

Anna Pokorska

ICT for Inclusive Learning: the Way Forward

Conference “ICT for inclusive learning: the way forward”,
Florence, 10–11 November 2011.

An international conference, “ICT for inclusive learning: the way forward” took place at the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in the centre of Florence on 10–11 November 2011.

The conference was organised by the Eurocademy Association and CNR-IBIMET and was financed by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning programme. It was an event which summarised and rounded off the “E-ruralnet” project the main aim of which was a diagnosis of the market of professional e-learning courses in the 11 EU countries which took part in the project and also a description of the expectations and needs of participants as well as potential participants of such courses, particularly in rural areas.

The conference goals were far wider than the dissemination of results of the E-ruralnet project. The conference gathered approximately 100 participants from 16 countries all over the world. The presentations and discussions centred around a few issues which were placed in subject blocks which were discussed during three plenary sessions and six smaller workshops.

The axis holding together the sessions, discussions and workshops was the idea of inclusive education, accessible to everybody regardless of background, abode, health or age. The concept of inclusive education which the speakers referred to was very broad and closest to the general understanding proposed by UNESCO, according to which “inclusive education is based on the right of all learners to a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Focusing particularly on vulnerable and marginalised groups, it seeks to develop the full potential of every individual”¹.

¹ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/strengthening-education-systems/inclusive-education/>

The speakers showed that exclusion in education has many faces and concerns not only children and youth but also adults and can be caused not only by disability but also such variables as gender, abode or socio-demographic factors.

The variety of causes of educational exclusion was highlighted during the first plenary session “ICT for inclusive learning – setting the scene” which opened with a lecture by Brian Holmes, Head of Department, Education Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) at the European Commission. Using examples of projects carried out within the EACEA (such as Bridge, Signs2go, Tips, Migrant ICT) he presented the opportunities provided by the digital world for inclusion into the mainstream of life of those people whose access to it is limited for a particular social characteristic (e.g. the elderly, hard of hearing, migrants) or integrating people around common goals (e.g. the eTwinning project).

Then Fouli Papageorgiu (PRISMA – Centre for Development Studies) on behalf of the partners of the e-ruralnet project presented the results of research of supply and demand for professional education in the e-learning system in 11 European countries, stating that e-learning in rural areas, despite infrastructural problems connected with its implementation, could become one of the channels of inclusive education which the following speaker David Instance (Centre of Educational Research and Innovation, OECD) characterised as “sensitivity on individual and group differences, including of the weakest learners”. This definition can be considered a common feature of all the presentations. Such an understanding of inclusive education was represented at all the sessions and during work in subject groups regardless of whether they referred to theoretical findings or practice in daily life. David Instance also noticed that education assuring inclusion should be learner-centred, structured and well-designed, profoundly personalised and social, which was also confirmed in other presentations.

The second plenary session “Building an inclusive learning society” was devoted to practical examples of inclusive education and a critical reception of the effectiveness of this type of initiative. Maria Ranieri (University of Florence) presented projects of the mobile learning type, advancing the thesis about the existence of the mobile divide and the technological and knowledge gap which prevent people from fully benefiting from the possibilities of new technologies and mean that they cannot be considered as a successful solution to the problem of exclusion. Pippa Buchanan (Independent Educator) presented the project of the Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU), submitting for

discussion its usefulness for the development of the concept including lifelong education and drawing attention to the problem of the lack of a universal language which would enable easy communication on an international level. In spite of the universality of the English language, it is not a lingua franca capable of replacing local languages and competing with them in the field of education.

Joe Cullen (Arcola Research) argued that an inclusive learning society is but a dream because the projects and actions so far undertaken are fragmented and determined by their social, economic and geographic context which means that in the field of inclusive education we are faced with:

- Evidence of ‘small successes’
- Little evidence of longer-term impacts and no evaluation culture
- Menace of sustainability through short-term funding constraints
- Excessive dependency on initiators/champions/animations

The third plenary session “Introducing innovation in the learning environment”, which took place on the second day of the conference was devoted to various aspects of innovation. Stefania Aceto (SCIENTER) discussed the effectiveness of learning within learning communities. David Worley (independent expert) used selected examples to prove that the latest generation of technologies, including immersive technologies provide new possibilities for the inhabitants of rural areas to learn, acquire information, develop professional and personal competence or have an influence on their attitudes and behaviour, regardless of age. Lutz Laschewski (Alcedo Social Research) portrayed e-learning in rural areas from the theoretical perspective of the diffusion of innovation.

Apart from the plenary sessions involving all the conference participants, there were six thematic workshops where the following issues were discussed:

- Best practice in rural areas
- Innovative learning methodologies
- Difference facets on inclusive learning
- Guiding, motivating and mentoring learners
- Technological and delivery innovation
- Pedagogical innovation

During the first of these meetings there was a presentation of initiatives using ICT which were successful in stimulating the social or economic life of rural inhabitants, underlining that inclusion implies allowing people to achieve

success (educational, economic etc.) in their own local environment. Each example was accompanied by a commentary about the barriers encountered during its realisation, which again portrayed that creating equal educational opportunities for everybody is difficult and requires the involvement of varied and wide groups: the authors of social and educational projects, their performers and evaluators, as well as politicians of various rank.

Among the presented examples collaborative learning and online professional communities played an important role and in the light of the presentations and in the subsequent discussion it seems that they provide the greatest hope for successful educational projects for rural inhabitants. Both ideas are connected with the concept of learning as a social process, which during the conference became a key factor in many statements arguing that the process of inclusion must be well established in the social context, based on intersectoral solutions, appreciating and promoting the role of interpersonal and intercultural contacts in acquiring knowledge on many levels: formal and informal, linking the real world with virtual milieus, and “communication” understood as informing and “communication” understood as speaking, sharing and gathering around common goals, values and undertakings.

Such an approach which was defended during the meeting is particularly advantageous for rural inhabitants and is an excellent example for their many highly specific educational needs, resulting from the area they live in. It evens out the negative consequences of the territorial fragmentation of communities overcoming inconveniences resulting from their small numbers. The change in paradigm from learning steered from above by imposed principles to a grass-roots process, running between interpersonal contacts, activates individuals but also provides tailor-made learning suited to individual possibilities and professional needs as well as enabling socialisation, i.e. knowing how to function in wider circles than simply the local milieu. This favours the understanding of global phenomena and mechanisms, providing a basis for reacting to emerging circumstances.

The idea of learning through the participation of professionals in communities and collaboration often appeared during the remaining meetings, particularly accentuated during the workshops “Innovative learning methodologies”. The presentations led to the conclusion that methodological innovations largely rely on the concept of community learning, at the base of which there are factors such as: exploration, discovery, creativity and the sharing with others of knowledge, documents, experiences and views in the real or virtual world.

From the presented examples which were largely to do with foreign language learning, it emerges that more important than the used tools is the content transmitted by them, and tools should be chosen to enhance interest in the lesson, add variety and personalise the learning process, as well as exposing its informal aspects.

The issue of choosing methods and tools adequate to needs was also underlined during the paper and discussion “Different facets of inclusive learning”. The statement that refined technology is not always required to achieve educational goals emerged in almost every presentation and during the final session of the conference was summarised with a sentence that we need technologies which are not necessarily highly advanced but those which do the job and fit the need. New communication and information technologies, while providing a partial reply to pupils’ needs, should be included in all educational processes. Being an integral part of modern society they also have to be part of the widely understood socialisation to an effective, creative and satisfying life.

One of the authors of a presentation in this group proved that new technologies are also a key part of the sustained development of communities. She said: “The ICT could facilitate a growing awareness and respectfulness to cultural differences; the ICT can also move to action because by being global, ICT contribute both to accept our global responsibility as active agents for our actions and for the consequences that these actions may have for future generations, and to develop a planetary citizenship and/or a planetary awareness that we share and inhabit one common house: the planet earth”². These words are an excellent conclusion to the discussion which took place in this group.

The usefulness of social tools in building stable communities was also emphasised by the speakers and discussants of the workshop: “Guiding, motivating and mentoring learners”. One of the examples, based on the project “Mentoring rural women through social networks” showed how, with the help of social networks developed on the internet rural women can be activated and involved in active participation in the life of local communities or be encouraged to take part in lifelong education. Although the realisation of the project was difficult, the final effect was positive. Women taking part in

² Ibanez Angula Monica, 2011, Challenges for the 21st century: Inclusive learning on human sustainable development, Conference Proceedings – ICT for inclusive learning, p. 144, available on 05.01.2012 on: <http://euralnetconference.com/>

it gained greater confidence, showed their creativity, activity, curiosity, passion and leadership qualities. One of the greatest benefits was the possibility of contact with other people with similar experiences, living conditions and daily problems. It therefore emerges that contact and exchange of experience is one of the most successful methods of motivating adults to learning and using ICT and the community networks play an irreplaceable role in mutually reinforcing one another in their activities and plans, providing meaning and direction in private and professional life.

The advantages of including informal education into educational activities were also emphasised during other presentations. It was argued that they lead to greater individualisation, encourage independence and provide an emotional component to learning which is essential for its success. They also help contextualise knowledge and take an active part in its construction, putting forward one's potential, resources and capacity. The pupil becomes responsible for the choice of educational path and the teacher becomes the mentor and advisor, particularly if the education is backed up by new technologies.

As was noticed during the discussion in the group "Technological and delivery innovation" we can gradually make use of a newer generation of societal tools than the 2.0 web, which are radically changing the nature of formal and informal online education, leading it in the direction of a process adjusted to the needs of the specific user, designed by the user but supported by the expert knowledge of teachers and other users of the network. New generation social media, a different form of 'cloud-located' tools, search engines and other usage and user information seeker/collector services are rapidly changing its manner and it is becoming a significant future factor in providing personalisation and profiting data. Today mostly used for advertising/commercial purposes but it will also for sure enter into the sphere of learning services³.

The new 3.0 internet generation is an exceptionally innovative project, allowing for the more and more precise search of information, receiving whatever is of interest to us and fulfilling the required criteria while enabling the cooperation within groups, the whole information ecosystem according to subject communities.

Both future and present technological projects are a considerable challenge for the traditional school hierarchy and also demand changes at pedagogical

³ Lindquist, Kenneth, 2011, Trends & innovative applications of learning media potentially applicable to regional development initiatives, Conference Proceedings – ICT for inclusive learning: the way forward, p. 181.

level. It is impossible to ignore the fact that “according to recent estimates, there is more content created via social networks than there is by institutional, public, private and professional internet users”⁴. The network propagated new learning methods, such as acquiring knowledge by creating one’s own projects, experience and experimentation and, as was underlined during the session “Pedagogical innovation” the redefinition of the role of the school and education has already been determined and we must look for a new educational formula, both as regards aims, resources, methods and expected results.

The speakers discussed the growing role of competences such as emotional intelligence, imagination, knowing how to establish and maintain social relations as well as working in a group. Such training requires assuming that learning continues throughout life and its main goal is the ability to react flexibly to change, instability and the unpredictability of our complex world. In the context of education this requires a review of the role of teachers who cannot continue to be considered as people possessing a closed repertoire of solutions for current and future problems. We should see them as experts in assisting independent search in the expression of individual potential and talent or shaping such competences as the recognition of sources of reliable expertise and knowing how to make use of it in a given context.

During the conference the issue of inclusive education was analysed from many aspects and portrayed both theoretically and practically. From the discussions, comments and presentations it emerges that inclusion in education is always closely connected with the institutional and social environment. The last mentioned context can be developed, shaped and created not only through traditional contacts but also through the new media and technologies. Numerous examples showed that for a growing number of people the idea of inclusive education supported by ICT is not only an effective rhetorical figure but a real component of their daily practices and efforts.

This also means that there is a profound need for developing activities in this area and also a common platform for discussion, exchange of experience and inspiration. That is probably why the initiative suggested by the organisers at the end of the conference to create a network promoting ICT- supported inclusive learning met with such interest among participants.

⁴ Krzysztofek, Kazimierz, after: Anna Pokorska, 2011, Existing and future roles of new media in professional training, Conference Proceedings – ICT for inclusive learning: the way forward, p. 214.

References

ICT for inclusive learning: the way forward, 2011, Conference Proceedings, available on <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/strengthening-education-systems/inclusive-education/>