

**An Alternative Framework  
for  
Community Learning Centers  
in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**

***A Systemic Design Approach  
Toward the Creation of a  
Transformational Learning System***

**by  
Michael Frederick Reber**

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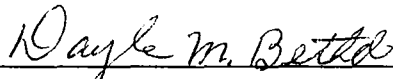
*An Alternative Framework for Community Learning Centers in the 21st Century:  
A Systemic Design Approach Toward the Creation of a Transformational Learning System*

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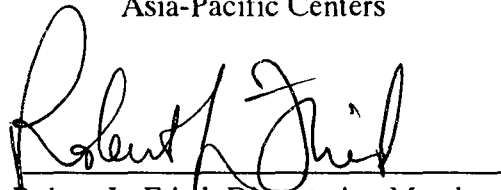
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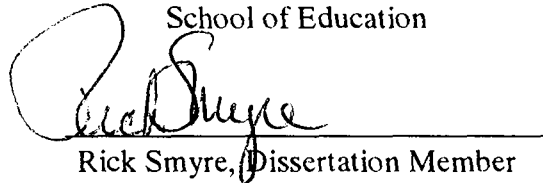
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Michael F. Reber  
has been approved for the  
Asia-Pacific Centers  
by



Dayle M. Bethel, Dissertation Advisor  
Dean of The International University  
Asia-Pacific Centers



Robert L. Fried, Dissertation Member  
Associate Professor of Northeastern University  
School of Education



Rick Smyre, Dissertation Member  
Doctoral Student Mentor of The International University  
President of Communities Of The Future (COTF)

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**Abstract**

Public Community Learning Centers (CLCs), at least in the context of the United States, are social structures that have been established to address particular community needs. In the beginning, they were instituted as extensions of state departments' human services in order to assist communities with programs such as adult literacy and high school graduation certification. Today, they have taken on a broader role as a result of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title X, Part I) that gives rural and inner-city public schools nearly \$2 billion over five years (1999~2004) to develop CLCs for programs such as mentoring in basic skills or helping high school students prepare for college.

Despite these noble efforts, public CLCs are still not integral parts of community sustainability. One could argue that a major cause for this is that they are established mainly for political purposes. However, the problem is much deeper. Public CLCs today are unable to serve as sustainable social structures because they lack several foundational principles that assist communities with creating and maintaining sustainability. In short, they do not adequately reflect the values, beliefs, and knowledge of the current community education movement. Thus, an alternative framework within which communities can develop CLCs is needed.

Using a systemic design approach toward the design of a community learning system, an alternative framework for CLCs is designed that enables communities to create the conditions whereby they can become self-reliant, self-governing, and sustainable.

## **Introduction**

The community learning network is a framework proposed by scholars such as Ivan Illich, Malcolm Knowles, Bela Banathy, James Moffett, and Charles Reigeluth that enables communities to create the conditions for self-reliance, self-governance, and sustainability. Each of these scholars has created an approach for developing and implementing a community learning network. Bela Banathy's "Design Architecture" is one approach that has been helpful for communities and which is the method employed in this treatise.

Systemic Design Architecture is a design approach toward all social systems and consists of five iterative cycles: initial exploration, knowledge base, description of outcomes, evaluation and experimentation, and design solution. It is appropriate for designing a community learning network because it can assist a community with revisiting and refining its values and beliefs and incorporating principles of *participatory democratic action*. This in turn creates the necessary conditions whereby a community can, increasingly, become more self-reliant, self-governing, and sustainable. In addition, all members of the community, not just those elected to the school board or parents of children who attend public schools, participate in the design solution of the learning system. This activity includes defining what the system is and what the system will do for learners, addressing the specifications, describing the system's functions, and finally, defining the enabling systems which typically are the management system, the organization, and the systemic environment of the learning network.

Using Systemic Design Architecture to design an alternative framework for community learning centers in this treatise, several conclusions can be drawn.

The kind of society that the learning system should help to create is one in which every individual discovers his innate potential and lives a life that is commensurate with his self and others in order to, through participatory democratic actions, create a culture that develops and sustains the political, cultural, economic, and environmental spheres of society.

This vision of society is complemented by a vision of a future learning system. The learning system should be an open and transformational learning environment that exists to assist individuals with discovering and actualizing their innate potentials; transmitting to them cultural roles; conveying to them values of the culture; assisting them in learning how to search for truth, beauty, and good, and to create value in the world; developing in them competency in the culture's notational systems; providing them guidance, coaching, teaching, and training in the human domains of society; and encouraging experts in their respective fields to participate in the educational endeavor of the learning system.

The visions are actualized within the context of current realities. Some of the realities include cognitive and human growth, sociocultural, economic, socio-technological, technological, scientific, and organizational realities. Some of the implications of these realities entail a more learner-centered educational environment and a transformation *in the relationship* between the four spheres of society.



Some of the values to which the members of the new learning system adhere include recognizing the dignity and uniqueness of each individual and organizing learning around the cognitive abilities of each person in order to assist him with actualizing his inherent potential.

Using the visions and realities as a knowledge base, an image of the future learning system is created. Some of the elements of the image include the contention that education SHOULD assist an individual with actualizing his potential and that education SHOULD be organized around the cognitive abilities of each person.

The core ideas that help shape the learning system include the principles of self-actualization, brain-based learning and theory of multiple intelligences, symbolic interactionist social psychology, self-government, learner-centered and learner-directed education, and systemic design.

In order to implement the image, a mission statement and purposes are developed. One mission of the learning system is to maximize the greatest benefits for individuals in their development toward self-actualization. In addition to the mission statement, the statement of purposes explains the arrangements and relationships within the community learning network, such as creating a society in which all four social spheres are arranged and integrated in such a way as to assist individuals with actualizing their true potentials.

The mission and purposes of the new learning system transform the definition of community learning centers into one that acknowledges a holistic outlook toward life and learning. Some of the new aspects of CLCs include: 1) becoming a “node” in the learning network that helps to facilitate learning and network relationships in order to maximize the total benefits of the system, 2) providing for learners of all ages learning resources and arrangements that assist them in actualizing their true potentials, and 3) encouraging the creation of a true learning society in which all individuals are able to contribute to one another’s learning despite geographical differences.

In summary, systemic design architecture transforms the narrow utilitarian definition of community learning centers into a holistic and life-actualizing definition that is inclusive of the entire community. CLCs within the framework of a community learning network are located in different places throughout the community, such as school buildings, local business offices, or people’s homes. Furthermore, within this framework CLCs fill a multitude of communal learning functions that assist in the natural process of community sustainability and self-reliance.

The picture that I have briefly presented is based upon some basic assumptions that must be clarified before proceeding with a comprehensive discussion on the topic of public community learning networks. First, what I mean by *public* is that which affects or concerns the community or the people. Second, *community* is differentiated from “society-at-large.” As David Norton states, society-at-large is about impersonal association (1991, 146):

Relations among persons who appear to one another not as persons, that is, unified totalities that are ends in themselves, but rather as compartmented roles, offices, skills, and so forth. Relations in society-at-large are impersonal because they are utility relations, others appearing to each in but the aspect according to the needs of each, and not for what they are in themselves.

Community, on the other hand, as Walter Nicgorski describes, “is rooted in the individual and is formed, led and enriched by distinct responsible persons. Rather than a collectivity of people, it is a mutual sharing of their particular endowments” (1986, 326). It is, overall, about interpersonal association, the “form of association intermediate between the individual and society-at-large” (Norton 1991, 138). It is comprised of integrated persons who interact with one another as “whole persons” (ibid.):

Everything that is the person is continuous with what appears in each expression and supportive of it....Each of a person’s expressions reflect one or another of her life-shaping choices and her life-shaping choices are themselves complementary to one another and contributory in their distinctive ways to the individual’s enterprise of self-actualization.

Furthermore, these integrated persons find solidarity in certain shared beliefs that are “embodied in institutions and practices,” and it is within this context that people come to acknowledge those who are members and non-members of the community and to care for one another as whole persons (ibid.). This caring is best actualized when conditions exist to assist people with doing self-fulfilling work.

With this understanding of community, *education* is defined as the drawing out of one's inherent potential in accordance with the principles that govern each stage of life. Childhood is a stage for exploring one's immediate world, beginning with the family and moving outward into the community. As the child explores his world and engages in meaningful activity that is commensurate with his interests, abilities, and inclinations, he acquires necessary skills at an elementary level that imitate those skills for the performance of social roles in later life. Adolescence is a time for self-discovery, the answering of the question, "Who am I?" which requires society to provide young people opportunities to experience alternative social roles or lives and to recognize mistakes as part of the educational process of discovering one's true self. Maturity is a time for actualizing the life that one has chosen to live. The mature individual is self-governing and requires opportunities to further the development of his growth, in a term, "self-fulfilling work." Society must provide the conditions that enable people to do the work that is theirs to do in life. Finally, old age is a time for reflection and the contribution of experience and wisdom to the next generation. Senior citizens should be regarded as important educational resources for all the preceding stages of life.

*Public Education for an American Republic* is education that is available to all members of a community. It is the *complementarity and congeniality* of private and civil association within the public sphere for the purposes of assisting persons with identifying and drawing out their inherent potentials and helping them to actualize those potentials. The implication of this idea is that the responsibility for education lies solely in the hands of the members of the community and not government. Hence, to

entrust government to be the primary benefactor, standard setter, and overseer of public education only leads to political and educational lethargy on the part of the populace; thus eroding democratic, republican self-government.

Government has two roles in a healthy society. At one level it must be a “monopoly of coercive power” that provides for public safety, law enforcement, and national defense (Norton 1991, 170). For Americans, it must protect our Bill of Rights and those rights expressed in the state constitutions. On another level it must be a conducive power that “affords to the persons who comprise its constituency the requisite social conditions for leading the best lives possible,” i.e. subsistence and enablement (ibid., ix). This is in alignment with John Dewey’s two criteria for a democratic society as stated in, *Democracy and Education*: (1) providing a numerous and varied amount of interests that are consciously shared amongst members of the community and which are relied upon in guiding society, and (2) maintaining a fuller and freer interplay of the various forms of private and civil association that the members can enjoy which in turn affect social habits in the democratic community (1997, 86-87). Thus, the development, financing, and implementation of a public community learning network occurs via the private and civil associations of the community with government providing a “conducive” environment to let them do so.

Because individuals are complementing each other’s personal excellences within a context of congenial relationships, people who do not necessarily share common values, interests and ideals can create a public community learning network. Randy Hewitt purports that “the democratic ideal refers to the faith in the individual to

define and develop her particular capacities in harmony with the needs and demands of others as they define and develop their own powers” (2002, 8). Hewitt continues, “As a standard of judgment, the ideal refers to the degree to which happiness and harmony are brought about in actual effect of acting upon her idea of the good. It follows, then, that the individual has the right and duty to act with common good in mind. And, as new potentials are realized, new consequences, demands, and claims of right emerge that require a recalibration of action and a broader idea of a common good” (ibid.).

A person acting within the context that Hewitt describes is the embodiment of those values and beliefs that Norton refers to as, *noblesse oblige*, “persons recognize that their responsibility for continuous moral growth is their responsibility for progressively more elevated moral conduct” (1991, xii). This is not an elitist or utopian ideal. It is an ideal that every person strives to achieve at his particular stage of life. Therefore, a child cannot be held accountable to the demands of an adolescent and an adolescent cannot be held accountable to the demands of an adult. Each has its own place and its own principles for character development that a person is responsible for achieving.

Character development is categorically entwined with equity. According to Hewitt (2002, 9):

That the democratic problem is a practical one suggests that it gets its concrete form and meaning from within the various associations that individuals share with each other. Therefore, the particular meaning of liberty, equality, justice, and hence power are determined

by individuals as they define and measure the particular consequences of acting for some specific good upon the growth of their individual capacities and upon the shared conditions that nourish this growth....Democracy in general can be realized only to the degree that the individuals put it into practice through the particular shared activities that define them and give them purpose. A more just and enriching relation between the development of one's potential and that of all others can be established, refined, and expanded only to the extent that individuals strive to be thoughtful, appreciative, and understanding of each other in everything they do.

Equity can be further explained in terms of proportional equality. As Plato quotes Socrates in *The Republic*, "We are not born all exactly alike but different in nature, for all sorts of different jobs" (*Book II*, 168). This can be differentiated into *proportional productive equality* and *proportional recipient equality*. Proportional productive equality "obtains when A and B are alike doing the work for which each is by nature best suited" (Norton 1991, 161). This holds that government has a responsibility to create the conditions that provide people ample opportunities to do the self-fulfilling work that is theirs to do, and the nature of each community will determine the management of its members into the *right* work. Right work in this context is work that exists or has the potential to exist in the community that can be done by those people who have the commensurable nature and capacities to do the work. This extends beyond the limits of racial, physical, cultural, or gender equity. Funding and access are available to all in accordance with each person's nature and capacities and the management structure of the system.

Proportional recipient equality “obtains when A and B alike possess the particular goods and utilities to which each is entitled” (ibid.). This means that not all people will be entitled to all goods, but all people will be entitled to only those goods that assist with their self-actualization. And who determines this? For Plato in *The Republic* he believed that it is was the role of the Guardians. But for an American Republic, the responsibility rests in the hands of mature, self-governing individuals. For children and adolescents, the process of entitlement is assisted by parents, the extended family, teachers, mentors, guides, and coaches. It does not rest in the hands of our current guardians, i.e. the school board, state boards of education, the federal government, or presidential blue-ribbon committees. Each person is entitled to those goods that he requires for his self-development and the limits of one’s entitlement is determined by the course one chooses in his life. Norton expresses this in the following manner (1991, 121-122):

The individual who possesses self-knowledge and lives by it manifests justice, first by not laying claim to goods that he or she cannot utilize, and second by actively willingly such goods into the hands of those who can utilize them toward self-actualization. What is expressed in both cases is not “selflessness,” but the proportionality of a self-responsible self that is situated in relations of interdependence with other selves that are, or ought to be, self-responsible. An individual who possesses self-knowledge and lives by its direction recognizes goods to which he or she is not entitled as distractions from his or her proper course of life...And to will to others their true utilities is at the same time the concrete expression of respect for them as ends in themselves and recognition that we stand to gain from the worthy living of others.



In conclusion, the learning system proposed in the following pages recognizes the dignity of the human being and his integral relationship with community. It is by re-organizing learning systems around individuals that a clearer understanding of community is realized. Thus, a public community learning network is not created by atomized individuals who have conflicting values and beliefs and who view themselves as utilities, but “whole” people who see themselves on journeys of self-development that ends only at death. In order to guide people on their journeys in a most equitable and humane way, tools are provided, such as the voucher system (it is more of a pass than a voucher), which are developed by the community via private and civil associations in cooperation with local government. Though all communities are different and have varying notions of “community,” the learning system should never undermine a people’s right to equal access and opportunities to those goods and utilities that are required at the appropriate times of their learning and self-actualization.

**Part 1**  
**Review of Literature**

## Introduction

Part 1 is a review of the literature on community learning and Community Learning Centers (CLCs). The term “community learning” or “learning-in-community” is employed instead of “community education” in order to distinguish between the two meanings. Within the “community-and-learning/education” movement, two distinct concepts regarding the relationship of learning and community have developed. According to Robert Fried, *learning-in-community* emphasizes “community-based *learning* processes,” whereas *community education* focuses on “the delivery of educational *programs*.”

Chapter 1, “CLCs—Past and Present,” reviews various case studies of CLCs in both the public and private sectors. It begins with a summary of the earliest documented public CLC, the New York City CUE CLC Program, and continues with an analysis of two other public CLCs. Following discussion of the public CLCs is a look at one example of a fully integrated CLC system, the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago with a history dating back to 1903.

Chapter 2, “Community Learning Concept Contributors,” reviews some key scholars who have developed the idea of community learning networks and community learning centers. Specifically, the work of Ivan Illich, Malcolm Knowles, Bela Banathy, James Moffett, Charles M. Reigeluth, and Robert L. Fried is explored. Illich’s concept of the learning “web” is recognized. In addition, Knowles’ conceptual framework within which all social systems are viewed as systems of learning resources is discussed. Banathy’s “Learning Society” is referred to as well as his method of

systemic design of learning systems. The educational contributions of Moffett are acknowledged, especially his vision of “the universal schoolhouse” and its emphasis on systemic problem solving, open system of education, and moral democratic society. Also considered is Reigeluth, a systemic design colleague of Banathy, who perceives the CLC as a component within a transformational learning system. Finally, Fried’s contribution to the concept of the CLC during his work with eight communities in New Hampshire from 1973 through 1975 on the CLC Project is presented.

## **Chapter 1: CLCs—Past and Present (1969 through Today)**

This paper focuses on a few CLCs even though an abundance of models could be addressed. The intention is to shed light on the different learning systems in which CLCs are grounded. The CLCs that are addressed include the New York City CUE CLC, USAID LearnLink, the federally funded 21<sup>st</sup> Century CLC Program, and the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago.

### ***New York City CUE CLC Program***

#### Background

The New York City Center for Urban Education (CUE) established its first Community Learning Center (CLC) Program in 1969 for the South Bronx and the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn. The program's mission was to create better communication between schools, parents, and the greater community (1971a, 1-5). As CUE recognizes in, *Ways of Establishing and Funding CLCs* (1971a, 1),

From one city to the next, community mistrust of what goes on in the buildings called schools emerges as a persistent and pervasive deterrent to establishing the level of communication necessary for effective education. Equally many school people often regard with suspicion any parents or other community residents who express close interest in their educational activities. Thus, despite the polite rhetoric which is designed to mask the extent of the severely strained relationship between school and urban community, more and more the widespread disillusionment with traditional public education unabashedly occupies the attention of community groups. The schools are perceived as irrelevant to the needs and interests of the urban community and, with few exceptions, they are.

### Assumptions

Three assumptions served as the basis for the conception of the CLC that the New York City CUE developed. These included an expansion of urbanization, increase in society's technological needs, and continuance of participatory democracy in both action and belief (ibid., 2). Furthermore, these three assumptions had at least three implications. The first implication was a need for an enlightened electorate who was capable of meeting requirements such as technological literacy, political participation, and virtuous living. The second implication was the creation of an educational system that could communicate and interact with its clients responsibly. The final implication was the creation of self-governing communities that were capable of understanding their own needs and wants and in turn creating an educational system that was able to produce future generations that were capable of doing the same within a pluralistic social framework (ibid.).

### CUE's Definition of a CLC

The purpose of the CUE CLC Program was to enhance communication between the schools, parents, and greater community. CUE defined CLCs as (ibid., 3),

Settings in which educational activities and meetings take place. They are strategically located within the community. As envisioned, the Centers should exist independently of the school system, and therefore be funded by other sources such as foundations, the federal government, private organizations, and universities...The community learning center [should] be a place which fosters easy exchange of ideas, and a productive working together of school personnel and community persons.

Other attributes of a CUE CLC included staff, personnel, and costs. The staff developed and evaluated programs and designed research. It was also knowledgeable about the community for which it was serving, such as the kinds of programs that were already serving the community, school and community demographics, school data, school enrollment figures, and information regarding parent participation in the school (ibid., 5). Furthermore, the staff included members of the community and adequately reflected its culture and beliefs. For example, if a CLC were situated in a predominately Spanish-speaking community, then the staff of that CLC was bilingual and lived in the community.

The personnel were both paid personnel and volunteers from within the community. Volunteers were part-time high school students, college students studying to be teachers or social workers, or full-time retirees. They assisted in a variety of ways. Full-time retirees were valuable because they had experiences that they could share, such as assisting with office management or program development (ibid., 7).

A final key attribute of a CUE CLC was its costs. The budget for a CLC was supported by outside sources, such as the state or federal government or foundations. Costs included fixed and variable costs, such as salaries, office supplies, and electricity (ibid., 9).

In addition to the aforementioned attributes of CLCs, CUE distinguished between CLCs and Community Centers. Though community centers had some of the attributes of CLCs, they did not have them all. CLCs were considered to be legitimate

organizations in the view of the community, the political establishments, and the educational practitioners. The programs, projects, and curricula of CLCs were integrated into the school curricula. In addition, the programs offered by the CLCs were both formal and informal. Another attribute of the CLCs was their location. All of the CLCs were located in an area that was accessible to both community members and school officials (1971a, 4).

#### Mission and Goals of a CUE CLC

The mission of a CUE CLC was “to improve the quality of the transactions between school systems and the publics they serve” (1971e, 1). This mission was supported by three goals. The first was to provide a neutral environment in which both school officials and community members were able to discuss educational problems. The second was to serve as a resource center for both school officials and community members regarding educational issues. The final goal was to serve as a mechanism for translating community educational needs into developmental projects (ibid.).

#### The CUE CLC Program Components

The first CUE CLC that was established served “as a resource center for community residents on educational issues” and as “a mechanism for increasing program interface” (1971e, 2-3). The components of the CUE CLC Program included three sub-programs: The Educational Leadership Development Program (ELDP), The Parent Participation Workshop Program (PPWP), and The School-Community Relations Program (SCRCP) (ibid.)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>For purposes of this paper, only the ELDP is reviewed because of its significant impact upon the lives of those



These sub-programs were mutually exclusive in the first year that they were implemented—“no formal attempt was made to interrelate the programs, and no sessions or special events were arranged to bring participants in the various programs or subgroups in contact with each other” (ibid.). However, in the following years, CUE worked to establish stronger communications between the three sub-programs via field administrators. The field administrators were responsible for three key aspects of communication between the sub-programs. The first was to act as liaison between the CLC and the central CUE office regarding administrative matters. The second was to create a communications network between community-based educational interest groups, community leaders, and school personnel. The third was to allocate and utilize space in the CLC for functions not directly related to the programs (ibid., 2-3).

### **Educational Leadership Developmental Program (ELD Program)**

#### Participants in the ELD Program

The program took place at the South Bronx CLCs and the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn and included two hundred trainees that participated in the program from fall of 1970 to spring of 1971. The predominant groups were Puerto Ricans and African-Americans. One of the objectives of the CUE staff was to increase the level of cooperative interaction between these two groups (1971f, 8-9).

#### Goal

The most important goal of the ELD Program was “increasing a sense of community, unifying community residents to present a united front in presenting

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involved in the program, the schools, and the greater community to which all belonged.