

Serious Challenges to Learning Communities

Intro

What are the most important lessons learned when working towards a learning community? We list and shortly describe roadblocks and how to avoid them or manage them.

Read more...



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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

SERIOUS CHALLENGES TO EXPLOITATION AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES



Which are the most important lessons learned when working towards a learning community? We list and shortly describe roadblocks and how to avoid them or manage them.

There are numerous threats to quality exploitation and to learning communities, as they are up against old and traditional structures of policy-making, power structures and powerful interests not taking community needs into consideration.

Policy changes, competent resources find other occupations, different crises and set-backs disturb well-functioning partnerships and the global world changes rapidly.

There are no life insurances for learning communities.

Furthermore learning communities are living organisms that must change along with the surrounding realities, and are depending on the interest and dedication of real people.

Most of these threats are beyond our control and we need to accept that. It part of the game.

However, and this is of course very important and many lessons have been learned here, learning communities can do a lot to avoid such threats, and so can the involved key players and stakeholders.

Learning communities can be designed and formed in many different ways, and not all of them are sustainable, as they do not respect the basic principles of and criteria for learning communities.

In this text we describe some of the most typical threats and how to deal with them proactively.

Before doing so, let us list some key words about how to sustain those fragile structures called learning communities:

- ⇒ Allow and promote critical and open reflections on the learning community from all involved players and take the critical approaches seriously
- ⇒ Promote a living organism mentality: a learning community is always on the road, dealing with set-backs and problems, and on the quest for new ways
- ⇒ Avoid excessive and false rhetoric about the learning community: state the problems openly and invite debates
- ⇒ Include new visions and perspectives and take up challenges incurred from the surrounding world of economic, demographic and social world
- ⇒ Promote constantly an inclusive approach; the community is for all
- ⇒ Interact with and be inspired from other communities, national as well as European and intercontinental
- ⇒ Never give up on creative initiatives

Let us now describe some of the most typical threats to learning communities and to communities taking steps towards a learning community.

The descriptions are primarily based on practical experience from the Xploit and other European communities, with which the project has collaborated, including the national learning cities initiative in Israel.

The descriptions are also inspired by the global contributions from learning cities experts such as Peter Kearns (Pascal) and Norman Longworth (EU).

The Xploit contributions have been checked against the global debates.

The Xploit and collaborating communities are very different and from very different parts of Europe, which means that the lessons learned are based on a variety of cultures, traditions and mentalities (Denmark, Spain, Romania, UK, Hungary, Italy and Israel), and furthermore including many different kinds of organisations, from educations to local governments and private organisations.

Now, which are the most important threats to emerging learning communities - and how can we deal with the threats proactively?



THE ROLES OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES



One of the most important threats to learning communities is the continuation of traditional public authority roles. In learning communities the local government should assume a partner role in the community partnerships and networks. The local government is still the local government, but the community practice the local decision-makers and administrative should learn to play another role: partnering up with other stakeholders and active citizens and working for the community at large, especially promoting inclusion and involvement of institutions, groups of citizens and small organisations, including NGO's.

The role of the local government in the community partnerships is not a political role, but a parallel community structure in which joint values and principles rules.

It is indeed a big challenge for the local decision-makers and administration to learn to play this double role: the political, based on a political program, and the community-based, governed by joint values and principles.

One of the most important contributions for local governments in learning community networks is to offer open frameworks, spaces and platforms for free citizen initiatives, not controlled by the political agendas.



To avoid such obstacles, the learning partnerships and networks should discuss the roles of public authorities openly, and should offer such dialogues on a number of occasions. Decision-makers should seek dialogues with experienced colleagues in other European communities and learn from them. Medium level managers and administrative staff should be offered training and inspiration to allow changes in mentality and perspectives.



REPRESENTATIVE OR DIRECT DEMOCRACY



In the political life representative democracy rules: we vote and the politicians and their administration work on the basis of political programs.

The idea of learning communities and local partnerships is on the contrary to promote direct democracy: the learning community promotes and supports

initiatives not directly linked to political programs or political agendas, but emerging from the needs and interests of groups of citizens or groups of institutions. This bottom-up approach supplements the traditional representative democracy. The aim of such approaches is the mobilization and activation of groups of citizens and the promotion of creativity and initiative.



Open community dialogues on direct democracy should be organized and form part of everyday community life. Policy-makers and administrations might need training and inspiration, as this approach calls for a shift of mentality in many local governments. A strong opportunity could be dialogues between emerging learning communities and local governments from different countries, or more focused activities such as study visits, twinning cities, etc.



CROSS-SECTOR FAILURES



Many learning communities and partnerships are working well, but within a limited number of sectors, such as the educational and social sectors, occasionally also the energy or health sectors. The private sector, including the financial sector, is often non-existing in these partnerships, and very often the cultural and sport sectors are also absent. This significantly weakens the actions of the learning partnerships, as very many resources are not available, and as the learning community is not penetrating the community at large.

In times where closer links between the world of learning and the world of work and a stronger focus on entrepreneurship, the absence of the private sector is even more problematic.



An ongoing learning process must be included in emerging learning communities, allow the public, social and educational sectors to learn to approach and work with the private enterprises, and allowing the private enterprises to develop a new mentality towards their community. Sometimes the world of sports can mediate between the traditionally much separated sectors.

The aim of such collaborations is to develop a mutual understanding and language of the common benefits of learning communities.



LACK OF COMPETENCES



To work in learning communities partnerships require a set of competences which in most cases must be developed as an integrated dimension of the community processes. Most staff in the public sector is not trained to work with learning

community challenges, neither with European cooperation or for instance entrepreneurship. On the other hand most private players are not trained to work with the wider benefits of learning or to imagine how young people or retired citizens might be a resource to innovation or industry.

Both sectors' managements and staff need what might be called transversal learning community competences, and this competence gap should be seriously addressed along the learning community activities.



Public sector management and staff, as well as private players, should engage in reflections on the new world order, and especially how local and global processes are now closely linked together, producing many threats, but also offering hitherto unseen opportunities at local community level.

Such training and inspiration activities are not taken seriously in most emerging learning communities, and this might in fact limit the actions and perspectives and impact of the learning communities tremendously.

The training of learning community guides would be a strong resource for organizing such training and inspiration activities, integrated in the normal work days of the employers and employees in question.



AMATEURISM AND VOLUNTEERING



Volunteering works well in the sub-structures of learning communities, such as community centres and youth clubs, and also in the initial phases of the emerging learning community. Furthermore volunteering is a very important resource for learning communities in general, especially taking into account the upcoming demographic changes.

However, amateurism and volunteering does not work when establish sustainable infrastructures of collaboration in learning communities. It takes professionals to organize volunteering, so to speak. Without professional community workers the full roll-out of learning community potentials will not happen. The key partners in learning partnerships, including public authorities, should dedicate themselves to train staff to carry out important learning community tasks, at strategic as well as practical levels. A learning community will not, for example, be able to exploit European resources and European funding, if qualified staff is not available.



In dedicated learning communities the key partners will agree to train certain staff members to carry out learning communities tasks both at strategic and practical levels. This does not mean that staff members need to work full time on learning community tasks. These tasks might very well be integrated in upcoming job profiles, including entrepreneurship, European cooperation and innovation.

Still it is recommendable to take into consideration the training of specific learning community staff in the major partnering organisations, including especially the local government. Claiming that the communities cannot afford such training and such staff members is a contradiction in terms, as the aim of the learning community resources precisely is to attract, create and exploit relevant resources.



LEARNING COMMUNITY CULTURES

⚠ One of the most important long-term challenges is often forgotten, namely the creation of learning community cultures. The real impact and sustainability of learning community initiatives is very much linked to the visibility and presence of the learning community in everyday life and among all kinds of citizens. In one of the Xploit learning communities, for example, the partnership decided to be visible in the local supermarkets. Such visibility and the creation of learning community cultures are often regarded inefficient or simply not necessary. The short-term pay-off is not clear from such activities, and therefore they are often given low if any priority.

❤ This problem should be addressed openly in the community debates and forums aiming to promote a more strategic approach to learning community cultures. Often few resources are available for such activities, and once again this would change if a number of staff members in the major stakeholder organisations, including public authorities, would appoint specially trained staff to carry out learning community activities, including the creation of learning community cultures.



TRADITIONAL MENTALITY

⚠ No doubt the worst threat to emerging learning communities does not come from economic crisis or set-backs, but from traditional mentalities penetrating potential major stakeholder organisations. Mentality changes take time, often a long time, and emerging learning communities should address this at a very early stage. Statements such as: this is not my obligation, I am not trained for that, I don't have the time, it doesn't matter anyway, it's always the same, I cannot work with these people, etc., are testimonies of the traditional mentalities. It takes a long time and a lot of dedicated work to change this, but it is extremely important to any emerging learning community.

❤ It is not easy to address the problems of traditional mentalities. In most communities such mentalities have been built up through decades and centuries and in some cases the social realities justify and support such mentalities. Training measures are not always a useful answer, as mentality is too deeply rooted to be changed through training measures. This is a field calling for much creativity for dedicated learning community players! One of the most creative and sustainable directions is to grant staff members the freedom to co-create elements in the learning communities and experience the

satisfaction of this freedom, thus offering them a sense of dedicated and responsibility, but also personal benefits.



POLITICAL CHANGES

 Experience shows that political changes in the local government can be a serious threat to learning community structures, even to well-established learning communities and partnerships. The more dependent the learning community partnerships are on the local authorities the more dramatic the changes. Political changes can affect funding, mentality, interest, dedication and values within a few weeks. Best case, the learning community will experience set-backs, worst case years of community work will be lost. The biggest impact of political changes occurs in cases where the political stakeholders have not been able to play different roles in governmental and community contexts.

 Independent learning community infrastructures are the only answer to this threat. Sound community structures and collaboration should build on the capacity of the local government to partner up with other stakeholders in the community activities not importing the political agendas in the partnerships. Lessons learned are that the learning community partnerships and infrastructures should be as independent of the local government as possible. If this is done successfully, it will at the same time contribute to the general sustainability of community initiatives. It is very important to establish open discussions on the independency of the community partnerships from the early phases of a learning community to avoid misunderstandings in case of political crisis or elections. Not all local governments can be expected to accept and support such agreements. Many local governments apply the principle of: if we pay, we must control.



THE QUALITY OF THE PARTNERSHIPS

 It is not easy to form learning partnerships joining forces towards a learning community. A lot of mentality work is often needed to include the different sectors, as community partnerships are not traditionally a priority in the organisations. Often this causes biases and imbalances in the initial partnerships, often including only educational and social organisations, occasionally also a representative from the local administration. Such partnerships can be efficient in the initial phases, but they will soon lack further potentials.

The absence of many private and cultural stakeholders in the learning partnerships represents a considerable weakness, limiting the scope and perspectives of the partnerships.



The emerging learning partnership should discuss from the beginning how to include the different sectors in re-thinking what community means. The partnership must learn how to explain the mission and how the different sector players will benefit from the partnering.

Any kind of charity approach should be avoided: private organisations, such as enterprises, banks and insurance companies, should join on the basis of mutual benefits, not based on social charity.

It can be highly recommended to work for a series of sessions in which the different sectors explain their interests in learning communities, and through which it might be possible to establish a common language.



STRATEGIC DEDICATION



A special obstacle can be caused by potential stakeholders' lack of strategic dedication. This means that the stakeholders take an interest in forming the learning partnerships and addressing important needs in the community, but are not able to see the strategic perspectives in building sustainable community infrastructures.

Most stakeholders can be expected to act like this: they are focused and dedicated as to concrete community initiatives, and they offer useful resources, but they are not interested in or able to see the values of new infrastructures relatively independent on to concrete community initiatives. Such stakeholders might lose interest, if the concrete community initiatives are not well within their organisational agenda.



There is no simple solution to such problems, except integrating open debates on the wider benefits of strategic partnerships and infrastructures in the concrete community activities. Once again, it is important to address such topics openly from the early stages of the new collaborative structures.



REAL INCLUSION - REAL IMPACT



From time to time we see partnerships, even cross-sector partnerships, working well and slowly making their way towards a learning community. However, it seems at the same time that the infrastructures and new collaborations have little real

impact: nothing seems to change, and the citizens seem not really included, albeit participating in some activities.

Such scenarios are rather typical for some communities: the partnering and the initiatives seem well-functioning and meeting community needs, yet the real impact and real inclusion is missing.



Such scenarios indicate that organisations or partnerships are acting on behalf of the citizens, instead of involving them. The needs are addressed, the activities are relevant and the collaboration seems smooth and fluent. What is missing here is the deeper understanding of learning communities: participation is not involving, and activities do not automatically mean impact.

In this case critical input is needed in the community: the values and principles of the learning community should be openly debate, aiming to reconsider the alibi-like practice in the community and work for more real inclusion and real impact.



TRADITIONAL CAKE MENTALITY



Almost all sectors are now more or less competitive or acting competitively, as the public sector increasingly employs models from the private market sector.

Like it or not, this change causes many potential stakeholders to protect their activities, even social institutions and educations. The traditional and outdated cake mentality in the private sector is thus imported into non-private sectors such as educations and social institutions.

The traditional cake mentality goes like this: there is only a fixed and limited marked and income opportunity (the cake), and therefore it is our mission to get as big a piece as possible. Obviously such mentalities are not useful to learning communities, but we increasingly see non-private institutions behave like this, even if the globalized economy is about the exact opposite of the cake model.



The cake mentality can be deeply rooted in many also non-private organisations. This means that sharing, openness and collaboration is not on the agenda, whereas self-protection and primitive competition is definitely on the agenda. Such mentalities can be very difficult to change, and the only option is open and constructive debates on the dynamics of the globalized economy's eco-structures: yes, the Chinese are "stealing" our factories, but at the same time China produces many millions of new consumers demanding quality products and services from your European community!



YOUTH



In some communities it seems difficult to include young people in the learning community initiatives, and especially the non-academic and disengaged groups of young people. The involved stakeholders are not able to change this, and the learning community progresses without significant involvement of the new generations.



A learning community trying to involve groups of young people is a problematic scenario: it is unfortunate to establish learning community structures and then try to involve young people. One of the basic criteria for learning communities is inclusion, and this means that young people and their interests should be a major concern from the very first steps of the new initiatives. In fact, we might even insist that groups of young people should be key players in the establishment of learning community initiatives.

Therefore learning communities not able to involve and attract different groups of youth should openly re-think the community approaches and reflect on the quality of the community initiatives and how to re-organize the partnerships.

It is important to maintain the value of involving youth groups directly in the community initiatives, not accepting youth being merely represented by for instance educations or social partners.



NETWORK SUSTAINABILITY



Often we see network partners lose interest after some time and leave the learning community initiatives. This might be caused by internal difficulties or changed agenda, but is also might be cause by a static partnership.

Often learning partnerships become part of the everyday routines, once the first exciting steps have been taken. Such partnerships lose their dynamics and are not able to sustain the motivation of the partners.



It is crucial to new learning communities' structures to maintain a dynamic collaboration and feed innovation and new missions into the partnerships. However, this is not an easy task, as new feeds must be interesting, relevant and attractive.

Especially when the networks are based on volunteering, the energy slowly fades away, leaving only the everyday routines.

Therefore such networks and learning partnerships are in need of dedicated and qualified people, perhaps even in the form of learning community guides, responsible for the constant feeding of new community initiatives to sustain the dynamics and motivation of the partners.

Without such dynamic feeds a partnership might slowly degenerate into a traditional collaboration.



PHYSICAL SPACES



Some learning community initiatives overestimate the potentials of digital networks and underestimate the importance of physical spaces in the community, where people meet and carry out different forms of community activities. Relying on digital spaces alone is at one hand naïve, and on the other it might prove more excluding than including for many citizens.



Balancing digital and physical spaces is one of the very interesting challenges of learning communities. Much can be accomplished if a creative interacting between these spaces are established and further developed. However, to this end it is important in the early stages of the new community networks to discuss what physical spaces could be made available to the community activities, thus functioning as living hubs for the learning community steps. Obviously, both the local authorities and powerful private organisations play a crucial role in offering such physical spaces.



PERSONALIZATION



Very often only a few people from key stakeholders are involved in the learning community initiatives and even in the case where learning community guides are employed excessive personalization can pose a serious threat to the sustainability of the developed partnerships and initiatives.

The problem is that in cases where very few persons are deeply involved in the activities these persons learn a lot and develop valuable and often irreplaceable competences, networks and resources.

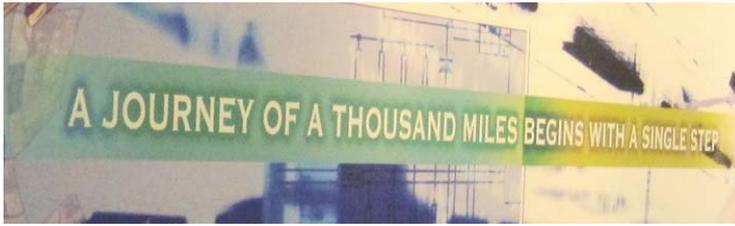
Should the community lose such persons it would represent a considerable set-back.



This is a dilemma. On one hand, we promote the training and employment of professionals when the initiatives have reached a certain level, and we appreciate the constant learning of those people, but on the other hand an excessive personalization represents a serious threat to the sustainability of the initiatives.

The solution is obviously not to avoid the involvement of professionals, and neither to stop them from learning, but rather to ensure that as many different people from different organisations are, if not fully, then partially involved in most activities, and that the new competences also reaches these teams.

Furthermore the professionals in question should share and make transparent their competence development as much as possible.



FINANCIAL DEAD-ENDS

 The financing of learning community structures and partnerships is always a threat to learning communities. Often the first steps are taken with volunteer resources from participating organisations, and sometimes this model is continued along the further steps. This can cause serious problems to the new infrastructures, as they are totally dependent on the good-will of individuals and institutions. Should these persons and institutions withdraw, the network collapses.

 There are two basic principles governing the financing of community networks: the first is that without financing the network will ultimately stop working, the second is that the networks should not depend on public funding from the local budgets.

This leaves, however, a number of creative funding opportunities, of which we will mention the most typical:

- ~ The participating organisations practice co-funding
- ~ The network of partners might decide to form a private organisation, legally allowed to make financial transactions
- ~ The network establishes private sponsorships from powerful local or regional companies, banks or insurance companies, or even from strong sport clubs or cultural institutions
- ~ The network offer services to the community and is paid accordingly
- ~ The network applies for national or European funding to ensure the first steps



POPULIST RHETORIC

 One of the general threats to learning communities is the threat of populist rhetoric. Globalization offers many opportunities, but also many problems: popular trends are disseminated rapidly across all continents, and some policy-makers are tempted to empower political agendas with the new and hot community slogans, such as learning city, healthy city, and smart city and so forth.

Such inflations can endanger the trust of citizens and organisations in the learning community missions and make it very difficult to include important organisations and groups of citizens.

 First of all, such scenarios once again confirm that the learning community infrastructures should be independent of the local political agenda. Second, such scenarios also call for critical debate in the community, and a community mentality

reacting to cheap rhetoric. In cases like this critical voices and strong discussion forums are invaluable to the sustainability and credibility of learning communities.

