

From Exploitation to Learning Communities

Intro

For many years the EU Commission has supported innovative lifelong learning projects financially. Different program periods and action have been launched within the last 15 years or more.

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Read more...



Contact

Jan Gejel
jan.gejel@skolekom.dk



Local learning centers and partnership are yet to be built into a coherent lifelong learning policy. Despite the numerous partnership and network initiatives of recent years, they remain occasional, interest-driven and short-lived. Policy development and local implementation are still lacking.

The European Association for the Education of Adults, 2006

The European exploitation interests

For many years the European Commission has supported innovative lifelong learning projects financially. Different program periods and action have been launched within the last 15 years or more.

Thousands and thousands of lifelong learning projects and partnerships have been created and still are created - and probably will be within the upcoming *Erasmus for All* from 2014-20.

More and more financial resources have been injected into the different formal and non-formal educational scenes across Europe, and more and more resources will be, as educational innovation is one of the Europe's strongest assets in the future global competition and growth.

The numerous projects and other activities have been very successful in creating a sense of European citizenship in the member states. This is a reality and cannot be neither disputed, not underestimated.

However, the impact of the many initiatives has mostly been limited to the participating organisations and people, and not always in a sustainable way.

It is fair to say that a very large part of the initiatives have vanished into the thin air after the funding ended and the projects were terminated.

It is rather showing that not even the participating organisations have always been able to sustain the innovation developed.

An important part of the European projects has always been dissemination and exploitation, *telling about* and *using in practice*.

Exploitation is, of course, the most important of these activities, as it addresses the challenge of making the created resources useful to other people, organisations and countries, than the ones participating in the project.

The Commission's funding should be regarded investments: a group of partners join forces, receives European co-funding, and take on the role of pioneers developing innovation. Part of the project is about making the produced innovation useful to and used by people outside the partnership.

So, the Commission obviously would like some return on investment: the partners are not funded to improve the performance of their own organisations, but are funded to produce innovation useful to other organisations.

This is the agenda of the funding, but it never happened.

Very few European funded innovations in education have been exploited by other organisations than the participating partners.

In the Lifelong Learning Program 2007-13 this challenge was addressed directly for the first time - through the Transversal Action KA4 Exploitation.

Xploit was funded by this action in 2009.

The KA4 Exploitation invited stakeholders to develop models and practices for infrastructures able to receive and exploit European lifelong learning resources.

As this point learning communities was not a focus in Europe, and that is probably why the term never appeared in the programs or in the calls - or because learning communities were linked to the Active Citizens' programs and actions.

Bottom line was, however, that the Transversal KA4 represented a strong interest in getting much more out of the investments in educational innovation: new structures should be developed and tested to increase the exploitation of European innovation projects.

It goes without saying that the financial crisis put even more pressure on exploitation: with fewer resources, cutting public spending, innovative resources for learning should be exploitation to the max!

And, of course, this happened - or did it?

No. it did not.

The financial crisis did not increase the interest in exploiting European learning resources, perhaps even on the contrary.

Surprising as this may be, it helps us to identify one of the core problems in exploitation and in the KA4 Action.



From exploitation to learning communities

The renewed interest in exploitation at first aimed to create such infrastructures in the communities that would enable the community to find and exploit such learning resources. How could infrastructures be created that would allow the communities to go through the exploitation process with a successful outcome: freely available innovation now put into practice in our community...?

The idea was rather instrumental: how are such instruments created in the communities?

This instrumental approach quickly proved useless. The exploitation of European learning resources was so complex and demanding that this approach needed to be re-formulated, taking into consideration especially the following challenges and obstacles:

- ~ Exploitation is a complex process and many conditions must be in place to accomplish such tasks
- ~ Exploitation involves many and different stakeholders in a community
- ~ Exploitation very often involves the local authorities, and they are not prepared to carry out such European innovation
- ~ Qualified needs and opportunities' analysis must be carried out to identify relevant resources to exploit
- ~ A minimum of infrastructure of communication and collaboration must be in place in the community
- ~ Community resources, including public staff, must be qualified to conduct such processes
- ~ A mentality of collaboration for mutual benefit must be present in the community and balanced against traditional competitiveness
- ~ Leaders and managers must be able to perform and act at a certain strategic level
- ~ A both formal and informal mentality of sharing and contributing must be visible in the community
- ~ Cross-sector collaboration should be possible
- ~ Innovation in education should be linked to wider benefits of learning
- ~ The community should be very supportive towards bottom-up initiatives and active citizens
- ~ Political changes and elections should not overrule meeting the strategic needs of the community
- ~ The community should take a strong interest in European cooperation
- ~ Etc., etc.

This long and serious list of challenges and obstacles, and the list only present examples, is what exploitation of European lifelong learning resources is up against! Obviously, these challenges and the efforts to meet them far exceed the limited instrumental approach to exploitation.

In the future the scenarios will be even more dramatic, as learning activities are increasingly seen as closely linked to the community.

Conclusion: serious and sustainable exploitation must be linked to the community at large and to community interests and capacity.

All this took the Xploit project and the partner communities on a journey from exploitation to learning communities.

Without a strong learning communities agenda it would not be possible to change the low levels of lifelong learning exploitation across Europe.

In other words: exploitation should be embedded in a strong and strategic learning communities approach, and exploitation and European cooperation should be an important and natural part of such learning communities.



A common framework for understand learning communities

In parallel, an increasing focus on *cities* emerged, in Europe and at global level. Not nations but cities created different forms of city profiles and joined networks of similar cities: learning cities, eco-cities, healthy cities, green cities, smart cities, etc. It is not the ambition of Xploit to interact with or compete with these global trends, but to apply a more pragmatic approach: how can communities develop strong infrastructures of communication and collaboration and meet the needs of the citizens and the challenges of globalization? How can communities develop sustainable steps towards becoming a learning community?

A few surprises:

- ~ A healthy city is not automatically a learning community
- ~ An ecological city is not automatically a learning community
- ~ A learning community is not necessarily a healthy city
- ~ A learning community is not necessarily an ecological or a smart city

- ~ A learning community is not about learning!

It is a threat to the true values of a learning community to draw in ambitious City X rhetoric. Therefore clear quality criteria must be in place, and the Xploit offers a contribution to such a quality framework.

A learning community is not about learning, we said. Why is that?

More precisely we can say: a lot of education does not make a learning community, as this education simply might be very traditional and in no way contribute to new infrastructures of collaboration.

A learning community is not about education, learning or training. It is not about individuals learning, but about organisations' and institutions' community learning.

A learning community is a community that learns; learns to collaborate, learns to innovate, learns to include, learns to trust in people, learns to take new ways, learns to change, learns to open up, learns to interact with different people and cultures – and learns to take up, capture, welcome and EXPLOIT innovative resources available etc.

The community is involved in a joint learning process, not individuals. A learning community is very much about... mentality.

A community or a city might be a member of a smart city network, and still not be a learning community.

Learning communities can be described along very different discourses, just as all other things. In a political discourse, for example, you might say that a learning community is replacing the traditional representative democracies, or that the public authorities should enter community partnerships and act as a partner among other partners, including active citizens.

A clear-cut definition of a learning community is not possible and not attractive.

Learning communities are and should be very different. The Xploit contributions to the understanding of learning communities are disseminated along the project's products and resources. Together these resources present a coherent way of looking at learning communities.

Having said this, we strongly believe that it is possible and useful and even necessary to create a common understanding of the key values of learning communities.

This is why it is very important to develop and discuss common criteria for learning communities.

