



PASCAL International Observatory - EcCoWell 2 Community Recovery Program

Briefing Paper 7

Rethinking Lifelong Learning within Current Contexts of Time and Space

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... we've forgotten how to learn and the importance of learning. It takes time to learn other people, to learn how they work. It takes time to learn where we come from ...

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury¹

Our purpose in this think piece is to open up some fresh lines of thinking about lifelong learning by looking in a very broad way at the dimensions of time and place, in a global context. Maybe 'think piece' suggests something more coherent than what we offer; it's more some ideas, schematically presented, which might help adult educators around the world to loosen up our thinking. This is at a time when the arguments for Lifelong Learning (LL) are very familiar, but the contexts for those arguments are changing in highly unpredictable ways.

The central focus is demographic – the changing shape of populations around the world (Barry *et al.* 2019; Kearns & Reghenzani-Kearns 2020). In some regions – most countries of the North – ageing is a central feature of population change, affecting social and family relationships, labour markets and employment practices, housing, and social and health policy (Dixon 2020).

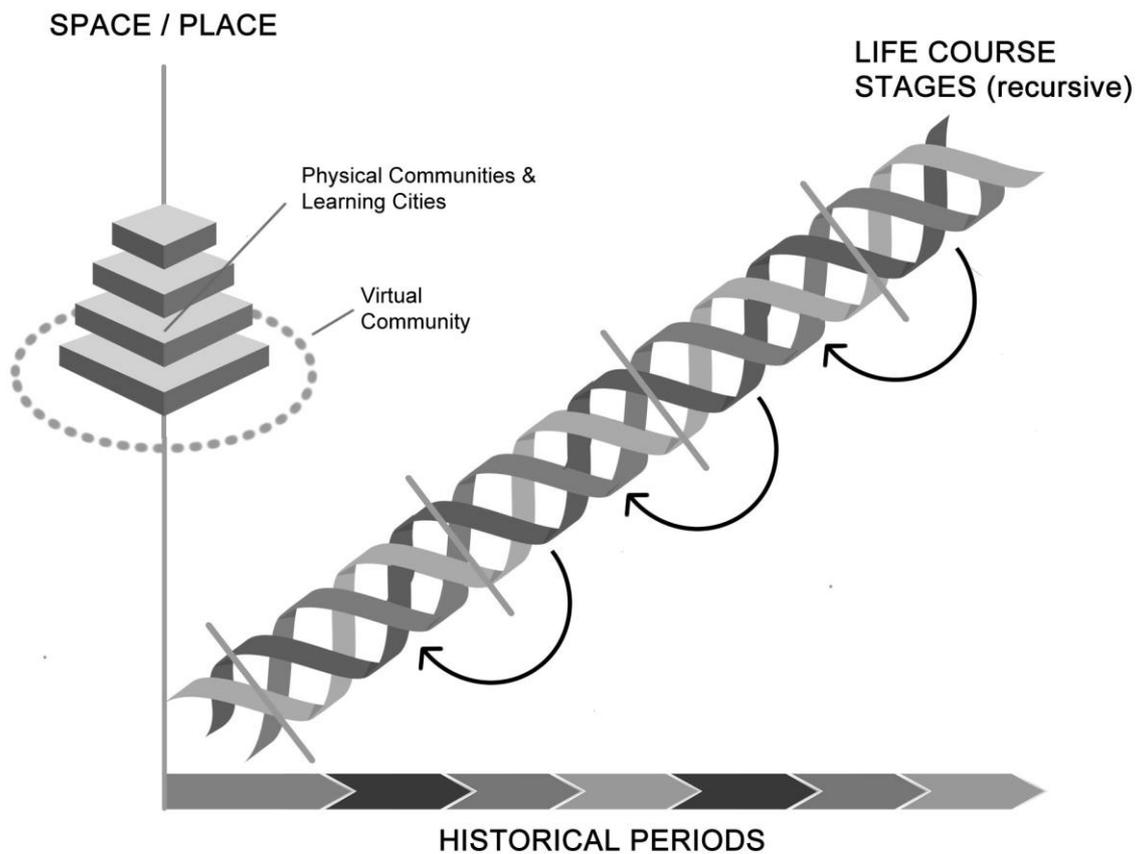
¹ Podcast from *Start the Week*, 28 September 2020 [online] Accessed from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000my6r> [28 September 2020]

In other parts of the world, notably Africa, the immediate prospect is for great increases in youth numbers, but also with growing numbers of older people living to previously unheard of ages. A common issue is therefore the changing relationships between generations, and what LL can contribute to making these relationships harmonious and fruitful (Schuller 2018).

There are three dimensions to the framework for our agenda:

1. **Historical periods:** the dynamics and pace of change. We have become very familiar with how the dynamics of and pace of change varies across periods of history, and the challenges we face in a *faster-speed* period. The *triple life course* speed conception divides the history of human life into three time periods of *low-speed*, *fast-speed* and *faster-speed*. Each of these periods has particular characteristics and corresponding lifelong learning programmes. The *low-speed* period is one during which the world was sparsely populated with a short human lifespan, during which most people had just enough time to exercise only one vocation or profession throughout their lifetime. The *fast-speed* period is characterised by low consciousness of human and animal rights (e.g. large tolerance for gender inequality, racial oppression, and non-recognition of animal rights). The *faster-speed* period is characterised by the demonstration of higher levels of consciousness wherein humans have come to discover the interconnectedness of all that is extant in nature (minerals, vegetation, animals and human beings) and the complex identities that humans are capable of exhibiting (e.g. with respect to sexual and gender identities).
2. **Life course:** changes in the way lives are divided into ages and stages. There are many ways of dividing up the life course. One of many models available is that of a 'triple helix', with three strands of biological, psychological and socio-cultural development marking out the different stages. Developments along these strands occur at various rates, generating a wide range of learning needs and propensities. We need somehow also to recognise the recursiveness of life course development: other than on the chronological dimension there is no straightforward linearity in how people pass through stages. (Schuller 1995).
3. **Space/place:** urbanisation, the Learning Cities movement and the interaction/tension between physical and virtual communities. It is a period of rapid urbanization and mass migration from rural areas with the world's urban population expected to double by 2050. As UN-Habitat (2016) argues it is not simply that people will be concentrated in cities, but also much of world's social, economic and cultural activities, with their concomitant environmental and humanitarian impacts. Wang and Kintrea (2019: 3) point out that this presents very particular challenges to sustainability in the global south. Learning cities (and regions), although a long-standing conception over almost three decades, have emerged in recent years as a primary vehicle to drive place-based lifelong learning in urban settings across the lifespan through formal, non-formal and informal means. Less prominent has been the discussion of *virtual learning cities* (see Sankey and Osborne 2006), but it is clear that advances in technology have overcome many traditional geographic boundaries.

These dimensions are shown schematically in Figure 1 below.



Taken together these dimensions should, we hope, provide a framework for rethinking some of the challenges facing adult educators and policy-makers. Below is a set of short propositions and questions which flow from bringing the dimensions together within six cases: global interdependence; historical understanding; citizenship; prosperity and well-being; health; and information . They might, with a good deal of permissiveness, be thought of as a common agenda, perhaps even a common global curriculum, to be interpreted according to national/local circumstances.

Do these dimensions provide a useful framework and do they provide a common agenda for discussing the future of lifelong learning?

The general question to be applied in each case is:

What are the implications for LL systems, institutions, policies, practitioners?

1. Global interdependence

COVID-19 has brutally brought home the way behaviour and events on some countries affect other countries. Pandemics join climate change and migration (McDonnell and Shendruk 2020) as issues which highlight the interdependence of our world, in ways which

cannot be ignored. Viruses move invisibly, people more visibly and often with much more positive consequences (so we should usually beware of drawing this parallel!), but in both cases there are issues around the responsibilities of the source countries and receiving/host countries.

Better public understanding of the implications of this interdependence is a challenge. With climate change, for example, most of us have difficulty in sorting out the relative magnitudes of the different factors which are causing the crisis, for example the respective contributions of air, car and ship travel, or the differential impacts of consumption patterns in richer and poorer countries. More fundamentally, a high proportion of population lack fundamental environmental literacies in order to make such judgements. For example, in a survey of 2054 adults in the city of Glasgow, almost 60% were unable to identify from five options, the protective function of the ozone layer (Thakuria et al. 2020). Broadly similar levels of factual knowledge concerning the environment that have been reported in other surveys around the world, and this form of literacy is of course closely allied to adult literacy in general. It is also a major component of enabling many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Hanemann 2015). However, as important as factual knowledge and understanding, the empirical situation is the capacity to understand and engage with standpoints and attitudes that diverge from our own. Individuals need to be able to judge the impact of their behaviours, and those of others, including their governments on the environment.

The growth of misinformation gives this particular salience, as there is less and less certainty about who or what may be regarded as authoritative sources of information and wisdom (see 6 below).

How might lifelong learning contribute to literacy for informed sustainable environmental behaviours?

Both COVID-19 and migration have emphasised age differences. COVID-19 particularly affects older people's health and younger people's employment prospects. Migration may be driven by poor employment prospects amongst younger generations, but also by the needs of countries which have too few young workers (cf. Japan), and increasing demand for health and social care staff.

To what extent are employment-related programmes geared to raising self-sufficiency, by reducing the economic need both for immigration and for emigration?

What are the best examples of education to foster integration of immigrants into host communities? How are these evaluated?

Moreover, in some countries internal migration is as important as emigration/immigration, with similar issues around integration and mutual adjustment. Data from 2017 reports that whilst there were 258m international migrants, this was

dwarfed by 763m internal migrants (World Economic Forum, WEF, 2017). Azizi *et al.* (2019: 5) report that ‘countries with the highest numbers of internal migrants (including internally displaced people) contain the most conflict-affected regions of Western and Eastern Asia, and those also most affected by environmental disasters’. Hence this mobility, most of which is to cities brings many challenges, whether driven by what Lee (1966) has described as pull factors (e.g., economic opportunity, better housing and peace) or push factors (e.g. conflict, drought, famine and war). Making movement too difficult causes economic difficulties, but if it is too easy it causes social and community stress.

One very immediate impact of COVID-19 has been a massive spurt in on-line learning, both in what educational institutions offer and more broadly. This may mark a step change in the overall shape of educational provision. There will certainly be much more blended and online learning, public and private. This is to be welcomed, but it has some quite unpredictable consequences for the profile of educators and other staff, again in public and private sectors.

What new training and recruitment will be needed to enable these new forms of online learning to be properly accessible and pedagogically effective?

2. Historical understanding

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gives that interdependence a powerful historical perspective. It may present today as mainly a Western affair but it has highlighted the historical legacy of empires and colonialism, with major differences in how these are to be understood. Different generations grow up with different understandings and experiences of this legacy. And different societies will place very different emphases on how their nations have evolved over time, for instance in identifying key periods of development.

How should educational institutions at all levels respond to this?

What are the implications for curricula and staffing?

How can they enable constructive exchange between different groups?

Obviously this starts in schools, but the issue confronts all levels of education.

A historical perspective is not necessarily easily defined. Western imperialism can be quite accurately chronicled, but issues of boundaries and borders can go back a long way. This means for example that ownership of historical artefacts is often hard to establish. So there is a major public educational challenge, which extends beyond formal education. Our historical understanding is shaped by museums, galleries and other forms of cultural

activity: what they choose to offer, how the offer is framed and what opportunities are given to the public to absorb and discuss the implications.

Historical understanding is shaped by generation. We all grow up with a particular selection of events, themes, personalities and issues from the past, and carry at least some of that into our adulthood. As a result, different age groups will share different understandings of the past, and therefore of the present, even if these are often implicit.

How should we best enable these understandings to cross generations and enable fruitful inter-generational conversations?

Cross-nationally, how far can a common understanding of historical developments be developed, given the imbalances of power and legacies of exploitation?

3. *Citizenship*

Citizenship is not a static concept.

What are civic duties and entitlements?

How are people prepared for them, as native citizens or migrants?

How have these changed over time, for instance in the notions of democracy that are deployed (*cf.* above on historical understanding)?

Attempts to formalise these duties and entitlements are controversial and often futile, yet most societies will function better if there is some degree of common understanding of what they are, whilst obviously respecting – indeed learning from - national differences in how these are interpreted.

Generally there is some variety across the life course in terms of people's commitment and engagement as citizens. Action on climate change is often powered by younger people – and yet many of their grandparents are engaged precisely because they feel some degree of obligation to succeeding generations.

There is also the question of what is the most effective unit of citizenship – national, regional or local?

Who has the authority to develop a 'citizens curriculum' (recognising the possibility of tensions between the different levels)?

Attention is often focussed on national parliaments and how well democracy functions at that level. Formal citizenship is generally a national matter. But for most people civic

participation is more likely to operate at a more local level. The Learning Cities movement recognises that whilst the city might be the level at which major initiatives can be taken, the successful nurturing of learning may be best promoted at neighbourhood level. This is something highlighted in Faris's (2004) seminal work in the field, and exemplified by some of the most successful models of learning cities such as in the Republic of Korea, which are based on a systematic place-based structure cascading out from neighbourhood-level learning centres (Han and Makino 2013). Faris has put much emphasis on the role of place management, referring to a co-ordinated mechanism for delivering services at different scales of geography from the neighbourhood to the region. However, despite these examples of localised learning focus, it is argued by Ahmed *et al.* (2021) that 'there tends to be a lack of sensitivity to the role that neighbourhood differences play in shaping opportunities and livelihoods, defining and perpetuating inequalities, and reflecting entrenched forms of social, economic and political inclusion and exclusion', pointing to 'the silence on neighbourhoods in the "New Urban Agenda" (United Nations 2017)'. There is also a caveat perhaps in relation to these forms of engagement that stem from a neighbour base when considering the extent to which they are shaped by communities, or are based on a 'top-down' model directed by government.

In a sense the same might be said of other new forms of civic participation that are emerging around the world. For example, citizens' assemblies are being used as ways of enabling sets of citizens, deliberately selected (usually by governments) to represent a range of different value positions, to engage with potentially controversial issues such as same-sex marriage or electoral reform. Such assemblies are intense learning experiences. The process of engagement can be seen as important as the outcome.

We generally agree that learning has a major role in promoting social cohesion (*cf.* Section 1 above, on the integration of immigrants). Some of this is quite straightforward, for example learning of a common language, though even on this there is disagreement over how forcefully this should be pressed. 'Citizenship tests' often seem to rely on factual knowledge which are at best very partial indicators of how well individuals understand the culture and values of the society they live in. Even people who have been born and grown up in a single country have only a partial grasp of what might be regarded as its defining features. Often these features are highly contested, and the object of much misinformation and distortion.

How much is citizenship about factual knowledge, and how much about values and behaviour?

4. *Prosperity and wellbeing*

Conventional measures of how well a country or a population is doing are increasingly called into question. GDP and incomes are poor indicators, only loosely related to wellbeing and happiness. This is not just a technical measurement issue; it affects individuals' aspirations and goals, and our collective understanding of how well we are doing. This has obvious educational implications: what careers young people aspire to, and how older people might seek to change careers; how people seek to combine paid

work with family and other activities (lifewide learning); and how political and organisational priorities are established.

How well do LL programmes enable learners to formulate their life goals, in professional and personal spheres ?

How far are these defined in accordance with values rather than a single financial metric (i.e. lifewide) ?

What needs to be done to enable people to reformulate these goals at different stages in their life course?

Such measures can be applied nationally, and/or more locally. A crucial element is that of equality: high GDP is no guarantee of wellbeing if it goes along with high inequality, between classes, ethnic groups or regions. And intergenerational equity is an important part of this debate: how different generations share wealth and wellbeing. Once again, there is a need for open, informed and constructive debate at all levels – maybe especially in families and in local neighbourhoods.

Sustainability and the climate crisis are a very significant aspect of this: younger generations tend to be more actively concerned with the threat of unsustainable growth, and therefore to operate with a different set of wellbeing measures. However the intergenerational contrast should not be overplayed; a key challenge is how far generations can work together in the face of the climate crisis.

(Overlapping with the citizenship section)

How can a citizen-led discussion be conducted on the key measures and values we should use in estimating progress and development, at whatever level of society?

We have interesting examples of participatory budgeting and citizens assemblies, which are inherently educational activities; what is the scope for developing these further?

5. *Health*

In the words of the World Health Organisation, health is ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (WHO Constitution)². This prescription has so far proven to be a tall order since over time, only incremental progress has been achieved in this realm. Not only has each century brought its own health challenges and achievements, each passing cycle of human existence has equally had to throw up aspects of personal health that are in most need of attention.

² See <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>

Prior to the 20th century, lifespan was relatively short across the globe. Everywhere, people passed through transition between their 50th and 70th birthday as a result of inability to maintain a robust health over an appreciable length of time (Graebner, 1980). However, beginning from the 20th century, spectacular advances began to be realised in orthodox medicine leading to exponential improvement, mainly in human physical health. Many common illnesses, before the 20th century sent people to early graves. Notwithstanding the current challenges of COVID-19, many diseases have been conquered and made treatable. Achievement in improving human physical health has perhaps not been paralleled in the domain of mental illnesses and disorders with, according to the World Health Organisation (2001), one in four people suffering either mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives . While a human may appear to be perfectly healthy in a physical sense, s/he may suffer poor mental ill in the form anxiety, eating disorders, mood changes, personality disorders, psychosis or disorders that are related to substance abuse or trauma. On a fundamental level, for example, in this season of COVID-19 pandemic the possibility of contracting the virus or the inability to reach a loved one that may be in isolation as a result of COVID-19 infection, lead some individuals to a state of anxiety. Some learning city initiatives such as those in Duhok in Iraq have highlighted attention that has been given to trauma-related issues amongst war-torn populations of refugees (Osborne and Hernandez 2019). This is a rare example of learning cities addressing such issues.

At a personal level, maturing or aging physically naturally brings about biological changes which manifest in differential functioning, discomfort and health challenges. For example, a maturing child who turns into an adolescent and subsequently into young adult, does go through experiences that need mastering through learning. The inability to access the needed learning in this case may lead, not only to physical discomfort, but also to mental challenges. The older adult who does not obtain community or societal approval and support that s/he seeks, may equally suffer mental distress if s/he does not access learning opportunity. There is certainly a strong association between learning on the one hand, and health and well-being. Those who engage in learning tend to be more healthy, and those who are healthy tend to engage in more learning. It is a virtuous circle that is well understood, though receives relatively little support in the practice, especially for those in later life. In a recent paper for the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning's 4th global lifelong learning conference, Osborne and Hernandez (2019) have pointed out the relative lack of attention in learning city developments to the needs of two vulnerable groups where health issues are major considerations: older adults and the disabled.

What approaches that integrate policy in health and in learning are likely to be most effective?

What approaches can cities take in addressing health issues, and put greater emphasis on mental health?

Are there new arguments that will convince policymakers that investment in older learners is worthwhile?

Yet, attending to the learning needs of these two vulnerable groups (older adults and the disabled) would benefit society immensely. Barring the most debilitating of disabilities, if the thesis of a positive association between learning and health is correct, the more viable learning opportunities that are provided to older adults, the less may their need be for support and assistance in other ways they progress in age. Furthermore their feelings of independence may increase. The less any segments of society are dependent on society for many of their needs, the more societal time and space resources are freed up for other uses.

What is known about learning programmes that effectively promote independence in later life?

What approaches might the lifelong learning community make in response to the learning needs of older adults and the disabled, so that they can be assisted to participate in producing within and for society?

How can the learning needs of the disabled be brought to greater prominence in learning city developments?

The role of lifelong learning at the very end of life is also a growing focus for thinking. While it is understood that all human beings are aware of the inevitability of death, very few are aware of how to prepare for this great event. Yet, a learning programme that may make our exit from this world both smooth and stress free is desirable. Learning for retirement, learning to cope with terminal illnesses, learning to live with the loss of mental abilities and learning to erect structures through which valuable philosophies of the older generations may be passed on to younger generations are some of the typologies of learning that lie at the farthest end of the lifelong learning spectrum (Biao, 2013). A multiplicity of teaching-learning strategies have been and are being developed to assist persons in these categories, including how to make the best use of their last days on earth. Some of these learning strategies are personal (e.g. development of inner strengths through the aid of prayers) while others are professional (e.g. gerontological processes assisted by specially trained nurses, artists and performers).

Therefore, from the beginning to the end of life and at every turn, life beckons us to learn in order to ensure a health filled existence. Much of that which needs to be learnt to attune a personal life to the right vibrations during adolescence and youth does exist in books, and through electronic and online media, even if some content would need to be tweaked to suit prevailing circumstances at any point in time. However, in this fast changing world, much that is to be learnt to guarantee a healthy life especially beyond adolescence, may yet exist only in potential form.

What are the potential roles of the lifelong learning facilitator in developing an awareness of emerging teaching-learning strategies based on new scientific and social-scientific knowledge with a view to continuously assisting people to learn throughout life stages and phases, including for death itself?

Who is leading the way in exploring and developing the place of learning as a preparation for dying and death?

6. Information

The explosion of information and knowledge accounts for the uniquely complex nature of our time. Fortunately, information scientists have been able to package and organise this vast information and knowledge into accessible streams of relevant data and material. In other words, access to information and knowledge has been made easy and seamless. Consequently, information technology has proven to be a blessing in this sense as the path to information has been clarified and people can easily identify and navigate through the information path of their choice.

However, beyond the good work performed by information scientists, lays a host of other challenges, including the fact that more than one information path is needed for an individual to cope with life and living in the 21st century. The difficulty in identifying authentic and accurate information from among the maize of available material, the ability to analyse and make judgements, being data literate and the mastery of the use of the scores of available information technology communications devices are challenges that the 21st century individual is confronted with. Even where an individual succeeds in mastering the use of a few of these devices, the rate at which they are confined to the archives of history is so dizzying that only persons that are ready to devote a considerable amount to learning may keep a reasonable track of them. We can to this the ubiquity of digital-driven interfaces and devices that we encounter in our day to day lives as we seek to utilise even the most basic of services, for example banking, shopping and social services. What seemed niche is now routine as 'smart' technologies develop, and our urban spaces become 'smart cities'.

These considerations represent a new manifestation of the 'digital divide': the gulf between generations. While youth are people in general expend a considerable period of their time working with digital devices, older adults who, though often having acknowledged the inevitable dominance of information and communications technology in their day to day lives, tend to have less time, opportunity and propensity to embrace technology. A number of studies show that it is older adults along with low-income and marginalised groups who are most likely to be digital excluded, and this is exacerbated technologically driven urban developments, such as 'smart cities' (Borkowska and Osborne, 2018). Yet, adults and youths share the same social, environmental and economic spaces. How do they do this with minimal friction? One potential avenue lies in inter-generational skills sharing. It is in this respect that lifelong learning for both the

youths and the adults become inevitable and desirable. An inter-generational approach provides a multitude of potential exchange. Whilst older adults might become digital literate through learning from the young, the converse is the case in relation to traditional skills and the learning gained from professional experience. In *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich (1971) spoke of *learning webs* and *skills exchanges*. We now have the technology to be able to implement his principles on a global scale, and in so doing underpin inter-generational and inter-cultural exchange based on learner directed principles.

How might existing physical institutions adapt to provide the most effective blends of digital and face-to-face learning?

How might lifelong learning combat the challenges of disinformation in the digital age?

How do we stimulate effective intergenerational learning exchanges in the digital age and the world of smart services and cities?

Is it the right time to develop new forms of learning webs and skills exchanges, using technology as a mediator?

Illich's suggestions of *learning webs* as well as Reimer's (1971) *alternatives in education* readily come to mind as learning pathways for all, including older adults, that society must promote as a pathway to sustaining independence as they progress in age.

Furthermore in many countries, especially in developing societies, rural areas are becoming depopulated through the process of rural-urban migration. If learning webs and alternatives to existing learning systems were created both in cities and in rural areas, then, a number of advantages may accrue. For instance, the tide of rural-urban migration may be reduced. The networks of learning webs that may be established may become so interconnected from rural to urban areas through the development of neighbourhood learning circles that villages and cities may end up becoming more connected than they are at the present moment. Out of the context of this village-city connection, an inter-generational dialogue might grow since the young people might be less likely to elect permanent residency in cities. Older adults who tend to be less mobile would benefit from the support of more mobile younger and vice-versa.

Illich's and Reimer's recommendations are relevant to the disabled as well, and ICT-supported learning webs would be of great value to these groups in society. The more social strata are assisted in participating in contributing ideas, tangible products and innovations to society, the better and happier society is likely to be.

How might societies provide the conditions to better harness learning exchange across the generations?

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