

# When we learn and change together

## The possibilities of learning communities

by Paul Born, with Louise Merlihan

*Together, through dialogue, we become more than the sum of our parts.*

**In the fast-paced world of social change** leadership, we need more time for thinking together. Specifically, we need time together to understand connections, context, and how context influences societal behaviour toward the type of change we desire. Together we can assess patterns of change, turning theory into practice or actions that can influence system behaviour. I believe this type of thinking can be achieved through learning communities, which help us achieve a collective impact.

I am intrigued by collective thinking processes, such as the one that Op Ed columnist David Brooks describes as “crystallized intelligence.” In his recent article featured in *The New York Times*, “Building Attention Span,” he defined such intelligence as the ability to use experience, knowledge, and the products of lifelong education to deepen understanding and build wisdom.

Brooks also makes a compelling case for slower learning, where people connect more deeply with ideas and each other: “When people in this slower world gather to try to understand connections and context, they gravitate toward a different set of questions. These questions are less about sensation than about meaning. They argue about how events unfold and how context influences behaviour.”

I wonder if being part of a learning community and

engaging in dialogue can give us this same sense of space and lead us to a kind of crystallized intelligence.

David Bohm, a famous theoretical physicist, was also curious about how people connected in dialogue. He was especially interested in what happens between people during the dialogue. His observations and research convinced him that the true intention of conversation is to provide the means by which people think together.

Together, through dialogue, we become more than the sum of our parts. This way, true breakthroughs to the possible can happen.

### **Learning together**

About 10 years ago I was part of a learning community on applied dissemination, convened by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. Each member of the learning community was an innovator who had developed a successful program idea in a community in Canada. The Foundation wanted each of us to consider if our work could be scaled (more cities) or deepened (more results), and thought that if they brought these people – who had shown such great potential to learn from each other – the Foundation’s grants would have a higher chance of impact.

In the early days of this learning community, speakers joined us so we could engage with their ideas. But what we hungered for, more than anything,



was to hear each other's stories. Through structured conversations that enabled understanding of, and also provoked empathy for, the challenges we each faced, we were able to articulate common patterns and engage in deep dialogue about our work. Just about every partner in that learning community was successful at both scaling and deepening their work. Today, the project idea we brought to that learning community, Vibrant Communities Canada, has formal partners in 47 cities across the country. Collectively we have set the target to reduce poverty for one million people.

### **Systems change requires us to learn together**

I see social change as a process of people learning together to change how we act and think about an issue. Large-scale change occurs when we engage an entire system, like a community, to learn, become engaged, and act.

If we were to impose a social change on people through force, or via democratic means (a policy), they might conform because they want to follow the new norms or they fear the consequences of not conforming. Though this type of social change may be effective in changing a specific situation in the short-term, like making a neighbourhood safer by installing a new stop sign, long-term, sustained change requires people to be engaged. I would argue that kind of change necessitates a different way of thinking.

Learning communities are a mechanism that prompts large-scale change in thinking – where a group of people can develop a collective wisdom that causes them to act and live differently. It's not a stretch then to argue that those engaged in collective impact are also members of a learning community.

Collective impact starts with bringing people together to collaborate on a common agenda. Working together, and continuously communicating, the members of the collaboration test ideas, make sense of

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Photo: Tamarack Institute

Learners respond to John McKnight at Neighbours: Policies and Programs workshop, Hamilton, Ontario, June, 2015.

the work they are doing, and find mutual context.

A backbone organization keeps everyone acting collectively together by creating structure and processes that help the collaboration work more effectively.

**As community leaders host conversations, they invariably uncover ways to better align community systems.**

Collective impact learning communities ensure that members learn together to see what is working.

**A learning community**

Learning communities create spaces for people to learn together and,

when taken to scale, change a community.

Each year, Tamarack connects people who are interested in community-building and social resilience to strengthen cities and neighbourhoods. Each participant brings tacit knowledge about the power of community. Learning takes on a generative quality at these events and creates a network or social structure that can both deepen each learner's knowledge and create better knowledge and action for the field.

By making a commitment to learn together in a co-generative process, learners co-create a space

for reflection and knowledge creation. The basic structure of a community of practice includes three components:

- 1. Domain:** This creates a sense of common identity. It becomes a statement of what knowledge the community will steward.
- 2. Community:** This includes the people who care about and interact with issues related to the domain. The community creates the social fabric of learning.
- 3. Practice:** This is the specific knowledge that the community develops, shares, and maintains.

When member cities of Vibrant Communities Canada start working towards reducing poverty in their communities, they spend a solid year engaging business, government, not-for-profit leaders, and people with lived experience in dialogue about why so much poverty exists when supports are already in place. Over that year, as community leaders host conversations, they invariably uncover ways to better align community systems. They look to modify existing social policies and envision new ones that will reduce poverty. This year-long process of engagement and learning deepens citizen and organizational commitment to work together.

## **Convening learning communities, our experience**

At Tamarack, we implement three kinds of learning communities. We host face-to-face learning events by creating an environment where people can learn as much from each other as they do from experts. We host online learning communities, where people can engage with their peers through interactive webinars and blogs. And, we have created two “campaigns” to facilitate action learning, where members participate in a continuous cycle of learning, doing, and reflecting on their common work.

**Learning events:** Tamarack hosts more than a dozen workshops on topics related to community change each year. We organize each event to ensure people experience a sense of “commons” through deliberate interaction, such as learning labs and interactive workshops. We facilitate trust-building between learners so that they can engage with genuine questions to challenge their ideas and create new knowledge.

We also aspire to build a common language between learners by highlighting the emerging knowledge, skills, and resources available to us. Ultimately, we want to create a supportive community where people can regenerate a sense of energy, mission, and purpose in their work so they can go back to their communities and implement what they articulated and learned.

**Online communities:** In addition to our main website, [tamarackcommunity.ca](http://tamarackcommunity.ca), we host three online spaces for specific learning communities: Tamarack Communities Collaborating for Impact for collaborative leaders utilizing a multi-sector approach to solve complex challenges; Vibrant Communities Canada for cities with comprehensive poverty reduction strategies led by multi-sector roundtables; and Deepening Community for those looking to recapture the idea of community, make it a guiding force in organizing neighbourhoods and institutions, and envision policies that foster well-being.

Each learning community hosts resources, interactive blogs, learner-initiated communities of practice, and webinars.

**Campaigns for Change:** Currently, Tamarack leads two action learning communities that support practitioners working to achieve large-scale community change. The first is a growing network

of 47 cities, known as Vibrant Communities – Cities Reducing Poverty, who are creating comprehensive poverty reduction strategies to impact the lives of one million Canadians living in poverty. Members of this network believe this can be achieved through aligning poverty efforts at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. If we all work toward the same end, the result will be a healthier, wealthier, and more vibrant Canada.

The second action learning community is Deepening Community which supports a network of cities in two areas of practice. The first is exploring social resilience through understanding and ultimately deepening the experience of community for residents. The second practice area is creating and sustaining strong, robust neighbourhoods.

**We organize each event to ensure people experience a sense of ‘commons.’**

### **Successes**

These learning communities have been successful. We see consistent growth in membership and participation in each space, resources are being used, and learning events are oversubscribed. Those of us working to create large-scale social change crave the opportunity to come together to share resources, reflect on our learning and experience with other practitioners, support each other in what is often isolating work, and consider new ways forward.

In a survey conducted in June 2014, learning community members shared that the value of connecting and collaborating with others enabled them to advance their community change efforts. Over the next five years, we plan to invest in strategies that improve the ways in which members can engage with Tamarack, with each other, and with their communities.

### **Challenges**

Convening a learning community isn’t without its challenges. Chief among these is sustaining the ongoing learning of members by providing regular opportunities to interact, easy access to resources, and keeping the sense of the commons when learners are dispersed. Capturing, making sense of, and reflecting back the knowledge the community creates



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**We turn theory into action by connecting people.**

remains a resource-intense challenge.

Time to participate is another reason for not joining in on learning activities. My good friend Al Etmanski often reminds me, “it is our job to make it easier for people to do the right thing.” By scheduling

short webinars and communities of practice, and providing e-magazines and events that allow people to “take the time” to learn and share knowledge,

we make the work of joining a learning community easier.

**Theory into action**

At Tamarack we work with leaders in non-profits, government, business, and the community to make their work of advancing positive community change more effective. We do this by teaching and writing about collective impact, community engagement, collaborative leadership, evaluating community impact, and community building. We turn theory into action by connecting people into networks to advance the change they wish to see in their communities. This is our contribution to a learning community of over 14,000 people.

Building learning communities provides a unique opportunity for those of us that want to see large-scale change. Learning together reframes the

agenda and enables us to ask bigger-meaning based questions, which in turn creates a deeper desire to collaborate and change the current system.

We are smarter together. Crystallized intelligence, collective wisdom, a common agenda, and shared measurement systems are all roads that lead to mutually reinforcing activities. Somehow I believe that learning communities are the ideal understanding of the continuous communication required for collective impact to work. We communicate to engage with one another, we learn about what works and what does not, and we change together. We become the change we want to see.

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