

Briefing Paper 40

Towards a Learning Economy?

This is the final Briefing Paper of a project cluster that run between July 2001 and July 2003.

Context

Policies for learning, and their reflection of a “learning society”, are not merely policies for teaching and learning, or even for education and training, but form an integral part of wider social and economic policy. The outcomes of learning are intimately connected to core economic *and* social policy concerns and have social as well as economic consequences and opportunities attached to them.

The European Union has placed enormous emphasis in recent years **on the economic sphere**, expressly politicising views that Europe’s economic and social development will be advanced through fostering an innovative, knowledge and information based economy. This intense emphasis on the economy and the neo-liberal agenda for economic reform has extended its reach to demands that society become a knowledge-based or “learning society”. Considerable fields of social policy have been drawn into this economic orbit, including notably education, which for some enthusiasts can be reduced to lifelong learning for economic activity.

This **cluster of 29 social science research projects** supported under the Fourth and the Fifth EU Framework Programmes demonstrates that while there are alternative conceptualisations of a “learning or knowledge economy/society”, it is the predominantly economic visions and rhetoric that have dominated the discourse on the “learning society”. The work of this cluster highlights the dangers from the uncritical acceptance of the current rhetoric surrounding the “learning society” concept and demonstrates that **there is an urgent need for balance between the economic and socio-cultural objectives, policies and practices of learning in Europe and worldwide.**

This cluster was an effort to debate, to critically evaluate and to cross-fertilise the findings of these twenty-nine research projects, many of which addressed directly issues of education and training. It was an organised “dialogue” between different parts of the social sciences research community which used the results of EU-supported multidisciplinary collaborative research in order to debate and deconstruct the heavily contested and controversial concepts of the “knowledge economy/society”, “learning economy/society”, and “learning citizen” in Europe and internationally using the resources of a range of disciplinary perspectives and methodologies.

The list of projects included in this cluster can be found at the end of this Briefing Paper.

The cluster divided its activities into three thematic domains: -

- Living, working and learning in the Learning Society – the perspective of the learning citizen
- Knowledge and Competencies in the Learning Economies
- Learning and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

The cluster was coordinated by Dr. Michael Kuhn (University of Bremen – contact details at the end).

Key Conclusions

Some of the key conclusions of this debate are:

Living, working and learning in the Learning Society – the perspective of the learning citizen

Education has had a long humanistic tradition that is currently being overshadowed by an economic rationale for lifelong learning.

1. Education has had a long humanistic tradition that is currently being overshadowed by an economic justification for lifelong learning. However, the current European discussion, although tempered by social agendas, latches on to education as a key policy route for solving economic

and social challenges. This is focused around the need for success in world markets, increased productivity, transition to knowledge-based economies and social exclusion are best tackled by attracting European citizens back into education and training, and keeping them there.

The citizen in the Learning Society

2. However, often absent from this discussion is the notion of a European learning citizen that has a duty towards themselves, their country, and their Europe.
3. There has been little analysis as to why the technocratic, instrumentalist view of knowledge and learning has come to dominate the debate over lifelong learning. If it is accepted that improved economic performance is a focus for the "Learning Society", there is conflicting evidence as to whether many of the jobs that are currently being created do in fact need high levels of skills, and whether there may not after all be a low-skill path to development.
4. If citizens are getting decreasing returns (in terms of economic and social insecurity) for an increasing investment (continued education and training), then: Why should the notion of the Learning Society be subjectively appealing and readiness to change, flexibility and adaptability are a precondition for survival within it? Why should citizens want to get onto the lifelong learning bandwagon when they have so little time to care for themselves? These questions still need answering.

The working citizen

5. There appears to be wide acceptance of existing work structures, trajectories of work and the priorities of employers. But, there is uncritical use of the term "human resource" without consideration of how management views workers. Work is also being seen as purely a rational economic activity.
6. However, whilst it is sometimes acknowledged that economically rationalised work may not be the sole model, it is nevertheless accepted as the prevailing model, and the one that best responds to the needs of contemporary society.
7. Whilst work can be used for individual and group advancement, the overall drive towards hyper-rationality, flexibility and innovation has led to a climate of heightened uncertainty and contingency.
8. This view of work and workers is reflected in the ways production is organised with the result that there has been an increase in temporary, intermittent and 'portfolio' workers.
9. The European "liberalised" working citizen has therefore become "de-collectivised", individualised and a free-floating 'human resource', with management encouraging these free-floating "human resources" to reshape their lives as entrepreneurs.
10. The assumption that a knowledge-based economy requires most workers to have higher skills is not challenged. This is despite evidence towards uneven and polarising trends with 'knowledge rich' and 'knowledge poor' sectors of industry. Dull, repetitive jobs not only still exist, but are increasing in some sectors.
11. It is critically important to take these trends into consideration in discussions about the Learning Society. The notion of "workers" also needs further consideration. They are not passive recipients of such forces, but self-reflexive, relatively autonomous individuals. They will increasingly place their experiences in the context of lifelong learning. If this results in a deteriorating quality of life, this could lead to a greater demand for citizenship and democratic rights.

The learning citizen

12. There appears to be a trend towards reducing knowledge and learning to competencies. Whilst this demystifies learning, the breaking down of knowledge into digestible parts reflects a preoccupation with measurement of what is learnt and a clinical approach to tasks in life. Thus the 'effective' citizen replaces the 'wise' citizen.
13. Learning appears to be considered as a group or social activity. This is different from the individualistic ideas found in European Commission documents.
14. However, there is little consideration of the fragmentary nature of learning in social and technological contexts. For instance, the use of information and communication technologies tends to individualise learning, as does the current emphasis on self-directed learning.
15. There was little consideration that citizens are mobilised as individuals to use learning as a way out of exclusion, but opportunities available to them are structured in an organised way.
16. Progressive alternatives to democratise access and to facilitate re-entry routes for learning have been identified under the umbrella the Learning Society. They are seen as breaking down boundaries and thus extending participation in education. However, two key issues have been glossed over. Can there be an entitlement to education or will this shared responsibility eventually change to become just the responsibility of the individual? Whose agendas will prevail with the breaking down of boundaries and with the regulatory role of the State being eroded?
17. Finally, the most important consideration of the working and learning citizen is the question: *What sort of learning, for what sort of life, for whom?*
18. Recent European Community-funded initiatives have become pre-occupied with responding to the concerns of entrepreneurs and statesmen. This has led to the bracketing of the realities of the ordinary working, learning citizen, whose needs the former often claim to serve.

Knowledge and competencies in the Learning Economies

19. Many of the research projects were based on the assumption that knowledge used in the productive process (i.e. the real social and technical processes through which goods and service are produced) is contextually created and also imported from outside. Learning in turn is considered as a relational issue dependent on the interactions of the actors within the learning environment. Competencies are assumed to be individual or collective abilities that are put into practice to perform specific activities and face situations arising out of those activities.
20. Evidence suggests that learning and competencies are continuously developed in different organisations and that important phenomena of participation and reflexivity occur in the operation and management of production processes.
21. Competencies are developed through different kinds of systems, which in most cases positively satisfy social and organisational needs. These needs are not only related to performance assessment, but also to the establishment of shared frameworks regarding learning, innovation, interpersonal relationships, leadership and other crucial aspects of organisational life.
22. As a consequence, new generations have to be prepared to not only acquire formal knowledge, but also to use knowledge and utilise experience in work activities. Education and training has a crucial role to play in this evolution of new knowledge development processes. But, significant changes are still needed when considering this in the broader context of "lifelong learning".

23. An evolutionary perspective of knowledge, learning and competencies tended to be taken. However, this process cannot be understood simply with “workplace learning” being considered “lower-value” learning compared with formal education. Organisations in general are powerful environments for knowledge creation, use and circulation, requiring continuous development of competencies at all levels.
24. Several assumptions of the current European debate were challenged, like the view that knowledge has only an economic value and the concept of “the learning organisation” just means “flexibility”. This was illustrated with examples that showed the emergence of a new dimension within firms’ cultures and practices - whereby knowledge and learning are not only high value resources, but are the pillars of a new *organisational citizenship*.
25. At the micro-level, research focused on the interpretation of relevant experiences and supporting lifelong learning policies. This resulted in suggested approaches and policy recommendations that enlarge the scope of organisational citizenship, the enhancement of reflective practices and the development of action-focused methodologies that lead to models and tools for reflective practices.
26. At the meso-level the focus was on inter-organisational cooperation and on the encouragement of reflection to support the development of new forms of local (inter-organisational) citizenship. Action methodologies also have a role to play at this level in the process of “perspective making” or “perspective taking”, in which actors communicate specific, often specialised, viewpoints and reciprocally take on the viewpoints of others.
27. At the macro level the perspective is focused on trying to provide a conceptual background to the efforts of researchers, funding agencies and user groups by linking research with real social practices. The implementation of the interactive social science approach could be a politically significant step towards a new role for the Commission, by bringing it closer to European citizens and their social realities.
28. However, the micro, meso and macro levels do not form ordered layers of a top-down construction. They are interrelated steps of new forms of citizenship and governance based on social knowledge creation and on competence development at different levels.

Knowledge and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

ICT in education

29. The focus has tended to be of the technical aspects of ICT but there now is a need to focus more on digital pedagogy. This involves implementation strategies that embed ICT within the curricula.
30. New priorities for the role of ICT can be derived from an analysis of core teaching problems thus highlighting new possibilities offered by ICT and the focus on the new competencies needed to address these issues.
31. ICT offers possibilities for new forms of collective learning. One particularly important development is computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL). This is important in the learning economy because students learn to construct new products and build new knowledge together. In this way they learn to be part of innovation and research. The introduction of CSCL requires a fundamental change in the curriculum, but this is not an easy process.
32. Often research projects are designed to encourage innovation and the commitment of teachers and schools. This is mainly due to schools and teachers not being involved in the design of the research and the writing of the reports; time and financial constraints; and the de-contextualisation of the research from reality in the school.

ICT in complex learning environments in and between organisations

33. It is important to run projects that combine input from the organisational and from the educational context. A project based organisation seems to be the best way to collaborate.
34. Students and workers are much better in working with discussion and collaboration forums than the trainers and educators.
35. Using ICT learning environments as *teaching* environments can facilitate learning in positive directions.
36. New skills demands are not so much ICT skills, rather they are soft skills like social skills, management skills, work organisation skills and virtues like entrepreneurship and reliability.

ICT outside education and work

37. ICT is important outside education and work and has potential for the learning of citizenship. Although not much is known about the learning of citizenship, what is known is that the learning citizenship is located in social practices and takes place over long periods of time. Informal learning is the dominant way to learn it. ICT can have a role, although at this stage little is known about the role. Developing ICT learning materials, games and exercises may help the process.

Further Information

The full title of this activity was – “Towards the Learning Economy – Conclusions from FP4 and FP5 Projects to Shape European Policies in Education and Training”

Publications

M.Kuhn, M.Tomassini, R.-J.an Simons (editors), “Towards a Knowledge Based Economy? – The Forgotten Learner in European Educational Research”, Peter Lang, 2005 (forthcoming)

Tomassini, M., “Learning and citizenship in organisations: outcomes and perspectives from research studies under EC 4th and 5th Framework Programmes”, *European Journal Vocational Training*, 2005 (forthcoming).

Tomassini M., “Apprendimento e cittadinanza nelle organizzazioni. Risultati di alcune recenti ricerche europee”, *Professionalità*, 81, 2004

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