

## **EcoWell Community Recovery Program**

### **Wyndham Learning City Report**

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*The Wyndham Learning City in Victoria Australia has a focus in its report on supporting learning cities by rethinking shared projects. The report also addresses one of the themes set for the program in harnessing cultural institutions and libraries in building a sustainable learning culture in the community. The Wyndham rethinking shared projects included developing the concept of a new model of partnership with empathy which was illustrated by a Global Learning Festival project undertaken with the Melton Learning City as partner.*

*The important role of cultural institutions may also be seen in the Harlem New York report where the Wall-Ortiz Gallery and Center plays a key role in harnessing the arts in an integrated EcoWell approach that connects faith, the arts, and eco-justice.*

Are Learning Cities with strong pre-existing partnerships better placed to face the challenges of 2020, than those without strong partnerships? UNESCO highlight that 'partnerships are a key enabler for meeting global challenges and generating sustainable change and long-lasting impact'. For many Learning Cities like Wyndham, partnerships have been firmly embedded in learning city strategies and actions plans, particularly on a local level where regions have local learning festivals.

By working in partnerships, learning cities and their partners can leverage resources, expertise and competencies, in order to better achieve common development goals, visibility and impact for the communities they are set to serve.

Wyndham City Council's Learning Community Team has worked closely to harness partnerships with educational and cultural institutions and libraries in order to build a sustainable learning culture in the community. Many of these partnerships are formal and guided by a partnership agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Our partnership with our libraries is embedded in everything we do because our team has been purposefully placed within the Libraries area at Council as a key Council business goal. Indeed,

Wyndham Council acknowledges and supports the importance of libraries in underpinning and facilitating learning in the community.

A partnership that supports solidarity during times of adversity and hardship; as well as in more favourable times of prosperity and peace, needs empathy and compassion as its foundation. UNESCO highlights the 'worldwide response to COVID-19 has demonstrated the power of solidarity'. Wyndham concurs with this wholeheartedly and have seen this occur in our work in partnerships over the past six months in our COVID response and recovery. Building on this, in our work we have found that response and recovery occurs more profoundly when people within the partnership use empathy and compassion to create that solidarity.

While it might sound counter-intuitive in today's professional and detached world to establish and view partnerships in this way, reconsidering the building of partnerships using this empathy model means that when adversity hits, those in this robust partnership are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their stressors and challenges in a timely manner. Sharing these challenges can ultimately save a partnership project and support a better model of resilience and recovery when partners know they can be transparent in sharing their needs without the preconceptions and judgement of the other partners within the partnership. This is necessary at all stages of a partnership and allows the partnership to evolve authentically to achieve your shared goals. How, then, do we strengthen our partners' knowledge and understanding that showing empathy and vulnerability is not only ok, but a key element to supporting response and recovery in a crisis?

The fact that an intrinsic part of the Wyndham team's 'business as usual' approach and a key outcome of our Learning Community Strategy is based on harnessing and maintaining profound partnerships means that when COVID-19 hit, we immediately applied this lens to ensure these partnerships remained strong and authentic to support our own resilience in our programs, as well as those of our partners.

Thus, when something unexpected occurs such as a pandemic or a 'chance' opportunity comes our way such as our Global Learning Festival, we are prepared and able to respond much more proactively by tapping into those well-established, authentic partnerships to bring the relevant partners into our projects, reduce the response time, and acknowledge the immense opportunity to learn through the challenge of the crisis.

Supporting the EcCoWell2 Community Recovery Program stage of 'rethinking' in 2020, and 'recovery' in 2021, we collaborated with our neighbour Melton City Council to create the Global Learning Festival. This project was intended to support unity, recovery, engagement, collaboration and partnerships that may not have occurred without the impact of COVID-19 on our lives and communities. Our secondary goal was to motivate and support resilience for our learning city partners, but also for ourselves.

Each of the Global Learning Festival partners we worked with were at a different stage of their recovery process. For example, our partners that were running learning festivals, and had to postpone them, came up with alternative ideas to rethink how to respond to the pandemic. Options included cancelling completely, rescheduling until restrictions eased, and even moving the whole festival to an online format. The interactions we facilitated with global partners as a part of our Global Learning Festival project supported the various learning cities

and communities with their decision-making and rethinking process. Indeed, many of the learning festivals around the world incorporated shared ideas from their global colleagues because of this. This, in turn, created resilience through flexibility and a newly emerged support network of others on the same rethinking journey.

Our proactive harnessing of cultural institutions, schools, cities and public libraries in building a sustainable learning culture in the community was a global undertaking. Whilst an intended outcome was to support these groups to build a sustainable learning culture in their local community, a further outcome was also to create a culture of global recognition in the worldwide community where we are all intrinsically connected in 2020 due to the pandemic. The pandemic was the catalyst for us to form longer, more profound and a higher number of partnerships wherever we could because we knew strength in numbers, with a focus on authentic support and partnerships, could shift how a learning community saw itself during, and in post recovery of COVID.

The Global Learning Festival sought to enhance the healing and transformation of learning cities through a shared partnership model. It also came from a place where we wanted our partners to succeed despite the adversity facing them in 2020. We wanted to proactively partner with them to form a part of their success story. Their wins and empowerment spurred us on to support others in this way, and truly highlighted to our team the power of reaching out to a partner during challenging times and offering an opportunity to showcase their brilliance when there was a lot of surrounding darkness.

Our role, as partnership brokers this year has been one of required diplomacy and kindness. We have needed to be quick responders, cultural wizards and openhearted in our ways of reaching out and connecting. While this may seem beyond the professional lens that learning city professionals usually operate with, the dynamic of such a broken and confronting year has called for a different viewing of what helps form a successful, durable and resilient partnership in the first place. Is it about the champions involved and the energy they bring to a partnership? Is it the formality of a partnership agreement or MOU? Is it about the time that you put in to create and maintain the partnership, or is it something different? In 2020, we feel it has been a mix of this, with the addition of a huge amount of compassion and understanding. Understanding that yes, learning city programs and festivals will be delayed or even cancelled, teams may be redeployed, or people lose their jobs, people have been unwell (some affected by COVID-19 itself), others have lost loved ones. How can a partnership only take a professional stance when, in 2020, the personal has driven so much of the professional that the two stances can no longer be separated?

In terms of our partnerships for 2020, while we have used tools such as the Collective Impact Assessment Tool (CIAT) to measure how we are tracking and to ensure we create purposeful partnerships, we have tried to offer something more that is much harder to articulate.

In terms of establishing the co-led project with our neighbouring Melton City Council, we took a moment to compassionately understand the impact of COVID-19 on their Learning City team and consider if pitching to co-lead a project together at this time would enhance their motivation or add more stress to an already trying time. We also applied this same lens to ourselves as a team before embarking on proposing the Global Learning Festival. After all, what good is a partnership if partners burn out before a project even begins? This partnership wellbeing measure needs to be applied to be able to accurately see the capacity of the

contributing partners, view this through a lens of compassion, and then plan the project accordingly. Do we always get it right? Absolutely not. But going in to a partnership with this lens certainly helps drive better results because we care about our partners, the people behind them and their wellbeing, as well as the outcome of our projects.

People have been asking us, if we were to do the Global Learning Festival again, what we would do differently. While some have suggested a need to have had a longer lead time to plan and run such an event, others might say that it was only because of the short turnaround of this festival that such a positive response and final result ensued. That is to say, if we had not been in such a desperate state to connect, we may have been more cautious and calculating in even engaging in some of the partnerships that we did. However, because of the nature of such a challenging year for so many of those we partnered with across the globe, we became 'yes' people because we knew that for us, and many others, this partnership would be our lifeline to recovery in the most empowering and humbling way.

It is these non-traditional partnerships where we purposefully minimised the classic bureaucracy of working within a government agency that has allowed us to bring resources together in non-traditional ways. And the catalyst for such partnerships has been the impact of COVID-19.

What kind of organisations can serve as catalysts for creating compassionate partnerships? It is really around timing and capacity. Not every partner can take a step back to cast a critical eye over the environment to see where the most support and 'care' is needed, and to then approach partners to ask them the best way to create this partnership and offer this support.

On reading this, we hope that our global partners can see how we worked to create a model of compassionate partnerships, and that our aim was to support thriving, empowered and dynamic partnerships and projects with our team as a response and also pre-emption to this challenging year.

*The Global Learning Festival was co-led by Melton City Council and Wyndham City Council, in partnership with 20 other learning cities/communities from across the world including the PASCAL International Observatory and members of the EcCoWell2 team <https://www.globallearningfestival.com/>.*