



Learning Individuals and Learning Communities: Informal Learning in 2025

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Learnovation Vision Paper 4

“Learning individuals and learning communities: informal learning in 2025”

November 2009

A Vision for 2025:

“Being a Lifelong learner becomes a condition of life.
Thanks to their massive and natural use in everyday life,
technologies acquire an emancipating power on people opportunity
and ability to learn, favouring a spontaneous tendency towards
meta-cognition and ownership of their learning process”

1. Introduction

This Paper presents the Learnovation vision within and around the area of informal learning, and more specifically it concerns three “eLearning territories”: individual development through e-Learning, non-professional learning communities, and communities generating learning as side effect. What these three territories have in common is that learning is not organised or structured, nor necessarily intentional from the learner’s perspective.

A key assumption to understand the Learnovation Vision of ICT for informal learning is that the internet is no longer seen a “medium” for learning, but rather a “learning playground” where people can search for the tools and contents they prefer; and, more importantly, with the aid of web 2.0 technologies people can create, share, exchange, remix their own contents and learn through knowledge and experience exchange and sharing. Peer-learning and changing roles of “who teaches whom” are also typical for these three territories. The roles of provider–consumer are altering: learning isn’t anymore about “consuming” the learning products but about collaborating in an exercise where each learner can create his/her own knowledge patrimony and learn within the aid of tools and peers. Also, these territories are characterised by the speed of development and adaption of new technologies and trends. Furthermore, adoption, and even participation in the development of new tools and services is faster here than in formal learning settings.

The Vision Paper is structured around **three main blocks**: state of art of innovation, expected future, and recommendations to reach the desired future scenario, the latter being composed of long term recommendations for 2025 and short term agenda on urgent actions to be taken starting from 2010 to let the desired scenario(s) come true.

The paper must be seen as a component of the whole Learnovation effort to refresh the EU vision of innovation and ICT for learning, and is based on a number of research results that can be accessed through www.elearningeuropa.info/learnovation.

2. State of art of innovation in the field

If a general trend can be identified in terms of (virtual) community activity in Europe and worldwide, this is a trend of participation and collective knowledge sharing and building, especially linked to the expansion of web 2.0 tools. Blogs and blogging networks, social networking software applications, eCitizen journalism, online encyclopaedias, podcast services, online networks of civil society organisations and hobby-related online discussion spaces are all community-based forms of interaction, and all of them imply some sort of learning. It can be said that this increasing participation trend is most of the times perceived as "natural", since it is part of a smooth trend of evolution: what was done before by sending an interesting link via email, is now done by bookmarking a site that, through a social bookmarking system, reaches all the members of a specific community, stimulating comments and instilling a virtuous circle of collaboration. The learning implications of this trend are immense: one could say that we are slowly but steadily approaching the situation where collaborative work and learning, supported and mediated by ICT, represents the rule rather than the exception of some particular best practices.

Some other innovation trends can be reported:

First, online communities are not only experiencing an impressive increase, but they are naturally opening up to sectors such as school education and higher education, as in the case of the many university Groups in Facebook.

Second, in terms of technology, the unexpected is starting to happen: unlike the classic computer business paradigm, the social software sector seems to have accepted the need to move towards convergence; most of the main community-based systems are now connected and interoperable amongst themselves and the tendency is increasing.

Third, in terms of learning dynamics, it must be noted that there has been an increase in the use of storytelling as a pedagogical technique (most of the time without it being considered in these terms), as it happens for example in many communities dealing with excluded social groups, where the learning process takes place by telling and listening to others' experiences.

These innovation trends have an impact on skills acquisition. A number of field research results (coming from studies such as "Pedagogical Innovation in new learning communities"¹) suggest that the impact of informal learning taking place in communities is concretised through the acquisition of horizontal skills such as critical thinking, active participation, sense of initiative and socio-civic competences. ICT skills development is supported in some communities whereas the majority of them presuppose a sufficient ICT competence of members on registration.

In terms of sectors, some groups of citizens and professionals seem to be more advanced in adopting collaborative and community-based learning practices, the clearest example being the health sector, where on the one hand, professionals aggregate to exchange (mostly through ICT) opinions and evidence-based cases, and on the other hand, communities of patients join together for mutual support, therefore generating learning. In general terms, the key issue able to boost innovation in the sector seems to be the motivation to collaborate and learn about and around a commonly shared interest, be it professional or personal.

¹ Study commissioned by IPTS to Scientoer in 2008.

3. Looking ahead: expected future developments

Given the rather high level of potential and real innovation in the field of informal learning, the best way to briefly define the possible future developments in the area is to compare what is happening in informal and non-formal learning practices in relation with classical characteristics of formal education and training settings. The following dichotomies help to understand the nature of this sector in relation to others:

- **Bottom-up vs. top-down impetus.** The initiative to act and learn is taken more and more by the individuals and groups themselves and is not dictated by authorities or directed institutionally. Bottom-up approach is self-managed, peer-supported and community based. This applies e.g. to self-initiated portfolios, blogs, and entire communities starting out of individual or small group initiative. Although bottom-up approaches are to be found also in formal learning settings, they are much stronger in informal learning.
- **Non-professional vs. professional learning.** Activity, and learning along it, takes place within and outside the professional context, although the skills obtained outside mainstream learning activities can be naturally practiced also professionally. Learning needs and objectives can be related to any trivial or day-to-day matter that a citizen feels curious about.
- **Learning centred vs. value centred practices.** In value centred action, learning is a secondary output after other purposes and not necessarily formally expressed. Value centred actions develop a sense of affiliation, e.g. political/environmental/social activity group or a community of people suffering from a same disease.
- **Community - driven vs. individual - driven.** These two features don't exclude but rather reinforce each other. Although community- driven, the outputs of an activity are accomplished by individuals. Within communities both the individual and collective dimension are fostered and at the same time as a member may have personal learning objectives, these objectives are in interaction with and influenced by other community members and contribute to a "collective intelligence and knowledge creation" of the community itself.

In terms of ICT future developments, the continuously developing web applications, including semantic web experiments, and particularly the ones that provide the users with tools for self-managed activities are showing a great potential for learning opportunities. Not only the internet is providing information for any learning experience but online environments, including both personal (learning) environments and shared community areas are definitely accelerating informal learning. Online communities and other communication tools provide already an endless capacity for peer interaction. This can turn out into enhanced teaching-learning experiences.

Again, it is important to note that informal learning is based on self-motivation. The fact that learning is not mediated by a teaching/training institution, with all their embedded management of the learning (e.g. teachers, materials, exams, certifications) implies that learning is led by the citizen who makes the first step to act, reflect and participate. Success factors for individual learning in communities include (1) perceived relevance of the community (2) the commitment to the community goals and culture (3) the opportunity for participation and (4) personal IT and e-skills, as instrumental to access all these environments.

The DELPHI Survey run by Learnovation to investigate on the future of learning (in terms of innovation in learning and contribution of learning to innovation) led to some interesting results which are relevant to envision the future of informal learning. Somehow in line with the core tensions identified above, respondents to the DELPHI identified social networking on-line, raising of global online community, and multiculturalism among the main external factors that will produce the most important change in the way people learn. Technological progress was also mentioned (actually at the top of the list), showing how learning practices are somehow following and adapting to new emerging ICT tools.

In this general context, what scenarios are expected for informal learning in 2025?

Learnovation identified four macro scenarios graphically represented below and asked experts to rate their likelihood in each lifelong learning area, including those related to the field analysed in this document.

		Convergence		
Inertia	"Mc-learn" Hyper competition of providers on a global scale will lead to a "strive for survival" of learning providers	"Babelogue" The world becomes a global network of learning occasions/spaces available any time anywhere	Innovation/ pro-activity	
	"The monad" Education becomes more and more insulated from the context and unable to explore emerging innovation practices into learning environments.	"Civitas" Education improves its "profile", its "relevance" to the context, i.e. the learning patrimonies of local communities and "responsiveness" to stakeholders' needs		
		Context		

In a nutshell, the following scenarios are resulting from the Learnovation consultation:

Individual development through e-learning: Mc Learn and Babelogue, followed by Civitas

This territory presents evolutions linked to three main scenarios, all implying a high degree of dynamism. All the comments and recommendations provided by respondents go in the direction of supporting individual development as an integration to formal learning processes, rather than "formalising the informal". The need to develop quality assessment mechanisms is highlighted as a key challenge to be addressed (despite the risk of formalising the informal) given the increasing trend of giving more reliability to the information provided by groups of peers rather than by traditional learning providers.

Non professional learning communities and Communities generating learning as a side effect: Civitas and Babelogue

Not surprisingly, the two prevailing scenarios for these territories fall into an innovation/proactivity attitude and share the two sides of the coin of informal learning communities: orientation to local context and to the international one. Recommendations by respondents are linked to supporting further the development of these communities by pushing forward the value of education and Lifelong Learning and by developing more and more user-friendly applications. In line with the comments related to the individual development territory, the issue of quality assurance is highlighted as a serious and urgent challenge to be faced.

The consultation on polarities led- as evidenced from the data displayed above – to an overall consensus on an increasing focus on individuals and bottom-up processes for innovation in learning: learning systems are expected to increasingly adapt to the needs of individuals; experimentalism and change are expected to be driven from the bottom and to win the traditional resistance to change of education systems; interest and motivation are expected to be the main drivers of learning in adulthood prevailing over compulsiveness and urgency imposing Lifelong Learning from the top .

Another important outcome of the Learnovation consultation goes in the direction of cautiousness, in the sense that the limitations and challenges for informal learning will play an important role.

First, interaction - that is at the core of online communities functioning - does not always imply learning, so the risk to label any kind of interaction within a community as an informal learning experience should be avoided.

Secondly, a risk of "learning divide" is present in informal learning online communities as – in general – the acquisition of learning to learn competences and digital skills is not supported but given for granted and left to the responsibility/capacity of individuals. This implies a strong risk to deepen, rather than reduce, social exclusion.

Last but not least, the issue of quality and reliability of the information shared is becoming a key concern as community members tend to support the equation peer knowledge = reliable knowledge which is not always true and which implies a risk in terms of quality of the knowledge acquired through community participation.

4. Towards a desired scenario: the LEARNOVATION recommendations

Analysing the free comments provided by the experts consulted with the DELPHI one can argue that the desired scenario for the area of informal learning is "Babelogue", a scenario where the world becomes a global network of learning occasions/spaces available any time anywhere. In this scenario, peer learning will be the most common and appreciated learning model in online communities, communities will have a strong role in their members' empowerment, not only (and not always) in terms of learning but also in social terms, and learning system will somehow have to go through a process of change to take into account the emerging new trends. Education and training system will have to change and become more and more plural, more attentive to individual and societal needs and consequently reflecting the diversification of learning and living patterns. Lifelong learning shall become a fundamental right and duty of all members of the communities and widespread learning networks foster the enforcement of this duty.

What are the actions to be implemented to support the realisation of such a vision?

Learnovation elaborated, based on the results of analysis of innovation in learning in all Lifelong Learning areas, a set of 26 "statements" on urgent actions for change in order to implement innovation in learning and to make sure that learning supports innovation of the European society and economy. Originally, five main statements were linked to the area analysed in this vision paper:

Bring informal learning into the policy spectrum

Lifelong Learning for all citizens may become a reality earlier than foreseen thanks to new ways of ICT-supported and socially-networked informal learning: policies at all levels should acknowledge this potential and act consequently.

Address quality issues in informal learning, but respect its specificity

Informal learning and the recognition of its value poses some problems of reliability of sources and quality of processes, but learners quality literacy is probably a better approach than formal quality assurance to respect the spontaneous and differently structured learning models in place.

Make recognition of informal learning outcomes a reality for all

Recognising learning achievements is a powerful way to motivate people to learn further: the implementation of the European Qualification Framework is a great opportunity to address the issue and set up generalised approaches and facilities to do so. The role of ICT-supported devices (ePortfolios, personal learning environments, social reputation systems, etc.) should not be underestimated to this purpose.

Help teachers and trainers to recognise and respect the value of informal learning

Teachers and trainers should be supported in using the potential of informal learning to complement and enrich the "institutional" teaching and learning process and in recommending learners ways to do so autonomously.

Campaign for learning

Lifelong Learning could become the flagship initiative for a creative and innovative Europe: awareness of citizens, organisations and communities should be raised through mass media campaigns and concrete incentives should be provided to engagement in learning.

Such statements were subject to a multilevel consultation involving (in chronological order): the ca. 100 experts and policy makers participating in the Learnovation Open Forum held in Brussels in May 2009; the ca. 1200 practitioners participating in the on-line consultation launched through the Learnovation web site, the ca. 50 experts and decision makers involved in the DELPHI consultation. The elaboration of the ratings as well as of the comments and proposals for new urgent actions to be included led to the following "imperatives for change" to be implemented by 2025:

Imperatives for change- Horizon 2025

Given the raising importance of informal learning practices across all sectors of European Education and Training, a number of imperatives were judged as the most relevant for long-term and sustainable change. The list is presented below, according to a set of identified "clusters" of recommendations.

An overarching call for action

Face openly the issue of relevance of current learning provision: change is urgent

There are many good reasons why change in institutional education may not be too quick, and stakeholders' concern is one of them. However, the generalised perception of decreasing relevance of education should leave nobody indifferent, especially policy makers: Europe needs learning systems which are closer to societal needs and encourage creativity and innovation, and it needs them now.

Cross-sectoral & structural recommendations

Re-integrate education into real life

Education curricula and teaching/learning practice should come closer to societal needs and the habits of digital natives and digital immigrants, in a real multidisciplinary fashion.

Devolve responsibility and governance to community and stakeholders and share a common vision of learning

Local stakeholders should increasingly be involved and committed in the governance of education, in a perspective of decentralisation and autonomy aimed at making the education system more and more relevant to local needs.

Focus on the learner

Increase focus on learning processes and attitudes

Disciplinary contents are important, but more focus should be put on explaining and demonstrating processes such as problem solving, self assessment, information search and filtering, team work, evaluation, critical thinking, networking: to develop higher level competences and to root learning in a context and add meaning. ICT may help to make each of these processes more effective and efficient. Cooperation between content experts and process experts is key.

The key point of assessment

Ensure that assessment supports learning

Examination practice should be changed, including specific training for those who assess, in order to allow differentiation of learning paths and review and recognition of skills and competences developed. This would introduce substantial room for innovation in contents and methods, without dismissing feedback against objective standards. Both summative and formative assessment shall be promoted so to favour innovation, instead of conformance and control.

Teachers training and informal learning

Enhance the innovation capacity of teacher training systems

Teachers training should include creative and innovative approaches to teaching/learning able to develop the motivation to learn and the joy of learning in future lifelong learners. Creative people should be stimulated to become teachers. Teachers should be educated to develop for themselves and for learner creativity, innovation and self-management.

Help teachers and trainers to recognise and respect the value of informal learning

Teachers and trainers should be supported in using the potential of informal learning to complement and enrich the "institutional" teaching and learning process and in recommending learners ways to do so autonomously, with a specific attention to multi languages and multicultural approach. Incentives and rewards could help in this respect.

Recommendations – Agenda 2010

In order to implement the above mentioned imperatives for change, the following action lines are suggested, in the form of recommendations, as short-term instrumental actions to be put forward by policy and decision makers, teachers and trainers and researchers in the field:

As concerns policy:

- Strengthen support to the acquisition of digital skills and learning to learn competences, focussing on segments of the population at risk of exclusion to assure that nobody is left behind.
- Broaden the concept of e-inclusion, making sure that online communities are equally accessible by all the population.
- Address the quality issues in informal learning, putting forward the concept of “learners quality literacy”, as an approach able to respect the spontaneous and differently structured learning models in place.
- Elaborate new frameworks for teachers’ competences that include training on how to recognise and assess informal learning achievements.

Research shall:

- Strengthen the analysis of the pedagogical and social models emerging from informal learning in online communities so to suggest new models to be adopted in formal learning.
- Investigate on how the European Qualification Framework could support recognition of informal learning achievements.

Annex: Background

The LEARNOVATION project

In the period 2008-2009, the LEARNOVATION project, supported by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, has worked to stimulate a consultation process aimed to lead to a collective and consensus-based new vision of eLearning (or technology-enhanced learning) in Europe. The rationale of the exercise is to inspire the full exploitation of its potential to implement lifelong learning strategies and to support innovation in Europe, also beyond the borders of education and training systems.

What is behind this Vision Paper

LEARNOVATION has organised a number of activities involving a high number of European decision makers, experts and practitioners in the field of ICT for learning, with the aim of reaching a set of recommendations that can contribute to guiding EU E&T policy in a long term perspective by increasing the level of innovation and creativity of EU LLL systems.

The present document presents the results of these activities and the constructivist process that has brought to the LEARNOVATION Recommendations, along the following steps:

1. **Desk research and EU networks consultation.** An intense desk research phase has brought the LEARNOVATION consortium to the identification of a number of learning-related areas that need specific attention in terms of innovation and creativity. The work has concentrated on four main areas, related to school education, higher education, work-related learning and informal learning. The results of this work, that are available in four Cluster Reports at www.elearnineuropa.info/learnovation, have then been discussed with some of the most relevant European networks in the field of ICT for learning² in March and in November 2008, as well as with key European and national policy makers³.
2. **LEARNOVATION Open Forum, Brussels, 27 May 2009.** The result of the previous phase has been condensed in 26 “imperatives for change” (that are presented in the next paragraph), a list of actions that should be taken in all the four areas tackled by the project plus some general transversal imperatives. These 26 statements have been discussed and improved in small workshops and then have been voted in terms of relevance during the **LEARNOVATION Open Forum**, organised in collaboration with the European Commission in Brussels on the 27th of May 2009. The main result of the Open Forum has been a list of the most relevant 10 imperatives in the opinion of the selected stakeholders present at the event.
3. **Online consultation (July-September 2009).** Following the Open Forum, with the aim to involve in the consultation all interested European stakeholders (targeting in particular E&T professionals and practitioners), the 26 statements have been at the centre of a broad online consultation, conducted through the eLearning Europa Portal and promoted through the main networks in the field (EDEN, EFQUEL, etc...). The consultation has involved more than 1100 participants and has resulted in a new list of 10 top imperatives for change, plus in a high number of bottom-up comments, ideas, and concerns.
4. **Delphi Consultation (July-October 2009).** To complete the consultation, the 26 statements have been included in the DELPHI Survey that LEARNOVATION has conducted in the period July -October 2009, that was focussed on the future of European E&T in terms of ICT, innovation and creativity. This has allowed a restricted number of selected experts to give their view on the 26 imperatives “with an eye on the future”.

² This has been possible thanks to the Learnovation Roundtable, an informal cooperation platform that gathers 8 key European networks in the field of ICT and innovation in learning. For more information see www.learnovation.eu.

³ The proceedings of these events are available at www.elearnineuropa.info/learnovation

The results of these four phases have then been analyzed by the Learnovation consortium, with the aim to transform them into a set of practical recommendations that can contribute in shaping future learning and learning-related policies at the EU and at national level, by instilling the needed level of innovation and creativity, discretely but substantially supported by ICT, in E&T settings. Chapter 3 of this Report presents these recommendations, together with some very practical ideas that could contribute to increase the level of innovation and creativity in E&T settings.

The LEARNOVATION Commitment

Finally, given the interest raised by the exercise and the relevance and potential impact of the resulting recommendations, LEARNOVATION commits to make this open consultation a permanent exercise rather than an exceptional event. In this sense, the Learnovation consortium and the Learnovation Roundtable (www.learnovation.eu) will explore partnership possibilities with European and national stakeholders to make sure that the 2009 consultation can be remembered as the first important step of a systematic bottom up policy agenda definition process involving stakeholders in the debate on the role of learning for innovation and creativity and for shaping the future of Europe.