



Our growing understanding of the key competence Learning to Learn

This document is based on the exploration undertaken by the Development Group within the multilateral GRUNDTVIG project "L2L – Learning to Learn"¹ aiming to arrive at a common understanding on the key competence of Learning to Learn. Its current form represents the discussions and outcomes after a process of two meetings of this group, reading and writing in between March and April 2009.

We consider it to be a working document which we hope will serve as an input into the further discussions and explorations throughout the life-span of this project. Surely it is not attempting to arrive at the ultimate all-time valid definition of learning to learn! It represents the developing thinking of the people involved in the project – thinking that is based on reflected experience as well as the studying of existing literature from the field. It will be subject to alteration and further development through the on-going discussions around this project and the results of the related action research.

We chose the form of a fictitious interview between "questions" and "answers" as a structure for this document to highlight the exploratory nature of it as well as to document some of the questions we came across so far. For some of the questions we identified fairly clear answers for us, for some others, though, we are still searching for more light. So, if you are provoked by this document let us know what your thinking is – we highly appreciate any contribution to this exploration process. Connected to the website of the project (see footnote on this page) is an interactive platform containing discussions about Learning to Learn.

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¹ see www.learning2learn.eu; the project has been designed and is being implemented by a consortium of 7 organisations from 6 different countries.

Our exploration in the world of Learning to Learn

Some inspiring findings while studying literature on and around Learning to Learn

1. OUR questions: So what is Learning to Learn all about? What is the definition of it?

OUR answers: Well, let's start by emphasising that it is quite a complex thing with many dimensions and certainly there is more than one definition or understanding. First of all it depends on what meaning one gives to the word "learning" or what happens when one learns.

2. OUR questions: That is not so difficult. I have learnt something when I know something new - something I have not known before.

OUR answers: Yes, certainly this is one common way of understanding learning. But there are more understandings around. A Swedish educational researcher - *R.Säljö* - once asked many students what they actually mean by learning. They answered in manifold ways which revealed five different conceptions of learning:

- Learning as the increase of knowledge - like you were describing it.
- Learning as memorizing - a technique we practise a lot in formal education.
- Learning as the acquisition of knowledge that can be retrained and/or utilized in practice - here the focus is not only what was learnt but also for what - where it was applied.
- Learning as the abstraction of meaning - here people did not talk only about "a piece or a unit" of knowledge which was learnt but what they understood from something they read, heard, saw or had experienced.
- Learning as an interpretive process, aimed at understanding reality - probably the most complex understanding of learning.

The answers in the last category did not refer so much to the content of what was learnt but mainly on the process highlighting a certain relationship between the learners way of seeing and experiencing things and the world around him. Here the social aspect of learning comes in.

Like Roger Säljö, I am interested in the distinction between learning and studying. We can look at most educational situations and define learning as something like a quest for meaning and define studying as something like what is necessary in order to survive and do what the institution requires.

Hounsell, 1988, p.17

Thus, if learning is thought of as "an increase in knowledge" or "memorizing", then the phrase "learning to learn" must mean "learning to increase knowledge", or "learning to memorize", yet clearly it means much more than this. What is more, the word "learning" must have at least two quite different meanings, or else the phrase translates into "memorizing how to memorize" or "increasing knowledge about how to increase knowledge".

Candy, 1990, p.36

3. OUR questions: Does this mean that there is better and worse or less and more developed ways of learning?

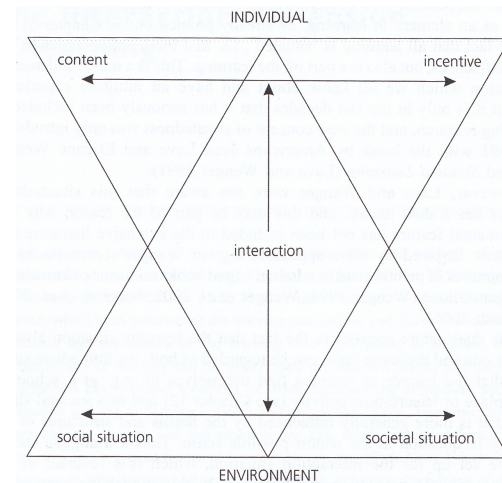
OUR answers: No, they simply represent different dimensions of the process called “learning” - a process which leads individuals to grow or change and consequently do something differently than before. You see, the interesting questions for us are especially WHY and WHAT FOR; or in other words what motivates and inspires people to learn and where to they apply what has been learnt. For learning to be sustainable we have to consider the “application” side of it - only when the learnt is being applied in various contexts it becomes an integral part of the capacities of the learner.

4. OUR questions: Let me see if I understood. For example I attend a 3 days training course and at the end there is the question “What have you learnt?” - according to your understanding I can not answer the question since I do not know then when and how (and if!) I will apply what I have heard and experienced at the course.

OUR answers: Well, if you have a fairly clear idea before the course what your learning needs are and what you want to use the learnt for the better at the end of the training course you can identify learning outcomes and foresee their application afterwards. In other words we are convinced that learning is more likely to be sustainable if the content connects or responds to a clear (self-) identified need and/or strong interest/passion and therefore creates in the learner an intrinsic motivation.

5. OUR questions: That’s true. I remember when I was a teenager at a certain point I was very interested in engines. I deconstructed completely the one of my motorbike and rebuilt it just to learn about how they function; I read books; then I started to create own little engines - I spent hours and hours with it and learnt a lot which still today is very useful when there is the need to repair the car or other machines.

OUR answers: Exactly. This example refers predominantly to skills you have learnt being driven by passion for the topic. Often this intrinsic motivation is being also created through challenges you would like to or you have to deal with. Consider situations in your life where perhaps through sudden crisis situations which lead to emotional stress you were almost forced to change something, to grow - to learn.



The amended model of learning dimensions (Illeris 2007)

6. OUR questions: Thinking about it I realise how much I have learnt in the times I lived abroad. At the beginning I felt terribly isolated and I considered the people there to be ignorant and cold. Only through the talks I had then with a person who himself was an immigrant in this country I understood more and more that I was not really open or showing interest in the others. How does this fit in with your ideas?

OUR answers: Here we touch upon an essential dimension of learning as we see it - the social aspect of it. People learn a lot through interaction with others. Human beings as we know are social creatures and have a need to belong, to be part of a group; and this process of becoming a part and living together requires a lot of learning in the sense of developing; and on the other hand the social context has a big impact on the how and what of learning. If we often find ourselves in conflict with others, for example, there is perhaps something to learn (unless you consider the others are wrong or are to blame!).

7. OUR questions: Phew, that is a difficult area. Sometimes you feel you have made progress but then you fall back again into well-known patterns of behaviour which you had considered already as overcome.

OUR answers: Certainly, nobody would state that this is an easy process - especially since in these cases beliefs, values, attitudes play an important role; and most of those have been acquired unconsciously in early age through socialisation as well as culturalization. All of those shape to a large extent one's "meaning structures" (as *Mezirow* calls them) or the predispositions of learners. Not everybody has the same "starting point", the same pre-conditions for learning AND not everybody learns the same thing from the same situation.

8. OUR questions: Meaning, some arrive in adulthood and are lucky and have the right "predispositions" - and some others because they are born into the wrong environment do not have them?!

OUR answers: Well, learning can be learnt - we reckon! The essential starting point, though, is a clear openness and willingness to learn; or as *Hodkinson* calls it an understanding of learning as becoming - a commitment to grow and learn from challenges and change.

Learning to learn involves acquisition of a repertoire of attitudes, understandings and skills that allow people to become more effective, flexible and self-organized learners in a variety of contexts.

Candy, 1990, p.34

Learning to learn involves entering into the deep meaning structures of material to be learnt and, in its most advanced forms, may lead to critical awareness of assumptions, rules, conventions, and social expectations that influence how people perceive knowledge and how they think, feel and act when learning.

Candy, 1990, p.35

9. OUR questions: ...becoming what??

OUR answers: A life-long learner in a community of other learners. There is a mutual influencing between the learning of the individual and of the community - you learn also for the others and the community (or the “learning culture” as *Hodkinson* calls it) impacts on your learning.

You see we take so many decisions every day, make loads of choices in life and often we do not have a clear grip on what drives us to say *Yes* to one and *No* to another option. We consider it important to through self-reflection raise your awareness about these “driving forces” in you - for, as *Candy* writes “the development of a sense of personal control and a robust self-concept as a learner”.

10. OUR questions: Wow, I was not aware that talking about learning and Learning to Learn you would reach out so far into the spheres of psychology and philosophy.

OUR answers: This is how we chose to approach the topic. You can talk to some others who would when talking about learning to learn refer mainly to techniques and strategies to become more efficient in learning, meaning acquiring new skills and knowledge. We, though, are convinced that Learning to Learn is a competence area where attitudes, values and beliefs play an essential role. One could say it is a “meta-competence” since it impacts on the selection, acquisition and application of other competences.

11. OUR questions: So, according to you how do you learn to learn then? How do you learn attitudes?

OUR answers: Good question! Surely it has got a lot to do with increasing self-awareness and hence with reflection. The starting point would be to become aware about your attitudes, values and beliefs in relation to learning and you as a learner. As stated before throughout your childhood and adolescence parallel to learning contents you develop - mostly unconsciously - a concept of yourself as a learner and based on it strategies on how to learn.

There are several levels or layers to such self-awareness, extending from knowledge about one's learning style to the development of a sense of personal control and a robust self-concept as a learner.

Candy, 1990, p.47

Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habitats of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change.

Mezirow, 1991, p.92

12. OUR questions: Can you give me an example?

OUR answers: Let's consider a child learning how to ride a bike. The father whenever the child falls becomes angry and explains in a loud voice to the child how to do it correctly. The same pattern happens when the child learns how to swim, or catch the ball, etc. Surely the child learns unconsciously something about its kinaesthetic capacities, its relation to sports and movement in general and the fact that it needs authority who explains and you follow.

In this way beliefs and concepts about yourself as a learner are being developed which impact on your learning efforts as an adult - you develop a self-understanding of how you learn best, what are your strengths and weaknesses and what is important to learn and what not. Learning to Learn means becoming aware of these concepts as well as able to adjust them if they do appear limiting for further development.

13. OUR questions: OK, but how do you become aware of these patterns? Do I sit in a corner for days and reflect?

OUR answers: No - or at least not only. As stated before developing self-knowledge is an essential requisite of becoming competent in Learning to Learn - hence, self-reflection plays an important role.

But clearly Learning to Learn has as well a strong collaborative and interactive dimension. As with other areas of learning - as explained earlier - the social aspect is important. Observing how others learn, through feedback, being challenged by others, learning in teams - all of this supports the process of becoming aware and creates opportunities to further develop your Learning to Learn competences.

14. OUR questions: Wow, this is all a bit heavy. I thought Learning to Learn is mainly about organising my learning better, to become more efficient; and now it sounds like I have to start a psycho-therapy.

OUR answers: Do not worry! We refer to Learning to Learn in terms of a life-long and life-wide process. It is an open-ended process meaning at a certain point you decide consciously to develop this competence area and from then on it will slowly but surely become an integrated part of your life-long learning - whenever you learn something in the background or in parallel you learn also to learn.

The eight phases of learning how to learn – understood as the unlocking of learning potential – are planning, mirroring, knowing yourself, observing yourself when learning, changing frameworks, listening, transforming your believes, being playful and creative.

Mattoni, 2007

A focus on learning to learn is important because it leads to 'intentional learning'. Intentional learning implies a novel sense of agency and choice on the part of the learner, and involves self awareness, ownership and responsibility.

Hoskins, 2008, p.9

15. OUR questions: So, slowly but surely I will become automatically more competent in learning.

OUR answers: Well, not so automatically - you will as with other competences need conscious (self-)reflections, support of facilitators, educational programmes, communities of practice, discussions, etc. Furthermore it is important to understand that there is a content-specific aspect in the Learning to Learn competence; which means that in some learning areas you can demonstrate this competence better than in others depending on the context and your pre-dispositions.

16. OUR questions: So what happens when I am competent in Learning to Learn - what effects might it have?

OUR answers:

- You might become clearer on your aims - in life in general (vision, life goals) and then in specific learning areas.
- You connect better to your potentials and can make use of them in various situations.
- You might be more capable to learn from challenge and crisis situations.
- You have developed your capacity of critical thinking.
- You might have increased capacities to participate as an active citizen in your communities.
- You become a more effective, flexible and self-directed learner in a variety of contexts.

17. OUR questions: Active Citizen and Learning to Learn - could you explain that connection a bit more please?!

OUR answers: Let me quote here from the report of the *CRELL network* on Learning to Learn and Civic Competences: different currencies or two sides of the same coin? "Both these competences are tools for empowering the individual and giving them the motivation, autonomy and responsibility to control their own lives beyond the social circumstances in which they find themselves. In the case of civic competence; the ability to be able to participate in society and voice their concerns, ensure their

The idea that learning can lead to profound change in individuals, and communities is an important link between these two core competencies because both the notion of competence as we have described it, and the notion of personal and social change, are historical, contextualized, and value dependent: they imply a sense of direction leading towards a 'desired end'. In a discussion of key competencies for life in the 21st century, (Haste, 2001) identifies an overarching 'meta-competence' of being able to manage the tension between innovation and continuity. This is something which schools need to nurture and develop in their learners and, in our opinion, this is a prerequisite too for both lifelong learning and active citizenship.

Hoskins, 2008, p. 12

rights and the rights of others. In the case of learning to learn to be able to participate in work and everyday life by being empowered to learn and update the constantly changing competences required to successfully manage your life plans.”

18. OUR questions: Seems like learning to learn is not only a key competence but a key to happiness...

OUR answers: Depends of course which meaning you give to the word happiness; but once you are competent in learning to learn you surely have a clearer understanding what happiness is for you... :o))

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