HOW DO I LEARN? A CASE STUDY OF LIFELONG LEARNING OF EUROPEAN YOUNG

Prudencia Gutiérrez-Esteban[1] & Piotr Mikiewicz[2],
[1]Faculty of Education. University of Extremadura (Spain)
Avenida de Elvas s/n, 06006, Badajoz (Spain), pruden@unex.es
[2]University of Lower Silesia (Dolnoslaska Szkola Wyzsza) (Poland)
Wagonowa 9, 53-609 Wroclaw (Poland), piotr.mikiewicz@dsw.edu.pl

Abstract: European young people are categorized as the New Learners Millenium that learn at everyplace and everywhere, by their own and/or in community, such as in real as virtual world. Thus, learning can be provided by educational institutions as well as informal online scenarios, where information is freely distributed at any time. The core question in this field is about the relation between formal education and process of acquiring knowledge. The paper shows findings about some perspectives in that mater presented by participants of the Council of Europe project entitled Edgeryders.

Keywords: Learning, Lifelong Learning, Youth, Europe, Education

INTRODUCTION

In 2012 the authors were invited, as semi-external experts who would confront ideas of Edgeryders with existing European educational policies (full report Gutiérrez and Mikiewicz 2013), to participate in the works of **the Edgeryders** project (http://edgeryders.eu) - an action of the European Commission and the Council of Europe. The project's goal was to collect knowledge about contemporary youth perspectives on transition into adulthood processes. The core of the initiative was to build the internet platform (http://edgeryders.wikispiral.org/) as an interactive, horizontal sphere of discussion and sharing experiences concerning the transitions of young people around the world (not just in the European Union). In effect, more than 2,100 participants logged in from very different parts of the world. Several topics called '*Campaigns*', were established with invitation for all sort of information and commentary from participants. Each campaign (*Making a living, We the people, Living together, Caring for commons, Learning, Resilience*) contemplated several *Missions* (questions to answer and aims to achieve) and participants voluntarily contributed with their own 'reports'. Mainly there were short entries, with personal statements about discussed topics, but sometimes it was quite

sophisticated elaboration. In the end the project brought about very interesting research material about contemporary youth perspectives. The basic outcomes of analyses are presented in the report of Collins and Farrel (2013).

Recruitment to participate in the project, had the nature of networking, contributing with their experience and further promote the idea of Edgeryders, which also has the diagnostic ambitions based on social innovation[1], what resulted with certain advantages and disadvantages at the same time. This is not, therefore, a representative group (in the sociological sense) in relation to any population. Edgeryders are a group itself, a community, with a very diverse set of participants from national or ethnic composition of the group but with a certain kind of social and cultural experience in common, such as the education and experience of the transition from education to the labour market/adulthood. Referring to the terminology of Bourdieu (1992), we could call it a **habitus,** formed on the basis of similar conditions of socialization and experiencing the successive transition through the system of education and entry into maturity.

1. NEW LEARNING SCENARIOS

What their experiences contribute to the discussion on nowadays ways of learning and using knowledge?. Learning is a growing concept: it is always developing. We could even talk about a new learning culture that breaks traditionally offered situations for learning. In fact, there are many different new ways and kinds of learning. The most popular: formal, informal, online and lifelong learning and the lately born: invisible learning (Cobo and Moravec 2011), edupunk, edupop, incidental learning, ubiquitous learning… (Beetham, McGill and Littlejohn 2009), the key idea is that with the introduction of ICT and mainly Internet in our lives, we could **learn at any place and at any time** (everywhere&everytime learning: EEL), what by some scholars have been labeled as **mobile learning**. Citizenship has been moved from Formal Schooling Paradigm to Do It Yourself (DIY).

In addition to this new social, economic and cultural scenario, the development and infrastructure improvement of Information and Communication Technologies, led to emergence of a new set of technologies used in distance learning called Virtual Learning Environments, not only for the implementation of mixed systems of education, which brought distance education to traditional school, but also with the inclusion of particular online methods for training. Consequently during the last few years, the profusion of b-learning, e-learning and m-learning has been taking place. Where classroom teaching is complemented by virtual spaces for training offered by educational institutions, such as universities for the development of formal

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[1] „the project´s platform allows for multi-faceted usage: it allows the project to take the forms of peer-to-peer learning platform, idea incubation and crowd-sourced ork“: http://www.scribd.com/doc/144017510/New-Avenues-of-Democratic-Participation-and-Social-Innovation-The-Interplay-Between-Citizen-Expert-Think-Tanks-and-the-Council-of-Europe-in-the-Edger

education (Mikropoulos and Natsis, 2011). This traditionally has been taking place primarily through the so-called virtual platforms or LMS (Learning Management Systems). It is obvious that with years, learning trends have been growing, when the learning possibilities would be increased with the addition of new devices, aims, scenarios and/or uses.

The key question is how the **New Millennium Learners** introduce all these new scenarios? How do they learn? How do they think and see how, where, with who, with, what do they learn?. (Kennedy et. al. 2008; Prensky 2009; European Commission, 2008). We will present some insights on the basis of our analyses of information delivered by the Edgeryders. We focus here on the issue of relation between formal education and learning, informal education and learning and online education and lifelong learning, as the concepts are presented by young people.

2. EDUCATIONAL AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF THE EDGERYDERS

Not much can be said about the concrete educational paths of Edgeryders. However, their views offer an opinion that school is hostile, limiting force, essentially extraneous in preparation for adult life; where acquired knowledge is not always welcomed either useful for life, even not related with society around them. In some way, a metaphor about having a disease and being at school (for compulsory education at least) is created; a disease that you should have learnt how to overcome. Although, they recognized not being able to advance without some kind of "basic floor" learning basis.

In fact, participants at the platform know and use theoretical approaches and their own thesis for explaining some facts taking place in their lives. They ask themselves whether theory helps you to understand practice or knowing practice helps you to build theory. The traditional dilemma, plus some new thoughts: what happens when your training is made of theory and practice but not in an equal and/or related way?. These comments help us to understand what Learning means for Edgeryders in two opposite ways. Firstly, learning is seen as not related with education and/or teaching (training?) and these last usually are perceived as negative, because do not allow developing you in the natural, "proper" and excitable/interesting/ enjoyable way:

We are learning junkies, because that's how we survived. We managed to learn before the formal education kicked in, through the environments and the peers. Studying sometimes does not provide a learning environment, but a huge amount of data which is not to be confused with learning. (...) Education has its dangers: Get stuck in a subject bubble: when only your fellow researchers can understand what you're talking about. When studying is exciting there is a risk to become biased and to start collective polarisation amongst your fellow colleges/classmates. (K)

And secondly, learning is perceived as a pleasant and valued activity (in the whole sense, with all the implications that it has, plus all factors around it) but not the education/training either teaching (itself):

I am comfortable with the idea of learning as a hobby (…) I guess learning is just a great hobby, and if you do it as a hobby you can learn about fascinating things that are difficult to monetize. (Alberto)

Moreover, the teaching method is also questioned because did not offer any kind of interests by students in order to help them to learn (mainly at HEIs). After being in Educational System, they manifest being more fostered to learn. Effectively, it is quite awesome also to check the way in which they describe how they learn and what educational institutions offer them, what resources they use and what kind of social relations are created in order to learn, creating collaborative knowledge, parallel to formal education; enriching, completing this:

Socially, I feel part of a community & we seem to all support each other well. I think the fact that the majority of us are not stereotypical students & have to juggle other responsibilities makes us all quite respectful and encouraging. Everyone seems to have perspective & their eyes on long-term goals, which is satisfying. People are (generally) studying for explicit reasons rather than doing it because it seems like what you're meant to do. (Hec)

There are super helpful (unofficial) Facebook groups as well, running parallel to the course forums. I only bothered looking recently & must have missed out significantly (…) as there's a lot of valuable discussion there (…) Re synchronous contact - for the design modules, there's been a focus on practical skills (…) alongside the more academic, and I haven't felt limited by the tuition format. There have been companion manuals/workbooks to work through (…) and for me the main benefit of this kind of study is that it is self-directed (…) I think it's more valuable to learn these kind of things by trial and error rather than being shown & getting it right first time. Maybe that's just how I learn best but I've been surprised by how well me & my coursemates have got on with "harder" skills. (Hec)

Therefore the topic which is worth noting is the idea of sharing: knowledge, ideas, thoughts and experiences. Even some new practices are arising: co-authorship, collaborative, co-creation. All of them generate a good atmosphere for discussion, creating new perspectives and ways helping to make new projects and proposals, in a job environment highly competitive and were the markets and society establish our individual (as well as professional as personal) pathways, where the rational is more important than affecting dimension, participants at Edgeryders platform talk about "soul", trying to create a balance between states and individuals, the self and the society.

Also, some examples about how to learn on your own (*Do It Yourself, self-learning*) are possible; in this way, it is discussed *self-learning*, *flipped learning* and *inclusive learning*. Even some ideas about learning in community are given; how they

understand education and learning (learning everywhere and everyplace, from each other, by sharing, interchanging and creating):

But there is time for everything, this is why I'm here, to improve my skills! :) (Florina)

I really agree that all of us we have to learn how to learn and that we could learn anything (Daniela)

It is quite interesting indeed to discover their views about online learning. Besides, the positive values and/or benefits given to studying formal education through internet. What's more, the ideal pattern of online education offered by these participants includes formal and informal learning (official and non-official discourse, tools and methods, but they –both- work):

The use of technology in course delivery & design is pretty innovative, the first course I did won some sort of award for this. Lots of video, audio files, realtime communication, interactive systems (we had an online portfolio/design studio for one, so we could all feed back on each other's work). I think this is a large part of what makes it effective. (Hec)

This leads them to consider online learning as the future for changing Education Paradigm, including it in formal learning, creating what authors called *Personal Learning Environments* (Casquero et. al., 2010):

So are digital learning establishments the future?" If they are the future or they might be a larger part of the future, then the differences between the two models need to be split into those differences necessitated by the model (my concerns for vocational subjects and subjects requiring access to expensive equipment), and those which can be resolved through the application of emerging technologies (socialisation, access to resources which can be virtualised). (Joye)

CONCLUSION – EDUCATION VS LEARNING OR EDUCATION AND LEARNING SCHEME?

One of Edgeryders Mission was aimed at the problem on how to change Education Paradigms[2] in order to adapt to Digital Society and face learning and educational challenges, reshaping Educational and Learning models. This needs to be added to the concepts of training and what learning were generated thanks to this teaching. Their statements clearly distinguish education from learning and indicate that the formulation of specific competences and skills is made in the environment outside the schooling system. It is like they were disappointed and irritated, that all this effort to cope with educational system and moving up all these levels does not translate simply into a further path in a social life. However, for many participants, learning is a way to develop your mind and personality, but they do not forget the

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[2] http://edgeryders.ppa.coe.int/reality-check/mission_case/changing-education-paradigms#comment-1368

social need of job, … to be train for facing the adult world and as a way for social mobility.

So, learning is understood as the activity of an individual, not necessarily related to school activity. Most of the comments are indeed about acquiring skills (through learning, so person decides) but not thanks to teaching (education, where others are responsible of what you learn). It can be shortly summarized like this: look, how much do I know, but it is not you, who teach me, but I learned it by myself. However, it is not directly reported that the school (as institution) shall be eliminated but also how to flexible it, in better correspondence with "real life". What is proposed is a change of it – to become a place of learning how to learn. This is associated with disrupting education and re-organizing schoolwork, flipping the classroom and changing teachers' role, allowing them to realize individual projects and take personal responsibility in the learning process. One of the most important solutions to solve some recognized problems of educational/learning system is networking and dense social relations, Van Dellen (2013) and Veletsianos and Russell (2013).

On this way the implicit concept of social capital is being brought into the discussion on education and learning. Dense social relations are perceived as a way of gaining required knowledge, skills, and information. This is particularly interesting in the scope of initial interpretation made by Collins and Cuzzocrea (2012) about individualisation of Edgeryders transition processes. In fact, the nowadays concept of social capital, especially by Coleman (1991) and Putnam (2000) can be perceived as a quest for lost community and in entries of Edgeryders we can trace some clues of such sentiment. On the other hand, the strong emphasis has been given to importance of the weak ties, which again brings the concept of social capital developed on the basis of network theory (Lin 2001).

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