

Europe's Learning cultures - A discussion paper

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Introduction

Each country has its own culture, identity, history and practices on education and training and also has its own approach and system for education and training. We describe this specific approach as the learning culture in a certain country. Since the learning cultures – and therefore, also the policy on 'valuing learning', which is based on this learning culture – can vary widely within Europe, the systems for 'valuing learning' also vary. Many countries have been involved with 'valuing learning' in one way or another, and it is interesting to study the various approaches in more detail. The concept and process of 'valuing learning' provides a perspective with which to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of each country's systems and frameworks. This facilitates mutual knowledge exchange in which all countries can have an interest. It can be called benchmark learning (Karlöf 2001) since the active learning of each other's strong points takes place based on benchmarking.

A cluster model was used in *Making Learning Visible* (Bjornavold 2000) to describe the various learning cultures. Mutual learning takes place through geographic proximity and institutional similarities of the countries within each cluster. This has led to the observation that, overall, 'valuing learning' approaches within each cluster often resemble one another.

Defining culture

Before moving on to a cluster-model for analysing learning cultures in Europe, it's necessary to take a look at the concept of culture itself.

The concept of culture came to mean in the eighteenth and nineteenth century "first, a general state or habit of the mind; Second, the general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole; Third, the general body of arts; and fourth, a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual." (Williams 1984, 16).

From this multi-dimensional view on the concept of culture it becomes clear that culture is a flexible and dynamic term, adapting itself to changing societal systems.

A general definition therefore is helpful. Norman (1991) defined culture as the set of beliefs, norms and values which forms the basis of collaborative human behaviour and makes human actions to some extent predictable and directed towards a set of commonly held purposes or the maintenance of some commonly

accepted state. Culture is generally fairly stable. It is embedded in language, institutions, habit, social relations. The learning system is a reflection of the general culture or societal state of the art. Changing a culture requires a formidable effort. The same therefore goes for changing a learning culture.

Embedding RPLO in an existing Learning System

The question arises how to embed the Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes in an existing Learning System. Do we have to aim at re-inventing or innovating the learning system? Both strategies can be helpful and the truth probably lies in between. What remains is a vision of a concept of culture in which we can acknowledge that a learning culture:

- Shows itself on many levels: meta (e.g. European), national, sectoral, regional and even organisational,
- Is based on a power of balance between the suppliers (the learners), the teachers and the users of learning (organisations, functions),
- Is dramatically difficult to adapt quickly to changing circumstances in and for the learning system because learning in itself is so strongly connected to the society as a whole.

Europe's clusters

In *The Unfinished story of 'VPL in Europe* (Duvekot et al 2005) this model was adjusted in order to reflect the current situation in Europe. For example, Switzerland was added to the dual system. Furthermore, the French, Belgian and Dutch systems were added as three separate learning cultures, all three of them characterised by different types of top-down steering on implementing VPL. In the Leonardo-project *Managing European diversity in lifelong learning* this cluster-approach has been updated and used to analyse the variety of VPL-usage in Europe. The cluster model at present focuses on seven learning cultures. In the course of this project, these learning cultures might be described in an even greater variety in order to catch (and respect) Europe's diversity for the sake of embedding VPL on the levels of the *learning individual, organisation and system*.

Figure 1: Europe's main learning cultures

System	Characteristics	Countries
The dual system	Learning while working; social pacts; VET-levels	Germany, Austria, Switzerland
The Mediterranean approach	Regional; flexible and implicit	Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal
The North European model	Government-driven; regional; VET-levels	Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden
The Atlantic model	Demand-steered, summative	England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Ireland
The Romanic System	Top-down; legislation; incl. HE	France
The Romanic-Low Countries model	Top-down; legislation; shared responsibilities	Belgium
The Low Countries model	Supply-driven; summative; shared responsibilities; bottom-up implementation	The Netherlands
The East European model	Top-down; in transition due to entering EU	Bulgaria, Rumania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Baltic States, Slovakia

Benchmarking national learning cultures

For the RPLO project it is crucial to get a grip on the existing learning culture in the participating countries. A way to do this is to benchmark the learning cultures of Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom in order to find out similarities and differences.

On the basis of such a benchmark a SWOT-analysis can be made to show how to tackle the specifics of a national learning culture since the analysis might show solutions from one country for the problems in another country in embedding RPLO as an approach to lifelong learning and an instrument into the ways of working of the learning system. The benchmark aims at filling in the characteristics of the national learning culture in matrix and commenting on the changes for embedding RPLO in the short and long run. Each partner fills in the matrix and comments on the perspectives. After that a SWOT-analysis will be made for all countries.

References

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