EMERGING ISSUES IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

PREFACE
This paper is based in part on work that was conducted on behalf of the Appalachian Regional Commission by Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. The concepts and opinions presented in the paper do not reflect the opinions or policies of the Appalachian Regional Commission.

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the concept of learning communities and the shifts in concept and practice required to bring them about based on emerging ideas in the physical sciences, leadership training, learning theory, rural development, public work, organizational learning, systems thinking, and community capacity building. The major shifts in concept include changing assumptions about people and human nature and changing definitions of community and development. The major shifts in practice include creating multiple spaces for public deliberation and removing barriers to action and reflection. Embracing these changes leads to a redefinition of the role of the Appalachian Regional Commission and rural development practitioners from agents external to the communities we attempt to serve to integral parts of community systems with revised roles and responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION and CHALLENGE STATEMENT
The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) engaged in a strategic planning process in 1996 that culminated in a Strategic Plan for the Region. The third goal of the Plan states, “The people and organizations of Appalachia will have the vision and capacity to mobilize and work together for sustained economic progress and improvement of their communities.” This paper introduces and discusses the concept of “learning communities” as it relates to this complex goal.

With the assistance of the ARC, the Appalachian Region has made considerable economic progress over the past 26 years, at times outpacing the nation as a whole: however, this dynamic and growing region still contains some of the poorest areas in the nation. Counties with below average economic performance are found scattered throughout the Appalachian Region (Isserman, 1996). Within Kentucky, for example, significant socioeconomic disparity remains between mountain communities and the rest of the Commonwealth, irrespective of county boundaries (Eller et al., 1994). There is less industrial diversity in rural areas in general than in
areas of greater population concentration, leaving rural areas most vulnerable to economic restructuring (Isserman, 1996). The “learning community” approach as outlined here offers the poorest communities, in particular, a powerful alternative to more traditional development approaches.

Richard Karash (1996), a learning organization practitioner, stated:

“A ‘Learning Organization’ is one in which people at all levels, individually and collectively, are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about.”

By substituting the word “community” for “organization” in the above quotation, we have defined the strategic challenge facing Appalachian communities – to continually increase citizens’ capacity to produce the results they really care about, both individually and collectively.

The concept of a learning community is both related to and distinct from concepts of civic capacity and democracy building. While creating learning communities is expected to increase civic capacity and strengthen democracy, the concept of a learning community recognizes that the capacity to learn, both individually and collectively, is a function of creating a learning culture that is different from the prevailing culture.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?
The problem, simply stated, is our inability to mobilize effectively to achieve what we really want in our communities. Our traditional ways of solving problems on behalf of each other aren’t working well anymore, as acknowledged by a wide variety of experts in numerous fields.

Boyte and Kari (1996), authors of Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work, echo many experts in observing that “Today, the inability of a specialized expert to solve virtually any serious public problem is increasingly apparent.” After extensive research with focus groups around the country conducted on behalf of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism at the outset of the 1996 presidential cycle to learn what is on the public’s mind, what its hopes and problems are, and what it thinks of the political process, Richard Harwood (1996) observed, “People are clear on their common concerns but they’re unsure about how to act on them or are torn over what to do. They acknowledge that part of the problem has been their own failure to get involved.”

Much of what Harwood heard as he traveled around the country was frustration: “people are frustrated by the false choices campaigners give them ... People are frustrated by the rise of the public expert, who speaks to ordinary folks from on high and in a strange language.” Most importantly, Harwood found, they are frustrated by a lack of genuine public talk, public deliberation. “This is what any kind of community is founded on: talk ... In the absence of real talk and real listening, people draw apart” (Mike Phillips, 1995). Harwood (1996) concluded, “America is stuck. How can a nation move forward when its public life is mired in acrimony and divisiveness, selfishness and personal greed? Too many people have abandoned their sense of responsibility.”
Creating learning communities is about creating the opportunities for citizens to exercise their civic muscles, get involved, and regain a sense of personal responsibility for public well-being. We will need to change the system of public engagement we have now if we hope to achieve more satisfying results. In this case, the system we’ve got is a system that makes it extremely difficult for citizens: (1) to recognize the communities of which they are a part and find those citizens who share their concerns; (2) to discover, together with their fellow citizens in a meaningful and ongoing way, what it is they really care about; and (3) to act effectively and consistently to produce the results they really want. This paper suggests some of the things we need to do differently if we are to achieve learning communities.

This paper draws on emerging ideas in the physical sciences, leadership training, learning theory, rural development, public work, organizational learning, systems thinking, and community capacity building as they relate to the concept of learning communities. Common themes which suggest a profound transformation in the way we understand reality and ourselves are abundantly clear throughout the literature. The next section of this report describes some essential aspects of transformative thinking and action.

**FROM MECHANICS TO ECOLOGY: CREATING A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT**

**Moving from the 17th to the 21st Century**

The system of public problem-solving we’ve got, and with which many citizens are increasingly dissatisfied, is based on an understanding of the universe dating back to the 17th century. Newton and Descartes introduced us to a world in which it was assumed that the whole could be explained by examining its parts. Exact knowledge was possible and predictions about the behavior of physical objects could be made with certainty. Objectivity was possible because the world existed as something separate from and outside ourselves and could be known with certainty through our senses. Causality could be precisely established with sufficient research, and forces were understood to act upon one another in a linear fashion. One thing, quite literally, led to another.

“This reduction into parts and the proliferation of separations has characterized not only organizations, but everything in the world during the past three hundred years. Knowledge was broken into disciplines and subjects, engineering became a prized science, and people were fragmented -- counseled to use different ‘parts’ of themselves in different settings (Wheatley, 1992).”

The assumed static nature of the universe allowed us to focus on controlling it and each other to achieve our desired ends. This, in turn, encouraged us to centralize and create bureaucracies and hierarchy in which power resides at the top. As part of this journey, we have come to see fulfillment of our individual needs in terms of the material accumulation of objects and ourselves.
as relatively passive recipients of services from government, institutions, and businesses. While many positive discoveries have been made based on the world view of the 17th century, we are increasingly frustrated in trying to apply these tools to the complex, unpredictable, and uncertain world in which we now find ourselves.

“As we think about ourselves, our community and institutions, many of us recognize that we have been degraded because our roles as citizens and our communities have been traded in for the right to clienthood and consumer status. Many of us have come to recognize that as we exiled our fallible neighbors to the control of managers, therapists, and technicians, we lost much of our power to be the vital center of society. We forgot about the capacity of every single one of us to do good work and, instead, made some of us into the objects of good work – servants of those who serve (McKnight, 1987).”

As Margaret Wheatley (1992), organizational consultant and student of the new science observes, “It has not been easy living in this universe. A mechanical world feels distinctly anti-human. As Zohar eloquently describes it, ‘Classical physics transmuted the living cosmos of Greek and medieval times, a cosmos filled with purpose and intelligence and driven by the love of God for the benefit of humans, into a dead, clockwork machine … Things moved because they were fixed and determined; cold silence pervaded the once-teeming heavens. Human beings and their struggles, the whole of consciousness, and life itself were irrelevant to the workings of the vast universal machine.’”

The mechanistic world view is giving way to a new understanding of the universe with profound implications for our understanding of our own role within it. The emerging paradigm assumes that we, consciously or not, create the world in which we find ourselves. Furthermore, the world we create is one interconnected whole that can best be understood as a system. The new paradigm assumes that our inner wisdom is as important as or more important than the evidence of our senses in “making sense” of the world around and within us. In writing about community transformation, Michael Ray (1995) suggests, “Rather than believing it only when we see it, the emerging viewpoint seems to be that we will see it only when we believe it – shifting the locus of control from the outside to the inside.” This new vision speaks to the central importance of relationships, systems, and self-organization. In the new paradigm, continuous learning through an ongoing cycle of action, reflection, and action becomes essential to survival.

**A New Approach to Learning**

A learning community approach to community change begins with an understanding of what learning is and how people learn. As part of the paradigm shift outlined above, our very understanding of how people learn is changing. Within the field of education, recent work on how people learn draws clear distinctions between “Old Answers” and “New Answers” to the question of why and how individuals learn (Table 1).
Table 1: Old and New Answers to How We Learn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Answers</th>
<th>New Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is a “thing” that is transferred from one person to another.</td>
<td>Knowledge is a relationship between the knower and the known; knowledge is “created” through this relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is objective and certain.</td>
<td>Knowledge is subjective and provisional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners receive knowledge.</td>
<td>Learners create knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We all learn in the same way.</td>
<td>There are many different learning styles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge is organized in stable, hierarchical structures that can be treated independently of one another.</td>
<td>Knowledge is organized “ecologically”; disciplines are integrative and interactive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We learn best passively, by listening and watching.</td>
<td>We learn best by actively doing and managing our own learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We learn alone, with our minds, based on our innate abilities.</td>
<td>We learn in social contexts, through mind, body, and emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We learn in predictable sequences from simple “parts” to complex “wholes”.</td>
<td>We learn in wholes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our intelligence is based on our individual abilities.</td>
<td>Our intelligence is based on our learning community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Cleveland and Plastrick 1993.

Notice the emphasis in the “new approach” on relationships, systems (“wholes” and the importance of the learning community) and self-organization, as seen through self-direction and action in the learning process of individuals. It is not enough, however, to understand how people learn as individuals. We must also be concerned about bridging the gap between individual learning and community learning. To do this, we must confront and change a host of structural problems in our communities that are our legacy from a previous era.

STUMBLING BLOCKS TO CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES
Primary stumbling blocks to creating learning communities that practitioners encounter on a regular basis in the United States include:

Both intentional and unintentional lack of communication between actors in the community who share or may share common goals. No matter how large or small the community may be, people typically do not know what each other is doing or thinking about any given aspect of community life. Peter Scholtes (1995), leader of the Partnership Project on Continual Learning of the W. Edward Deming Institute observes, “Communities are filled with functional ramparts (such as health care organizations, education organizations, public safety organizations, etc.) ... Within each of these ramparts are many more internal ramparts. Each competes with each other for funds, for credit for successes, for attention, and for philosophical superiority. A rampart
mentality consists of a collusion among the various fiefdoms to not interfere in each others’
territory, to maintain autonomy and rugged independence.”

Lack of fit between what really matters to communities and the agendas, resources, and design of
government programs are all too often designed
to provide specific “one size fits all” services that may not be appropriate in any or all small rural
communities. Over time, communities often learn to skew their own priorities to gain access to
government and other program resources and learn to overlook their own local assets. For
example, many rural communities have focused on housing to the exclusion of other
development activities and concerns simply because that’s where the money has been. Even
within the housing field, some communities have not been able to meet their real needs for
housing rehabilitation because the only money they’ve been able to access has been for housing
construction. In another example, we recently learned of a community that limited its thinking
about strategic planning for agriculture to areas in which they thought state funds would be
available. This type of lack of fit is quite common and is an artifact of a centralized, hierarchical,
and bureaucratic approach to development.

Lack of fit between the information available to a community about itself through traditional
sources (e.g. the U.S. Census, Departments of Labor, etc.) and what people in communities really
want to know about themselves. Much of the information traditionally made available to rural
communities about themselves is out-of-date (based on the last census), inaccurate or incomplete
due to nondisclosure requirements, or lacks meaningful context to compare one community with
others that are similar in one or more important ways or to place a community in a larger regional
context. When communities decide what it is they really need to know to produce results they
really care about, they will be in a better position to shape information and information flows to
meet their real information needs.

Poor collective recognition of human, economic, and environmental assets and accomplishments.
Communities have been encouraged to focus on their problems not their assets. This leads
communities to think they need outside experts and money to address community concerns.
Whereas there is certainly a role for specialists as catalysts, supporters, facilitators, researchers,
and witnesses, the dependency created by a problem-oriented approach is not conducive to
creating learning communities. As Robert Chambers (1993) of the Institute for Development
Studies reports, “There are two disadvantages to a problem orientation for rural management.
The first is negative connotations. Problems present themselves; opportunities have to be sought
out. The solution of problems is liable to maintain a static situation rather than to promote a
developmental one ... The second disadvantage is that problem-solving may lead to misallocation
of resources. If a program goes badly, solving its problems may involve devoting more resources
to it and incurring elsewhere costs quite out of proportion to the benefits from the program in
question ... An opportunity orientation, by contrast, ... would direct attention to seeking out new
possibilities rather than concentrating effort on what was already not working.”

1 Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have popularized the concept of “asset-based” development and have provided a
number of useful tools in their book Building Communities From the Inside Out. An asset-based approach is also
understanding a community’s assets is knowing its history of effort and accomplishment in the areas of concern to the community as a whole. What is the history of the community as a whole? What are its defining struggles and achievements? What has been tried in the past to address public issues of concern? Although people in communities know their own histories and experiences, this knowledge isn’t activated in the design of traditional development activities.

There is no public process that shapes individual histories into community history and validates individual and collective experience. Often, past efforts to address public issues of concern have been managed by outsiders and may not have had a community focus. For example, a program to address teenage pregnancy may have been quite successful, but because it depended on resources from outside the community, it was discontinued at some point and the community has never been able to understand why. Learning occurs, in part, through feedback about what works and what doesn’t. In many communities, the avenues for feedback have been blocked. Communities are often unaware of their own success stories, let alone those of the town next door. This happens, in part, because our patterns of communication draw our attention outside our immediate communities and, in part, because, even at the local level, the media do not pay much attention to success (Theobold, 1996). For all of these reasons and doubtless many more, feedback loops, critical to community learning, are broken, misplaced, or nonexistent.

Inability to raise and resolve conflicts productively. In many communities, there are topics that are simply not discussed because everyone assumes they cannot be resolved. Sometimes power elites deliberately block discussion because they do not want people to learn or change or act. Even communities that are not overtly controlled by power elites often get “stuck” on conflict and confrontation, viewing every controversy as having “sides” that cannot be moved or bridged. This leads to collective paralysis and undermines the capacity to mobilize resources to get what a community really wants. Culturally, we tend to view conflict as something negative. For many people, conflict is scary and something to be avoided whenever possible. However, in our complex and uncertain world, conflict is inevitable. Understanding conflict as an opportunity for learning, rather than a barrier to progress, is a shift in thinking that must occur if communities are to move forward. In describing unhealthy communities in a paper prepared for the Pew Center for Civic Change, Bruce Adams (1995) uses the words “confrontation, focus on division, ‘not in my backyard,’ polarization, mean-spiritedness, questioning motives, politics of personality, blockers and blamers, attacking, win-lose solutions, and dividers.” Each of these words speaks to the inability to raise and resolve conflict productively. The outcome, as identified by Adams (1995) is “gridlock, and ‘nothing works’.”

Given these stumbling blocks, how do we accomplish the change needed to unleash the learning potential in our communities? How do we get beyond well-meaning but too often trivial, superficial, even manipulative attempts at “public participation” to helping to create real learning communities capable of doing what needs to be done to reach citizens’ vision over the long term?

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gaining ground in anti-poverty work where the focus is shifting away from government-provided safety nets and toward facilitating accumulation of financial assets by poor people.
FROM STUMBLING BLOCKS TO BUILDING BLOCKS: CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Creating learning communities will require us to use both new conceptual and new applied tools. We need new conceptual tools to examine and change our assumptions about people, leaders, and human nature, and new understandings of community and development to guide our efforts. The first two building blocks are conceptual undergirders of behavioral change. We need new applied tools to create space for ongoing public deliberation within and between communities and to remove obstacles to citizen action and reflection. These last two building blocks are the arenas in which behavioral change is evidenced and the actions through which community learning occurs. The rationale for each of these changes is presented below along with some suggested approaches.

Changing Our Assumptions about People and Leaders

Many people, including those who live in rural communities, who provide services to rural communities, who provide funds for rural communities and who consult with rural communities, hold certain assumptions about people, leaders, and human nature that inhibit our capacity to learn and work together to get what we really want. Some examples of these assumptions are the following:

- People are basically unwilling to make an effort, to be honest, and to do the right thing.
- People only care about themselves and only act out of narrow self-interest.
- Emotion has no place in “rational” discourse.
- When things go wrong, it’s because someone messed up.
- People resist change.
- Communities consist of individuals; improving communities therefore consists of improving individuals in the community.
- Community accomplishments depend on the heroic efforts of a few outstanding individuals (adapted from Scholtes, 1995).
- Resources are scarce. There are always winners and losers.
- There are only two sides to any issue and we already understand them.

These assumptions do us all a disservice. For one thing, they are not true. In every healthy community there are examples of people who make an effort, are honest, do the right thing, and act out of interest for others, i.e. people who understand and express their self-interests positively – people who are motivated not through fear or rewards but through an effort to create meaning in their lives. That is the energy we must tap to bring learning communities into being.

The assumptions listed above are the legacy of a mechanistic world view that devalues the possibilities we all have for making choices. Although we are not free to choose everything – we cannot choose, for example, the family we are born into, the historical era in which we live, the
climate in the place we live, or even aspects of the policy environment we must live within – our
capacity to make choices and make a difference is far greater than we tend to admit. Despite
much evidence to the contrary, however, these assumptions, and others like them, continue to
block our way forward. We need to become open to the possibility of examining our assumptions
and adopting a new set of assumptions that will promote learning. Where this is occurring,
positive change is evident. For example, HandMade in America (Anderson, 1996) in North
Carolina is succeeding in strengthening a regional economy in large measure by creating
community collaboration through new models for civic relationships.

Assumptions underlie expectations and expectations easily become self-fulfilling. If we are truly
interested in empowering communities to learn and take effective action, we must begin by
naming, examining, and transforming our assumptions about people and thereby forging
connections with others in our community who are able and willing to do the same. One of the
most powerful set of tools for examining our assumptions are the “mental models” tools
developed by Peter Senge (1994). These tools are described in detail in Senge’s The Fifth
Discipline Fieldbook, Greenwood, South Carolina (Senge, 1994), successfully employed these
tools in its efforts to become a learning community.

Willingness to examine deeply held personal beliefs does not come easily, nor is it painless.
However, this process is essential if we are to embrace the new paradigm. Not everyone will step
up to the plate. Those who, for whatever reason, are unable to tolerate an examination and
transformation of fundamental assumptions will be far less effective in this work. People who are
ready to take up this work will be people who are able and willing to make a commitment to
learning and change. They must also make a commitment to examining their own power
identities. They must be willing to redefine those identities whether they are starting from a
position of power or from a position of powerlessness. Learning behaviors are based on
acceptance of co-equal responsibilities and partnership.

This is a process that must begin with a commitment to change. One of the most important
findings from The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s New Futures Initiative is that “a community
cannot back into, or evolve into, a system-change agenda. The political will to take risks, to face
resistance, and to do business differently must be present from the beginning (Morse, 1996).”

Transforming Concepts of Leadership and Change

“The leadership challenge before us is transformational, not merely transactional
(Adams, 1996).”

All the assumptions we make about people influence our choices and our behavior. One set of
assumptions, in particular those regarding the nature of leaders and leadership, have particularly
profound implications for learning communities. Traditional concepts of leadership and how
change occurs focus on the heroic efforts of a few outstanding individuals and ignore the
widespread capacity for leadership and variations in the style and patterns of influence of
different types of leaders. “The institutional conception of leadership, assuming an elite few can
know best what to do, contrasts markedly with the democratic conception, assuming the community as a whole possesses the only capacity to respond effectively to public problems (Briand, 1996).” However, as with all deep-seated assumptions, changing our notions of leadership will not come without effort. “Basically, the transition from a traditional leadership model to a new model of collaborative community leadership is hard. It takes time and commitment from many hundreds of grassroots leaders. We have learned many bad habits, and it is not easy to unlearn them (Adams, 1996).”

According to Harvard professor Ron Heifitz (1994), collaborative community leadership requires leaders who “want to wean people from their addiction to a person and instead want to empower the group to move toward change.” Leaders and potential leaders in a community are not only those holding office or other prominent positions. There are many different types of leaders in communities, some of whom are not readily identified through our political process. For example, in studying civic life for the purpose of assisting journalists in doing their jobs more effectively, Richard Harwood (1993) discovered many layers of civic life including the official, quasi-official (associations, leagues, etc.), third places (churches, socials, barber shops), incidental (sidewalk/backyard interactions) and private. He identified two important types of leaders who are often overlooked by journalists and community developers. “‘Connectors’ can tell journalists about different kinds of conversations that are going on in a community because they move between various groups. And ‘catalysts’ are those who make things happen by using their influence to get others involved.” Understanding the roles of connectors, catalysts and other nontraditional leaders and being able to identify and access people in these roles in community is an essential step in changing our understanding of what a “community” really is. Equally important is the realization that civic leaders in elected or appointed positions often have little concept of ‘the public’ that exists in communities (Harwood, 1993). Creation of learning communities builds relationships between leaders and the publics they serve.

**Shortcomings of Existing Traditional Leadership Training Programs**

In an extensive review of traditional leadership programs available in the South, including parts of the Appalachian Region, prepared for the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation by MDC, Inc. in 1996, several shortcomings in leadership training programs were identified.

“While traditional community leadership programs ensure racial diversity in the makeup of class participants, they often concentrate participant recruitment and selection on a narrow field of middle and upper-middle class professionals in a community (Mary Babcock Reynolds Foundation, 1996).” This recruitment and selection process appears to be based on the old paradigm of leadership by elites.

“The programs are generally both issue-neutral and value-neutral ... Leaders are not forced to grapple with their own or others’ values – a core step in moving a community towards resolving critical challenges (Mary Babcock Reynolds Foundation, 1996).” In other words, most existing programs do nothing to examine and begin to change assumptions about people and human nature.
“Most community leadership programs focus on transferring skills and information but without an aspect of applied civic work. This is despite the fact that most adults learn most effectively through action.

“Community leadership programs assume that sharing information about the community and connecting people with one another will positively impact the community. The assumption is valid, but it reflects a limited view of what the work of leaders is and what the needs of communities are ... Simply sharing information does not result in the formation of thoughtful judgment about problems ... Tough issues require deliberation and problem-solving among a diverse mix of people (Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, 1996).” Most leadership programs, as currently structured, neither provide nor model the importance of public discourse.

New Leadership Training Programs for Learning Communities
Lamm and Gage (Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, 1996) have articulated a handful of principles that can be applied to the redesign of existing leadership training efforts in the Appalachian Region. These principles happen to correspond quite well to emerging view of the learning process, the notion of communities as systems, and the need to connect skill development with action and results. Leadership programs, if structured according to these principles, would become another important venue for public deliberation as described in a following section.

It is important to include a very broad range of the community in training for community and economic development leadership. This is an achievable goal that is critical if the benefits are to be widespread. It takes special effort, commitment, and know-how.

Individual development matters. It is important to recognize and value the individual transformation that occurs in a leadership program, even though this change must be measured in stories rather than in statistics.

Social capital development is a key to economic development. A good program will deliberately build bridges across fault lines in the community as an integral part of developing leadership for community and economic development. It will also shine a light on places where bonds are so tight that they exclude others.

Good programs expect results. Programs for community and economic development should result in concrete projects most of the time. If they don’t, it’s time for some soul-searching. On the other hand, if there are no failures, the goal isn’t high enough. Programs need room to fail, but the dialogue about why things are or are not working needs to be ongoing and honest.

Good programs balance information, action, and reflection. Participants need to be the primary actors in their learning; staff can offer questions, examples, and occasional information.
By encouraging providers of leadership training to imbed these principles in their work, the ARC can transform leadership training into a vehicle that supports learning communities.

**Changing Our Understanding of Community and Development**

Typically, communities, whether of place or of interest, are thought of as static entities that exist outside the world of the development practitioner or service provider or funder. However, using a new paradigm based on our new scientific understandings of the biological world, “The organism (community) is not a static system closed to the outside and always containing identical components; it is an open system in a (quasi-) steady state ... in which material continually enters from, and leaves into, the outside environment (Capra, 1996).”

The vision of community that appears to be most consistent with the emerging paradigm is community as **system**. Peter Scholtes (1995) writes, “When we talk about a community as a **system**, we are describing a quantum leap beyond ... cooperation and partnerships. To be sure, ... collaborative relationships between the different agencies and sectors are essential. They are probably necessary prerequisites for creating systems in the community. But cooperation is not enough. We must **understand** systems, **think** in terms of systems, **create** systems, **lead** systems, and **work together** in systems.”

According to Scholtes, when a community is working within a systems view, it works together to identify:

- The purpose of the community.
- The highest priority needs of the community.
- Indicators of how well these needs are being met.
- The systems of interacting conditions and factors that create the needs, problems, and gaps.
- The causes of the problems.
- The interdependent policies, activities, interventions, programs, and resources that are necessary and sufficient to meet the needs and solve the problems at their source.
- The plans for implementing these solutions and monitoring these solutions.
- The cross-functional organizational infrastructure needed to support and sustain these solutions.

The difference between this model and the more traditional “strategic planning” model for communities is in its emphasis on understanding the purpose of the community, the entire systemic context of a given issue, and the provision of indicators and the monitoring of results of actions taken to solve problems so that continual learning can occur.

**Learning How to Think, Understand, Create, Lead and Work Together in Community Systems**

“Moving away from this habit of blaming others for problems and failures, and recognizing instead that the systems in which we live cause most of our problems,
is a very difficult step for most people. It is also an unwelcome and threatening idea for many when they first confront it (Theobold, 1996).”

That does it mean to learn to think, understand, create, lead, and work together in systems? How is this different from what we already do? There are an abundance of theories that could be drawn on to answer these questions. One practical approach has been developed by Barry Oshry who spent twenty-five years running the Power and Systems Laboratory (now called the Power and Leadership Conference) in which people came together for a week or more at a time to experience issues of power and powerlessness by participating in a “society” of Tops, Middles, and Bottoms or Elites, Managers, and Immigrants. Years of observing the dynamics of these experiments led Oshry to identify four aspects of “system blindness” that we must overcome in order to think, understand, create, lead, and work together in systems: spatial blindness, temporal blindness, relational blindness, and process blindness. Each aspect is highly relevant to the creation of learning communities. Oshry’s book (1996), Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life, is an easy-to-read yet detailed guide to his discoveries summarized below.

**Spatial Blindness**

Spatial blindness is about seeing the part without the whole. If we see the world only from our own perspective, we are suffering from spatial blindness. Overcoming spatial blindness requires looking beyond one’s own perspective to “see” the world as others see it, to understand who you are to them and who they are to you, and to go beyond the assumptions, prejudices, and myths we have all inherited. One powerful tool to illumine spatial systems is collective reflection. If people are willing and able to tell the truth and willing and able to let in and accept as valid the experiences of others, movement occurs. Once people learn more about each others’ worlds, they have more empathy, understanding, and patience with one another. They are less quick to judge. As people begin to see the contexts of each others’ actions ... they are less apt to take these actions personally. They realize, “This is not an act directed against me.” This allows people to use the energy they would have spent in reaction into the work of the system instead. Often, as people begin to see others’ worlds, they see how their own actions have made it difficult for others to cooperate with them, and they see how they might get what they need by easing rather than exacerbating the conditions of others. Problems can be readily solved when all the information is present.

**Temporal Blindness**

The second type of system blindness is temporal blindness. Temporal blindness is about seeing the present without the past, and forgetting to ask how we got here to begin with and what has already been tried. Overcoming temporal blindness means attending to the history of our concerns and results of past efforts by ourselves and others to address them. Overcoming temporal blindness means seeing the patterns and processes in the system that could be blocking

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2 In Oshry’s (1996) model this occurs in TOOTs (Time Out of Time). There are only two basic guidelines for TOOTs: Tell the truth (paint a picture for us; you are the experts on your part of the system; there is no other way for us to know what your world is like) and listen carefully to others (don’t argue or debate, just let it in).
us and leading us to misunderstandings and unproductive conflict. Oshry (1996) uses “anthropologists” to overcome temporal blindness. Anthropologists observe the unfolding of the drama and keep records of events as they happen. Participants keep journals. Whenever blockages occur, participants and anthropologists gather to reflect on the process that brought them to this point. What really happened? What was the sequence of events? Where did the system breakdown? What can we learn from it? Oshry describes this process as moving from a flat plane of experience to a multidimensional one – like moving from seeing a drawing of a scene to entering the scene itself. Monitoring and shared reflecting aid in overcoming temporal blindness.

**Relational Blindness**

The third type of system blindness is *relational blindness*. Relational systems speak directly to the issue of responsibility. Overcoming relational blindness is key to restoring citizen responsibility. “In system life, we humans are in constantly shifting patterns of relationship with one another. For the most part, this phenomenon of being in relationship is invisible to us. We tend to experience ourselves as whole and autonomous beings rather than as being in relationship. As a consequence, we blindly fall into certain unproductive and destructive dances with one another. We fall out of the possibility of partnership and into relationships of misunderstanding, opposition, antagonism, and destruction (Oshry, 1996).” Oshry calls this the Dance of Blind Reflex. The relationships he explicates are those of Tops, Middles, and Bottoms. These can be applied in many different contexts from buyer, supplier, and seller to elected official, bureaucrat, citizen to parent, teacher, and child. The key to determining which type of relationship you are in is to see where the responsibility is flowing. Ideally, responsibility is shared. If too much is flowing to any one part of the system, the system will not function properly. Tools for overcoming relational blindness include monitoring our own behavior, coaching others to assist them in seeing the dances they are in, paying attention to our feelings, and taking a stand for partnership.

“Partnership is an essential characteristic of sustainable communities ... In human communities partnership means democracy and personal empowerment, because each member of a community plays an important role ... As a partnership proceeds, each partner better understands the needs of the other. In a true, committed partnership, both partners learn and change – they co-evolve (Capra, 1996).”

Oshry offers the following language to define a “stand for partnership:”

“Our commitment is to avoid the Dance of Blind Reflex and instead create and maintain partnership with one another in whatever processes we are in. We are aware that each of us brings different roles, perspectives, experiences, resources, and skills to the process. Our commitment is to respect and use these differences toward the successful resolution of our joint efforts (Oshry, 1996).” Seeing relationship is about putting responsibility where it belongs. The skills of partnering, including monitoring our own behavior, coaching others, and paying
attention to our feelings should be part of the training offered to citizens in learning communities.

**Process Blindness**
The fourth type of system blindness is *process blindness*. The processes we are typically blind to are the ones that operate within any given peer group. For example, Top systems (e.g., groups of elected officials, bosses, elites) exist in environments of complexity and responsibility; to survive in those environments, Top systems differentiate. Then they get stuck in differentiation, and that’s when Turf Warfare sets in. Middle systems (e.g., groups of bureaucrats, managers) exist in diffusing environments (pulled between the Tops and the Bottoms); to survive in those environments, Middle systems individuate. Then they get stuck on individuation and that’s when Alienation from Tops, Bottoms and each other sets in. Bottom systems (e.g., groups of children, immigrants, poor people) exist in an environment of shared vulnerability; to survive in those environments, Bottoms tend to dedifferentiate and integrate. Then they get stuck on integration and Group Think happens. When we are blind to the process tendencies inherent in the system we are in, we tend to politicize these processes – valuing some and devaluing others. In fact, all group processes (differentiation, individuation, dedifferentiation, and integration) have their place in the dance; the challenge is in maintaining awareness so that we can choose the appropriate process at the appropriate time within any group we happen to be part of.

“When we see system processes, we can choose. We can strive to create Robust Human Systems – systems in which we develop, respect, and encourage our individuality and our community, our diversity and our commonality. In the Robust System, members function in a coordinated manner – enhancing one another’s performance through providing one another information and resources – and members modulate their own behaviors in the service of the whole (Oshry, 1996).”

Oshry’s tools and terminology are but one set of ideas on the systems theme. However, most systems thinkers seem to agree that the key to overcoming our “stuckness” is increasing our awareness of context and behavior. “If, when talking with people, you can put their problems in some kind of national, or international, or historical context, they stop blaming themselves for the situation they find themselves in.” (Mankiller, 1995) To that end, for example, many trainers in business, organizational, and community settings use the Myers-Briggs personality profiles or similar tools to help their clients appreciate innate differences in personal styles so that they can develop tolerance and increase their capacity to work together productively. Chris Argyris (1993), professor of education and organizational behavior at Harvard University, has developed and tested another set of interventions designed to make people aware of defensive routines and help them learn how to substitute learning routines to achieve lasting change in organizational systems. We need to use the tools we have and develop new ones that will assist communities in understanding systems, thinking in systems, and working in systems and making choices that will improve the functioning of systems vital to community well-being.
Self-Organization of Systems and System Boundaries

If we are going to work in a systems framework, we need to understand how systems organize themselves. The concept of self-organization is essential to understanding systems. Self-organization is being widely applied in the business world and can be applied increasingly in community economic development. In a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, Tom Petzinger (1997) writes, “Last year I interviewed hundreds of businesspeople in industries all over North America, and I exchanged E-mail with thousands more ... As I compiled my list, everything seemed insignificant next to the biggest trend of all: rethinking the definition of management and the structure of work. Businesses – in fact organizations of all kinds – are starting to abandon the most time-worn principles of control in favor of a new way: freeing employees to figure out how to get the job done without central planning or control. ‘Self-organization’, some call it ... I’ve seen nothing but successes.” In an analogous sense, learning communities would free citizens to figure out how to get the job done without central planning or control (which is largely absent in most places, anyway).

Margaret Wheatley (1994) suggests, “Self-organization succeeds when the system supports the independent activities of its members by giving them, quite literally, a strong frame of reference. When it does this, the global system achieves even greater levels of autonomy and integrity.” The force around which self-organizing community systems cohere is meaning or purpose. “Meaning or purpose serves as a point of reference. As long as we keep purpose in focus in both our organizational and private lives (and in our communities), we are able to wander through the realms of chaos, make decisions about what actions will be consistent with our purpose, and emerge with a discernable pattern or shape to our lives (Wheatley, 1994).” If meaning or purpose is the force that holds self-organized systems together, how do we know what the boundaries of a self-organizing system are? If we think of communities as self-organizing systems, how do we interact with them? Fritz Capra (1996) suggests that “a family system, for example, can be defined as a network of conversations exhibiting inherent circularities. The results of conversations give rise to further conversations, so that self-amplifying feedback loops are formed. The closure of the network results in a shared system of beliefs, explanations, and values – a context of meaning – that is continually sustained by further conversations.” Substituting the word “community” for “family” gives us a new lens through which to grasp the concept of “community,” one that corresponds to the new paradigm in its emphasis on relationships, systems, and self-organization. Using this lens, funders, service providers, and other practitioners must recognize that once they are engaged in conversations that create shared meaning or purpose within a “community” they become part of that community. Community is not only fluid, but no longer external to those providing it with information, resources, and services.

Based on the insights presented above, community can be defined as a system in which a meaning or purpose is co-developed and shared in common through networks of conversations, otherwise called relationships. This definition incorporates both communities of place and of interest by recognizing the elements of each in the other. In seeking to understand community as a system, we need to look at how relationships within a community are organized – not at tasks,
functions, and hierarchies – but at the patterns of relationship and the capacities and opportunities available to form them. Capacities include knowing how to build and sustain relationships.

One set of tools for understanding how relationships within a community are organized is mapping. Mapping is an essential tool for apprehending patterns because patterns cannot be measured or weighed. There are a wide variety of mapping techniques available to practitioners from two-dimensional drawing to electronic mapping to three-dimensional webmaking to cultural anthropology.

Close examination of relationship patterns in a community will reveal multiple communities within each community of place as well as distinct differences in the ways in which different communities communicate. For example, in an experiment in civic journalism, the staff of The Wichita Eagle teamed up with The Harwood Group to investigate four Wichita neighborhoods. They discovered that each neighborhood had a distinctive communications structure. One neighborhood has extensive, professionalized, well-organized quasi-official organizations such as neighborhood associations and nonprofits that were seen as important while in other neighborhoods such organizations were fragmented, not seen as important, or nonexistent. In some neighborhoods, the comfortable public meeting places such as restaurants and barber shops were active communication nodes whereas in others they had atrophied or were virtually invisible to outsiders. The centers of public life varied as well: from meetings of organizations, to private connections, to civic leaders, to informal public conversations (Harwood, 1993). These types of insights into community networks are fundamental to understanding our communities as systems as well as to promoting learning communities.

Reconceptualizing Development

“Development is not a movement toward a fixed goal but continuous adaptation to maximize well-being in changing conditions (Chambers, 1994).”

There are two aspects of development that we need to address. The first is the meaning of the word itself as it applies to communities. What is the intended result of development and who decides? The second is the locus of control over development activities. As suggested in the above quotation, development is often conceived as a convergent movement toward a fixed goal that has universal meaning. In reality, it often consists of programs developed outside of communities and then offered or imposed upon them. In the learning community context, development must grow from within in response to the discovery of shared meaning and purpose in community. The role of the funder, service provider, or practitioner is to contribute to the conversation as invited but not to dominate or impose an external agenda. Where the agendas of communities and resource providers diverge, respectful negotiation toward a mutually agreeable solution is in order.
In the field of rural development, David Korten (Chambers, 1994) has contrasted the “Blueprint” approach to development with the “Learning Process” approach to development. Some elements of the contrast are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Elements in the Blueprint versus the Learning Process Approach to Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELEMENTS</th>
<th>BLUEPRINT</th>
<th>LEARNING PROCESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idea originates in</td>
<td>Capital city</td>
<td>Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Steps</td>
<td>Data collection and plan</td>
<td>Awareness and action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Static, by experts</td>
<td>Evolving, by people involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Rapid, widespread</td>
<td>Gradual, local, at people’s pace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Vertical: orders down,</td>
<td>Lateral: mutual learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reports up</td>
<td>and sharing experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>External, intermittent</td>
<td>Internal, continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>Buried</td>
<td>Embraced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management focus</td>
<td>Spending budgets,</td>
<td>Sustained improvement and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>completing projects on</td>
<td>performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from David Korten as appears in Chambers, (1994).

The major contrast here is between imposed development planned by experts and development that evolves from within the community. Learning by local people is a critical part of the development process, which occurs through action, continuous evaluation, sharing experiences, and embracing error. The measure of success is sustained improvement and performance or getting the results local people really care about.

“The learning process and the new paradigm of which it is a part, are not mechanical but (co-)evolutionary ... The new development paradigm is not just a rural Third World phenomenon. It overlaps and resonates with the alternative movements of rich countries. Solutions to the problems of unemployment of the rich world, and of the degraded rotten cores of decaying inner cities, are equally to be sought in decentralization, empowerment, community involvement, and processes of learning. The reversal of learning from, and working collegially with, clients is one of the rediscovered keys to business success (Peters and Waterman, 1982) as well as an imperative for anti-poverty development (Chambers, 1994, words in parentheses are added).”

Development is also often considered synonymous with growth. However, this is not at the top of the list in most communities. Learning is stifled to the extent that an externally derived
expectation about what development is is imposed on communities. Robert Theobold (1996), author of *Transformational Learning Community*, notes “The truth is that ordinary people are not interested in maximum growth – their real concerns are quite different. They want to be able to have as decent life and to ensure one for their children and grandchildren.” Robert Chambers (1994), speaking from the perspective of a lifetime in the international rural development field recognizes, “The many priorities and criteria of well-being of poor people vary from person to person, from place to place, and from time to time. Health is often, if not always, one. In addition, a common and almost universal priority expressed is an adequate, secure, and decent livelihood. Livelihood here can be defined to include a level of wealth and of stocks and flows of food and cash which provide for physical and social well-being. This includes security against sickness, against early death, and against becoming poorer. A sustainable livelihood includes reserves which can be used to meet contingencies ... It includes, thus, secure command over assets as well as income, and good chances of survival ... A phrase to summarize all this is sustainable livelihood security.”

In redefining development, I suggest we begin with what it is communities really want as discovered through an inclusive process of public deliberation and accept the possibility of divergent goals.

Sustainability, not only of livelihood security but simultaneously of our natural resources, is an important feature of the new development paradigm. The Urban Sustainability Working Group (1996) defined five characteristics of sustainable communities. Sustainable communities are (1) both adaptable and stable; (2) nurture self-organization and autonomy; (3) messy, redundant and diverse; (4) nurture interdependence and connectivity; and (5) learn as a community. All five of these characteristics are modeled after what we now know about biological systems.

The new paradigm embraces decentralization and recognizes that diversity and stability are two sides of the same coin. When we set maximization as a development goal as in creating the largest number of jobs, we are operating within a linear and mechanistic paradigm. If, however, we follow the hearts of ordinary folks, we are in the realm of optimization where our work is to obtain the best outcome possible given the goal of sustainable livelihood, the nature of the systems we have to work with and the constraints of all types we choose to work within. We trust the decentralized process of self-organization and anticipate diversity.

Within a learning community, development will be determined by self-organizing community systems who develop shared meaning and purpose. The goals of development will be divergent, depending on the needs and opportunities identified by communities. Supporters of community development will become part of the community itself as they contribute to the conversation, resources, and services desired by community members. Communities that do not wish to expand their conversations to include certain funders, service providers, or practitioners will be free to say “No.” To achieve development within a learning paradigm, it is necessary to create spaces for ongoing public deliberation in communities so that the conversations from which shared meaning and purpose can emerge will occur. The next section addresses the role of public deliberation and briefly reviews a variety of approaches to creating multiple spaces for ongoing public deliberation in communities.
Creating Space for Ongoing Public Deliberation

“There are important differences between what the sum total of individuals happen
initially to think about some question and what people of a community think as a
community after they’ve had a chance to discuss it together ... The community’s
judgement does not exist until members of the community have deliberated together
(Michael Briand, 1996).”

Where does meaning and purpose come from in communities? Meaning is created and recreated
through public deliberation. Unfortunately, avenues and venues for public deliberation in our
communities are few and far between. The typical “citizen input” processes are too short, too
expensive, and too focused on process and outside experts to be meaningful. The challenge is to
create structures that provide multiple, redundant opportunities for citizens to consider, at length,
the issues and challenges of public concern.

“A community cannot make lasting progress toward solving its problems unless it
involves members of the community ... Meaningful public participation requires
face-to-face political discussion. In the absence of face-to-face interaction there is
a tendency to see political opponents as distasteful caricatures ... Face-to-face
exchange enables people to develop a more complex, more human, more realistic
picture of their fellow citizens. They begin to understand their fellow citizens’
motivations to maintain strongly held opinions. Face-to-face discussion thus
compels us to recognize the moral standing of our fellow citizens (Briand, 1996).”
To use Oshry’s terminology, it allows us to overcome spatial blindness.

Public deliberation is necessary not only to overcome systems blindness but, even more
fundamentally, to create the shared meaning around which communities self-organize. There is a
big difference between polling or surveying to determine community attitudes and engaging in
public deliberation. When individuals are polled or surveyed, they respond from their own
limited perspectives based on whatever information they may have acquired up to that time.
They are not learning. When individuals participate in public deliberation, they have an
opportunity to learn a new perspective and new information to assist them in thinking through
many aspects of the issue of concern, some of which, no doubt, would never have occurred to
them otherwise. Members of a community require an opportunity to confront and work with their
own and others’ ambivalences, the gray area where there are no easy answers. The results of
deliberation are always unpredictable, but the process itself creates access to a common pool of
knowledge and perspectives from which many can partake. “Collaboration is a process through
which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences
and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible (Gray, as
cited by Morse, 1996).”

The purpose of public deliberation need not be to arrive at either consensus or compromise but
rather to create common ground for effective action. “Common ground is often confused with
compromise. Compromise, choosing a solution within current thinking, assumes that people’s
initial positions represent their true best interests. If this is the case, all one can do is search for a position which seems least bad to all parties and which each will reluctantly accept. Common ground strategies, on the other hand, require that people with conflicting ideas or opinions on a certain matter think together and learn to define a problem in wholly different terms. Everybody may then feel they have won. South Africa is a classic example of how problems can be reframed through common ground activities. The largely unknown story is the patient work done by people who enabled conversations and dialogue to take place which broke what appeared to be a permanent logjam (Theobold, 1996).” Common ground, rather than compromise or consensus, is the appropriate aspiration for public deliberation.

Public deliberation is only meaningful if many diverse views are represented in the conversation. “Contradictions within a community are signs of its diversity and vitality and thus contribute to the system’s viability... However, diversity is a strategic advantage only if there is a truly vibrant community, sustained by a web of relationships. If the community is fragmented into isolated groups and individuals, diversity can easily become a source of prejudice and friction. But if the community is aware of the interdependence of all its members, diversity will enrich all the relationships and thus enrich the community as a whole, as well as each individual member. In such a community and ideas flow freely through the entire network, and the diversity of interpretations and learning styles – even the diversity of mistakes – will enrich the entire community (Capra, 1996).” Learning happens in the presence of diversity when individuals can maintain an open mind.

“Most people spend most of their time meeting with people with whom they already agree. They seldom have the opportunity to talk through differences in a rational setting with their adversaries ... The person they attack is usually an abstraction, a stereotype to them. The hard work of community-building is getting people to disagree in the same room for constructive conversations. With the right leadership, they will find they have far more in common than conflict (Adams, 1995).”

Ongoing public deliberation, with the goal of seeking common ground, as opposed to compromise or consensus, is instrumental in shaping community systems through building new networks of trust and partnerships.

Having established the unique and irreplaceable value of public deliberation, what can we do to promote it? There are a number of models available to assist in this task, ranging from civic journalism, to study circles, to leadership training programs (as discussed above), to community-based restorative justice programs. These models should be used to create a menu of opportunities from which citizens can chose and chose again as circumstances require.

Some resources and models that can be used to create space for public deliberation include:

**Civic Journalism**
The crux of public or civic journalism “has been to move away from a narrow focus on politicians, news that is essentially about and for politicians. We’ve tried to start covering public
life. Public life requires a much wider range of sources. Traditionally in journalism, when we pick out the sources, they’re usually on the extremes. So we’ve had to learn to listen beyond the quotes. Listen for internal tensions. Where are you torn on an issue? What would people who are least like you have to agree with you about? Where is there agreement as well as disagreement? (Boyte and Kari, 1996).” “Rather than seeking the points of disagreement and conflict, we were consciously doing exactly the opposite...Rather than just giving people information, we were creating opportunities through our story for a dialogue where there had been none before (Berlow,1996).” Civic journalism goes beyond reporting to providing the information and opportunities to link citizens so that they may take action.

The Pew Center for Civic Journalism supports a variety of experiments in civic journalism through its Batten Award Program. The Pew Center has also published a Civic Journalism Workbook prepared by The Harwood Group called “Tapping Civic Life: How to Report First, and Best, What’s Happening in Your Community.” The Harwood Group has identified key factors for engaging people in public life by contrasting “what we often see in society” with “what citizens can do” (The Harwood Group, 1993). These “key factors” identify behaviors based on traditional versus transformative assumptions about people. When journalists adopt a civic approach to their work, they can create space for public deliberation.

Table 3: Factors Key to Engaging Citizens in Public Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>WHAT WE OFTEN SEE IN SOCIETY</th>
<th>WHAT CITIZENS CAN DO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>Fragmented issues or concerns.</td>
<td>Make connections between concerns rather than isolate one concern from another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Context</td>
<td>Appeals made to people’s self-interest.</td>
<td>Draw on their life experiences and imagination to establish ties to public concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>Concerns depicted through masses of fragmented facts.</td>
<td>Want to know the “whys” and “hows,” the history, and all sides of the debate behind a public concern.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room for Ambivalence</td>
<td>Public debate cast in extremes and polarized.</td>
<td>Need room for ambivalence—to ask questions, listen and learn, test ideas, and make connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>“Rational” discourse that is stripped of emotion.</td>
<td>Use emotion as a vital part of forming relationships with public concerns, and need emotion to be part of public discourse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Expert-driven facts and figures used to establish authenticity.</td>
<td>Look for people and issues to “ring true,” to reflect a sense of reality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Possibility</td>
<td>Public concerns riddled with inaction, stagnation, lack of hope. Emphasis on giving “bad news.”</td>
<td>Want a belief or feeling that progress is possible on a public concern and that they can play a meaningful role in bringing about such progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalysts</td>
<td>Experts seen as the “credible sources” for information and engaging citizens.</td>
<td>Are spurred to discuss and act on public concerns by individuals in their daily lives-neighbors, family members, friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediating Institutions</td>
<td>Appeals that treat people as if they were passive consumers of information, isolated in their homes.</td>
<td>Come together to discuss, learn about, and act on public concerns in a variety of places: schools, churches, neighborhood councils.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From The Harwood Group, 1993.

**Study Circles**

The National Issues Forums Institute offers a model for organizing public deliberation and moderating a forum/study circle. The National Issues Forum model could be adapted to address local issues as well. The National Issues Forum reports on more than a dozen studies of citizen deliberation which conclude that “public deliberation makes a difference. Not only does it change the way individuals understand an issue, it changes the way people talk with each other; and it improves a community’s (society’s) ability to deal with its issues, concerns, and problems (National Issues Forum, undated).” Importantly, there is evidence that ongoing public deliberation leads people to increase their activity around issues. Within the Appalachian Region, National Issues Forum Public Policy Institutes are supported by Auburn University Extension, University of Kentucky, University of Tennessee, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, West Virginia Humanities Council, and University of Charleston.

The Study Circles Resource Center, a project of the Topsfield Foundation, is another group offering resources for the creation of study circles. They offer a [Step-by-Step Guide to Planning Community-wide Study Circle Programs](#) that includes case studies of successful programs around the country. The Study Circles Resource Center (1993) emphasizes the distinctions between dialogue and debate. Dialogue is collaborative, calls for temporarily suspending one’s beliefs, involves listening to understand, find meaning, and find agreement, affirms a participant’s point of view, creates an open-minded attitude, and assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution. Debate is oppositional, assumes there is one right answer and that some one has it, and calls for investing wholeheartedly in one’s beliefs. Community-wide study circle programs are large-scale, broad-
based discussion programs involving dozens of small study circles focusing on a particular issue. Community-wide study circles often begin by pairing small church or synagogue-based study circle. Community-wide study circles are often organized in successive rounds to allow expanding participation. Study circles often result in action taken to address community concerns.

Civic journalism, study circles, and the leadership training program guidelines suggested above share certain fundamental characteristics:

They are pragmatic. “In public settings the search is not for “truth” or final vindication; rather, there are many truths, reflecting the multiplicity of experiences and stories that bring diverse groups into politics...Principles of action are different in public. The aim of politics is action on significant problems – not bonding, or intimacy, or communal consensus (Boyte and Kari, 1996).”

They encourage people to treat one another with care. “In public, principles such as recognition, respect, and accountability are appropriate bases for action (Boyte and Kari, 1996).”

They recognize the importance of recurring connections and opportunities for deliberation; in other words, they are not “one shot deals.” Sustaining a learning community requires discipline, the discipline of meeting together for the purposes of public deliberation on a regular basis. “The experience in a group that has moved into community can be one of uncertainty, especially when they have to get back to work and they forget the discipline it takes to get to and maintain community (Ray, 1995).” This does not mean that the same people must meet continually but rather that the process of deliberation continue, allowing participation to shift, expand, and contact as appropriate to meet community needs.

In learning communities, multiple ongoing opportunities for public deliberation occur at many levels, formal, incidental, and informal. Public deliberation at each level is recognized as an important part of the creation of community. The drive to action and reflection that results from public deliberation is nurtured and celebrated.

Removing Obstacles to Action and Reflection

“Throughout the conversations, participants said that the key to improving America’s future was for people to start working together (Harwood, 1996).”

Action and reflection are integrally related aspects of the learning process for individuals and for communities. If the process of public deliberation results in shared meaning around which communities can self-organize, the test of the emerging community systems will be in their accomplishments. We must recognize that those who deliberate in formal or quasi-formal settings, will not always be those who act. To quote Maria Varela (1994), founder of Ganados del Valle, an exceptional community development effort in New Mexico, every community has “the
hands” and “the mouths.” Engaging “the hands,” people, who relate by doing, not by talking, is essential in creating a learning community that values its own assets. Moving from deliberation to action and reflection allows “the hands” as well as “the mouths” to become engaged in the learning and development process.

Citizens who are brought together only to talk and are not provided with tools, support, and opportunities for action soon become disillusioned with the significance of their contribution and rightly so. David Matthews, President of the Kettering Foundation, warns, “Don’t ask citizens to take responsibility for a community need without helping them develop enough power – enough civic muscle – to carry them through (Phillips, 1995).”

In helping to create learning communities, we must learn to support action and reflection as integral to the learning concept. “Several years ago, organizational theorist Karl Weick called attention to enactment in organizations (communities) – how we participate in the creation of organizational (community) realities ... If we create the environment, how can we argue about its objective features, or about what’s true or false? Instead, Weick encouraged us to focus our concerns on issues of effectiveness, on questions of what happened and what actions might have served us better. We could stop arguing about truth and get on with figuring out what works best ... Weick also suggested a new approach to organizational analysis. Acting should precede planning, he said, because it is only through action and implementation that we create the environment (Wheatley, 1994).”

Part of the transformation from a traditional to a learning community is a change in the role of citizens from consumers to producers. Producers act to create choices for themselves and others.

“Patterns of action need to see all stakeholders as potential co-producers of people’s environments and things of value. Finally, attention to the craft and purposes of work reinvests work with dignity and meaning that most work has lost in America. Until we develop a stronger sense of ourselves as producers we will not find the confidence nor the capacity to address the crisis of government (Boyte and Kari, 1996).”

“Before the concept of public work, we hadn’t been able to give citizenship a muscular quality that went much beyond volunteerism or participating in community life. Public work creates a far more interesting and complicated identity for citizens. You are called upon to give your capacity, not simply your time and caring (Jay Rosen cited in Boyte and Kari, 1996).”

Studies of public deliberation have shown us that deliberation itself unleashes the commitment to act. Part of the job of creating learning communities is to support the impulse toward constructive public action which becomes the grist for further reflection and refinement of what the community really needs.

Information Systems and Feedback Loops
An important focus in removing obstacles to citizen action are the information systems and feedback loops present in a community. This means not only internal information and feedback, but information and feedback from outside. Rural communities, in particular, often lack information systems and feedback loops needed to evaluate opportunities presented by forces operating outside (as well as within) the community. “In the universe new science is exploring, information is a very different “thing.” It is not the limited, quantifiable, put-it-in-a-memo-and-send-it-out commodity with which we have become so frustrated. In new theories of evolution and order, information is a dynamic element, taking center stage. It is information that gives order, prompts growth that defines what is alive ... If we are seeking resilient organizations, a property prized in self-organizing systems, information needs to be our key ally (Wheatley, 1994).”

“An organization (community) can only exist in a fluid fashion if it has access to new information, both about external factors and internal resources. It must constantly process this data with high levels of self-awareness, plentiful sensing devices, and a strong capacity for reflection. Combing through this constantly changing information, the organization [community] can determine what choices are available, and what resources to rally in response. This is very different from the more traditional organizational response to information, which priority is given to maintaining existing operating forms and information is made to fit the structure so that little change is required (Wheatley, 1994).”

“Management has pioneered in understanding the needs for new ways of organizing work. Many companies have recognized that it is essential for everybody to have access to relevant information. They are providing evidence that trusting people is an effective management tool which now needs to be adopted by government (Harwood, 1996).”

Communities that map patterns of information flow may find new and more effective ways to share information that is already available. Information flow and feedback is essential to the health and well-being of learning communities

**Feedback and Reflection**

Without feedback, by which I mean the conveying of information about the outcome of any process or activity to its source, learning cannot occur. Feedback by itself is necessary but not sufficient for learning. Even with working feedback loops, communities need the opportunity to reflect on the information they are receiving.

“A community that maintains an active network of communication will learn from its mistakes, because the consequences of a mistake will spread through the network and return to the source along feedback loops. Thus the community can correct its mistakes, regulate itself, and organize itself. Indeed, self-organization has emerged as perhaps the central concept in the systems view of life, and like the concepts of feedback and self-regulation, it is closely linked to networks. The pattern of life, we might say, is a network pattern capable of self-organization.
This is a simple definition, yet it is based on recent discoveries at the very forefront of science (Capra, 1996).”

Ellen Schall sheds light on what a learning community means when she writes, “I’ve referred to ‘reflective organizations [communities] earlier, but would like to deal with them explicitly here. An organization [community] with a reflective capacity is one in which people can think about what they are doing, pool their thoughts and feelings in the service of learning about the organizations, and then use this learning in the way they manage themselves in their roles ... Learning as you go inevitably precludes a master work-plan approach, which, although comforting, often interferes with opportunities to learn from the unexpected. This is an anxiety-confronting rather than an anxiety-evading approach (Schall, 1994).”

Margaret Wheatley (1994) shares her insights into the role of practitioners in stimulating reflection. “As a consultant, the most important intervention I ever make is when I feed back organizational data to the whole organization. The data are often quite simple, containing a large percentage of information that is already known to many in the organization. But when the organization is willing to give public voice to the information – to listen to different interpretations and process them together – the information becomes amplified. In this process of shared reflection, a small finding can grow as it feeds back on itself, building in significance with each new perception or interpretation ... The simple process of iteration eventually reveals the complexity hidden within the issue. From this level of understanding, creative responses emerge and significant change becomes possible.”

Starting Points in Removing Obstacles to Action and Reflection

Recognize that action is intrinsic to learning and that processes for public deliberation that do not support action in the form of public work are incomplete;

Focus on redefining the role of citizens from that of consumers to producers, with recognition that all citizens have active contributions to make. Reward success. Spread good news. Tell stories.

Make time for reflection. Name it and value it. Sharing and amplifying information through public deliberation lays the groundwork for action; feedback on the outcomes of actions taken lays the groundwork for individual and collective reflection; individual and collective reflection lays the groundwork for future action. Remember that work and problem-solving, involving both reflection and action, entail practical relationships that can disrupt hierarchies of power and status which otherwise operate unquestioned.

HOW WILL WE KNOW A LEARNING COMMUNITY WHEN WE SEE ONE?
What are the observable changes that take place in a community as it adopts a learning approach to development? The Rural Community Capacity Building Learning Cluster of The Aspen Institute (1996) identified seven major elements of community transformation that could be applied to learning communities.

1. **Power shifts.** As a community adopts a learning approach, we would expect to observe shifts in power from traditional leaders, elite “experts”, and other “Tops” to citizens. Citizens will begin to redefine their roles from consumers of and/or advisors about public goods and services to producers of public goods and services. Information will be freely shared.

2. **Language changes.** Evidence of shared meaning will be found in language used to describe the community and its members and in discussing issues of shared concern. Blaming and stereotyping will diminish and awareness of systems, as seen through changes in language (and behavior), will increase.

3. **Policy and practice of inclusiveness becomes standard.** Meaningful public deliberation will become a way of life, incorporating the voices of all elements of the citizenry. Conflict will be openly examined, ambivalence will be respected, and common interests will be identified.

4. **Change in self-awareness and cultural identity.** Citizens will become self-aware of their role and power and will gain self-confidence as producers of things of public value. Citizens will become self-aware of the many communities to which they belong and will gain skills in strengthening inter-and intra-community relationships.

5. **Catharsis happens.** Experiences will occur that are contrary to traditional expectations and assumptions present in the community. These “Ah-Ha” experiences will lead to redefining operating assumptions about people and what is possible.

6. **Movement/action/accomplishment occurs.** The individual and community capacity to produce results they really care about will increase. There will be specific accomplishments citizens can point to in addressing issues that have been publicly deliberated.

7. **Heart becomes more central.** As relationships are strengthened and commitment to partnership develops, people will be able to express their caring for one another more directly and spontaneously. *Wilma Mankiller (1995), Chief of the Cherokee Nation, said,*

   “When I say ‘whole, healthy communities’, I don’t mean that all the social problems are solved or that there is a perfect economy, or that everybody is happy...I mean communities where people understand their connection to one another, and when one falls, another is there to help pick him or her up...I see people holding hands or linking together in some way so that when there are tragedies—when a family has a problem, maybe somebody is in jail, or somebody has no job, or whatever—then there’s someone who can help until things get cleared up.”
CONCLUSIONS
Creating learning communities will require some radical changes in the way we understand people, communities and development. Existing methods of leadership training, community strategic planning, visioning, and related practices are generally too limited in scope and time frame and too narrow in focus to greatly affect the capacity of individuals and especially communities to produce results they really care about.

The learning community approach is not a new “program” or “package” that can be provided to communities. It is a profound change in the way we relate to communities and to the development process itself. In this paper, we have identified a variety of tools that can be used to help create and support a learning culture in communities. None of these tools can be used productively without the commitment of the people who use them to change. Learning leads to change, change in beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavior. To the extent we have learned to fear change, we have also learned to fear learning itself. A learning community approach offers individuals in communities an opportunity to reexamine closely held beliefs that many will find threatening. However, for communities willing to make a commitment to this approach, research suggests there will be tangible and intangible benefits. Tools, from mental models to systems thinking to civic journalism, do exist and are continuing to be developed that can assist those communities that would like to try something different. Research suggests that a learning approach to community development based on changed assumptions about people, changed understandings of community and development, the creation of multiple spaces for ongoing public deliberation, and support for action and reflection that flow from deliberation would greatly increase the likelihood of achieving the third strategic goal of the ARC which is to insure that the people and organizations of Appalachia will have the vision and capacity to mobilize and work together for sustained economic progress and improvement of their communities.

To support a learning community approach will require the ARC to reexamine its own assumptions and operating procedures and to help redefine the goals and incentives for itself as well as its partners and funding recipients. This is one area in which further research will be necessary. Other areas for suggested research include development and testing of approaches to systems thinking that work for communities and field work with pilot communities to introduce and evaluate the impact of the learning community approach.
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