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### **The Learning Region**

A Critical Interpretation

#### **Abstract**

The ‘learning region’ discourse emerged from the debates of the neoliberal views of socio-economic and cultural change. These views stressed the overall trends of globalisation which had to transform the traditional economic, social and cultural institutions. In opposition of these views, the ‘learning region’ discourse pointed out the importance of locality. The ‘learning region’ discourse has challenged the globalisation arguments in three dimensions. (a) *Market forces* work only in the traditional sense (local markets) and lose sense in a global environment. (b) *Democratic governance* is also a local idea; ‘democracy’ in a globalised world makes no sense. (c) *Social networking*, communities of practices and similar efforts to use the forces of cooperation for innovation are also bound to localities. Thus the ‘globalisation’ discourse of the 1990s makes only sense with the ‘learning region’ discourse of the 2000s.

*Key words: learning region, globalisation, social learning, local education*

#### **Introduction**

A neoliberal wave hit the economic and social policies during the 1980s in Europe. This philosophy has the ‘market’ as the central force in economic and social development, since the market, if it is free may give new impetus to competitors. The actors of the market can be competing if local markets are connected to each other, so the products and services can flow unlimited. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, a new idea appeared. It is called the ‘learning region’. As opposed to the (neo-)liberal concept of the ‘market’, the ‘learning region’ idea calls upon social cooperation as the main force for economic and social development. Social networks can be organized locally (regionally) rather than at the global level. As opposed to ‘global’, the idea of the ‘learning regions’ stresses the importance of the ‘local’ (regional) (Berman & El Khafif, 2008; Thouard et al., 2003).

Is the idea of the ‘learning region’ an alternative to the global trends of marketisation and globalisation? The present study tries to answer this question. First, the idea of the ‘learning region’ is presented as an alternative to market-based socio-economic development. Second, a new governance is proposed for the ‘learning region’ idea. And third, the old concept of comprehensive (higher) education is renewed as a factor that may contribute to the emergence of the learning regions by returning institutions to their geographical and social environments (Antikainen, 1980).

#### **'Learning Region': Challenging 'the Market'**

The traditional approach to socio-economic development stresses the importance of market forces and competition. If the markets are growing and their actors are free, the competition among them may select the best actors of the market. In contrast, 'learning region' is an idea in which the socio-economic development lies on the local / regional actors and their cooperation (social networks) rather than on the market and its competitors.

The idea of the 'learning region' was spreading in the relevant English and German literature as early as the beginning of the 1990s (see Abicht, 1994; Illeris & Jakobsen, 1990; Lernende Regionen, 1994; OECD, 1993). Two ideas emerged from these studies. One is that economic development can be based on social networks rather than on market forces. The other is the impact of socio-economic networks on regional development.

The most known author (and activist) of the 'learning regions' became Richard Florida (1995). According to him, "learning regions function as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas, and provide the underlying environment or infrastructure which facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning." (Florida, 1995, p. 527). There are two dominant elements in Florida's study and in the literature he cites (e.g. Ohmae, 1993; Regional Advantage, 1994). One is the growing role of regions and regional approaches in the process of globalisation; the other is an alternative strategy of economic development.

In Hassink's view "a learning region can be defined as a regional innovation strategy in which a broad set of innovation-related regional actors... are strongly, but flexibly connected with each other..." (Hassink, 2004; see also CERI, 2000). Every enterprise is a social organisation. Its production and all related learning are social activities. So they cannot be understood outside a regional context. Globalized enterprises experience the hidden knowledges and learning behaviors embedded in local / regional culture, Hudson (1999) says.

Morgan (1997) aimed at linking two concepts and approaches: economic geography and innovation studies. His purpose was to work out a regional strategy on the basis of the results of innovation studies and thereby contribute to EU regional development plans. He applied the idea of 'learning region'. He interpreted it as a territorial network of innovations, which may necessitate new developmental strategies.

The shift from the market forces to social cooperation – from global to local / regional -- did not need a precise definition of the concept 'learning region'. A formal definition would just hinder the flexibility of the necessary developmental actions.

According to Boekema's (2000) opinion there is no need for definitions. Let us think of learning regions as an idea that does not have to be defined. According to an OECD document (OECD, 2001, p. 23; cited by Hassink, 2004) a learning region „constitutes a *model* towards which actual regions need to progress in order to respond most effectively to the challenges posed by the ongoing transition to a learning economy..."

The above mentioned approaches linked the regional development with the study of innovation, and introduced the concept of 'learning regions'. They searched for an alternative to the view that enterprises are the only actors on the market. In regional approaches the dominant factor of economic development is the social environment of enterprises. As a result, a new idea of economic and social development was evolving where the community, its government and its regional policies gained (or even regained) a key role.

### ***'Learning Region': Challenging Bureaucratic Administration***

Governments in the traditional (neo-liberal) view has to have only minimal role in the developmental process. They should not interfere in the market processes; rather, they has to be the guards of fairplays. The idea of the 'learning region' involves a new role of the governments. This means decentralisation at the regional level, coordination of specialized public administration at that level, as well as an active local society which is taking part of the bottom-up decision making processes.

According to Morgan (2008, p. 499) "Throughout the world we see a greater emphasis on regional and local levels of governance and the provision of services, including those of education and training 'close to the ground'... it is at the level of urban communities and economic regions that individuals tend more to establish a local identity and rootedness."

There is a need for a different kind of public administration to coordinate special administrative departments at the local level. Lukesch and Payer (2009) stress that the work of local-regional 'development agencies' gradually shifts towards local-regional administrative tasks. The national government intervenes from outside (above) by providing the conditions for development only. Local / regional public policy is becoming the sum of special policies such as policy of education, health care, transportation etc.

In this new model public administration is locally (regionally) coordinated, while the decision making processes have grassroot impetus. The governance of the 'learning region' should not be self-regulated just because of pure theory but because self-regulation in decision making may lead to organizational learning (how to make better decisions next time). Self-regulation is the guarantee for learning by decision making in the idea of a 'learning region' (Macleod, 1996).

Path-dependency, however, makes it difficult for the public employees to come up with new, alternative, innovative and creative answers to developmental challenges. Therefore, the key issue is learning within the administration (see Geenhuizen & Nijkamp, 2002).

'Learning regions' require local governments that are capable of solving local problems locally, learning from their solutions and establishing a new kind of administration on the basis of their learning. It is not only learning people and organisations that are necessary for the raise of 'learning regions'. A local / regional government is also necessary, which may coordinate all learning parties in order to solve local problems. This is how Lukesch and Payer (2009, p. 12) define the essence of this new way of governance: "...regional governance means that regional actors (representatives of interest groups, business, unions and other organisations) organise themselves through negotiation and networking, in addition and in constant collaboration with governmental institutions, specifically territorial authorities at local, regional, national (and European) level."

Or as the participants of a symposium on learning regions (Thessaloniki, 15-16 March 2001) stated: "...development is a collective process to produce an outcome... in which top-down and bottom-up developments form a dialectic. ...the focus is on achieving social and economic objectives in an integrated manner. Regional learning initiatives entail empowering local communities through the involvement of people from different interest groups..." (European Centre, 2003, p. 3).

The actors of a 'learning region' recognise challenges together and search for answers together because of common learning. Good governance is guaranteed by common learning. Learning -

not in the sense of being taught by somebody from outside but in the sense of an inner urge to learn - is a prerequisite for the formation of a 'learning region'. Learning in this sense, however, has its own limits. The 'governance by learning' idea is based on cooperation rather than on conflicts. As Hudson (1999) argues, the real question is not common learning, rather this: who learns what and from whom?

Critical social theorists (like Hudson, 1999) are sceptical towards statements like 'harmony of interests' and 'agreement in developmental goals'. According to their view decision-making are not the result of a 'harmony of interests' rather the outcome of fights among various interests and their representatives. To them, the governance of a 'learning region' does not mean smooth cooperation only, but also hard struggle of local / regional interest groups.

So we should expect more of the new governance than just better cooperation and reasonable development. What the idea of a new governance should also incorporate is the local /regional initiative--as opposed to central (and many times also bureaucratic) administration. But have civil societies any chance of taking the initiative? The following question can be raised: is this new type of governance an idea or a real alternative to the centrally controlled (and so many times bureaucratised) decision making?

### ***'Learning Region': Challenging centralised schooling***

The idea of the 'learning region' also challenges the neoliberal school policy with its slogans like 'school choice', marketisation in education (meaning mainly demand for and supply of education and training), as well as competition among institutions for more students and higher possible fees. Terms like 'world-class institution', 'quality education', 'research university', policies like institutional 'rankings' etc. are the results of forced rivalry among institutions in a globalized market of 'knowledge production and distribution' (Machlup, 1962). If we take the 'learning region' idea as an alternative way of socio-economic development and an alternative to bureaucratic control, a new question arises. Is there any alternative to the present policy of higher education with its worldwide competition for higher positions on the ranking lists, globalised rivalry for resources and growing embeddedness in (that is, growing dependency of) the world economy? Can an institution opt out of these globalisation trends while retaining its social functions? A possible answer may be offered by the 'regional institution'.

The idea of the 'regional institution' ('regional college', community / city institution, local or regional educational and cultural centres) dates back to the turn of the 1970s. (For a good review of the relevant literature of that time see Cohen, 1992; Cunningham, 1996). The idea of the English 'comprehensive school' or the German 'Gesamtschule' - comprehensive school and higher education - at that time involved various socio-economic as well as cultural and political factors in Europe. The drives behind the policy of comprehensive education were these: (a) to support the social mobility of students from lower-status social groups by opening to them access to education; (b) to increase equality in education by locating institutions closer to students in terms of geographical distances; (c) to support the democratization process (in the sense of Martin Trow [1974]) by changing education curricula as well as by guiding students to employment and life careers; (d) to contribute to the territorial development of stagnating or marginalized regions by establishing centers of education, vocational training as well as public culture (Fletcher, 1985).

The idea of comprehensive education had many roots in the history of education. (See Cohen, 1996; Davies, 1992) The American 'community college' was probably its closest forerunner.

Another forerunner was the adult education movement, especially as it was organized in Denmark and in Germany ('people's high schools' regularly translated as 'people's colleges'). This model of organized adult education was also rooted in the 19th century as a kind of liberal adult education (combined sometimes with VAT). Both this model and the American community college—together with various kinds of adult education throughout Europe—were linked with the cultural and political enlightenment of the working class, and were sometimes even connected with their social and political movements.

Rooted deeply in the history of education, comprehensive education has been reinforced by the massification of (higher) education in the mid-1960s in Europe. The new wave of comprehensive education—especially at the higher level (Gesamthochschule, Polytechnics) served various socio-economic as well as political and cultural aims. Therefore it unified the efforts of various local and regional interest groups. So the effort of 'regionalizing' the (higher) education network emerged as an educational and political movement in the 1970s (Merisotis & O'Brian, 1998; Osborne & Molyneux, 1981).

It may be called a 'movement', since it has been initiated not necessarily from the top, but mainly from the bottom. The local (regional) authorities together with their economic and cultural partners expressed their demands and dedications for education not only as a public service (a place to learn), but also as a social activity which supports the development of stagnating territories ('urban centers of education and culture'). The creation of such centers, supporting social efforts as well as regional development, was the main idea behind the comprehensive education movement.

The expansion process reached the Eastern part of Europe during the 1970s / 1980s in the form of the upgrading of institutions of secondary education, mostly technical and vocational training type schools. The main idea of the movement, however, was blocked by the political (party) authorities and by the bureaucracy of economic (social) planning. The dynamics of higher education expansions were stopped in those countries as the relevant statistics of higher education in Eastern Europe show. A new drive emerged immediately after the political changes of the early 1990s when the old political controls evaporated, but the new controlling forces (democratic states and their new public administrations) were not organized yet.

In the political vacuum created by the political transition, two dynamics became visible. One was the struggle for the new national higher education systems (new nation states emerged, like Slovakia, Ukraine, the post-Yugoslav republics and the so-called Baltic republics). These newly established systems ten years later stepped into the 'European higher education area' and are now competing for higher positions in world university rankings. The other dynamic was the struggle for individual freedom and community rights as opposed to the former political and bureaucratic control. These rights had included the right to establish new community (local, regional) institutions which would fit the local / regional needs rather than the administratively regulated system. Self-governance and local decision making were also massive drives during the political transition in Central and Eastern Europe; and the process of transition is still going on.

A study focusing on higher education among national (ethnic) minorities shed light on that process. In the course of the political transition the mushrooming of civil initiatives such as local 'community colleges' began (see the website of the TERD Project). They were the outcomes of various efforts of competing interest groups, which from time to time could make compromises if a successful 'change agent' took over the leadership. Following the life cycles of 18 'new-born'

institutions for a period of ten years, we noticed some common characteristics: Grassroot institutions may come into existence at a given time. After the period it proved to be very complicated again. Most of the founders became political figures later. But at the given time their most important aim was to create an institution. The grassroot institutions always needed the support of the local (regional) community (not necessarily the governmental support). The local elite *plus* the change agent together at a given time were only able to establish a grassroot institution.

The national universities face the dilemma of globalization and worldwide competition among institutions of higher education. They are pushed into a rivalry where institutions of small and medium-size European nations have no real chance to win. The idea of the 'learning region' may be a source of assistance both to the national universities pushed into the global market and to the community (grassroot) institutions facing marginalization. (For the effects of the Bologna Process on grassroot institutions see Kozma & Pataki, 2011). Educational institutions may opt out of an unrealistic competition on an invisible 'global market' by turning to their regional community and becoming regional education centres. Those centres may become the focal point of the social networks and the 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2000). The regional / local centres of education, training and culture have a new mission: to create a hub for developing their community as a 'learning region'.

Comprehensive (higher) education in the 1960s and 1970s supported stagnating and marginalized regions. The regional centres of education and culture may speed up the regional / local innovation processes. The task is not to perpetuate the local / regional identity, but to import new ideas from outside and to export local innovations from inside. So the regional centres of education, training and culture may serve learning regions not only by social networking (an inside service) but also by influencing its wider environment (an outside service).

To become a 'regional centre' the present higher education institution with all of its actors has to undergo in an essential transition. The major drive of this essential transition is organizational learning. Thus the regional centre may not be a place of education, training and community learning only, that foster 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 2000), and produce new knowledge and competencies. It should also be a *learning organization* itself, one that is "not only able to solve immediate problems but also to raise their capacity of problem solving" (Lukesch & Prayer, 2009, p. 15).

The 'learning region' discourse emerged from the debates of the neoliberal views of socio-economic and cultural change. These views stressed the overall trends of globalisation which had to transform the traditional economic, social and cultural institutions. In opposition of these views, the 'learning region' discourse pointed out the importance of locality. The 'learning region' discourse has challenged the globalisation arguments in three dimensions. (a) Market forces work only in the traditional sense (local markets) and lose sense in a global environment. (b) Democratic governance is also a local idea; 'democracy' in a globalised world makes no sense. (c) Social networking, communities of practices and similar efforts to use the forces of cooperation for innovation are also bound to localities. Returning to the question raised at the beginning of this study, the 'learning region' discourse of the 2000 is an alternative of the neoliberal philosophy and economics. Moreover, it makes only sense in the light of the 'globalisation' discourse of the 1990s.

**Note**

Thanks to my close colleague *Gabor Erdei* at the University of Debrecen for turning my attention to the idea of the 'learning region'. That the idea of the 'learning region' might challenge the globalisation process in higher education emerged out of a symposium on Equity in Higher Education (University of Ljubljana, 23-24 November 2010). Here I discussed relevant issues with (among others) *Roger Dale*, *Voldemar Tomusk* and *Pavel Zgaga* for whom I express my thanks. The first version of the present paper has been published in a Festschrift for Professor Osmo Kivinen (Ahola S et al eds, 2011, *Tiedosta Toimintaan: Osmo Kivisen juhlakirja*. Turku, Finland: Uniprint, pp. 41-54). It is an upgraded version of that paper.

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