

Collaborative Local Learning Ecologies: Reflections on the Governance of Lifelong Learning in England



IFLL Sector Paper 6

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promoting adult learning

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Foreword

This is the sixth of the Sector Papers to be published from the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL). The Sector Papers will discuss the implications of lifelong learning for each of the sectors involved in providing learning opportunities: early childhood, schools, family learning, further education, higher education, private training providers, voluntary and community organisations, local authorities, learning cities, cultural organisations, and local learning ecologies. The goal here is to encourage innovative thinking on how these parts do or do not fit together, as part of a systemic approach to lifelong learning.

The Inquiry was established in September 2007 and will produce its main report in September 2009. It is sponsored by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), with an independent Board of Commissioners under the chairmanship of Sir David Watson. Full details of the Inquiry can be found at www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry.

The overall goal of the Inquiry is to offer an authoritative and coherent strategic framework for lifelong learning in the UK. This will involve:

- articulating a broad rationale for public and private investment in lifelong learning;
- a re-appraisal of the social and cultural value attached to it by policy-makers and the public;
- developing new perspectives on policy and practice.

IFLL: principal strands

The Sector Papers are complemented by several other strands of IFLL work:

- *Thematic Papers*. These relate nine broad themes, such as demography, technology or migration, to lifelong learning. Each one reviews evidence submitted to the Inquiry, and then draws together strands from the debate into a synthesis of the issues, with key messages.
- *Context Papers*. These will provide a broad overall picture of expenditure on all forms of lifelong learning: by government, across all departments; by employers, public and private; by the third sector; and by individuals and households. The goal is to provide a benchmark for mapping future trends.
- *Public Value Papers*. These will look, from different angles and using a variety of techniques, at the 'social productivity' of lifelong learning, i.e. what effects it has on areas such as health, civic activity or crime. The goal is both to provide evidence on these effects, and to stimulate a broader debate on how such effects can be measured and analysed.

- *Learning Infrastructures*. Unlike the others, this strand consists not of a series of papers but a set of scenarios, designed to promote debate and imagination on what the infrastructure for learning might look like in the future. This challenges us to integrate the physical environments of learning, the virtual environments or learning technologies, and people's competences and behaviour.

Published papers are available from the IFLL website:

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Periodic updates on IFLL progress are to be found in our Bulletins.

(You can register for Inquiry Bulletins at: www.niace.org.uk/lifelonglearninginquiry).



Professor Tom Schuller
Director, IFLL



Sir David Watson
Chair, IFLL Commissioners

Introduction

The governance arrangements for education and training from 14-plus in England are changing once again (DCSF/DIUS 2008), raising questions about the future shape and direction of lifelong learning. This paper is an attempt to use ecological concepts that have been developed across a number of different areas of human and natural activity to think about approaches to governance¹ in the complex area of lifelong learning. While we recognise that the term 'lifelong learning' has many different definitions, both worldwide and across the different countries of the UK,² here we will primarily confine our discussion to adults in the learning and skills sector in England.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the English policy context of top-down governance of post-compulsory education and training and how this has recently stimulated a debate about 'localism' and the need for more powers to be devolved downwards in terms of the delivery and shaping of the sector. We go on to suggest that a fruitful way of thinking about this process in relation to adult learning and skills is through the concept of ecologies. The ecological metaphor helps us to recognise important features of the diverse, dynamic, complex, evolving, fragile spaces and entities that constitute adult learning.

In reviewing different aspects of ecological theory, the paper uses the ideas of two theorists in particular – Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Finegold (1999). Bronfenbrenner's four inter-connected ecological system levels and Finegold's dimensions of high skills eco-systems are employed to understand and critique the current organisation and governance of lifelong learning. Towards the end of the paper these tools, together with perspectives arising from recent research on the post-14 system in England,³ are also used to reflect upon possible strategies for building effective, inclusive and collaborative local learning ecologies, capable of meeting the needs of all learners in a locality.

¹ By governance, we refer to the way that governmental power is exercised through a range of agencies, policy steering mechanisms and hortatory tools and policies at different levels of the system (e.g. Kooiman 2003, Stasz and Wright 2007). We see governance as both top-down and contested and mediated by different actors at various stages in the policy process (Bowe *et al.* 1992, Coffield *et al.* 2008).

² See Lowe (2008).

³ See Hodgson and Spours (2008) and Coffield *et al.* (2008).

Possible implications for the Inquiry

The paper was presented at a seminar held by the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IfLL) at the Institute of Education, University of London on 4 March 2009. Participants were asked to reflect on what implications, if any, the ideas in the paper might have for the Inquiry.

Participants felt that the paper provided a potentially useful new lens on thinking about policy-making and the governance of lifelong learning.

- Ecological perspectives provide a useful critique of top-down performance management and markets as the mode of governance of lifelong learning.
- The humanistic language of ecologies, which recognises dynamics, diversity and complexity, helps practitioner, policy and researcher communities to move away from mechanistic engineering metaphors.
- Ecological perspectives also offer a critique of 'localism', because their spatial and multi-level approach emphasises the importance of decision-making at different levels and the need for a new balance between national, regional, local and institutional governance.
- The concept of 'local learning ecologies' recognises the different scales and spaces of lifelong learning and travel-to-study patterns.
- Local authorities have been seen by government as a major answer to governance issues in education and training. The ideas in this paper suggest, however, that while local authorities are important, they are not the only key players and are not located at the right level of governance for all aspects of lifelong learning, notably adult and further education.
- Local ecologies also have an important horizontal dimension spanning health, housing, social services, the environment, economic development, the nature of local communities and their histories, as well as education services.
- An ecological approach to 'joined up' and multi-level thinking puts the learner at the heart of the system and fits better with the broader concepts that lie behind the 'Every Child Matters' agenda.
- In these ways, ecological perspectives contribute to the debate about a more expansive approach to democracy and the role of the state in relation to public services, with the stress on the idea of devolution of power to different and relevant levels, distributed decision-making and joint accountability.
- It was also suggested by participants that ecological perspectives offer a different way of thinking about leadership, which is closer to the concept of 'stewardship' used by environmentalists.
- Finally, ecological thinking, with its emphasis on organic modes of development, suggests the need for a slower and more deliberative approach to policy-making.

The 'crisis' of governance in adult learning and skills

It would not be going too far to state that there is a crisis of adult learning within the English education and training system. Funding has shifted from adults to younger learners and between different types of adult learning itself – the recent government emphasis has been on developing employment-related skills and the attainment of Level 2 qualifications.⁴ The 'crisis' is manifested in the 'unintended' outcomes of these policy shifts – a sharp decline in those engaging with wider aspects of adult learning related to leisure and well-being,⁵ as well as the threat that those who cannot make sufficient progress towards qualification will be left behind.⁶ While the Government maintains that it values informal adult learning,⁷ and has stimulated a wide-ranging debate in this area, nevertheless government funding levels for adult and community learning continue to lag far behind resources for younger learners and for work-related adult skills.⁸

However, the problems of adult learning run deeper than shifts in funding. They can be traced to the Government's approach to governance itself. It appears to have an abiding belief in the political benefits of steering the education and training system from the centre,⁹ combined with a new enthusiasm for a market in adult skills.¹⁰ Initially, the effects of this policy, linked to increased investment through national initiatives such as *Skills for Life*, the adult literacy, language and numeracy programme, and attempts to 'professionalise' the delivery of adult learning,¹¹ were positive. Reservations by practitioners about the model of governance were largely put to one side in exchange for the raising of the status of adult learning.¹²

In a study of the learning and skills sector in England, however, Coffield and colleagues (2008) demonstrate that steering from the centre has produced instability amongst education providers as government shifts its priorities and institutional managers attempt to second guess the direction of policy. Reliance on the market (which in reality is highly centrally managed) has also resulted in the unintended marginalisation of the most vulnerable learners. Moreover, the combined effects of top-down policy-making and marketisation have contributed to the undermining of the local level of governance and institutions' ability to respond to their local communities and labour markets. The behaviour of education providers is principally driven by national

⁴ See DCSF/DIUS (2008) and Gamble (2008).

⁵ See Aldridge and Tuckett (2008).

⁶ See Hodgson *et al.* (2007a).

⁷ See DIUS (2008).

⁸ See CALL (2009).

⁹ See Keep and Rees (2008).

¹⁰ See DCSF/DIUS (2008).

¹¹ See DfES (2001).

¹² See Hodgson *et al.* (2007b).

policy levers, which continue to privilege competition over collaboration in a locality. According to Carmel and Harlock (2008) this has even extended to what is now called the 'third sector', with concerns that voluntary and community organisations, which continue to play a major part in adult learning, have become 'disembedded from their social and political contexts and denuded of ethical and moral content and purpose' (p.155).

Beyond institutional autonomy or localism

In response to this policy climate there has been a call across political parties, pressure groups and civil society organisations for greater devolution of powers to the local level and to communities.¹³ The Government itself has backed such a move,¹⁴ although in reality centralism remains its dominant discourse and practice.

Here we explore approaches to governance of adult learning and skills that can broadly be aligned with what has been termed the 'fourth way'.¹⁵ The 'fourth way' can be seen as moving beyond centralism and the market, and how these mechanisms have been combined under New Labour, towards a more democratic and locally responsive education system. We believe that this signifies more than the creation of 'localism', with its accent on separation from other levels of governance, and implies instead a rebalancing of institutional, community, local, regional and national relationships.

We are helped here by the work of Pratchett (2004), with his distinction between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. 'Freedom from' can be characterised as the search for institutional, community or professional autonomy from 'higher authorities' and, in the case of the learning and skills sector, from the effects of policy centralism, bureaucracy and intrusive top-down accountability systems.¹⁶ 'Light touch' inspection and self-regulation,¹⁷ for example, with their promise of less central interference in exchange for high performance, can be seen as part of a 'freedom from' perspective. 'Freedom to', on the other hand, focuses on democratic powers to act collectively to improve outcomes locally and regionally. It involves going beyond the search for institutional autonomy and its attendant market logic and, instead, requires local practitioners, policy actors and community groups to be given the powers to work effectively with a wide range of inter-connected local and regional factors – demographic, economic, cultural and political. Local government cross-sectoral strategic planning agreements can be seen as the beginnings of a movement towards the idea of 'freedom to'. 'Freedom to' not only represents a more ambitious stance towards governance than 'freedom from': it can be considered as part of a different political paradigm, aiming to empower those closest to learners and their communities.

¹³ For example, Heald (2006), Liberal Democrats (2006) and LGA (2007).

¹⁴ See DCLG (2006).

¹⁵ See Hargreaves (2008).

¹⁶ See Steer *et al.* (2007) and Carmel and Harlock (2008).

¹⁷ See FE Sector Self Regulation Implementation Group (2007).

Ecological perspectives

In this section of the paper we suggest that the ‘freedom to’ perspective, as an alternative to top-down centralism and marketisation, can be assisted by ecological system thinking in order to better understand complex, inter-dependent relationships at different levels within national arrangements for lifelong learning.

The terms ‘ecologies’ or ‘eco-systems’ have traditionally been used to refer to dynamic interactions between plants, animals and micro-organisms and their environment, working together as a functional unit. Ecologies are seen as living systems containing a diversity of factors that interact with each another organically; that are partially self-organising, adaptive and fragile.¹⁸

In recent years ecological perspectives have been applied to a variety of areas as ways of thinking about child development and inclusion,¹⁹ processes of business innovation and skill development,²⁰ communication and information systems,²¹ learning relationships,²² professional practice,²³ education policy development²⁴ and governance processes of evolution, resilience, sustainability and change.²⁵ While ecological perspectives are closely allied to a number of established system theories and forms of holistic thinking, they may offer a new ‘language’ to conceptualise change and stasis in a variety of environments, contexts and spaces of activity, which exist in linked scales or levels, ranging from the global to the local, from the micro to the macro.

We will attempt to illustrate the potential of ecological perspectives as a way of thinking about the organisation of lifelong learning by adapting the work of Bronfenbrenner and Finegold, in particular, to explore spatial and dynamic communication and governance aspects of what we will term ‘collaborative local learning ecologies’.

A key question is whether ecological perspectives are simply a metaphor used to assist ways of thinking about complex issues or whether they go further and provide a framework for deliberation and action. Weaver-Hightower and Nardi and O’Day admit that they have adopted the term ‘ecologies’ as a metaphor for thinking about policy and communication technology. But we think that Bronfenbrenner, with his multi-level approach, and Finegold, with his ‘elements’ of a high-skill eco-system, provide the potential for the concept of ecologies to move beyond the metaphor. Within this paper we wish, therefore, to make a distinction between ‘ecologies’ as a way of analysing existing complex systems and what we term ‘collaborative local learning ecologies’, which represent a possible future system for learning and its governance.

¹⁸ See Brown (2002).

¹⁹ For example, Bronfenbrenner (1979).

²⁰ For example, Finegold (1999) and Bollier (2000).

²¹ For example, Nardi and O’Day (1999).

²² For example, Siemens (2003).

²³ For example, Stronach *et al.* (2002) and Fisher and Owen (2008).

²⁴ For example, Weaver-Hightower (2008).

²⁵ For example, Folke *et al.* (2005).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) used the term ecology to propose that human development is influenced by factors operating at different 'systems levels' within a broad ecological structure, in which each level exerts reciprocal influences on the others:

1. the 'microsystem' contains the factors within a learner's immediate environment (e.g. individualised curriculum, social relationships with peers);
2. the 'mesosystem' encompasses the interrelations of two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. This might include relations between home and the learning institution, involving the role of education professionals;
3. the 'exosystem' consists of settings 'that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what is happening in the setting containing the developing person'.²⁶ This could include the organisation of the institution, its policies and wider system levels, including local and regional agencies and government;
4. the 'macrosystem' envelops the micro-, meso-, and exosystems. Macrosystems in Bronfenbrenner's conception are particularly associated with wider society, in which all settings at each level are to be seen within their historical, socio-economic and cultural contexts.

The significance of his work lies in its ability to link the learner to wider society via the interactive levels of human relations and organisations in what has become an increasingly complex formation of state and civil society and to identify the role of the individual within it.

Finegold (1999), on the other hand, in his work on 'high skill eco-systems', involving software and computer companies in California, shows how particular enterprises have become successful due to their participation in self-sustaining eco-systems. He contrasts these to the 'low skills equilibrium' experienced by the economy and education system of the UK in the 1980s.²⁷ As part of a movement towards a high-skills equilibrium, Finegold identifies four inter-related 'elements' which have contributed to the creation of dynamic business eco-systems:

- contingent 'catalysts' which can trigger development (e.g. the surge of defence funding in the US);
- 'nourishment' emanating from world-class research universities who have provided a stream of young talent;
- a supportive 'external environment', including infrastructure and a regulatory regime sympathetic to risk-taking;
- 'inter-dependent relationships' based on flatter hierarchies within enterprises, together with local and regional networks.

²⁶ See Bronfenbrenner (1979: 25).

²⁷ See Finegold and Sockice (1988).

There are several other areas of ecological theory, which have relevance for this paper, but cannot be explored in more depth here. Folke and colleagues (2005) examine the role of knowledge, feedback, co-ownership and adaptive management in the development of resilient natural eco-systems; a system approach, which appears closely linked to other work on deliberative governance.²⁸ Nardi and O'Day (1999) have developed the term 'information ecologies' – 'a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment' (49), such as a library or a school. They see these kinds of ecologies showing strong 'dependencies' among their different parts – diverse participants; 'co-evolution', in which adaptations lead to change both locally and across the system; 'keystone species' – central actors 'whose presence is crucial to the survival of the ecology itself'; and a defined 'locality' – a local habitation and a name. At the same time, information and educational ecologies have also been associated with grander scales of communication through the Web. Siemens (2003), for example, argues that we need to design learning environments in which learners interact more actively and with greater freedom and that the growing capacity of the Internet, particularly Web 2, provides new and exciting possibilities. He suggests that blogs, wikis, groupware, collaborative tools, any connection-forming tool (e.g. Skype, phone, email, face-to-face), RSS and social network tools provide the means by which the learner is poised to take back the learning experience. He asserts, 'Experts and gurus still exist within an ecology. The key difference is that they no longer dictate the environment'.²⁹

It is evident, therefore, that beyond the original fields of biology and the environment, recent ecological perspectives have been developed in a variety of ways to help shed light on complex situations in a rapidly changing and fragile world. They are not associated with any particular theoretical tradition, discipline or part of the state and can have different economic and political emphases. Much of the literature focuses on human relations, networking, communication and adaptive governance in the public realm, but there is also a distinct line of thinking rooted in the private sector with its stress on innovation and deregulation.

Moreover, ecologies do not suggest a particular quality of relationship. They can be healthy, under threat, competitive or collaborative. It is clear from a diverse literature, however, that those who use ecological theory seek to describe and create new realities. In the main they have attempted to develop holistic and multi-level thinking in order to address what Newman (2001) refers to as complex 'wicked' problems in an era of mass technology, globalisation and new public management. Ecological perspectives also point to areas of action, in particular the development of new forms of collaboration – popular, professional and institutional – that create spaces for local deliberation of innovation and capacity building. But there is also a deeper cultural dimension. It may be that environmental metaphors, now actively applied more widely, are capable of catching a cultural tide of concern, as people become increasingly

²⁸ For example, Hajer and Wagenaar (2003).

²⁹ See Collectivism Blog (2005).

anxious about the threat of climate change and are more prepared to see human, power and governance relations in more environmental terms, with the accent on fragility, sustainability and care.

In the remainder of this paper we use the concept of ecologies in two ways: first, as an analytical tool to describe the learning and skills system and second, as a way of thinking about improving the system for lifelong learning. In doing so, we seek to overcome the increasingly worn-out polarities of markets versus planning, linking instead with notions of networking, collaboration and forms of exchange, with an 'educational language' connecting back to the work of social democratic theorists, such as John Dewey, and the centrality he ascribed to the role of the curriculum.³⁰ However, we also believe that ecological perspectives need to be linked to concepts of civil society and wider politics if they are not to lead to naïve or even bureaucratic concepts of localism. The latter part of the paper, therefore, examines wider political and structural factors that have to become part of ecological tools for change.

³⁰ See Amend (2006).

Conceptualising learning ecologies

In this paper, we build on the work of a project within the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme, *The impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the learning and skills sector*,³¹ the Nuffield 14–19 Review's concept of '14–19 collaborative local learning systems'³² and the work of Stanton and Fletcher (2006) on post-16 organisation. We apply ecological perspectives to describe and analyse fluid learning systems. In the final part of the paper, we examine three 'elements'³³ that need to be considered in the development of what we term 'collaborative local learning ecologies'.

This is an attempt to see lifelong learning in a holistic way and as part of an inter-connected set of local and wider factors. These include: learner motivation and interests in lifelong learning; the condition of particular communities; traditions and patterns of lifelong learning provision; opportunities for formal and informal learning, institutional patterns and relationships; configurations of local demography and geography; travel-to-learn patterns; local and regional labour markets; patterns of skills levels and employer demand.³⁴ It is the relationship between these different factors at the 'exo-system' level, which provides a local learning ecology with its unique identity. An understanding of the specific combination of community, local and regional factors can shape our thinking about lifelong learning wants, needs and strategies relevant to different populations.³⁵

Provider institutions such as colleges, voluntary and community organisations and workplaces form part of the local ecology and operate within its dynamic and inter-dependent relationships. The recent policy emphasis on institutional competition has raised awareness of the effects that institutions have on one another and that 'the behaviour of one provider can affect the success or failure of others'.³⁶ Carmel and Harlock (2008), in their discussion of the effects of competition and new public management on voluntary and community organisations, go further and suggest that competition can actually change the identity and purpose of these providers.

Within these dynamic relationships, learning ecologies are not one-dimensional. They exist on different inter-connected scales and levels in different contexts and spaces that overlap, vary in size and often do not conform to local administrative boundaries. Learners, for example, may live in one area but choose to study in another, particularly if they wish to pursue a vocational specialism. Large providers, such as general FE colleges, are not just local institutions but have sub-regional and, sometimes, regional

³¹ See Coffield *et al.* (2008).

³² See Nuffield 14–19 Review (2007).

³³ See Finegold (1999).

³⁴ See Spours *et al.* (2007).

³⁵ See Brighouse (2009).

³⁶ See Stanton and Fletcher (2006: 15).

roles.³⁷ On the other hand, effective provision of adult and community education may be on a very local scale, near to or within particular communities.

Ecological perspectives not only help us to think about the governance of individual institutions, but also about partnership working at different levels of the system. A learning partnership, viewing itself as a 'collaborative local ecology', would be linked to ecologies above and below. In defining their parameters, some local partnerships would correspond to the boundaries of local authorities (LAs), while others might exist on either a larger or smaller scale depending on their function. Examples of these different ecological scalings can be found in 14–19 education. For instance, 14–19 consortia, comprising several schools and a college, will normally be responsible for the provision of day-to-day learning opportunities and are usually smaller entities than LAs. On the other hand, 14–19 strategic partnerships can be the same size as some smaller LAs and will involve the wider range of partners (e.g. health, housing and social services) who will offer the whole 14–19 Entitlement for an area. Learning partnerships, such as *Aim Higher*, may operate on a sub-regional scale and will draw in FE colleges, HE institutions, voluntary and community organisations and employers who work on a broader canvas and represent the ecology of wider journey-to-learn patterns and progression to local higher education and the labour market.

It is important, however, not to idealise local ecologies: they have their dangers, not least the possibility of narrow parochialism. Within them, however, they may contain the potential to develop a vision of the educational needs not just of particular students or of one institution, but, more importantly, of a local community as a whole.

³⁷ See Howard (2008).

Four levels of a lifelong learning ecology

In order to harness this potential and avoid the dangers, in what follows we apply and adapt Bronfenbrenner's four ecological levels (micro, meso, exo and macro) as an analytical tool to suggest how adult learners are connected to professionals and institutional arrangements to the wider political and economic system. Within this overall ecology, each of the levels works as a dynamic and overlapping system of relationships.

1. At the very centre lies the *micro-system of the learner*. This locates the young person or adult in their most immediate setting – their home, community and working environments, family networks and peer relations, and relationships with education professionals. Acknowledging the existence of a learning micro-ecology, for adults in particular, would also suggest taking the complex lived experience of learners as the fundamental starting point of their learning journey.³⁸ Furthermore, other TLRP research³⁹ has confirmed the centrality of the learner-tutor relationship in the progress of both younger learners and adults, particularly those who have been marginalised in the education system.
2. Closely interlinked with the personal micro-system of the learner is the *meso-system of professional practice*. Nardi and O'Day (1999) suggest that there are 'keystone species' that play a fundamental role within the overall ecology. In terms of lifelong learning, these would refer to educational professionals who play a critical part in the learner's micro-ecology. But lifelong learning is also affected by a range of wider factors – health, housing, work or worklessness. Thus the ecology of professional practice broadens, involving collaboration between different types of professionals, for example, education, health, business, administrative, who engage in multi-agency working.⁴⁰ The concept of 'ecologies of practice'⁴¹ is closely related to the well-known and researched 'communities of practice',⁴² but is able to acknowledge the existence and impact of wider factors, such as government performance measures that influence the health of particular professional communities.
3. Moving outwards we come to the *exo-system of institutional relations* that contributes to the shape of a local learning ecology (LLE). The LLE can be seen to include local institutional relations in the context of a wider set of interactive demographic, community, local/regional administrative and labour market factors. In recent years, top-down steering mechanisms, such as funding, targets and inspection, have encouraged competition between providers with the effect

³⁸ See TLRP (2008).

³⁹ See Coffield *et al.* (2008).

⁴⁰ See Daniels *et al.* (2007).

⁴¹ See Stronach (2002), Boylan (2005) and Fisher and Owen (2008).

⁴² See Wenger (1998).

of disrupting the relationship between them and their communities.⁴³ In 14–19 education and training and in relation to access to higher education, however, various forms of partnerships have arisen to support learner attainment and progression. These can be seen to be reinforcing the notion of ‘learning areas’, local and sub-regional, as dimensions of ‘strongly collaborative local learning systems’.⁴⁴ Whether these are competitive or collaborative, the inter-dependent exo-system of institutional relations forms the essential proving ground of LLEs.

4. Enveloping the previous three levels are *macro-systems*, which in terms of lifelong learning comprise national institutions and structures, approaches to policy-making and policy instruments. Recent history would suggest that micro-, meso- and exo-systems in the area of lifelong learning find it difficult to flourish in what is widely recognised as a top-down governance and policy environment in England.⁴⁵ There is also the issue about the role of the market. It is worth repeating the point that local ecologies can be more or less planned or market-based and there are different views amongst ecological theorists about the relationship and balance between these two fundamental dimensions in the development of ecologies or eco-systems. This is particularly pertinent in relation to 19-plus and adult learning, which has been seen by government as primarily market-oriented.⁴⁶

The identification of four system levels or ecologies produces a number of challenges, some of which are conceptual and others which are practical. First, they are not discrete systems of horizontally related factors, but also interact vertically. Second, there is a question of the relationship between ecologies, which are more ‘organically’ defined, and current bureaucratically determined administrative boundaries. Recognising ecologies should not lead to the chaotic dissolution of administrative entities, but can aid critical reflection on their boundaries and functions and pose questions about the optimum level of decision-making. For example, the decision that LAs, regardless of their size and capacity, should be responsible for the funding of parts of further education colleges ignores the sub-regional and even regional role of these institutions for 14–19-year-olds. An ecological view of the funding and governance of colleges might place them in a more regional or sub-regional location. But perhaps even more important is the recognition that multi-level systems will require new leadership and decision-making capacities. This brings us back to the role of LAs and their relationship with communities and national government, in a search for optimum levels of decision-making, able to combine leadership with popular participation.

⁴³ See Coffield *et al.* (2008).

⁴⁴ See Nuffield 14–19 Review (2007).

⁴⁵ See Spours *et al.* (2007).

⁴⁶ See DCSF/DIUS (2008).

Developing collaborative local learning ecologies

In the final section of the paper, we apply three elements of Finegold's (1999) eco-system analysis – catalysts, nurturing and infrastructure – to the world of lifelong learning in order to describe some of the conditions required to build what we term 'collaborative local learning ecologies'. The factors listed under each of the three elements are not exhaustive, but are intended to represent a starting point for discussion.

Catalysts – the power of funding

All ecologies require some form of catalyst to move the system from one stage of development to another. In the case of California's high skill eco-system, as described by Finegold, the trigger was the surge of defence spending in the 1980s. The world of lifelong learning will have to depend on more peaceful stimuli, but the root will probably have to be the same – funding. A particularly powerful stimulus would be the announcement of a personal entitlement to lifelong learning leading the diverse membership of the local learning ecology to collaborate in response to the new demand.

Nurturing – values, professionalism and leadership

Shared values and purposes

Given the potentially problematical relationship between ecologies and administrative structures, there is the issue of how cohesion can be achieved amongst the various partners often working in a multi-agency way. Fostering collaboration in more fluid and complex contexts requires a shared sense of vision and purpose in order to provide the 'glue' of the ecology.⁴⁷ This is not something that can be imposed from above, but has to emerge from a collaborative enterprise by different partners at various levels of the system as they prepare a shared framework for creative action. In the area of lifelong learning, a key principle might be a commitment to raising the educational level of all and not just of a minority, in which providers would be held jointly responsible for participation and achievement in a locality.⁴⁸

Professionalism and leadership

A new and outward-looking professionalism is a key factor in the development of local learning ecologies, involving a strong sense of local commitment and a shared

⁴⁷ See Hodgson and Spours (2008).

⁴⁸ See Fletcher and Perry (2008).

knowledge of the area.⁴⁹ There is also the question of leadership within local ecologies. Here there are roles for local and regional authorities to provide strategic planning; to arbitrate between the partners; to move decision-making forward; to commission provision by agreement; to work for local consistency and equity; and to provide accountability to democratically elected representatives.⁵⁰ It is important that providers, regardless of size, have a stable administrative base that supports their mission, hence the argument for a facilitating 'lifelong local authority'.⁵¹ Within this more collective environment, individuals matter and so does their leadership. Bollier (2000) argues that a key part of any thriving ecology is individuals with an entrepreneurial ethic. Citing Brown (1999:11), he states that a healthy knowledge ecology 'needs two types of contributors, characterised metaphorically as the serious scientist (analytic, focused, consistent) and the hungry artist (playful, transcending boundaries, unpredictable)'.

Supportive external environment – reforming policy-making and the state

In his work, Finegold refers to the role of infrastructure and regulatory regimes in building high-skill eco-systems. Given the specific history of the learning and skills sector in England and our concern about the governance of lifelong learning, we will focus here on the style and instruments of policy-making. In doing so, we will argue for a combination of measures, termed 'devolved social partnership',⁵² which may provide the basis for more participatory and collaborative decision-making to strengthen civil society.

Rebalancing national, regional, local and institutional relations

Local and regional ecologies will require the reform of national policy-making and decision-making structures in order to create a new set of democratic relationships with the accent on devolution and subsidiarity: 'that unless there is a strong counter reason (usually with regard to equity) democratic institutions should be located as closely as possible to the people they represent'.⁵³ These concepts recognise that those at the centre cannot, by themselves, adequately address complex issues that require greater institutional, community, local and regional determination.

New forms of governance for adult learning and skills will also require changes in 'policy style'; breaking with the culture of constant interference and endless national initiatives, tied to ministerial careers. We think that a slower policy process is a necessary precondition of a more participatory politics, in which political leadership would shift from micro-management to communicating and explaining broad policy priorities, promoting equity and securing national standards.

⁴⁹ See Hodgson and Spours (2006).

⁵⁰ See Coffield *et al.* (2008).

⁵¹ See Brighouse (2008).

⁵² See Coffield *et al.* (2008).

⁵³ See Lawson (2005: 28).

Adaptive governance, knowledge and feedback loops

Improving the external environment for collaborative local learning ecologies will be demanding. Participants will have to be able to analyse different terrains, understand and predict the potential impact of external factors and work flexibly across established boundaries. Folke and colleagues (2005) in their work on adaptive governance emphasise the role of feedback loops in order to enhance creative responses to complex situations. In practical terms, a more participative and responsive approach to policy-making and implementation would see local policy actors (including employer, union and community representatives), professionals and researchers reporting back to regional and national policy-makers on the conditions of their respective ecologies and on strengths and weaknesses of particular reforms. Moreover, they would need to be involved at all stages in the development, enactment, evaluation and re-design of policy, because they know most about how to make national policy work in their own ecologies.

Policy frameworks for collective action

Part of the process of devolution is likely to require a radical reduction in the use of remote policy levers and accountability mechanisms, currently employed nationally to enforce professional compliance and competition between institutions. These have proved to be costly and counter-productive.⁵⁴ One possible way forward might be a move towards what have been termed 'policy frameworks',⁵⁵ which provide the 'rules' and 'freedoms' that stimulate collective practice between social partners and encourage local innovation. This would, for example, see top-down performance measures being replaced by area-wide targets, generated bottom-up and based on collaboration between social partners. Policy frameworks applied locally would aim to develop strong incentives for collaboration across an area, including pooled funding, in which all the partners feel some sense of responsibility. Taken together, these developments would rebalance the relationship between central, regional and local policy, providing national frameworks for more autonomous regional and local actions that would bring a very different feel to the organisation of lifelong learning.

National regulatory frameworks for the labour market

We use the concept of policy frameworks not only to suggest devolution of powers, but also to provide a shared sense of purpose between the labour market and lifelong learning. An important strategy would be to increase the role of 'licences to practise' in the workplace and to offer a regulatory framework that brings employers, providers and learners into a common pact to increase the demand for learning. Taking the 'Care Standards Act 2000' as a model, such an arrangement communicates clear signals to

⁵⁴ See James and Biesta (2007), Carmel and Harlock (2008).

⁵⁵ See Coffield *et al.* (2008).

all the key partners; the qualifications and skills employers should demand; the level of qualification and skills learners have to achieve; and the courses providers need to offer. This regulatory arrangement would aim to improve predictability in terms of planning provision institutionally, locally and regionally.

Democratic accountability and local democracy

Centrally driven accountability systems have played a critical, and often negative, role in the governance of lifelong learning and have marginalised the local democratic process. Ranson (2006) suggests that the prevailing culture of accountability will have to be replaced by an obligation to communicate with and explain to the public in order to derive consent. Rather than the line of accountability always taking a vertical form, where the local accounts to the national, there would be a greater sense of horizontal and mutual accountability in which all levels of the ecology account to one another. It is not just that adult learning needs more democratic forms of governance. As De Groot (2009: 20) argues, adult learning itself has 'a critical role to play in the rapidly changing landscape of local government, not least in developing the essential tools of participative and representative democracy'.

Conclusion

In an era of top-down accountability and markets we believe that an ecological perspective on lifelong learning offers a number of possibilities. First, it provides a very different language and imagery from the mechanical metaphors that have been associated with New Public Management – levers, targets, outputs and so on. The language associated with ecologies suggests the potential for a more organic and human-centred approach to the organisation and governance of education, stressing concepts such as inter-dependence, complexity, fragility, resilience and sustainability. It also reflects the learning process itself (although this is not thoroughly explored in this paper), emphasising a more connective, participative and exploratory approach that critiques the stress on behaviourist and acquisitive learning. Second, ecological perspectives undoubtedly operate as a metaphor to aid description and analysis of complex systems and this is probably the major way that they have been used so far. We feel that this is particularly helpful in understanding the complexities of the current organisational and governance landscape for lifelong learning, offering the possibility of taking us beyond the paradigm of top-down centralism and markets. We think there is a third possibility, which we have tried to develop in the final part of the paper, of an ecological approach to reform and system building in lifelong learning. It may be that ecologies are not simply ways of looking, but can become actual living entities, relying upon the development of democratic structures and more popular involvement in the creation of sustainable and healthy communities.

But with these possibilities come a number of questions:

1. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of ecological perspectives? Are they anything new?
2. More specifically, in what ways can they function as more than a useful metaphor for thinking about complex environments? Are they helpful in developing particular strategies for a more inclusive and effective system of lifelong learning?
3. If so, what would ecological strategies for lifelong learning look like at community, local and regional levels?

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