

OPEN CLASSROOM WORKING GROUP

Discussion Paper

Towards Open Learning for the School Age in the Information Society

1. Education for the Information Society

Education is one way of our societies to achieve continuity of basic values, by transmitting our culture and our identity to the next generation. Education also should provide equal chances for each citizen to cope with changes, find an adequate place for her/his aptitudes and interests, and fill with dignity her/his individual role within the society. In consequence: the quicker and to a broader extent basic values of a culture have to be adapted to a changing situation, the quicker and more intensively external changes will become important for every citizen's daily life, the more important will the role of education become.

The information society of tomorrow will only sustain the values of our societies if our educational systems are reformed in a way, in which they can guarantee the promise of equal chances. The structures of the educational system of the past will not be adequate. The technologies leading to the information society and the structural changes in society which follow open the borders of classical institutions, intensify existing relations between different sectors and actors of our community and create new ones, beyond yesterday's limitations of distances and time. Education has to follow this step-wise process of opening, which just started.

Answering the demands of the relatively stable society of yesterday could be concentrated on a specific period in life: the school age. Adapting to the continuous process of change, which will characterise the information society, has to cover all ages; lifelong learning becomes more than a catchword. Of course, childhood will stay the most important period of growing into a society. The school age will lay the inevitable ground for equal chances, but schools have to open up to much closer interactions with the other ages. Parents and students e.g. faced with the same problems of existential importance cannot successfully learn and adapt separated from each other or only on an individual basis, leaving out the moderating and supporting role of the school.

As learning over the whole life span and work are coming closer together and will partly merge in a way not experienced in the past, not only the occupational environment has to come closer to the educational institutions. At the same time educational institutions have to be more receptive to problems and demands of work life, better and quicker aware of changing needs of work and more open to communicate with decision makers and actors in that field.

The world beyond family and work will similarly change on the way to the information society. New ways of citizens' participation in decision processes, contributions to the community by volunteer activities, leisure activities with increasing overlap to family, work, and community will generate an increasing demand for contacts and communication between the people responsible in this field and the educational community. In fields like religion or sport the educational system has developed a variety of adequate mechanisms for those relations. Driven

by the technologies and developments toward the information society these mechanisms have to be broadened to many other fields of importance.

To sum up: Open schools as educational institutions of tomorrow have to open up more intensively and in new ways to the family, to work life, to community and leisure activities. The open classroom, as the operational entity of our educational system of tomorrow, has to offer manifold connections and spaces for dialogue with students in their whole range of roles, with parents, with employers and trade unions, with decision makers at national, regional and local levels, with representatives of volunteer and newly emerging types of initiatives.

2. Various stakeholders

As the needs for change described are common to all of us - in Europe as well as world-wide - many persons, groups and initiatives are looking for adequate solutions in their area of action. It has become nearly impossible for each of them to keep an overview over all activities of others for similar problems, under comparable conditions, with experiences valuable for them and the problem they are faced with. The range, the intensive motivation and the variety of those activities in this way become themselves an obstacle for further development, because they contribute more to confusion and a lack of awareness of simultaneous developments than they are able to create synergy automatically.

Opening the school and its classrooms for tomorrow means also to open awareness and communication between initiatives and its actors in a co-ordinated way. Educational systems in the various European countries and world-wide are organised in different ways. National responsibilities and coherent planning are high in some countries, decentralised responsibilities on regional or local level are dominating in others. Traditions of contacts and influences between the school system and other actors in society are different from country to country, sometimes from region to region.

Closest, most frequent, to a high extent not very formalised and person-bound contacts between the schools and other actors may work at the local level. To capitalise on this structure support is needed for local initiatives, but as regional or national activities in some cases may be the dominating level, also those developments need support. The European Union as a whole has decided to face the challenges on the way towards the information society in a co-ordinated way, following the principle of subsidiarity, which means not to try to decide and carry out processes at a European level, which could be equally or better solved at national or regional levels; but reacting adequately to questions of a general nature, which can not be sufficiently, quickly enough or resource-effectively solved at the lower levels.

European Union member countries have - based on common roots of our cultures - developed educational systems, which show more similarities than we find between Europe and other parts of the world. As a consequence the journey of our school systems into the information society will benefit from activities at a transnational level: to raise awareness, to organise communication, to bring together experiences and to support the transfer into sufficiently similar situations in order to create synergy. Due to the basic commonalities of the educational systems within Europe it makes sense to organise this at a European level. Those European activities would not be sufficient, if not accompanied by an adequate space for local, regional and national activities of awareness, communication and synchronisation running simultaneously. As the particularities of the respective, more limited fields of action are the key reason to justify the

importance of these levels of initiatives, any link or co-ordination between those initiatives and the overall European frame must be subsidiary.

3. Where to start

The transition towards an open school and open classrooms for the information society will deeply involve the society as a whole. It will change our educational systems in a way only comparable with the transition from single schools and institutions for some elites to the comprehensive school systems for all citizens that we have known for centuries. With no respect to this big and important process, the number of actors and institutions really aware of that development immediately in front of us is still limited. The number of those, which have already taken concrete actions to enter the path towards open classrooms is still even more limited.

Therefore it seems wise to start at a point, where a reasonable number of those early actors and pioneers of trying out new ways in schools have already formed a platform based on common interests. The *Open Classroom Conferences I and II* in 1995 and 1997, organised under the responsibility of EDEN, have developed towards the most prominent focal point for those actors in Europe. Based on this interest of the actors, which has already been shown, an intensified continuation of Open Classroom Conferences is proposed as a key tool to reach the goals described.

A visible big event like the Open Classroom Conference induces manifold activities to report on own actions and experiences, to compare the own problems and results achieved with those of others, to create new ideas in contacts with others, to generate motivation for co-operation in the future. To exploit all these valuable impulses needs continuity, which goes beyond the potential of a conference. Therefore, we propose a mechanism of continuity, which builds on promising activities visible within the conference. This mechanism will support and organise the broadening and the continuation of those initiatives, especially in the first phase, and offer an attractive platform for problem-centred continuous communication. This at the same time has to take properly into account the high commitment of the active pioneers and - therefore - their high workload. So we must offer communication and co-operation facilities that occupy a minimum of time resources and additional orientation.

The variety of stakeholders and actions, the problem-centred approaches, the creativity and the accumulation of motivation of national, regional and local initiatives would make a too centralised approach to co-ordination costly with a high danger of discouraging leading actors. Therefore, we propose a lean umbrella structure, which offers for national, regional, local, and sectoral initiatives an attractive space for their own activities, offering only as much of general structure as needed to ensure overall coherence and communication.

Like the Open Classroom Conference those localised events should - as far as possible - offer a frame for continuous information, communication and exchange of experience. Therefore, we propose only a framework structure, which will facilitate the continuity between events for the localised actors, mainly by informing and offering infrastructures as well as offering an attractive, visible platform to disseminate results and plans to all others.

The different actors and groups which ought to be included when opening schools and classrooms each have their own dynamic identifying key issues, setting priorities for their actions, perceiving and reacting on society's demand. Their time schedule putting the open

classrooms high on their agenda will be quite individual. It is without any chance of success to try to synchronise those activities completely.

External offers, communications, examples of other groups may only be able to trigger internal developments and in some cases raise awareness within those groups to a level sufficient to take actions. In consequence we propose a structure, which allows those groups to develop their specific activities at any time they feel appropriate. Identifying the need of a continuous forum, they should be able to address these mechanisms on their particular schedule. The annual European Open Classroom Conference will act here as a mechanism to collect and condense those activities developed over a year.

4. Means of action

Means of action, in order to reach the afore-mentioned short- and long-term objectives can be grouped in two broad categories.

Those means that help for concrete proposals and initiatives to be built, at local, regional, national and also transnational level – i.e. workshops, seminars, preparatory studies and, of course, awareness raising activities (communication and promotion). And, on the other hand, the actions that facilitate the dissemination of results, experience and “good practice”, thus contributing to a spiral of increasing involvement of social actors and, eventually, increasing accountability and quality in education at school level.

There is an easily detected need for an organisation like EDEN, to play a leading role, in order to start this spiral movement towards the openness of educational systems. At present, EDEN can build upon the results of the Open Classroom Conferences’ and sustain the momentum towards the establishment of a permanent and consistent way, to co-ordinate the work for defining policies and measures and also communication activities in the next 2-3 years.

To this end, EDEN must collaborate with a number of European organisations and associations, with existing initiatives and running projects in the field of education at school level, especially focusing on the use of the new ICTs and their impact in all the educational activities. To say the least, there seems to be a strong relation between the expansion of use of the ICTs and the new media in learning, from the early childhood up to 18-20 years, and the new attitudes of the individuals, the social actors and the societies that are being developed nowadays.

Links with some organisations have already been established, in connection with the previous and the next Open Classroom conferences and through participation in the Working Group. These are:

- UNESCO
- The European Commission
- ICDE - International Council for Open and Distance Education
- ATEE - Association for Teacher Education in Europe
- EENet - European Experts Network for Educational Technology
- ESHA - European Secondary Heads Association
- EUN - European Schoolnet
- MENON - European Multimedia Support Network
- TRENDS - ET Telematics Application project
- T3 - ET Telematics Application project

In the future, contacts should be expanded in a non-exclusive way, open to cooperation with all organisations and bodies with an interest in the field, particularly those with a European level of operation.

5. Further actions in 1999

A number of activities are foreseen as imperative in the near future, to contribute to the “Open Classroom” Initiative’s take off and define the issues at stake for the long-term period. It is suggested here that EDEN should make the necessary steps in order to prepare the establishment of a permanent activity, and to link these steps with the next Open Classroom Conference, in Balatonfüred, Hungary, 25-26 March 1999. This will mean that a meeting should be organised in connection with the Conference, in order to consider this Discussion Paper and to agree on the establishment of a permanent Body to coordinate future activities.

The agreement would imply:

- The present Open Classroom Working Group should be replaced by a permanent *Open Classroom Networking Committee* with 8-12 members. The core members of the Committee will be nominated by EDEN. The membership should, however, include representatives of some of the other main stakeholders.
- The Networking Committee should meet at least twice per year to discuss and supervise joint activities.
- The Networking Committee should link closely with the Programme Committees and Organising Committees of further Open Classroom Conferences, in order to ensure synergy and provide opportunity for dialogue with conference participants and contributors. A meeting of the Networking Committee should be convened during or in connection with each conference.
- One key activity of the Networking Committee should be to map and exchange information about the major relevant European events, ongoing projects, working groups, resource materials, policy documents, studies etc. A particular effort might be done in analysing existing information.
- The Networking Committee should avoid duplicating efforts and, whenever possible, rely on work already being done by relevant parties. When the Committee wants to suggest or launch new activities, studies or projects, such activities may, when appropriate, be implemented by existing groups or bodies in agreement and co-operation with the Committee.
- Information about the work of the Networking Committee and the respective partners should be published (with links to relevant web sites) at the Open Classroom web site, along with conference documentation and announcements.
- The Committee should, in collaboration with the Editorial Board of EURODL (The European Journal of Open and Distance Learning), make sure that papers, reports etc related to Open Classroom activities and issues are published regularly in EURODL.

- The possibility and mechanisms of linking national and regional events, conferences, networks, and initiatives with a similar approach to or interest in the field, to the Open Classroom activities at the European level, should be considered. This may also include brokerage of experts, cases, studies, etc.
- The possibility of building a second-level, wider network, particularly with national/regional representation, may be considered as a further development in this context.
- The Networking Committee should consider ways of developing the idea of and the use of “learning resources”, be it contents, materials, institutions, individual experts, museums, in this sort of complicated, and yet pragmatic, network.