

Report on:

European Commission Directorate General Joint Research Centre Institute for Prospective Technological Studies Learning Communities Validation workshop, Seville March/April 2009

JRC IPTS held a workshop to validate its project on innovations in New ICT-enabled Learning Communities in Seville. The aim of the DG EAG project itself is to review and assess the emerging social and pedagogical approaches to learning within ICT-facilitated communities and:

- share additional insights into evidence of learning within these informal communities
- discuss future directions to inform and underpin policy, strategic and research directions

Key Issues

- There is a tension between vertical communities (of authority/ responsibility/ hierarchy/ knowledge management) and horizontal (P2P, non-hierarchical, self-forming, temporary) communication. But it is not a dichotomy – communities need to learn to deal with it and policy-makers need to recognise it.
- There is no clear boundary between formal and informal learning
- Formal assessment methods are incompatible with informal learning
- Need for better understanding of the characteristics and activities within informal learning spaces
- We should not romanticize online learning communities
- Shaping identity through individual trajectories is important (self-actualization, LLL)
- Online learning spaces seem to help develop nurturing transversal competencies
- Formal educational institutions cannot ignore informal learning but they need to prepare people for it and should learn from it

Conclusions from the workshop:

- Technologies are providing new means for different ways of learning, making them more reachable
- Online spaces and communities have potential to be a key tool for the desired lifelong learning continuum
- Online communities can be used for learning relevant knowledge, skills and competences for future jobs
- Collective online spaces provide creative and innovative potential both for individuals' learning and for institutions
- Online learning opportunities provide both new potential for equity and risks for increasing divides
- It is a major challenge to find how educational systems could best benefit from this informal online learning by
 - Preparing lifelong learners during formal education and outside of it
 - Learning to take advantage of these approaches in education & training
 - Validating learning outcomes in external settings without changing them
 - Finding how these communities could help in changing institutions (communities of learning practitioners, researchers, educational actors)

The benefits of online communities

Online communities can facilitate learning related to all the key competences for lifelong learning (Communication in the mother tongue; Communication in the foreign languages; Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; Digital competence; Learning to learn; Interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence; Entrepreneurship; and Cultural expression).

Broader conclusions

- While there are no stable business models, there were significant concerns that powerful single commercial players would dominate the space in the future
- There is real need for cooperation and collaboration to ensure portability and interoperability in supporting students' experiences (in their use of LMSs, content, ePortfolios)
- Online learning often takes place in informal settings where the process of learning itself is not foregrounded
- Future learning will take place in a heterogeneous environment whereby commercial and non-commercial information and content providers will rub shoulders with platform providers, corporate players and self-forming learner communities

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