



# Learning (in the) Region

Findings from the CRITICAL Project

Fourth SAUL Symposium

## The Learning Region

The Role of Knowledge in Spatial Planning

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## City Regions as Intelligent Territories

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University of Newcastle - University of Dortmund - Trinity College Dublin - University of Tampere - RMIT Melbourne

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# Learning Region

## an introduction

- First mention: Richard Florida (1995) and Kevin Morgan (1995)
- Basic idea: a region (respectively its actors) is/are able to learn and to renew itself/themselves
- During the following years theory has became popular and has been widely discussed in geography and regional science; reasons:
  - “Learning” as positive “thing”
  - interest in the question: why do some regions better than others?
- Popularity of similar theories and concepts, e.g.
  - Concept of Regional Competitiveness
  - Innovative/Creative Milieu
- These different approaches have in common:
  - further to “learning” they consider the meaning of **knowledge** and the meaning of **networks** (collaboration, exchange)
  - all are theories; i.e.: they want to describe and explain regional economic phenomenon
  - But: the strategic/action dimension of these approaches is different

# Learning Region

## different meanings/interpretations

- Different meanings/dimensions of the “learning region”
  - theory AND concept (analytic AND strategic) (cf. Hassink 2000)
  - Fürst (2003) differentiates between a *cognitive* concept of the learning region, a *political* one, an *economic* one, and a *diffusion* one
    - cognitive: stresses the importance of tacit knowledge
    - political: refers to strategic alliances and networks
    - economic: cluster strategies etc.
    - diffusion: refers to the difficulties to implementing the concept in a given institutional environment
  - Matthiesen (2003): concept of collective self-governing  
→ Fuzzy concept?
- Two further dramatically different interpretations:  
Learning society (lifelong learning) vs. learning economy (systems of innovation)

# Excursion: Learning and Knowledge

- Who learns? Primarily individuals, but also organisations and networks
- Why is learnt? to know, to innovate, to be competitive, to survive
- How is learnt? Differentiation between *individual* and *organisational* learning
  - individual learning: the individual learns on its own; principles: learning-by-using, learning-by-doing
  - organisational learning: the individual learns through exchange; principles: learning-by-interacting, learning-by-networking
- How is the relation between learning and knowledge?
  - Knowledge is a resource, learning a process (cf. Johnson/Lundvall 1994)  
-> without learning no knowledge, knowledge is based on learning
- Which kind of knowledge is relevant for being competitive?  
Relevant is the "tacit" or implicit knowledge: non-codified, personal, hardly to transfer, is perceived as basis for innovations
- How is it created? Through social interaction, mostly on a face-to-face base

# Excursion: Innovation and the Region

Under which conditions does innovation flourish?

- high degree of social exchange/interaction
- which often requires spatial proximity

⇒ the **region** is the relevant spatial level to deal with

⇒ the quality of interaction, the quality of **networks** within the region, including the ability to (permanently) learn, is crucial for the competitiveness of a region

Hence the CRITICAL project decided to further investigate networks

# Communities of Practice (CoPs)

## basics

- Social learning theory approach shaped by Etienne Wenger
- explains how organisations, associations, networks, and communities work and identifies conditions and factors which allow a group of people to learn individually and collectively.
- Wenger's definition (cf. [www.ewenger.com](http://www.ewenger.com)):  
*"Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope."*
- Shorter:  
*"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."*

# Communities of Practice (CoPs)

## characteristics

⇒ Learning through interaction in social groups

- Conscious sharing of existing knowledge
- Existence/development of
  - a mutual identity and feeling of belonging
  - mutual beliefs and attitudes (e.g. concerning the meaning of knowledge and learning)
  - mutual engagement, joint activities and practices
  - a shared repertoire (language, style, tools etc.)
- Transfer/conversion of shared and tacit knowledge into products, scripts, concepts etc.
- Crossing various boundaries: disciplinary, organisational, institutional etc.

# Communities of Practice (CoPs)

compared to other networks

	<i>What's the purpose?</i>	<i>Who belongs?</i>	<i>Reasons for holding it together?</i>	<i>How long does it last?</i>
Communities of practice	To develop members' capabilities, to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work groups	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganisation
Project teams	To accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal networks	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

Source: Snyder/Wenger 2000

# Communities of Practice (CoPs)

## open questions/issues

- Right approach for investigating inter-organisational communities?
- Right approach for overlapping and intersecting networks?
- What's about timing and phasing of networks?
- How is innovating guaranteed (instead of sharing old knowledge)?
- Can CoPs be produced? What makes a team into a CoP?
- How to govern CoPs? Does they need a certain governance structure?
- Which role does space (proximity) play?

# Learning Pods

## basic characteristics of pods

- Shared interest of group members
- Ability and willingness to learn
- Ability and willingness to adapt and renew oneself
- Relevance of spatial proximity
- Homogeneity: necessity to socialise
- ...
- ...



# Learning Pods

eight dimensions (preliminary)

1. **Tradition of learning** (sustainability of learning, knowledge stickiness, historical continuity)
2. **Leadership and other key roles** (champions and leaders - „shamans“, moderators of learning, boundary spanner)
3. **Communication and culture of debate** (BUZZ, agora/genius loci)
4. **Openness and transparency** (openness to outside ideas, openness for people to join)
5. **(Sense of ) responsibility** (socially, ecologically etc.; social inclusion)
6. **Reflexivity and learning aptitude** (time for reflection, wise use of resources for learning, learning towards (shared) visions, learning for innovation, experimental learning)
7. **Flexibility and reactivity** (capacity to respond to outside stimuli and crisis, capacity for organic growth)
8. **External influence/impact** (empowering external change)

# Learning Pods

## policy conclusions (preliminary)

- Open to external ideas with an ability to synthesise knowledge from outside and inside
- Willing to invest in experimentation and to learn from both success and failure
- Have an ability to value and build up an inheritance of knowledge culture and institutions without being trapped by the past
- Open and inclusive to knowledge and ideas from all parts of the community (race, gender, social status etc.)
- Responds effectively to crisis and with an ability to generate a sense of urgency
- Constantly reflective and building capacity to develop new ideas and initiatives
- Having and encouraging key individuals (shamans) both leaders and champions as well as moderators/communicators and boundary spanners
- Neutral places of dissent and discussion (agoras) and with a challenging and responsible media
- Learning towards shared visions
- Empowered to act wisely on the basis of knowledge with social and environmental responsibility