Research Paper

Learning communities in the various settings of lifelong learning

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Abstract

This paper examines the role and functions of learning communities across different contexts of lifelong learning, focusing on higher education, vocational education and training, learning in later life, and cultural learning environments. Drawing on sociocultural learning theories and the concept of communities of practice, the study interprets learning as a socially embedded process shaped through participation, interaction, and shared meaning-making. The paper applies a conceptual and interpretive approach to explore how community-based learning manifests across diverse educational and cultural settings. The analysis highlights that learning communities extend beyond formal educational institutions and constitute important spaces for knowledge creation, social participation, and identity formation. In higher education, they foster student integration and intergenerational learning; in vocational education, workplace environments function as collaborative learning spaces supporting professional socialization; in later life, community learning contributes to active ageing and social inclusion; while cultural institutions provide alternative arenas for non-formal and informal learning. The findings suggest that learning communities represent a key framework of lifelong learning by strengthening the social embeddedness of knowledge and supporting participation and personal development throughout the life course.

Keywords: learning communities; lifelong learning; community learning; higher education; vocational education and training; active ageing; cultural learning; informal learning; non-formal learning

Introduction

In the field of education and learning research, recent decades have seen a growing emphasis on approaches that interpret learning as a process embedded in social and cultural contexts. Alongside earlier conceptions of learning that focused primarily on individual cognitive processes, theoretical perspectives have increasingly emerged that link the construction of knowledge to community practices, social interactions, and the cultural environment. According to sociocultural learning theories, learning is not an isolated individual activity but a process in which individuals participate through social interaction, shared activities, and meaning-making processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Within this interpretive framework, learning is understood as a process of community participation and the co-construction of knowledge.

One key concept within this approach is the learning community, which refers to a learning environment in which participants develop their knowledge through collaboration, the exchange of experiences, and reflective dialogue. In learning communities, learners are not merely recipients of information but active contributors to the creation and sharing of knowledge. In this way, learning becomes a communal activity in which participants mutually influence each other's thinking, experiences, and interpretations.

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The concept of learning communities is closely related to the theory of communities of practice. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning can be understood as a specific form of social participation that is realized through engagement in shared activities. Communities of practice are groups whose members are connected through a shared domain of interest or activity, and who develop their knowledge and competences through joint practice. Wenger (1998) emphasizes that learning in this context is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but also an identity-forming activity, through which individuals gradually become active members of the community.

The significance of community-based learning becomes particularly prominent in the context of lifelong learning. The concept of lifelong learning is based on the idea that learning is not confined to formal educational systems but can be understood as a process that accompanies the individual throughout their entire life course. In this process, forms of learning that take place in informal or non-formal settings, often within community frameworks, also play an important role (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2015). In this sense, learning communities create environments in which knowledge is not generated exclusively through institutionalized educational processes but also through interactions and shared experiences among participants.

In higher education, learning communities primarily appear as tools for promoting collaborative learning and enhancing student engagement. The development of such communities can contribute to students' institutional integration, strengthen their academic motivation, and foster the development of critical thinking (Tinto, 2020). Within these communities, students engage not only in individual learning processes but also in shaping their knowledge through joint problem-solving and collaboration.

In adult education and vocational training, learning communities play a particularly important role in supporting experiential learning. Adult learning builds heavily on individuals' prior experiences, which become interpretable and shareable through collective learning processes. Andragogical approaches emphasize that the effectiveness of learning is significantly increased when learners are given opportunities to share their experiences and engage in collective reflection (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2015). In vocational education, this is especially evident in practical activities and professional socialization, where learners participate in shared practices and acquire various forms of professional knowledge.

Learning in later life is another area in which learning communities hold particular significance. Educational programs designed for older adults—such as Universities of the Third Age—not only serve knowledge transmission functions but also play an important role in strengthening social relationships, supporting active ageing, and promoting social participation (Formosa, 2014). These communities also provide opportunities for sharing experiences and fostering intergenerational learning processes.

Learning communities are not limited to formal educational institutions but also appear in various contexts of cultural learning. Museums, libraries, community cultural institutions, and other cultural spaces increasingly function as learning environments that promote community-based learning. In these settings, learning often takes place in informal and experience-based ways, where participants expand their knowledge through shared experiences and cultural practices (Falk & Dierking, 2013).

Hungarian academic literature has also devoted increasing attention to the study of community learning and learning communities. Kozma (2018) interprets learning communities as important arenas of social learning that contribute to the social embeddedness of knowledge and the strengthening of community participation. Similarly, Márkus (2021) highlights that community-based learning forms play a significant role in increasing adults' learning activity and supporting informal learning processes. Based on these perspectives, learning communities can be seen as a complex framework that plays an important role in the creation, sharing, and social embeddedness of knowledge across various educational and cultural contexts—from higher education through adult and vocational training to learning in later life and the sphere of cultural institutions.

The structure of the present study follows the logic of lifelong learning by examining learning communities across different educational and cultural settings throughout the life course. First, the paper explores higher education as a space where intergenerational relationships, student collaboration, and teacher–student interaction shape community-based learning processes. It then turns to vocational education, where workplace learning environments and dual training systems represent practice-oriented forms of community learning. The following section discusses learning communities in older age, highlighting the role of non-formal educational initiatives and social participation in active ageing. Finally, the study examines cultural institutions as broader spaces of informal and non-formal learning, where shared cultural experiences contribute to knowledge creation and community formation. Through these interconnected perspectives, the paper aims to demonstrate that learning communities constitute an essential framework of lifelong learning across diverse stages of life and institutional contexts.

Learning communities in Higher Education

Similar to learning activities in primary and secondary education, learning in higher education is not an isolated process, but takes place within various communities. Dialogue, interaction, influence, or counter-influence with these communities may be secondary compared to the individual characteristics, but they certainly contribute to the success or failure of learning. In higher education, students represent different generations, and can be classified into three large groups. Some students follow the traditional academic path, meaning they start right after high school, the literature identifies them as traditional students (typical age group between 18 and 24). The post-traditional or adult learners (over 25 years of age) generally fall into two categories: one of them take a few years off but still start college as young adults; still others are older when they begin studying for their first or subsequent degrees, often while balancing work and family life. The third group includes the lifelong learners (over 60 years of age) those who are studying at the end of their careers or as retirees.

The faculty also spans multiple generations, with both young researchers and senior faculty teaching students of various ages. Pusztai (2011) provides a thorough investigation of the nature of intergenerational and intragenerational relationships in higher education. In her opinion, fellow students are the most important agents in the socialisation process in higher education, as they offer social support to one another and circulate information; furthermore, they can also encourage commitment to academic goals and convey behavioural patterns. By analysing teachers as agents of socialisation, she points out that the role of teachers as information providers has changed through massification (the influx of large numbers of students into higher education), while in the teaching profession, which has become structured, there are different attitudes towards communicating expected norms. Students' relationships with their instructors have a major impact on the integration of adult students in higher education. Elmi (2020) draws attention to the fact that the instructor's support in developing community and motivation of students is important and facilitates academic success through emotional intelligence. Students demand and expect personal meetings, effective communication, partnership, and practical knowledge transfer. Their commitment to studying has a positive effect on the relationship with professors and vice versa (Engler 2017, and the relationship can also significantly influence the development of professional identity (Tomlinson & Jackson 2021).

Higher education students require the development and maintenance of personal relationships with their instructors within the academic context. Pusztai's (2015) research highlighted that the teacher-student relationship outside the classroom, along with the context of the class, defines academic progress even more. This is especially true for students of lower social classes, for whom faculty attention has a particularly strong impact on academic performance and institutional integration. According to the research of Wong and Chapman (2023) student satisfaction can be detected in three different types of relationships, namely student and student formal, student and student informal, student and instructor. Regarding the relationship between students and teachers, researchers emphasize the importance of feedback in collaborative work. (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Simonsmeier et al., 2020)

For university student communities, the participation of multiple generations can be an advantage, as they can learn from one another. Older students benefit from their labor market experience, and they also effectively apply the competencies they have acquired through various social roles (employee, parent, child caring for their parents, etc.) in the world of learning (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000; Pusztai & Engler, 2014). In fact, Kasworm (1990) argues that the presence of older student groups has a positive effect on the learning attitudes and work ethic of younger generations.

Older students, who mostly study while working, are called non-traditional students, who form a special but significant group of university students, both in part-time and full-time education. Comparative studies of full-time and part-time students highlight the adult students' excellent time management skills (Richardson-King 1998), their ability to maintain self-directed studying habits (Schuetze-Slowey 2000, El-Amin 2020), and their long-term dedication (Covas & Veiga 2021; Arjomandi et al., 2018). Students who defined themselves as non-traditional because of their age, employment and parenting responsibility, had higher resilience compared to traditional students (Chung et al., 2017). In addition to analyzing changes, an important question is whether higher education institutions should respond to changing needs and processes, and if so, how they should relate to the education of the new student society in practice.

Senge (1997) proposes a model in which institutions involve the potentials of the economy in education through practical and, to a lesser extent, theoretical training. Proposing the renewal of higher education, he criticizes those whose knowledge operates in a closed system, illustrating the complete isolation from the outside world with large lecture halls. According to the results of Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) non-

traditional students put more energy into informal contact outside formal teaching situations than traditional students do.

The growing presence of adult students has also attracted the attention of researchers, who also perceive a change in the role of higher education due to their increasing proportion. Part-time students form a heterogeneous society within the walls of universities and colleges not only compared to traditional students, but also due to differences in relation to each other (e.g. different ages, occupations, positions, work experience, student pathways, individual backgrounds, etc.). The changed, diverse compound of students creates a different milieu to universities, especially institutions with a long tradition.

Higher education institutions welcome their unusual students in different ways. Sometimes, certain groups are not allowed to prevail, the level of subsidies is quite limited, and the institutions do not show flexibility in response to these students' needs. Other institutions, especially smaller ones are welcoming new students with short-term but diverse trainings and individualized methods. The educational institutions should consider the needs of adult students, for example, the crediting of their previously acquired knowledge and their informal knowledge, in particular, self-directed learning, and their information and communication technological background. (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) The changing role of higher education institutions arises in connection with formal training in higher education. Higher education institutions, especially universities, have been set up to provide small elite training and conduct research, while adult education must provide practice-oriented training, sometimes for disadvantaged groups.

The extent of students' studying aspiration, effectiveness, and integration is likely to be increased if adequate resources are also available within higher education. It is also in the interest of higher education institutions to provide these resources.

Older students are often at higher risk of dropping out, especially if they work regularly, are raising children, are caring for an elderly family member, or have had a history of failure in their previous schools. (Behr et al., 2020; Fragoso et al., 2013; Engler, 2013; Sánchez & Elias, 2020; Pusztai et al., 2022; Venegas & Muggli, 2020) On the one hand, student drop-out can be reduced, and on the other hand, part-time student supply can be ensured, because with the approach and practice of the institution, it will be attractive in the higher education market. By considering their needs, teaching arrangements, teaching methods, and services can be improved, which also has a positive effect on the former factors. Through an inclusive approach, the institution can successfully integrate students and can contribute to creating opportunities. Thus, the heterogeneous student society finds its place in the academic space, makes a successful investment in human capital, expands its social and cultural capital, all of which creates a favourable studying aspiration for its future investments (Engler, 2017). While higher education learning communities are mainly shaped by relationships between students of different ages and the bond between teachers and students in an academic setting, another type of community learning develops in vocational education. Here, the workplace itself serves as the main learning space. In the dual training system, community is not defined by lecture halls or seminar rooms but by the shared activities in a working environment. This moves the focus of community from academics to the professional world.

Community-Based Workplace Learning in Vocational Education

In vocational education, during the implementation of training and learning processes, considered in historical terms (the ancient collegium, the medieval guild, the early modern manufactory, the modern factory industry), practice-oriented training and the related learning forms and processes that are realized through it have predominantly formed an integral part of the entire educational-learning spectrum. Education that is close to reality, knowledge transfer and acquisition that simulates reality as closely as possible is one of the most important areas of vocational education, and as such, it has often been and continues to be a subject of debate to this day.

The dual training system in the Hungarian vocational education has a significant history. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the demand for it was formulated at a state level, which had already been recognized earlier by the large industrial companies created at that time (e.g., the Ózd ironworks). In the vocational training being established (apprenticeship training), alongside theoretical education, practical training played a significant role from the beginning. This often-changing dual nature has accompanied Hungarian vocational education over the past one and a half centuries. In post-2010 education policy, significant emphasis was placed on the newly reorganized dual secondary vocational education (Vörös, 2014).

Over the past one and a half decades, on the one hand, more and more companies have become open to hosting young people studying vocational training and have registered themselves with the help of the chambers as training sites. On the other hand, as a result, more and more students are able to participate in dual training. Their numbers have continuously increased over the years; from 37,000 at the starting year, 2012, the number of participants in dual training has risen to over 50,000 (the data are not precise due to the uncertainty of the sources). This is a triangular relationship; school (student) – chamber – company (training site) promises benefits for all parties involved (Györgyi & Piacsek, 2025). Students enter a real or at least reality-simulating workplace environment (training workshop), and entirely different learning processes are initiated and realized than within the framework of school education.

In dual training, many forms of learning appear in workplace training and learning processes that are less common or not at all characteristic in other learning contexts. Learning by doing, stop and go model, instant learning, trial and error learning, project-based learning, problem-based learning, experiential learning, embedded learning, peer learning, group learning, mentored learning, learning by doing, informal learning, self-directed learning, autonomous learning provide the form and process diversity of learning. We can establish that the world of work and the tasks to be solved create their own forms and processes of learning in such a way that the most useful and promising learning opportunities are articulated in each workplace context. The lasting and organic integration of these learnings into an individual's body of knowledge and expertise is precisely provided and ensured by active behavior and the involvement of various senses in learning (CEDEFOP 2025; Evans, Bound & Erdei, 2022).

Workplace training settings function as hotspots of knowledge transfer in vocational education. At these points, previously learned theory meets and clashes with its application. The training workshops excellently support the paradigm shift in education and learning that has already taken place. Learning emerged from the paradigm shift the winner, and the training workshops are much more about learning activities (individual and communal) (Evans et al., 2006).

Workshops go beyond physical attributes and characteristics. The physical space of workshops not only serves for placing tools and objects and providing space for the production process, but it should also be interpreted as a learning space. Workshops model real work processes in a practice-oriented, sometimes playful way. Learning that takes place in the workshop, as part of the theoretical construct of workplace learning, ensures knowledge transfer. Part of this knowledge transfer involves the learner testing, applying, and gradually developing into a skill the theory they possess. On the other hand, the theory is also tested in practice. Furthermore, and at least equally importantly, physical contact with raw materials and machines, tools (technology) also takes place (Martínez, Izquierdo & Sánchez, 2022).

Personality development that takes place in the workshop, beyond the acquisition of concrete knowledge, also has a strong socializing effect. The young learner experiences the work environment and through this can form an idea of the professional tasks, emerging challenges, and exciting opportunities that await them later. This is work socialization, the characteristics of which can distinctly shape the personality of the young person learning the profession. Thus, the practical period, the activities carried out during it, and the experiences gained are about much more than just professional development.

The training and learning activities of dual education implemented in the workshop can also be examined from the perspective of organizational learning. The accumulation, strengthening, and intensification of workplace learning can create a learning organization. The essence of a learning organization is that, although learning takes place through the learning activities of individuals within the organization, learning is not only shaped individually; the knowledge accumulated as a result of various processes and forms (see the previously mentioned forms of learning) is also incorporated into the fabric of the organization (Elkjaer & Wahlgren, 2005).

In the practical part of secondary vocational training, which is currently in effect, it is also characteristic that students practice and learn the often manual operational processes that were typical of previous decades. According to mentors and practice supervisors, the lack of knowledge of the tools and procedures representing the earlier levels of technology from past decades can strongly negatively affect the students' later experiential knowledge.

In the dual training system of domestic vocational education – and higher education, which is not examined here – the emphasis is on practice-orientation, acquiring applicable knowledge, practicing it, and on students applying the knowledge and skills they possess in real working conditions. The physical space of the workshop, the tools and technologies placed there, and the objects that support learning and working all contribute to

personality development. This physical space not only supports the individual's personal learning activities, but also, the communication between the group within this space ensures community-based learning.

Learning Communities in Older Age

Demographic data from the 21st century clearly indicate an increase in life expectancy, which directly results in a growing proportion of the elderly population. Experts draw attention to the concept of successful ageing, emphasizing that individuals in this age group should find activities and communities that bring them joy. Several indicators have been developed to measure its effectiveness; among these, the most commonly used is the Active Ageing Index (AAI), which formulates the framework of successful ageing. Within this index, employment accounts for 35%, social participation (including family and community roles) also for 35%, independent, healthy and secure living for 10% (including physical activity, physical and financial security, access to healthcare services, and lifelong learning), and the enabling environment (including life expectancy at older ages, healthy life expectancy, mental well-being, social connections, learning capacity, and the use of information and communication technologies) for 20%. The index highlights that, from both an individual and societal perspective, it is advantageous if the ageing population can maintain self-sufficiency for as long as possible and adapt to communities as well as to rapid social and environmental changes. It also demonstrates that learning, as a community-based activity, plays a particularly significant role in this stage of life (UNECE, 2025).

Learning in older age typically occurs through non-formal and informal means.

Table 1. Percentage of participation in formal and non-formal education among the population aged 25–64 in the past 12 months, by age group (2016–2022)

Age groups	2016	2022
25-34	63,2	66,3
35-44	60,9	65,3
45-54	60,3	65,2
55-64	38,2	50,6

Source: KSH 2023

The data indicate that participation in learning increases proportionally with age. This is particularly evident among those over 55, where the most significant positive change can be observed during the period under review. This can be attributed, on the one hand, to the increasing educational attainment of the population aged 55 and over and, on the other hand, to the substantial growth during the period under study in the number of community activities specifically designed for senior participants, which resulted not only in greater diversity of content but also in increased formal and methodological diversity.

In Hungary, programs for older adults were for a long time primarily organized in retirement clubs within community cultural centers and in organizations dealing with elderly affairs, typically on an occasional basis. The primary objective was not learning or knowledge acquisition; rather, participation was motivated by social functions, togetherness, and shared conversations. This form of communal engagement remains popular today, as there are hardly any settlements without clubs or associations specifically established for this age group. In these settings, informal learning predominantly takes place.

From the perspective of knowledge acquisition and competence development, domestic programs can be categorized into two types based on their content. Public lecture–type programs (often referred to as “open universities”) are characterized by open and flexible curricula, while competence-based programs specifically aim to develop the skills necessary for independent living and social participation among older adults. Their goal is to help individuals preserve, develop, and activate those abilities that enable them to lead a full life. In 2025, competence-enhancing senior education programs operated in 35 cities across Hungary. A shared characteristic of these initiatives is that they provide both learning and community opportunities within a non-formal learning framework (Türmerné, 2025).

Their naming conventions are also diverse. The term “University of the Third Age” is frequently used. The concept of the “Third Age”, the period between the Second Age (adulthood) and the Fourth Age, characterized by dependency and illness, originated in France but became widespread through the work of Peter

Laslett. During this phase, individuals do not work anymore but remain healthy, feeling the need to participate in communities and to maintain their abilities through active engagement (Karp, 2013).

Terms such as Senior University, Senior Academy, and Retirement Academy are also commonly used, indicating that many of these programs are organized by or in cooperation with higher education institutions (Kerülő 2024). Nearly all institutions articulate goals related to senior education that include fostering activity and promoting lifelong learning. Activity is understood as the development of new competencies, and through the expansion of knowledge, these programs aim to preserve participants' cognitive vitality. They also consider it important to support the development of learning abilities that address cognitive and affective factors specific to older learners and mitigate the adverse effects of age-related changes (Kovács et al., 2020).

From the perspective of higher education pedagogy, these courses most frequently apply a learner-centered approach and problem-based learning practices. The learner-centered approach seeks to actively engage participants and stimulate critical thinking (Kálmán, 2013). At the same time, emphasis is placed on problem-based learning, with courses typically organized around the resolution of a specific problem.

In its 2002 document, the WHO defined the concept of active ageing, stressing that in order to maintain cognitive and mental capacities in older age, continuous learning, adaptability to social and environmental changes, and openness are essential (WHO, 2002).

Non-formal educational programs offered to seniors are typically learning occasions in which both participant well-being and instructor well-being can be anticipated (Kun & Gadanecz, 2020; Kun & Szabó, 2017). According to Wlodkowski's model of motivational conditions for learning, a motivating learning environment consists of four mutually reinforcing elements: establishing inclusion, developing positive attitudes, enhancing meaning, and engendering competence. The model highlights that learning motivation is significantly influenced by the environment, the quality of relationships between teachers and participants, cooperation within the group, personal interest, a positive attitude toward learning, and the integration of new knowledge with prior experience (Wlodkowski, 2008).

At the same time, all research examining learning motivation among older adults emphasizes that while acquiring new knowledge and commitment to personal development are important, the relationships formed within the group and the sense of community are at least as significant, if not more so. For this reason, community-based learning can become an ideal opportunity for ageing participants, as learning at this stage of life is not merely a matter of individual development, but also of social participation, serving as a response to social isolation. (Sipos, 2016; Kerülő, 2024, Türmerné 2025).

Organized programs for older learners are one way institutions respond to the need for community involvement later in life. However, learning communities at this and all other life stages are not limited to formal or semi-formal programs. Cultural institutions, such as museums, libraries, community houses, and performing arts organizations, provide a different learning environment. In these spaces, community-based knowledge is created outside of structured educational environments.

Learning communities in cultural institutes

Cultural learning is a form of informal and non-formal learning that occurs through a society's cultural institutions and embedded cultural tools and systems. It has existed since the dawn of humanity and the roots of its study stem from trends in cultural sociology. Several researchers have dealt with the definition and interpretations of culture (Maróti, 2005; Kroeber & Kuckhohn, 1952). The UNESCO World Culture Report (1998) attempted to define the concept of culture when compiling cultural indicators (Terry McKinley, Amartya Sen, Prasanta Pattanaik), which is a rather broad definition: "the way in which people live together, interacting and cooperating with each other – coupled with how they justify such interactions with some system of beliefs, values and norms." (Bellavics, 2000, p. 307). Culture here is a descriptive and non-normative term, meaning human development. The indicators in the report aim to examine human development from a cultural perspective.

In our interpretation, cultural learning is a non-formal and informal form of learning realized through the broad institutional system and tool system of culture, which is present throughout the individual's life with different intensity and use of tools. The institutions of cultural learning are houses of community education, museum and library institutions, various performing arts venues (theatre, cinema, circus, music institutions, dance institutions, amusement parks etc.), sports organizations and the media (press, radio, television, internet). The tool system of cultural learning is widely available, from passive, receptive genres (e.g. theatre performance, puppet show, attending a concert or sports match, watching television, listening to the radio) to

active, creative genres (e.g. membership in an amateur art group, learning traditional dance, leisure sports activities, sharing internet content etc.). Different forms of cultural learning are constantly present in the life of an individual, with varying activity at different ages. This presence can occur as an autonomous, conscious learning process, when the individual, of his or her own decision, begins to learn something with the help of the cultural institution and tool system for the purpose of self-development, in a guided form (non-formal learning) or in a self-directed manner (informal learning) (Forray & Juhász, 2009). But the presence of cultural learning can also be observed as a spontaneous, involuntary process, when the individual visits a cultural institution randomly or for non-learning purposes (e.g. entertainment), and is enriched there by cultural learning in an unplanned way.

In addition to primary research, we can learn about the international and Hungarian situation of cultural learning from statistical sources. The European Union Cultural Statistics contains statistical data by country, including Hungary. Its data target economic indicators, primarily relating to cultural consumption (European Union, 2011). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics also regularly compiles cultural statistics (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009). In 2006, the UIS sent a report to developing countries to test the EU model (Eurobarometer) on cultural activities. The report defines the applications of culture as follows:

- "Home-based" (e.g. watching TV, reading, using the Internet),
- "Going-out" (e.g. visiting the cinema, theatre, museum),
- "Identity building" (e.g. amateur cultural activities).

The definition of culture formulated by UNESCO's World Culture Report (1998) links the following indicators to cultural activities:

- performing arts: attendance, foreign tours, institutions, performances and attendance,
- archives, museums: archived materials in meters, visits, attendance projected on staff, museum attendance, attendance projected on staff.

In Hungary, the Central Statistical Office requires mandatory statistical data provision from cultural institutions, this is the so-called Cultural Statistics (KultStat, 2026). The main available indicators are about institutions and cultural consumption. Based on the main data for 2025, in Hungary, nearly 12 thousand cultural data providers (institutions and civil organizations together) had 34 thousand employees conveying cultural learning opportunities to more than 113 million visitors (as many of them participated in regular programs, e.g. club series).

Shared cultural experiences, interactions, programs, and most importantly, regular cultural communities all support community learning processes: in addition to the non-formal learning opportunities of culture, they initiate informal, autonomous learning processes. In these processes, the planned and organized (non-formal) learning opportunities of cultural learning (for example, regional dance learning under the guidance of a professional in a folk dance community) are complemented by the spontaneous and autonomous learning processes of informal learning (thus, in the folk dance community mentioned in the previous example, the participants learn autonomously about dance from each other, and spontaneously about behavior, communication, and relationships with each other, among other things) (Forray & Juhász, 2009).

Conclusion

Learning communities play a decisive role in lifelong learning by connecting individual learning processes with social participation, shared experiences, and collaborative knowledge construction. The examples presented in this study demonstrate that community-based learning appears in diverse forms across different stages of life and educational settings. In higher education, learning communities strengthen academic integration and intergenerational cooperation; in vocational education, workplace environments provide practice-oriented and experience-based learning opportunities; in older age, community learning supports active ageing, well-being, and social inclusion; while cultural institutions create informal and non-formal spaces for autonomous and collective learning. Despite the differences between these learning contexts, they share common characteristics: interaction, participation, experience-sharing, and the social embeddedness of knowledge. Consequently, learning communities can be interpreted not only as pedagogical frameworks but also as important social structures that contribute to personal development, community cohesion, and the sustainability of lifelong learning processes in contemporary societies.

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