

The underground rivers of innovative e-Learning: a preview from the HELIOS Yearly Report 2006/07

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Summary

The article is a preview of the HELIOS Yearly Report 2007, the final publication of the HELIOS project, which will present the main e-Learning developments of the past two years in Europe and review the debate on ICT-related innovation in education and training systems.

In particular, the article reflects on the present European debate on e-Learning, lifelong learning and ICT-driven innovation in EU education and training systems. Starting from analysing the terminological and conceptual crisis that the very concept of e-Learning seems to be undergoing at the moment, the article states that, paradoxically, the practice of using ICT to support learning processes seems to be more diffused and better articulated than ever before. Furthermore, while in the year 2000, e-Learning was perceived as a single mega-trend for education and corporate systems, experience has shown that this is not true. In fact, the purpose, the pedagogical models - or rather the learning patrimony - the organisation and the economic assumption of e-Learning are extremely differentiated, not only according to the learning sub-system (school, higher education, vocational training, etc.) but also according to the visions of the world of those in charge of promoting and designing e-Learning systems.

To better grasp these different kinds and visions of e-Learning far beyond the classical sector distinction, HELIOS is proposing the concept of e-Learning Territories, additional layers of differentiation and articulation of the "ICT for learning" phenomenon, able to better understand the present and future dynamics of e-Learning.

The relation between e-Learning and innovation in learning is then explored; the HELIOS results demonstrate that, apart from the terminological trends and hypes, the "ideal place" for new e-Learning is not where consolidated knowledge has to be spread but rather where new knowledge is developed, where innovation objectives are to be shared and achieved in a participative way.

There is then reflection on how HELIOS envisages e-Learning in the year 2010, and specifically on the different paces of change in different e-Learning territories. Typically, the speed observed is higher in informal learning environments, still relatively high in the corporate environment and rather low in institutional education and training.

As a general conclusion, the findings of the HELIOS observatory are that the new place for e-Learning as a catalyst of innovation and an enhancer of informal learning processes requires a completely new policy approach, in which education policy-makers are not the only, and maybe not even the main, actors. Learning has to be encouraged when and where it occurs: local and regional development policy-makers are very well placed to implement meaningful policies in this respect.

Keywords: Change in E&T, innovation policy, trends

Introduction

The present article represents an anticipation of the HELIOS Yearly Report 2007 that will be available in May 2007. The final publication of the HELIOS project will present the main eLearning developments of the last two years in Europe and that will make the point on the debate of ICT-related innovation in Education and Training systems. The report will also present the research results of the HELIOS project in terms of the impact of e-learning on six policy priorities (access to learning, employability, personal development, internationalisation of E&T, organisational change, innovation of E&T systems), together with some interesting foresight ideas.

HELIOS is an observatory project supported by the European Commission and coordinated by the MENON Network, aiming to establish a sustainable observation platform to monitor the progress of eLearning in Europe vis-à-vis policy objectives and to forecast future scenarios of e-learning evolution. The approach of HELIOS is to structure and integrate the activities and results of the different observation engines currently active in Europe. HELIOS will be able to “filter” the existing information through a set of policy priorities and so to show not only the state of development of eLearning, but also the impact of eLearning on the EU and on the national policy agendas

In the article the main conclusions, reflections and open questions that are treated in the HELIOS Yearly Report are presented: for more data and insights please see the full report, soon available at www.education-observatories.net/helios.

Is eLearning in crisis? No, eLearning is more alive than ever, but requires better analytical approaches to be understood.

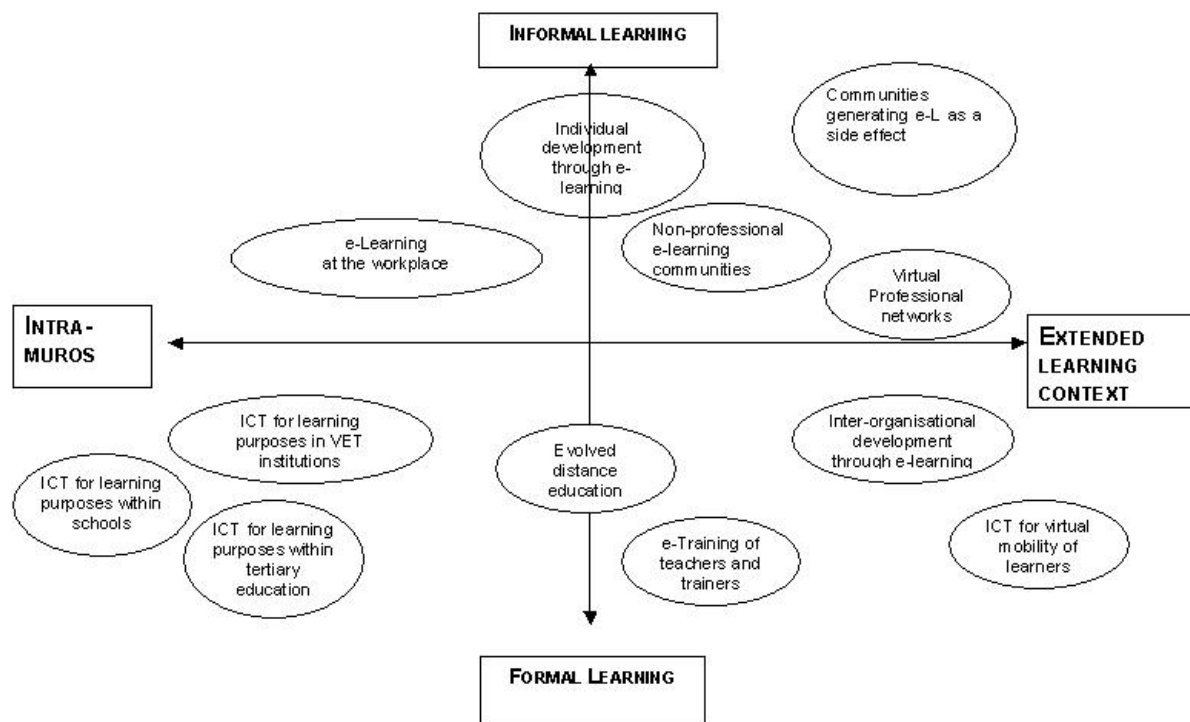
Like a large river which hides underground for a part of its way, and spreads into several smaller rivers which then converge again or even diverge, but will any how reach the sea, eLearning in 2006/07 is suffering a crisis that is both terminological and conceptual. The term is seldom used in policy making and the feeling that something went wrong with eLearning is widely spread -not only among policy makers- but paradoxically the practice of using ICT to support learning processes is more diffused and better articulated than ever before.

Differentiation is the key word to understand how this is possible: while in the year 2000 eLearning was perceived as a single mega-trend for education and corporate systems, experience has shown that this is not true. In fact, the purpose, the pedagogical models -or better the learning patrimony-, the organisation and the economic assumption of eLearning are extremely differentiated, according both to the different learning sub-systems (school, higher education, vocational training, corporate professional development, adult learning) and to the visions of the world of those in charge of promoting and designing eLearning.

Such differentiation in what HELIOS calls “eLearning territories”¹ has provoked a perceived loss of meaning of the term, too broad to represent realities which have very little in common, except the use of technology (see figure 1).

¹Helios consortium “Evolving e-learning: the Helios yearly report 2005/2006” Menon network 2006
<http://www.education-observatories.net/helios>

Figure 1. The HELIOS “e-learning territories”



Innovation and Lifelong Learning: where do they meet?

If we look carefully, eLearning territories are the meta-contexts in which different innovation aims and paradigms are associated to the use of ICT, for learning but -more and more frequently- not only for learning. New learning practices are taking place without a clear separation from working processes, social aggregation and leisure activities. To a certain extent this is also happening within formal learning environments, such as schools and universities, but is normally ignored or not given much importance, when it is not treated as “intrusion” of improper activities into a serious educational environment.

From the HELIOS report² it appears more and more evident that, while there is a huge potential of ICT to unbound and multiply the opportunities of learning informally, most of the technology enhanced learning research and policy has concentrated on reproducing formal teaching environments in a technology supported way.

² Reference as above

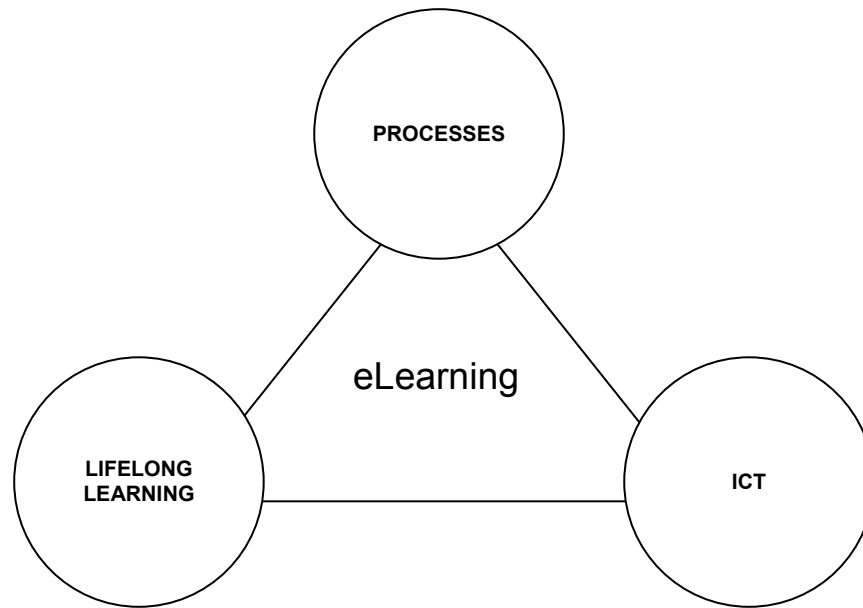


Figure 2: e-learning ideal place

The “ideal place” for new eLearning is not where consolidated knowledge has to be spread - this was the vision of first generation eLearning that is still explaining much of both the superficial enthusiasm and the rejection we observed-, rather where new knowledge is developed, where innovation objectives are to be shared and achieved in a participative way. The huge social aggregation potential of ICT is becoming clearer and clearer, but learning specific applications are rare to found.

Technology designed specifically for learning has produced some impact in formal or corporate learning environments, but “generic” technology (for example television, the web, Google, mobile learning devices, portable pc...) has certainly produced a much bigger impact on how people learn throughout their lives.

Learning takes place with full motivation when a change is perceived as necessary/desired by individuals, teams, organisations or communities: the immediate access to unlimited sources of information and learning opportunities puts the education system and even the training departments of companies and the Public Administration in a totally new situation.

Is teaching still necessary to learning? Not really, but it may help a lot.

Whilst it is clearer and clearer that much of what we learn is not taught by anyone, but just identified, organised and retained by each of us as a result of informal processes not led by any teacher, it would be catastrophic to underestimate the role of “learning process specialists” -the teachers, the trainers, the tutors, any name to define someone who deliberately and professionally supports the learning of other people- in the revolutionary process of appropriation of one’s own learning that our society is experiencing also thanks to ICT.

“Much of learning quality depends on the relevance of embedded teaching”³. In fact many teachers and trainers, many more than five years ago, can be observed embracing -at least

³ Nicholas Balatcheff, eAgenda Forum, Barcelona, October 2006

to a certain extent- the renewal potential of ICT to embed learning in everyday's life and shifting their role from content provider towards process facilitators.

High speed, low speed: what are the explanations?

Some eLearning territories are already experiencing major shifts in the use of technology towards an innovation-centred paradigm, whilst others are still dominated by "first generation" eLearning, purely reproductive of consolidated teaching practices.

This table caricaturizes the expected evolution from eLearning 2000 towards "innovative eLearning" 2010, but does not mean -not at all- that the HELIOS team expects to see only "i eLearning" in 2010.

e-l 2000...	i-eL 2010...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ distributes consolidated knowledge ○ is still e-Teaching ○ may isolate the learner ○ is delivered by a single provider/institution ○ ignores the learner's context and previous achievements ○ depresses the learner's creativity by transmissive logics ○ squeezes the role of teachers and learning facilitators ○ focuses on technology and contents ○ substitutes classroom sessions ○ privileges those who already learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ generates new knowledge ○ is owned by the learner ○ creates learning communities ○ is the result of and a tool to support partnership ○ builds on the learner's contexts and previous achievements ○ stimulates the learner's creativity by enhancing the spontaneous and playful dimension of learning ○ enriches the role of teachers and learning facilitators ○ focuses on quality, processes and learning context ○ is embedded in organisational and social processes of transformation ○ reaches and motivates those who were not learning

What the table is useful for is to detect differences in the direction and particularly in the "speed" of change in different eLearning territories. Typically, the speed observed is higher in informal learning environments, still relatively high in corporate environment and rather low in institutional education and training. Provocatively, one could ask: "Are high speed territories those in which professional teachers and trainers are less involved? Or are they those in which education policy makers and formal curricula have little to say?"

More reflexively, we should ask ourselves whether "high speed" is a good in itself, or should we not rather aim at the right speed. In spite of the recognised excessive resistance to change of institutional educational systems and -to a certain extent and for well justified reasons- of "professional" teachers and trainers, there is already some consolidated evidence that when "high speed" is required by policy makers -especially when accompanied by frequent variations in the direction of march- it may result counterproductive and frustrate authentic innovators, so losing their constructive energy for ever.

For example, one thing is to explore the potential of Second Life for learning purposes, another is to assume that learning practice will change at the speed of thought of visionary thinkers.

What should determine the "right" speed of change is the learning context, the "eLearning territory" and the scope of the overarching process of change: if an individual feels an urgent need to re-shape her/his life, nothing -no learning supply- can appear fast enough with respect to this need; if the change affects a complex system like education institutions, the

pressure to change is maybe partially balanced by the pressure to preserve stability and meet the expectations of a complex set of stakeholders.

Fortunately enough, however, eLearning territories are different but not isolated and “positive contamination” is happening and should be encouraged in a lifelong learning integration spirit.

The human touch, what makes the quality of eLearning experiences

“The core processes in learning are dialogue and interaction... with regard to the context, the organisation or the emotional support” required to learn⁴. The use of ICT is not diminishing the role of human interaction; on the contrary the best reports on quality of eLearning experiences almost invariably refer to the interaction with teachers, tutors or peers.

What was not understood by early eLearning marketers was the weight of services, context and learning community to determine the satisfaction of learners, whatever learning approach is used. By making efficient eLearning almost a synonym of “lonely” learning, they contributed dramatically to the doubts on the possible quality of such a learning experience. Recent trends observed are all in the direction of enhancing and refining the human component of eLearning approaches, practically in all eLearning territories - “The chance of joy through emancipation and control”⁵ of the learning process has to be shared with others.

Conclusions: Which policy implications?

As a general conclusion, the finding of the HELIOS observatory go in the direction that the new place for eLearning as a catalyst of innovation and as an enhancer of informal learning processes requires a completely new policy approach, in which education policy makers are not the only, and maybe not even the main actors. Learning has to be encouraged and rewarded when and where it occurs, at the workplace or in civic behaviours: local and regional development policy makers are very well placed to implement meaningful policies in this respect.

⁴ Carl Holmberg, eAgenda Forum, Barcelona, October 2006.

⁵ Walter Kugemann, eAgenda Forum, Barcelona, October 2006.

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