy and self-directed learning are considered the pillars of adult learning theory (Cannonier, 2014). Andragogy is the practice of adult education and theorises that adult will be engaged and receptive to learning when the material is relevant to work or social roles (Colman, 2019; Valamis, 2021). This theory posits that adults learn better when they can take a pragmatic approach and apply their learning to solve a specific problem. Self-directed learners seek resources such as books or conversation groups to help them learn.

Other theories include experiential learning, which centres around hands-on learning and the use of experiences to demonstrate concepts. Learners need to actively participate in the learning process and reflect on the success of this participation - what worked and what did not. Constructivism learning theories suggest that knowledge is created by learners attributing meaning to information rather than through transmission from the instructor to a learner. This emphasises the importance ofpersonal agency in a learning journey; it

seems crucial for adults to devise solutions individually and organise themselves.

A final approach is transformational learning. This theory posits that all learners use different assumptions, expectations and beliefs to make sense of the world around them. Through teachers introducing new concepts and challenging pre-existing assumptions, learners can change their worldview. This type of learning is a good fit for individuals who are aiming for personal growth or want to learn analytical or evaluative processes. To encourage transformational learning, organisations need to provide a supportive and safe space for learners to question their beliefs without judgement. This involves authentic interactions and empathetic instruction.

Although transformational learning may be more relevant to CoLab's mission, one commonality behind these theories is that adults tend to be self-motivated because they understand the value of education and have specific goals in mind. However, such a perspective implies that only those who can motivate themselves or are goal-oriented can benefit from learning. Therefore, the theories commonly presented in the literature overlook specific challenges in motivating adults who have not had prior positive educational experiences.

According to the Learning and Work Institute's Adult Participation in Learning Survey (2019), 59% of adults that have not participated in the previous three years reported that dispositional barriers were a factor in this decision. Such factors relate to attitudes, perceptions and expectations of adults that could be participating in adult education. This compares with 35% citing situational barriers arising from personal and family situations and 1% citing institutional barriers arising from the unresponsiveness of educational institutions. Consequently, skepticism over the benefits of adult education appears to be a significant barrier to participation (Bhattacharya, Corfe & Norman, 2020). For example, fear of learning or low levels of confidence can prevent adults from taking steps towards learning.

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Using data from qualitative interviews, Hammond and Feinstein (2005) reported that many respondents were deterred from taking courses because formal education provisions reminded them of negative experiences from school, particularly failing in front of classmates. This effect was particularly strong for women with poor school attainment and those at risk for depression or social exclusion. Hence, learning provision should be designed to build confidence, for example, through

bite-sized courses or discrete units, which can be extended as learners progress (Pennacchia, Jones & Aldridge, 2018). In addition, aspects of informal learning, such as learning at one's own pace in a non-competitive and supportive environment, may be very beneficial in these cases.

Attitude Change

But how can we convince a person who did not thrive at school and associated learning with failure to risk learning again? And how can we support their learning differently, so they succeed this time?

One method that may achieve this change in mindset is cognitive dissonance. Festinger (1957) proposed that cognitive dissonance explains that learners are motivated to achieve consistency between their beliefs, opinions and actions. Individuals are disoriented when new information is perceived as contradictory and cannot be integrated into pre-existing knowledge. This inconsistency is uncomfortable, so they will become motivated to alter their beliefs and attitudes to reduce this adverse effect. This process of belief alteration through problem-solving, procedural tasks, and self-reflection motivates behaviour change. Applied to learning, if learners can continue their education in safe, non-judgmental environments, this may force them to reconsider their attitudes towards it. This theory demonstrates the importance of informal learning, so education can be perceived differently than it was taught in school.

A second relevant psychological concept is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a belief about one's capability, and people tend to use their efficacy judgements about a specific goal. This contrasts with other more general self measures such as esteem or concept, which extend to more global perceptions. It is a component of Bandura's (1997) social-cognitive theory, where he posited that "people make causal contributions to their own psychosocial functioning through mechanisms of personal agency [...] Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief, therefore, is a major basis of action." Resultantly, it holds critical theoretical contributions to studying academic achievement, motivation and learning.

People with low self-efficacy in accomplishing specific tasks are more likely to avoid them, while those who believe themselves capable are more likely to participate. Research has demonstrated that performing tasks is the most influential source of efficacy information (Artino, 2012). This is because they provide the individual with actual evidence of their capabilities and inform what personal resources are needed to succeed in the future. Hence, past successes will raise efficacy beliefs, whereas repeated failures will lower them. Such a theory may explain why those who did not perform well in academic settings as a child or had negative early education experiences may be more resistant to getting involved in adult learning schemes. It suggests that to involve these individuals, small progressive steps are needed where they

can succeed and slowly but consistently raise their beliefs about their competence.

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This then helps understand the phrase "learning begets learning"; the more engaged people are, the more they identify as confident with learning, and the more likely they are to continue to seek out and participate in learning opportunities. Furthermore, Hayat and colleagues (2020) identified that when students believed in their ability to perform tasks successfully, they enjoyed the learning process more, finding a positive relationship between self-efficacy and hope and pride. This evidence was taken from a sample of medical students, who may value academic success more. However, it is plausible to expect the underlying cognitive processes to be relatively similar between groups. Therefore, the implication is that developing individuals' self-efficacy through learning programs is a holistic approach and may extend to other areas of their life, promoting well-being, social inclusion, and widening occupational opportunities.

Other methods of motivation include learning through observing the successes and failures of others. Observing similar others' success can convey to observers that they are too capable and thus, motivate them to attempt the task. Furthermore, verbal persuasion from others may also increase efficacy. It may bolster self-change if the positive appraisal is within realistic bounds. However, it is essential to note that overly optimistic comments tend to be ineffective, being perceived as inauthentic. This may both undermine and discredit the recipient's efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, though appraisal can increase efficacy in the short term to encourage the recipient to believe that they are able to face challenges, it needs to be backed up with practical evidence for these beliefs to become enduring.

Models of LifeLong Learning

This theoretical basis can be used to inform and understand practical methods that have been used to enhance adult learning across the globe. This chapter will discuss a few examples to showcase their application.

SkillsFuture, Singapore

The Skills Framework established in Singapore provides an example of a complex skills network operating at a national level (SSG, 2022). It is an initiative to promote lifelong learning as part of a country-wide movement to allow all Singaporeans to develop their skills and transform their education regardless of their starting points. Their website provides information and resources on sector information, career pathways, occupations and training programmes for skills upgrading and mastery. Competencies are available for residents to explore and distinguished into two classifications; Technical and Critical. Technical skills are job-specific knowledge and abilities. Critical skills are soft, transferable skills that enable individuals to be employable and facilitate career mobility. Critical skills are further differentiated into three broad clusters; thinking critically (e.g. creative thinking and problem-solving), interacting with others (e.g. customer orientation and collaboration) and staying relevant

(e.g., digital fluency and adaptability). These are achieved in three proficiency levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. In addition to the learners, employers benefit because they can more easily recognise individual skills and invest in effectively training their employees. Furthermore, training providers benefit because they can gain insights into sector trends and skills in demand and design programmes to address needs in the industry accordingly.

Nesta, UK

Nesta began collating skills mentioned in over 40 million job descriptions between 2012 and 2017. These included specific tasks (e.g. insurance underwriting), knowledge (e.g. biology), software programmes (e.g. Microsoft Excel) and even personal attributes (e.g. cheerful disposition). From this data, they have created the first data-driven skills taxonomy for the UK that is publicly available. Skills taxonomies provide a consistent way of measuring the demand and supply of skills needed to create an informed labour market. Only when education providers, learners and policy makers are all informed that they are empowered to react to changes in the skills needed to thrive.

Community learning, Thailand

A local resident created the Ban Nai Soi Community Learning Centre to improve the educational prospects of migrants, refugees and poor Thai families. The centre is a place for those in the community from all walks of life to learn vocational skills, such as mud brick making, or improve their English language skills. The belief underpinning this project is that once individuals have knowledge, they can take this ability and use it to give back to society. Learning is linked strongly to what the community needs and can gain mutual benefit from.

Centre4, Grimsby

Centre4 is a community hub located in the estate of Nunsthorpe, an area in Grimsby with high deprivation and only 49% of its 16-74-year-olds employed. Twenty-six years ago, a recruitment agency, ERA, was established here. This organisation is a successful example of social infrastructure, as it is community-led, providing personalised service to help people into jobs. Their approach starts with the needs of the person looking for a job rather than the needs of the businesses offering a job. So, if work is not immediately available, ERA supports members to develop skills for future employment through training or social action jobs in the community. These social action jobs may include shopping, digital buddying, gardening, and collecting prescriptions for neighbours. Therefore, they allow individuals to gain valuable experiences, increase their confidence and build connections in the community.

Most importantly, the people who partake in these jobs are rewarded by a point scheme. Their experiences are recorded and can be used on their CVs or collected to be spent with local businesses or on future training. This is a great example of how non-monetary incentives can be utilised to boost community relationships.

Totonac Centre, Mexico

Intangible cultural heritage are skills, knowledge and expressions that form the transmitted practices of local people (Aziz et al., 2020). UNESCO (2019) believes that transmission of this knowledge down generations is a form of informal education and, therefore, can be tailored into context-specific programmes. Therefore, it can potentially improve the relevance of education and learning outcomes for populations. As such, the UN lauded the Futures of Education initiative in 2019, calling for institutions to foster respect and formal recognition for intangible cultural heritage as well as provide the infrastructure and resources to ensure that this is not lost through increasing globalisation.

For example, the Totonac Centre for Indigenous Arts (CAI) offers training in different artistic disciplines to over 50 communities from different parts of the Totonacapan region, Mexico. Totonac arts include pottery, textiles, traditional music, dance, and performing arts. What is interesting about these schemes is that education is angled through community involvement in learning instead of governmental, top-down schemes.

This is because communities are responsible for what expressions constitute parts of their living heritage, resulting in otherwise marginalised groups being given voices. Consequently, learning established bridges with vulnerable individuals, helping them to build social resilience through inclusivity and feelings of belonging whilst emphasising the value of cultural diversity.

In this sense, learning involves getting rid of old obsolete skills as it does developing new ones. Learning revolves around changing our minds and developing new behaviours, habits, heuristics and biases based on new information.

Skills vs. Learning?

Skills training tends to focus on knowledge of what expressions constitute parts of their living heritage, resulting in otherwise marginalised groups being given voices. Consequently, learning established bridges with vulnerable individuals, helping them to build social resilience through inclusivity and feelings of belonging whilst emphasising the value of cultural diversity and competencies required in different jobs to boost the employment of those who may struggle to find jobs. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, it can be harmful to neglect the importance of personal development, particularly for those without much experience with a working environment. The connotations around skills, as opposed to learning, may be harmful to those who do not have much confidence in themselves. This is because skills imply a measure of ability which may discourage those who do not believe they can achieve this or are starting at a lower level. The ability to learn, rather than the acquisition of skills, enables the development of social capital and empowers individuals to steer away from passive living.

Community Based Learning

As displayed in Center4 and the Totonac Centre, successful lifelong learning more often appears achievable through a community rather than a national effort. This is because communities are more aware of their populations' needs and can provide a more tailored, innovative and agile approach to learning. For example, Grimsby has demonstrated that communities know best their needs and strengths and that they can manage funding and assets to deliver tailored and effective services. Furthermore, this reinforces the idea that learning can happen everywhere and is not restricted to childhood or institutional settings.

There are multiple paths into learning, and these look different to everyone. Learning can be a part of anyone's narrative, irrespective of labels or prior experiences. Therefore, plentiful learning opportunities must be available to people to focus on their own interests and develop their strengths when they are receptive and ready.

Actively involving individuals in their learning process is perhaps more sustainable than teaching specific skills. This was demonstrated in the Ban Nai Soi Community Learning Centre, which started with one individual and has grown substantially. This provides significant evidence that cumulative, strengthening cycles can form where learning benefits continue to reap increased benefits to wellbeing and social capital over time. When presented with the opportunities, communities can enhance their beliefs about personal agency and nurture the inherent capacity of individuals to improve their own lives and the lives of others.

Therefore, CoLab has the exciting opportunity to design learning to support learners, basing provisions on participants' voices from the start. When those in socially privileged positions develop initiatives, these tend to serve to replicate and reinforce that privilege - even unknowingly. Only through fluid communication between learners and providers can we comprehensively understand the barriers and enablers of utilisation and how to enhance the inclusivity of community initiatives.

Furthermore, this helps avoid rigid distinctions between 'service users' and 'providers' – instead bringing local people to explore the challenges they face, identify their strengths as a community, and develop shared solutions. People should be able to engage with each other in a reciprocal and mutually beneficial manner, facilitating equal-status interactions. In this way, we can kick start the snowball effect that allows people into a position where they can help themselves.

What Can We Learn?

Research into self-efficacy has demonstrated that learning needs to be nurtured in a way that progressively builds confidence. Therefore, it seems crucial to attribute value to non-accredited learning, no matter how small the increments. Providing a form of recognition for learning such as Grimsby's point systems helps create clear and valued outcomes.

Alongside SkillsFuture, Singapore has partnered with cities of learning, an organisation that liaises with employers, educators and learners to agree on shared learning priorities for their local city. One intriguing aspect of their work was the platform of digital badges they have developed. These badges are accredited to learners as a stamp of recognition for both formal and informal learning, connecting these learning experiences to workplace opportunities. Singapore now has frameworks documenting over 50,000 abilities and knowledge types which underpin over 8,000 specific technical skills. These badges are a common language to improve communication and cooperation between organisations, learning providers and individuals. Furthermore, they show the benefit of presenting learning opportunities as visible, measurable and supporting learners to articulate their experiences.

The self-efficacy research also indicated the importance of peers and role models in learning. Seeing similar individuals achieve forms of educational success can demonstrate that these positive experiences are possible, which may be enough to encourage an individual to start learning and unlock their potential. CoLab could incorporate this through buddy systems, where individuals are paired together to support each other through learning and to share their experiences. Alternatively, suppose these conversations feel too daunting. In that case, there could be a dedicated section on the website or in the leaflet where previous learners describe their experiences with a learning event or program and what they have taken from it.

Furthermore, within skills academies, there is much emphasis on reflective behaviours. For example, after learning, it seems beneficial to allocate time considering what achievements were made and what could be worked on more in the future. Asking for feedback could be another way of encouraging people to reflect and also has the benefit to CoLab finding out which classes and partnerships are most successful.

Approaching Partners

When approaching prospective partners, it is an invitation to a movement of social change and being part of a community in which we have a social and moral obligation to develop. When communities are depleted, they are unable to attract or retain talent, as demonstrated by the high incidences of social mobility away from Exeter when students graduate from the university (Redfern, 2021). Furthermore, businesses are less likely to invest and innovate, and civic institutions and charitable organisations lack capacity and capability. This cycle is self-reinforcing, with a decline in skills, finance and culture occurring over decades. Such cumulative forces will continue to widen geographical disparities across the UK unless policy and action change.

Considering that these cycles have been developing for years and exacerbated by COVID, there is no quick fix for these issues. However, investing in learning is a long-term solution with high potential for incredible outcomes which benefit all aspects of community living. For example, people are more likely to actively support local businesses when they feel at home and attached to their local areas (Debenedetti, Oppewal & Arsel, 2013). Moreover, when approaching charitable organisations as partners, it may be relevant to emphasise that a community with better health, welling and prospects reduces the demand and pressure on local services. For example, The Eden Project, founders of The Big Lunch, explain that an increase in social capital eases the demands on public services as well as

delivering productivity gains to employers. For example, they estimate that initiatives like The Big Lunch are currently delivering a reduction in the demands on health services that can be valued at £2.7 billion.

Potential Partners in Exeter

National Careers Service
The National Careers service has a skills Toolkit which is an online platform that gives users access to free courses. These cover practical maths, computer essentials and a variety of personal growth and wellbeing courses and often provide a certificate of completion. However, one limitation of this service is that it is online, and if people do not have access to technology they will be restricted from learning.

CoLab could therefore partner with local libraries to coordinate a specified time where individuals are able to use the library's resources free of charge to complete these courses.

Utilising Local Gyms Partners
Gyms can be intimidating to enter, especially alone, and can be expensive but their facilities are incredibly useful to improve health and wellbeing. For example, in PureGym members are able to pay £2 for Yoga classes. It may be possible to coordinate with these independent trainers who host classes and investigate whether they could deliver a class elsewhere. If CoLab organised such events at a beach or public park, there would be no associated cost with this.

Liaising with community initiatives

Community centres around Devon hold lots of learning events. For example, St David's Community Centre has a range of weekly classes from French to choir to yoga. St Sidwell's Community Centre holds community groups such as The Repair Café sessions where you can take broken items to be fixed or help out if you can sew or mend in any way.

Other Resources

- https://www.meetup.com/
- https://www.pinpointdevon.co.uk/spor ts-hobbies-and-activities/
- https://www.learndirect.com/