

Formal and Non-Formal Education in the New Era

Albulene Grajcevci, Doctoral student, Ludwig Maximilians University, Germany

Arif Shala, Doctoral student, Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich, Germany

Abstract

The recent economic crisis in Europe has reshaped the way education is perceived. Admittedly, education has been considered as one of the pillars that can push Europe towards economic stability. Consequently, in recent years we have witnessed growing investments in education. The much needed money flows have made an impact, however the situation is less than ideal as many urgent problems have been overlooked and continue to prevail. Europe is facing the problem of the economization of education, not providing students with the skills of the 21st century, and the reduced quality of teaching. It is our argument that three factors which will have a positive impact include using new technologies in education, teaching digital competencies, and finally highlighting learning styles preferences to engage all students in learning. It is the aim of this work to provide evidence that incorporating the three recommendations will result in improved education outcomes in Europe.

Keywords: New technology, digital competencies, learning styles, formal education, informal education.

1. Introduction

By 2020 Europe aspires to have a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy, to which education is the key component. So far Europe aims to reach this goal by creating partnerships, domestically and internationally, supporting student mobility and finally by creating a compatible and comparable higher education system (Todaro, 1995). In achieving this, EU has among other allocated 14.7 billion Euro to the Erasmus+ program for the time frame 2014 to 2020 (European Commission, 2013). Aside from investments, education institutions across Europe should explore innovative routes to increase their quality and one way to do so is to consider making education less formal. Generally, there are three major forms of education namely formal, non-formal and informal education. Formal education is close to schools and training institutions, non-formal is linked to

community and organizations. Finally informal education is connected to informal settings such as friends, family and work (Dib, 1988).

Formal education is an organized education model, structured and administered by laws and norms, and subject to strict curriculum objectives, methodology and content. Generally speaking this form of education involves the instructor, students and the institution. Participants in formal education are expected to attend classes, subject themselves to assessment that is meant to take learning to the next stage and it results in the attainment of diplomas and degrees (Todaro, 1995). Unfortunately this system blames students for failures but it takes no account of students' standards and subjectivities. Additionally, students –in most cases-fail to be active participants in the learning process. The teaching methodology is not creative, it fails to consider basic learning principles and the personal growth objectives of students are neglected (Dib, 1988).

Non-formal education is in many ways different from formal education. It is flexible in terms of curricula, and methodology but learning in these settings is not by chance, instead it is intentional and organized. Students' needs and interests are placed in the center and the time frame is lacking. Additionally, the contact between students and instructors is significantly less and most of learning happens outside class and institutions. While formal education lacks the practical side of knowledge, non-formal education focuses on skills and the development of attitudes such as tolerance (Dib, 1988) which are vital to one's future success. Studies suggest that the needs of students are better met by non-formal education which enables them to know themselves and the world better. In general, non-formal education focuses on the student, it is open and flexible to needs and interests of students, and is quick to respond to the changing needs of individuals and societies (Todaro, 1995).

Informal education does not follow a plan, it happens in all settings and learning is unconscious. In informal education the responsibility for learning rests with the individual. Mistakes are valued and are considered vital to learning, more mistakes means more learning. This form of education in most cases happens in friendships, families and work environments (Novosadova, et al., 2013).

Current education policies are radically handicapped for not utilizing the potential in non-formal and informal learning. Previous studies convincingly argue that formal education systems are failing to meet the needs of individuals and societies. The growing need to provide more and better education to an ever growing number of students especially in developing countries, are urging for alternatives that go beyond formal education in addressing these problems. Experts argue that non-formal education, compared to formal education, is an effective alternative to link education and national development. Furthermore, non-formal education focused on needs of real life encourages

innovation and offers short term results and long term achievements (Green, Hornyak, & Heppard, 2007).

2. EU initiatives

The present economic crises is challenging the education and training systems of Europe in major ways. First is the matter of investing in growth policies, a vital part of which are the education and training policies. Education is considered as an ideal tool to fight unemployment among young people. In the economic sense, education and training exert influence on innovation and productivity which is why it is a source of growth and contributes to the employment of the population, including young people. Recent studies which evaluate the impact of investment in education are arguing for a better match between education and the world of work. In changing policies the responsibility lies with national governments however the EU structures offer significant support. The year 2014 marked the beginning of the new support scheme for member states. The new Erasmus+ program 2014-2020 which is now the only education, training, youth and sports program of the EU has been subject to a 40% increase, with its budget now amounting to more than 14 billion Euros (European Commission, 2013a). Roughly 77.5% of the funds are allocated to education and training. Youth programs have received 10% of the funds, followed by student loan facility (3.5%), national agencies (3.4%), Jean Monnet (1.9%) and finally a 1.8% has been allocated to sport (European Commission, 2013a). It is evident from the allocation of funds that Erasmus+ will concentrate most of its funding on education and training. Between 2014 and 2020, 11.3 billion Euro will be invested in improving the education and training landscape in Europe. Within this scheme the majority of funds, 4.8 billion, are allocated to higher education. This scheme will finance the mobility of 3.59 million students/vocational students/volunteers/lecturers and education staff between 2014 and 2020 (European Commission, 2013a).

The second most important sector has been considered the VET- Vocational Education Training which will benefit 2.5 billion Euro. This sum will be used to increase the employability and life skills of vocational learners. Schools will be able to spend 1.7 billion in reducing early school leaving, improving learning of basic skills and the establishment of the eTwinning, the online community offering support for teachers, pupils and school leaders. A sum of 569 million will be used in programs addressing adult education which will be used to improve and modernise adult education programs, encourage cooperation with different sectors and evaluate the utility of non-

formal and informal education. Finally, the remaining 1.7 billion Euro will be allocated to programs as needed.

3. Addressing current problems of education systems across Europe

The number of students aiming for degrees is increasing across Europe. It is expected that the demand for higher education will increase from 97 million students in 2000 to over 262 million in 2025. The same trend of increase in the demand for education is expected to hit Europe in the years to come (Garben, 2012).

The EU has set five objectives to reach its goal of becoming a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. By 2020 EU aspires to improve on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and climate. It is expected that by the deadline school dropout will fall below 10 % and 40% of the 30-34 year olds will complete the third level of education. Member states underwent major changes such as the Bologna Process in order to transform EU in a knowledge economy and an international competitor (Garben, 2012). The fact that over the last years major problems in education in Europe have been completely neglected and at times denied is a source of worry. Currently Europe is facing the problem of economization of education, not providing students with the skills of the 21st century, reduced quality of teaching, and the development of course and program content by relying exclusively on one source of information (Garben, 2012).

The consensus view seems to be that education is tightly linked to the economy. Viewing education in terms of economic gains is a very biased and dangerous perspective. As a result of this tendency courses and study programs are being designed to fit the needs of the market, and not to promote knowledge for the interest of the individual, society or academic progress (Novosadova, et al., 2013). If this trend continues it should be of no surprise if university studies become nothing more than vocational training centers to meet the needs of prospective employers. In addition, the new century may mark the time when subjects such as history, archaeology and philosophy will be sacrificed for law, economics and business studies (Garben, 2012).

Additional problems in education institutions around Europe include preference for research over teaching, teaching versus teaching to a higher professional standard, and a lack of well trained and well qualified staff (Carron & Carr-Hill, 1991). Study programs and course content are not done in partnership with staff, students, graduates and the labor market. Finally, online forms of teaching and instruction have not been appropriately utilized. The new digital era presents many

opportunities to improve the quality of teaching and learning none of which are being employed by higher education institutions in Europe (Garben, 2012).

The main mission of higher education is to enable people to learn. Due to new developments, education institutions have to respond to diversity and specialization, new technologies to deliver study programs, as well as to changes in science, the world of work and human rights. In this rapidly changing world, European graduates need a type of education that allows them to be active, committed, critical thinkers, economic factors and global citizens (European Commission, 2013b).

4. Possible alternatives for education institutions

The future of effective education rests on the ability to establish a transition from formal education to non-formal and informal education. Simultaneously, this transition could provide solutions to a number of problems faced by education institutions across Europe. The first issue is the rigidity and inflexibility of the curricula and method of instruction. If formal learning environments become more flexible in terms of taking into account the characteristics of students (i.e. their style of learning) and utilizing possibilities for individual learning provided by technological developments, learning environments would come to resemble non-formal and informal learning settings. Many experts are now urging for a transition from formal to non-formal education by providing students with more freedom in terms of choosing course objectives, content, and activities as well as how much time is allocated to each. In this regard the promise of technological developments is vital. Secondly the center of the process should be changed from instructor to student, non-formal education programs are organized around the students, their needs, characteristics, and objectives. There is no reason why this should not be applied to formal education settings (Champoux, 2007). One approach in doing so is to emphasize learning preferences in learners and tailor learning-through IT tools- to suit the individual needs of learners at all levels of schooling.

4.1. Applying new technologies in education

New technologies offer unlimited possibilities to make learning more effective, engaging and inclusive. Technology- if incorporated in formal education settings- can reshape the learning experience by making it more creative and innovative. Technology can offer access to quality

education and individual learning- a much needed transition from the general approach to learning. Technology is the key to learning and instruction in the new era (Garben, 2012).

One example of European countries not utilizing the potential of technological developments is their lack of involvement in the MOOC-s. In the last years we have seen the emergence of MOOC, known as massive open online courses, which offer unlimited access for individuals to courses provided in the web. Unfortunately, studies show that only 9 European Universities are involved in such initiatives.

While technological developments are applied to various fields, with much success, experts agree that we are a long way from applying these approaches to formal education settings (Cox, 2013). The application of technology in education can result in a learning setting where the student is the center of the process, the information is related to real life issues and topics and the learning process is adapted to individual characteristics of learners (i.e. learning styles). It is often argued that this approach is critical to promote higher-order thinking, information-reasoning skills and collaborative learning in learners. The technology has untapped resources to improve the quality of instruction, by promoting access to unlimited number of sources in comparison to the instructor as the only source of information (Carlson, 2002).

This transition is not an easy one, primarily because it implies the fundamental transformation to a new form of learning which is not only incredibly different from formal learning but has its own risks. In formal education the learning experience is monitored and subjected to quality control, specifically, educational establishments oversee the quality of the curriculum and its application. In non-formal and informal settings it is not clear if the knowledge that the learner has acquired is reliable, if the information was useful or misleading, and if the learner was able to build knowledge and understanding over a topic. To illustrate, if a student used the internet to solve a question, this informal learning experience depends on his prior skills, abilities, and knowledge, and is unique to every person (Cox, 2013). This is the biggest critique towards non-formal and informal education, specifically their tendency to tolerate different education outcomes.

4.2. Enhancing digital competences

In order for all individuals to benefit from engaging, effective and inclusive learning more should be done to enhance their digital competencies. Gaining access to this form of learning is conditional upon possessing certain technological skills with many experts arguing that the “right”

skills for the 21 century are the digital competencies. It is a reason to worry that only 30-35 % of students in EU countries are digitally confident (Champoux, 2007; Garben, 2012). The reality is changing fast, the societies are based on information and knowledge but education systems are falling behind because they are not embedding digital literacy in all education systems (UNESCO, 2011).

Higher education and its components are changing fast and radically by globalization and technological developments. Ongoing developments are emphasizing the ability of learners to respond to an ever changing environment by continuously learning. It is expected that the demand for higher education will continue to increase and Europe will have to learn how to respond to this demand as well as how to respond to the competition with other educational powers. Literacy in technology is vital in this respect (Garben, 2012).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have infiltrated all areas of life. In this respect the understanding of digital competencies has expanded from the basic skill of handling computers to the advanced skills of using and producing digital media, processing information, and participating in social networks to create and share knowledge. Furthermore, the application of ICTs in all levels of education can make the learning process more personal, adaptive and interactive (UNESCO, 2011) –hence less formal.

International evidence provides that digital literacy has positive impacts on learning outcomes. To illustrate, the study of the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) show that students' knowledge and learning motivation for English and Math increased fast when their digital literacy skills were improved and when classes were taught using ICT resources (UNESCO, 2011). Opponents of emphasizing digital competencies across all levels of education point to the fact that the link between more IT literacy skills and knowledge acquisition is not definite. An example is the study of Wecker et al. (2007) exploring the link between computer literacy and knowledge acquisition provided that there is no correlation between computer literacy and knowledge acquisition.

4.3. Tailoring the education experience

Experiential learning theory is a worthy alternative to improve quality in all forms of education. Experiential learning refers to a wide range of learning and teaching practices, ideologies and policies (Champoux, 2007). In a few words, experiential learning is a process of reacting to

experiences with observations and reflection (Brah & Hoy, 1989; Kolb, 1984) based on the prime assumption that people learn best from their experiences (Green, Hornyak, & Heppard, 2007).

In his work Kolb (1984) argues that individuals encounter valuable experiences daily, however they do not learn from all of them. Experience can be utilized if learners are allowed to develop and construct their own knowledge while making discoveries and solving problems on their own (Barr & Tag, 1995; Green, Hornyak, & Heppard, 2007). The underlying assumption in this case is that learning should take place beyond the typical teaching environment and should thus focus on not just the knowledge but also on developing the skills necessary to continue benefiting and learning from experience (Harrackiewicz et al., 2008).

Nowadays, experiential learning is of special interest to European Countries, the crucial role of it is evident in the European Qualifications Framework (Corradi, Evans, & Valk, 2006). The framework states the importance of experiential learning which is seen as a tool to moving successfully towards a mass education system, in all levels of tertiary education. Consequently, much has been done in Europe in relation to experiential-based informal and non-formal learning, not excluding here the work-based learning (Corradi et al., 2006; Harris et al., 2009). Research has demonstrated that experiential learning in environments such as the workplace and the community can be successfully developed and assessed in terms of providing quality learning (Harris et al., 2009).

Ultimately, the experiential learning theory postulates that there are four types of learners: accommodative, convergent, divergent and assimilative. The differences between learners are noticeable on the way they respond to experiences. If forms of instruction and modes of delivery are personalized according to the four learning styles, learning outcomes will be significantly improved and the learning experience will become less formal and more personal.

5. Conclusion

The European Commission noted that there are serious challenges for the EU higher education institutions and their over 20 million students (Eurostat, 2012). Notable challenges include adapting to globalization (European Commission, 2013b), utilizing new technologies to improve the quality of instruction across higher education institutions (European Commission, 2013c), and matching learning to the needs of the society and labor market (European Commission, 2013d). In addition, experts note that EU higher education institutions continue to emphasize theory, intellectual abilities

and provide a broad education as opposed to offering an education that relies on experience, and is specialized (Aguilera-Barchet, 2012). While European countries are increasing the number of students attending higher education institutions, it is expected that this increase in attendance will result in lower standards (Ellis, 2013) as opposed to an increase in the quality (Katsarova, 2015). Ultimately, reforms in education are a necessity and not an option.

This article maintains that making education less formal by employing technological developments in learning, enhancing the digital skills of learners and recognizing the individuality of learners will solve many of the problems faced by education systems nowadays. The new education offers should provide access to new digital tools, appropriate levels of technological skills and the right educational strategies (Katsarova, 2015).

First, it is expected that technological developments will radically and fundamentally change education and research, in ways hard to imagine (Katsarova, 2015). The full implementation of technological developments to all levels of education will not only improve the quality of education but also transform the educational experience by making it less formal- more flexible and suitable to individual needs of learners. Evidently, opponents note that once technological developments merge with learning environments, the learning experience will become individual and the use and outcome of technological applications will depend on the previous skills, abilities and knowledge of the learner. In this regard too much individuality may risk education output. Admittedly, if this approach is applied, the learning process needs to be facilitated and accounted for.

Making technology available in the classroom is just the beginning (European Commission, 2013c). The enhancement of digital skills is necessary for the technology to successfully reform education. A considerable number of research studies provide that enhancing digital skills will improve learning and outcomes of the learning process. On the other hand, other studies imply that enhancing digital skills may have no implications for the learning process. Regardless, the implications of enhancing digital skills may be evident only once a considerable amount of time has passed as opposed to noticeable short time outcomes. Conclusively, as technology is becoming a key part of life, its application to education is a matter of time, and so is the issue of including digital competencies in the curriculum.

Finally, learners are unique and so are their academic needs and interests. Generalized approaches are evidently no longer acceptable in this rapidly developing era. The application of learning styles approach will add a considerable amount of individuality to education systems across Europe and thus address the recommendation of the right education strategies. Ultimately, the

application of learning styles will make the educational experience less formal by making learning an individual process.

Conclusively, we are living in an era that is unmatched for its rapid progress and change. The paradigm that education should remain as is, is above all a misconception. The much needed reform in education should emphasize individuality in learning, the application of technology and the development of digital competencies, in order to address its severe shortcomings. The application of these recommendations will enable the shift from formal education, to non-formal and informal approaches which above all build on needs and ambitions of individual learners while transforming them into continuous learning members of the society.

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