Three Lessons For New Pedagogical Environments

by Mag. Axel Zahlut
European Network of Innovative Schools, Austria
(ENIS Austria)
Email: axelzahlut@gmail.com

Abstract:

Being opposed to change might be reasoned with arguing that the traditional education system provided a good enough education for all generations up to ours. But the world we live in changed radically and information is manipulated and changed at the speed of thought. Therefore it is very important to prepare our children for this changing world to safely navigate through life professionally as well as privately avoiding any exclusion from the start. Two example schools in Europe tackled this development rather radically, changing the way of teaching and what is actually taught. Their experiences can not be transferred completely, but there are elements that can be implemented in every school no matter the infrastructure or the financial situation. Teaching competences rather than pure knowledge, creating new spaced of education and increasing the level of independence among the students might create an effect very desirable when it comes to leading changes. It all started with the implementation of eLearning techniques but it should not stop there and the change often stated in a lot of studies is only going to occur when the focus of attention is the classroom itself, not the school or the education system itself. It all starts with the teacher.

What is wrong with the old system?

Since its introduction to general public, the education system served to educate young people to become more knowledgeable and able to live their life on their own terms and improve their social status. Usually, children had been sent to school to get as much knowledge as possible with the teacher in the front talking and the children in one room listening, being assessed from time to time. This led to amazing developments in society itself, like the Aufklärung, but it all started with more and more people being able to read and participate in life and society in a much different way. They were not forced to believe in dogma anymore and slowly, over a couple of decades developed their

independence. Great philosophers took it to the next level even then and our society nowadays in many ways is a product of this great process.

So the main question remains, why shouldn't it work in the future? We have all been educated this particular way and we seem to do just fine. Unlike the curriculum in most countries - an exception might be the Scandinavian ones - the world we live in has changed rather dramatically over the last 20 years. The curriculum, in Austria at least, has only been adapted but its core is still the foundation of the principles set at the time of Maria-Theresia in the 18th century. And we can all ask ourselves whether this is adequate to prepare our children or not for the world we know is hitting us with lots of challenges every day, the Euro crisis is just a small one.

Changing the levels of communication, a different set of skills is needed to safely navigate through the modern society. It is not the face-to-face communication only anymore, we have phones, eMails and the internet is providing a whole virtual environment with different communication and information levels changing at the speed of thought. Consequently, it is a far more complex world children are needed to get prepared to basically survive, economically, professionally and privately. Some schools around Europe, Hellerup School[1] in Copenhagen and the „Freie-Schule-Anne-Sophie"[2] in Künzelsau, Germany, recognized those changing conditions some time ago and reacted in a radical way. In both schools, the physical classroom disappeared which leaves much more room for development, creativity and collaboration.

New Schooling Spaces

As mentioned before, both schools let the traditional classroom disappear. In Hellerup School, there are still classes of students taught by one teacher, but the teacher choses the environment he/she is going to teach, which might be a science corner, where you can do scientific experiments, a computer lab, the library, individual learning spaces, collaboration spaces where students are developing their own material and gaining knowledge or an interactive setting that is enhanced by the latest developments in virtual reality and cinnect technology. The students' age range is 6 to 14 and starting at 7th grade, there are cross country end-of-year-examinations so different school types can be compared beautifully as far as assessment results are concerned. This school is not doing any worse but the students gain a lot more social competences.

---

[1] http://www.hellerupskole.dk/Infoweb/Designskabelon8/Rammeside.asp?Action=&Side=&Klasse=&Id=&Startside=&ForumID=   September 14th 2013

[2] http://www.freie-schule-anne-sophie.de/home.html September 14th 2013

The other, to me, much more interesting example is Freie-Schule-Anne-Sophie in Künzelsau, Germany. The physical classroom disappeared completely and the curriculum needed to be disassembled by each teacher and divided by competences that needed to be taught. Having a different setting, the size of classes of students is reduced to 12 to 14 students and it is no longer called class, but learning family, creating a much more intimate connection between the students and their teachers. Each subject lesson starts in the *Input Room*, where the students are gathered around an oval table, standing (this seems to increase the concentration) and every students gets an individual task for the day and feedback on previous work. That process does not take any longer than 15 minutes and afterwards the students go into their own learning Studio and do some research and gather information as much as they can. If needed, they can collaborate in the collaboration room with other students - that room is red to make it more significant. Needing some help from the teacher, they can always get feedback or tutoring in the blue room especially designed for that purpose. And if, at any time, students want to rest and get a creative break, they can go to the yellow room to do so. Reading all that sounds very alternative and like something that would not work at all. But actually, it does. The main motivation for the students is to get as independent as possible. Every students starts as a *Beginner*, with a highly organized structure of what he/she is going to do in school every day. Afterwards, if they pass the tests, after each chapter in every subject and the whole competence test each month, they can advance to the next level, the *Advancer*. The *Advancer* has a lot more freedom when it comes to deciding when to learn, the most important thing though, is to past all the tests. The highest level is the *Master of Learning*, who can even decide whether to learn at home, school or some place else. Again, the assessments need to be taken and done very well.

Ideally, young children enter this school one year earlier than usual at five to learn from the very beginning the self responsible approach to schooling. Those kids are perfectly prepared and haven't got any problems. Those, who switched from other schools sometimes might have, bearing in mind that this is a completely new system which still meets all the requirements of the curriculum but students finishing this school are highly independent, more mature and really able to master their living. Being there myself and having seen a lot of school throughout Europe, I can tell with absolute certainty, that I have never met children at the age of 16 that were more mature, independent and self organized.

It is important to mention that the student-centered approach has been broadened by a very important aspect in both schools. The curriculum focus is no longer on teaching knowledge, but competences, hence a competence-based approach is necessary to fully exploit those developments.

The implementation of new technology demanded for a different setting. Up to this point, when talking about eLearning, new tools have been introduced without giving the teacher any advice to fully exploit them pedagogically and thus every school, even every class depending on the teacher reached a different competence level when it comes to dealing with new communication structures and tools.

Lessons learnt?

Having visited both schools and having no illusion about the potential of implementation in the average school, there are still some important lessons that need to be considered when planning a lesson or any classroom interaction.

One, the focus of attention should not be on the content taught any longer, but on the competences behind it. It is far more important to teach a variety of skills and competences than pure knowledge like traditional schooling is all about. In a world changing as fast as today's it is arrogant to assume that any school system can teach the needed knowledge with absolute certainty. Consequently the example of the school in Germany might be leading. Every teacher had the assignment to look at the curriculum of the respected subject and organize it in a new way in order to focus on competences and find ways to assess them. This might be a challenging task but could be done without major changes in our educational system. It really starts with each and every teacher.

Two, the implementation of eLearning tools in our schools demand for a different learning environment more meeting the needs of the real world that the traditional classroom. Having a constant access to the internet, students are able to gather information in realtime and this provides an opportunity to teach them how to differentiate between garbage and useful information. Combined with the competence-based approach to learning and teaching, it is inevitable to create new learning spaced to let the students „explore". Group work as well as an inquiry based approach to science education can be provided in this setting using real information rather than traditional textbooks. Interestingly enough, the teachers in the school in Denmark asked to get rid of the textbooks half a school year in the new building because the use of textbooks would limit the creativity not only for students but for teachers as well. Our society deals and works with an enormous amount of changing information every day and implementing it in class is going to teach the students how to deal with the information and bring school a little nearer towards the world we claim to educate our kids for.

Three, and this might be the most important lesson that can be learned, it is very profitable to increase the level of independence among the students. Giving them the experience of being in

charge of their own development creates a new levels of self dependence, the ultimate goal of every school worth its name. In combination with the competence based approach as well as implementing new learning spaces, students will increase their independence during the learning process if taught to do so very early in their school careers. Having a curriculum focused on the competences taught rather than on the content, students research and learn the content and gain the respective competence on the way being assessed periodically. Giving them feedback individually is very beneficial but sometimes hard to manage given time and circumstances in most schools. The introduction of learning platforms may help and automize feedback depending on the infrastructure. Up to this point in the debate, challenges have been put forward why any change will not occur in the current system. Be it the lack of money to provide enough equipment or teacher training procedures. With the introduction of eLearning elements in the classroom, the demands for schools have changed rather radically creating a tension between actual information connected to the outside world and the real world environment within the classroom as students more and more learnt that the information they gathered does not necessarily refer to the knowledge presented in school. But solely focussing on eLearning might be a trap as the school building is getting obsolete and content as well as knowledge is pushed to the virtual environment. Consequently, schools need to adapt their learning environments to the eLearning demands. But it is important to highlight that two of the three lessons learnt from these model schools have got nothing to do with infrastructure or money. It all starts with the teacher in charge and the slightest hope of improvement is that the education system is going to follow if parents, students and teachers are going to create a new way of schooling within their means.