

LOOK WHAT THE TIDE BROUGHT IN: THE TENSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN SEACHANGE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of learning communities in promoting lifelong learning futures in 'seachange' locations, where the movement of people into regional coastal towns has created both tensions and opportunities. I focus on the seachange experience of the Capricorn Coast, exploring how learning communities might respond to climate change.

KEYWORDS

Seachange, Learning Communities, Sustainable Lifelong Learning Futures

INTRODUCTION

The sea change movement refers to an increasing demographic shift of people to reside in coastal communities. The term originated from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* some 400 years ago (Phrase finder, n.d.) and, within the Australian cultural context, gained wider currency through a popular Australian Broadcasting Corporation television series of the 1990s. The Capricorn Coast area, which hosts the Lifelong Learning conference, has been identified as one such 'seachange community' (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2004). While such communities tend to be characterised by growth and innovation, the influx of new residents, ideas, lifestyle values and technologies, besides imposing pressures on existing social services, infrastructure and the environment, can cause certain tensions. This paper draws on principles associated with learning communities and inalienable interconnectivity, and focuses on possible partnerships and projects generated in response to the challenge of climate change, to suggest ways in which the seachange movement might contribute to sustaining and innovative lifelong learning futures within these locations. The paper proceeds through the following stages:

- A consideration of the local context of the Capricorn Coast as a seachange community;
- An analysis of relevant principles of learning communities;
- A discussion of how these principles might be applied to the seachange learning community of the Capricorn Coast to address the challenge of climate change.

Local Context

The Capricorn Coast in Central Queensland, Australia, which takes its name from its location on the Tropic Of Capricorn, consists of a number

of small and medium sized communities set on Keppel Bay, settled by Europeans from the 1860s. Over the last 50 years, the former Livingstone Shire which covers the Capricorn Coast and rural environs grew in population from around 7,000 to 30,000 people (Wannop & Danaher, 2007, p. 127). Concomitant with this growth has been a shift in focus from primary industries such as grazing, pineapples and fishing to services such as education, tourism, financial planning and property development. Improved transport technologies have enabled many coast residents to work and study in the hub city of Rockhampton, some 40 kilometres to the west, and to access higher education through Central Queensland University. The Capricorn Coast now actively promotes itself as a seachange community offering attractive lifestyle opportunities, cultural assets and services to those who reside here (Wannop & Danaher, 2007, p. 127).

In their study of rural Queensland communities focused on identifying why some towns thrive and others fail, Plowman et al. (2003, pp. 2-3) identified characteristics that distinguished the more innovative locations from their less innovative counterparts. Among them were: adequacy of products and services available to their residents; administrative and managerial capacity to run and promote the town; have a healthy exchange of ideas internally; and have a higher proportion of residents who had lived elsewhere. Seachange communities such as the Capricorn Coast tend either to have these characteristics or are challenged with building capacity in relation to them. It is to the extent that they can meet such challenges that seachange communities can be characterized as innovative and thriving.

Snapshots from the Capricorn Coast reveal certain aspects of an innovative community in practice. One has been the increase in cultural events, such as Great Australia Day Beach Party, Village Arts Festival and Festival of the Winds. Another has been the growth in restaurants,

tourism packages and accommodation and cultural assets like a community radio station. Besides local initiatives, the emergence of global information, communication and entertainment technologies such as broadband internet, mobile phone coverage and cable television has been significant in sustaining interconnections between the local area and the outside world.

While the seachange movement might be regarded as offering innovative opportunities to both seachangers and the community to which they move, it also creates certain tensions. Beside the evident stresses on the community's infrastructure, services, employment and ecosystems, and pressures on human and other resources to manage the change through effective town planning, there can also be conflicts in the values and ways of life between long established resident and new arrivals (Fraser, 2008, p. 24). Furthermore, the development associated with the influx of new people and money into such locations can impact on property values, exacerbating disparities in wealth, and, from a phenomenological perspective, undermine residents' sense of place.

Conceptual underpinning – learning communities

The concept of learning communities is useful in suggesting the possibility for fruitful lifelong learning encounters between new and existing forces shaped by the seachange tide. For Kilpatrick, Barrett, and Jones (2003), the term highlights communities' human element and the benefits of community members working together

Learning communities are made up of people who share a common purpose. They collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respect a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities. The outcomes are the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that new knowledge will be created. (p. 11)

Such a conception might be dismissed as naïve and idealistic; however, as the writers note: "Learning through collaboration with people and groups external to the community introduces new ideas, raises awareness of new practices and exposes community members to new norms and value sets" (p. 9). Furthermore, exhibiting respect for diversity that enhances the learning capacity of a community and builds trust and encourages risk-taking can be acknowledged as an important step in promoting an innovative community of the sort Plowman et al. (2003) identified.

Kilpatrick *et al.* (2003) go on to identify groups and process that contribute to the constitution of learning communities. Firstly, *communities of practice* have been defined as "individuals with common expertise participating in an informal relationship to resolve a shared problem or situation that impacts upon their shared futures" (Bowles, 2003; cited in Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003). Secondly, *situated learning* is used to explain how the social relationships assumed to occur in communities of practice constitute the context within which knowledge is acquired and managed. This emphasises that the knowledge gained is localised and emergent from a particular context that shapes how that knowledge is employed, important considerations that can be drawn on to show how the Capricorn Coast operates as a learning community.

Thirdly, *social capital* is "defined as norms, values and networks that can be used for mutual benefit" (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003, p. 8). Learning communities (and communities of practice) might be presumed to facilitate, and to depend on, the development of social capital, which maximises the value to community members of the networks and relationships within those communities. Fourthly, Kilpatrick *et al.* (2003, p. 6) identified *lifelong learning* as being, along with "learning opportunities" and "pro-active partnerships", the potential means by which community members "create new knowledge". In terms of the relationship between seachangers and established residents, the principles of learning communities demonstrate how collaboration between these parties within situated learning contexts and communities of practice might generate social capital networks that generate new knowledge and effective lifelong learning futures that benefit the community as a whole.

Climate change

In the context of the Capricorn Coast, one area where learning communities could play a significant role in reconciling sea-changers and established residents to sustainable lifelong learning futures is in relation to climate change. Indeed, of all the quite literally sea-changing forces brought in on the tides of contemporary life forces affecting this community, global warming is one of the most challenging. It impacts on ecological and economic sustainability, town planning, residential development (given risks of sea level rising), building design, energy provision and so forth.

In relation to the principles of communities of practice and situated learning, there are particular

cogent, local reasons why addressing climate change might be argued to be of special significance for this community's lifelong learning future. The first reason relates to causes. Much of the wealth of the community currently derives from links to coal reserves in the Bowen Basin to the west and north of the Capricorn Coast, and from the beef cattle industry in surrounding environs, both of which significantly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions in the form of carbon from coal and methane from cattle. Having a basis in economic staples that contribute to the cause of global warming, the community has a vested interest in contributing to solutions to this problem. The second reason relates to effects. Besides the impacts mentioned above, significant rises in average temperatures will have debilitating effects on climatic characteristics that contribute to attracting people to the community now, as well as the iconic tourist attraction of the Great Barrier Reef.

Another reason for local action on climate change relates to the concern that the wealth generated from regional and rural location tends to be removed from the area and transferred into profits for companies and corporations whose staff and shareholders are located elsewhere. That is, within the Australian experience as elsewhere, there has been a suspicion that while much of the nation's productive output derives from mining, tourism and pastoral enterprises in regions such as this one, wealth, power and influence tends to be concentrated in metropolitan centres in the southeast of the country. This sentiment might be regarded as part of the enduring metro-centrism: the idea that while regions might produce wealth in the form of raw material and agricultural produce it is expertise and knowledge networks generated in central metropolises that shape the ways in which this natural wealth is translated into dollars and cents. In other words there is a constituent alienation from natural wealth to financial wealth wedded to a displacement from the regions, the margins, to the centre.

The concept of inalienable interconnectivity (Danaher, 2006) can be recognised as one way of resisting such a displacement. Inalienable interconnectivity can be understood as

...a conception of lifelong learning as an inalienable value, part of the education of every citizen, and which is based on the principle of interconnectivity. This model would promote the interconnectedness between the local and the global, the physical and the spiritual, the learner and the learning experience. It would provide pathways, create partnerships, and fashion

pedagogies that are aimed at addressing this paradox: how to ensure the inalienable value of education in an interconnected world. (p. 56)

In the context of climate change, this model of lifelong learning can be extended as a means of resisting the alienation of ecological wealth into corporate wealth, and seeking to emphasise the interconnectivity of human and ecological systems in seachange learning communities.

Carbon trading schemes provide a mechanism for generating investment into the areas where that natural, ecological wealth has been generated and from where it has been displaced. Indeed, if the principles informing carbon trading were extended to include other sources of greenhouse emissions such as methane, there would be a basis from diverting profits generated from cattle and coal industries not into metropolitan corporations but rather into a range of local initiatives and projects aimed at building ecological sustainability within the community and addressing the challenge of climate change.

Carbon offsets might be invested in a range of initiatives located within the region that draw on local knowledge and emergent scientific understanding to trial innovations in addressing climate change. Possible projects are:

- Reafforestation to provide carbon sinks
- Alternative energy generators such as solar, wind and tide
- Eco-tourism and education resorts and resources
- Building design initiatives
- Town and regional planning

It would seem that a wholistic, interconnected approach across a range of fields would be appropriate to address this challenge. In making proactive solutions to climate change a focus, there is a commitment to exploring the inalienable interconnectivity of lifelong learning futures in practice.

There is a compelling precedent of learning communities being generated in regional Australia in action in response to a major ecological threat. In 1989, the Australian federal government established the National Landcare Plan to address the critical issue of land degradation in Australia (Toyne, 2006). The Landcare movement emerged when the National Farmers Federation, the peak body for pastoralists, and the Australian Conservation Foundation joined forces to address an issue of particular concerns to them both. That groups with such seemingly disparate worldviews and values as environmentalists and farmers should

agree to cooperate in this way demonstrates how dialogue rather than conflict is the best way to forge sustainable learning communities. As Landcare founder and former head of the Australian Foundation for Conservation, Phillip Toyne, remarked:

It is obvious to me that there can be no sustainable solutions to mind boggling problems like Global Warming, depleted fisheries, and land clearing without engaging with miners, farmers, foresters, fishermen - all those, who if they are not engaged in the ecological and economic solutions we need, are simply part of the problem. (Toyne, 2006)

Landcare groups remain active in combating land degradation throughout Australia; the local group in the Capricorn Coast is regarded as a particularly significant local resource.

Such shared commitment to the ecological sustainability of a region evidently acts as a powerful impulse for overcoming disparities in value systems and worldviews and creating a space for co-operative action. It eloquently demonstrates how a tide of new ideas and energies can converge with long established values and attachments to land and community in responding to threats to the basis of that attachment.

Learning communities and ecologically sustainable lifelong learning futures

Such projects and partnerships promoting innovations in energy and ecological sustainability can be understood as learning communities in practice. In relation to communities of practice, they involve “individuals with common expertise participating in an informal relationship to resolve a shared problem or situation that impacts upon their shared futures” (Bowles, 2003; cited in Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003). In relation to situated learning, the social relationships generated in communities of practice would constitute the context within which knowledge is acquired and managed. Accordingly, they would respond to the particular localised and contextualised challenges climate change presents to this community.

Such initiatives could facilitate, and draw from, the development of social capital, demonstrating the value to community members of the networks and relationships within those communities. And it is evident that these projects and partnerships support Kilpatrick *et alia*’s (2003, p. 6) contention of *lifelong learning* as being, along with “learning opportunities” and “pro-active

partnerships”, the potential means by which community members “create new knowledge”, in this case the knowledge to live sustainably with and in a particular ecology. In so doing, the Capricorn Coast might provide a model of an innovative seachange community building the capacity for an ecologically sustainable lifelong learning future.

We might imagine how such new knowledge could be expressed at the 26th Lifelong Learning conference projected, on current schedule, for 2050. Innovations in building design mean that proceedings are conducted perfectly comfortably in natural air conditioning. The conference is powered by energy drawn from alternative sources: solar, wind and tidal generators which are especially attuned to local conditions and variations. The food and drink enjoyed by delegates is generated locally drawing on innovations in biotechnology. And delegates have arrived at the conference via the latest developments in solar powered passenger gliders and sailing ships designed to emit zero greenhouse emissions.

Beyond the ecological utopia here outlined, this vision is more significant in terms of its relation to lifelong learning futures, seeking to promote a form of inalienable interconnectivity situated in its ecological context, attuned to outside influences and global currents, and open to new ideas. To return to the origin of sea change in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and the spirit Ariel’s song:

*Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear them, ding-dong, bell.
The Tempest, 1. 2 (Shakespeare, 1980, p. 23)*

It might be that by generating fruitful learning communities locations like the Capricorn Coast, the communities can develop ecologically sustainable and creative lifelong learning futures attuned to such a sea change, rich and strange, and attractive to sea-nymphs.

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