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Do Learning Experiences Lead to Constructive Citizenship?

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The majority of post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe started reorientation towards western democracy in early 1990s. Latvia commemorates the fifteenth anniversary of non-violent resistance towards the communist regime in 2006. Within this context the idea of constructive citizenship, especially for the younger generation, is today at a turning point, both on the level of shaping the new Europe and local communities within nation states.

The content and learning outcomes of today's schooling depend much more on the influences of wider society than they do on school and teachers. Teachers need to be aware of paradoxes in contemporary society, such as:

- The greater the use of different and complicated technologies, the greater the need to address the problems of illiteracy and lack of basic skills. Without these, people's participation in community life and employability is threatened.
- A growing proportion of the investment in education is not supporting social inclusion.
- Students following limited fields of studies (an increasing proportion) tend to not regard education as a resource enabling full participation in economic and social life.
- Processes in contemporary society create disparities between schools, and questions arise about whether there are common standards for the quality of education.
- Social polarisation is growing.
- The growth of individual needs in contemporary society alienates learning more and more from traditional education. Contemporary learning should be expected to provide more flexible and transferable skills, that will help the individual in a short period of time, giving them the resources to adapt and demonstrate self-efficacy within the constantly changing labour market and in social life.

Sir Christopher Ball, for the Kent region of learning, writes 'We belong to the first generation that knows for certain that it doesn't know what the future will be like'. Norman Longworth, in *Lifelong Learning in Action*, concludes that the humility inherent in that quotation should be what drives learning for the future (Longworth, 2004). The uncertainty evident in these statements opens opportunities for educationalists to set goals and find ways to implement them in a way that matches the complexity of contemporary and future society.

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An OECD report (Miller, 2003) suggests the following ‘Descriptors of Future Society’ (table 1):

Table 1

Indicator	Industrial Era	Learning Era
Wealth	Physical/financial	Human capital
Home	Life organised for work	Work organised for life
Authority	Hierarchy	Networked autonomy
Identity	Imposed identity	Self-generated identity
Freedom	Liberation from constraints	Capacity to do things

Source: Miller R., OECD, 2003

We need to focus on increasing the capacity of human capital and this should influence contemporary learning objectives, regardless the age of the student. Students should learn for three reasons:

- For full-fledged personal fulfilment,
- To achieve competitive and flexible employability,
- For constructive citizenship and social inclusion.

What is constructive citizenship and what can schools do to develop it?

‘Constructive citizenship is purposive participation in and for civil society, at the highest level of individual capacity. It is characterised by tolerance, non-violence and the acknowledgement of the rule of law and human rights. Constructive citizenship is promoted by civic education, through disseminating the fundamental values shared by societies around the world. These citizenship skills are developed gradually, through appropriate content, teaching and learning.’

This statement was tested with Master level students reading Law and Pedagogy at the University of Latvia. Students were asked to reflect on their own experience of schooling, and to state when in their education (primary, secondary or higher education), and through what subjects and teaching methods they thought they have acquired these skills:

Table 2

Applying new knowledge into practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeing the connection between theory and practice • transforming knowledge into action
Learning to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staying open to new knowledge and new learning techniques • identifying and using sources of knowledge • relating learning to personal objectives
Questioning, reasoning and critical judgement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowing the difference between good, bad and indifferent • continually wanting to improve procedures, processes and situations • never being satisfied with the status quo
Management and communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expressing oneself clearly orally and verbally in formal and informal situations • persuading others • listening to others • helping others to help themselves
Thinking skills and creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using creativity and imagination to solve problems • thinking 'out of the box' • anticipating situations and developing forward vision
Adaptability, flexibility and versatility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • facing change with confidence • adapting to new situations and tasks • being ready to change personal direction
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sharing information and knowledge • receiving information and knowledge • participating in goal-setting • achieving common goals

Adapted from Longworth (2004)

Figure 1 shows the results: when our students say particular skills were developed at particular educational level. Primary education promotes the development of teamwork, questioning, reasoning and critical judgement, while at secondary level they developed teamwork and learning to learn. In higher education the majority show the skill developed is applying knowledge into practice.

Figure 1: Development of skills for constructive citizenship at different levels of education

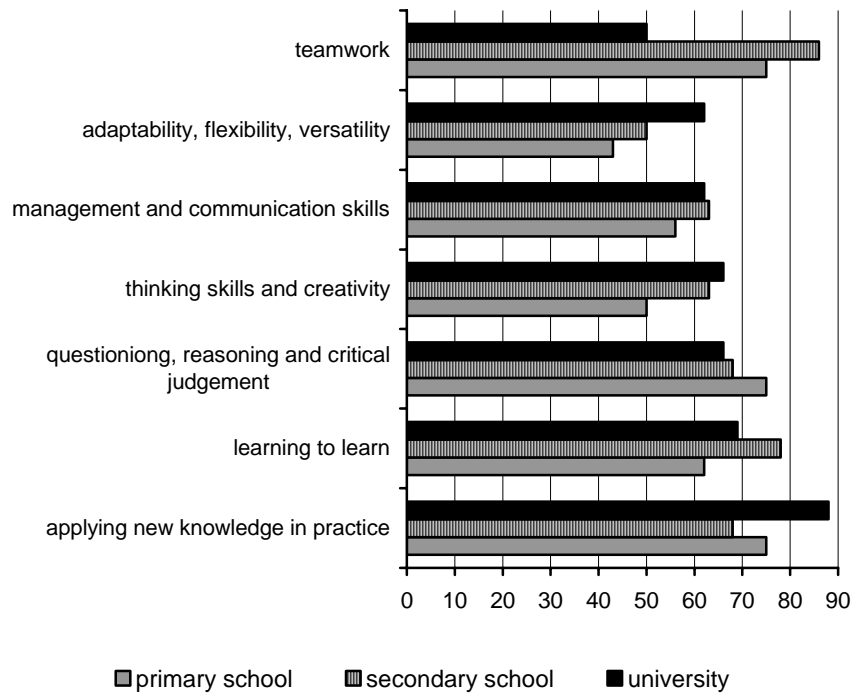


Figure 2 shows students' perceptions of the subjects in which particular skills are developed. In the humanities, they see thinking skills and creativity, questioning, reasoning and critical judgement as being developed most, while in the social sciences learning to learn and management and communication skills are developed, and in the natural sciences applying new knowledge in practice and adaptability, flexibility and versatility are fostered.

Figure 2: Development of skills for constructive citizenship in accordance with subject group

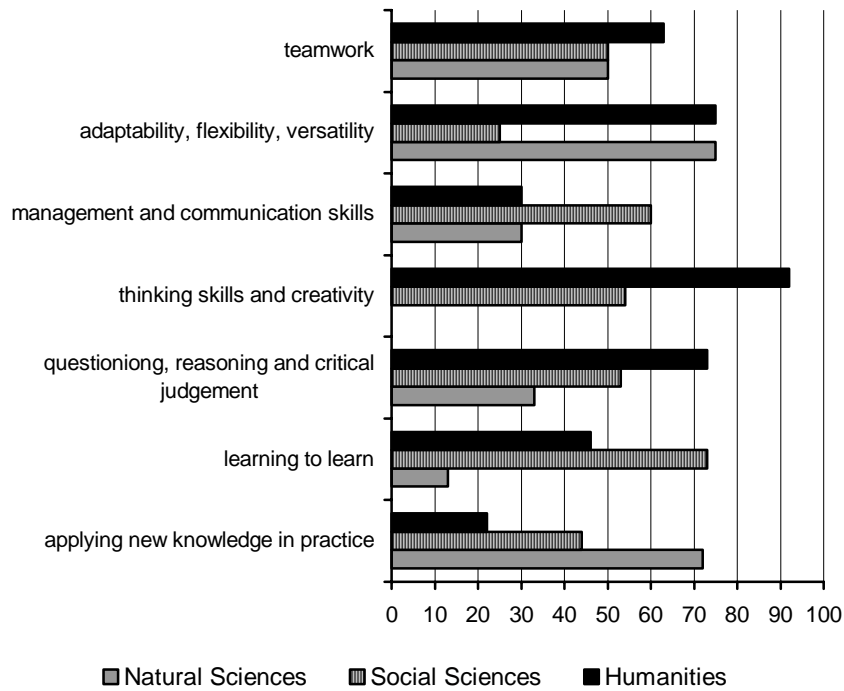
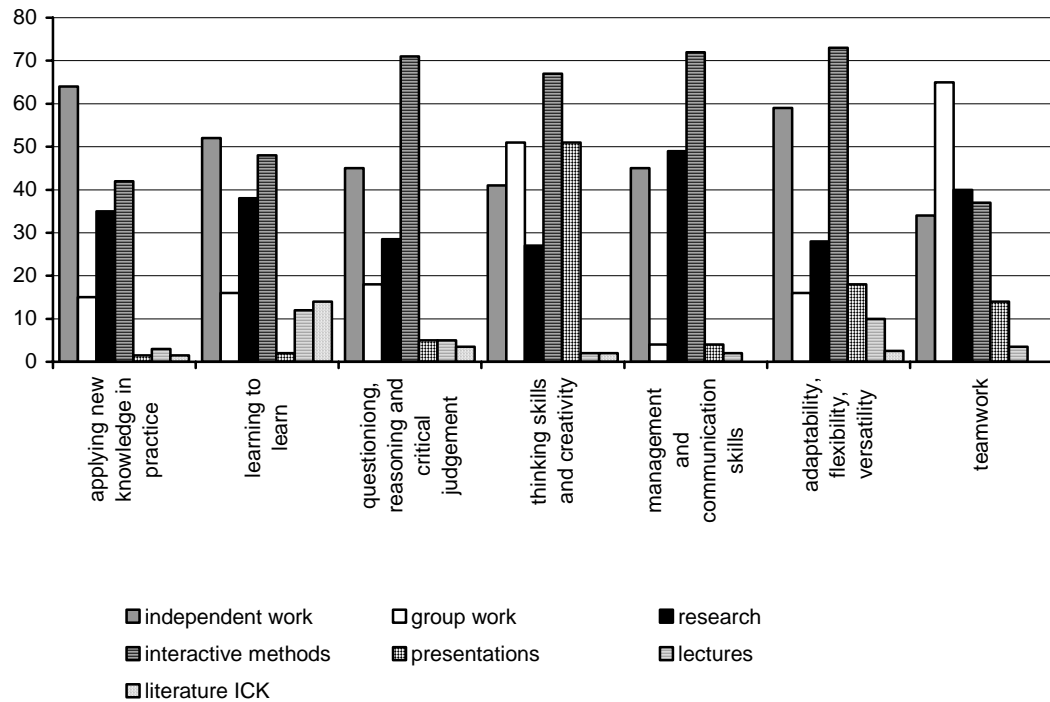


Figure 3 shows which methods of learning are thought to best develop these particular skills. Interactive methods help to develop such skills as adaptability, flexibility, versatility, management and communication skills, questioning, reasoning and critical judgement; while team work, thinking skills and creativity is mostly strengthened by group work. Independent work promotes applying new knowledge in practice and adaptability and flexibility.

Figure 3: Development of skills for constructive citizenship by teaching/learning method



To promote participation in school means creating the conditions for *learning to be*, in which young people enrich their experience through cooperating in their immediate environment. This involves three aspects.

1) To secure a sense of belonging

Each individual has a need to be accepted and respected by others. But growing inequalities and the social marginalisation of some students, coupled with teachers lowering students' self-assurance and self-esteem, means that often the school environment fails to promote a sense of belonging: teachers are not prepared or willing to differentiate their teaching methods or to accommodate each student's individual development. The growing phenomena of 'street kids' demonstrates that teachers often demand students follow uniform standards of behaviour and attitudes. Students should instead be taught to be aware of their development and to understand how to improve their performance, as well as being encouraged to take control of themselves and actively participate in decision making. Real democracy demands each individual's potential and participation, and cannot afford to waste human resources.

2) To supply maximum opportunity for students to participate in the public domain

Schools need to move from being storehouses of knowledge towards providing an environment of wide social contacts that teach students to multiply their social capital and to organise cooperation between individuals and organisations. They should focus on the possibilities of widening the educational environment, through cooperation between teachers, school heads, parents, university teachers, employers, NGOs and the local and regional community, to find solutions for questions of mutual interest and to implement joint projects. This draws attention to the reasons why competition, diversification and stratification are becoming stronger than solidarity and cooperation.

3) To provide opportunities for students to deal with controversial issues and different loyalties.

At the Education for All conference in Dakar in 2000, UNESCO members agreed that dealing with controversial issues and loyalties were a major element of the basic skills required for contemporary citizens. The Council of Europe identified a set of minimal skills for citizenship in Europe: these included resolving conflicts in non-violent way; knowing how to argue and being able to interpret the arguments of others; accepting differences; knowing how to make choices; assuming shared responsibilities and cooperating with others; and developing a critical mind. Miller (2000) discusses examples and analyses of how school can contribute to implementing these guidelines are discussed: his paper stresses the link between the experience of participation and involvement at school level and developing constructive citizenship in the globalised world.

Developments in education within European and Global Citizenship include:

- Learning results are **not** evaluated separately within each educational level by assessing student performance about the comprehension of knowledge, **but** by examining how prepared the student is to continue learning and their motivation and skills for participation.
- School objectives are defined not within a single educational level, but closely related to the future goals of society.
- The relationship between the content of education at every level and the qualifications/competences needed by employers (a skills-orientated curriculum).
- The guidelines to modernise the education system in Latvia have overall humanistic values and a democratic framework.
- The challenge of the future is to provide every student with the opportunities to create, generate and implement new knowledge through problem-solving, including informal learning/living situations - thus providing individuals with the experiences for constructive citizenship through self-directed learning.
- The social polarisation of individuals within Latvian society is inevitable. There is a challenge for schools to offer learning for socially excluded groups who might think that learning is 'not for them'. In Latvia we are starting to discuss the need to introduce '10th grade non-secondary school'.
- Changes in contemporary society influence people faster than they can comprehend these changes and adapt to them. Life-long learning should develop pre-emptive

understanding and preparedness for change and flexible self-determination skills: education policy should balance individual and societal needs.

- A shift in focus from individual learning to learning through implementing teamwork with shared responsibilities.
- Success in education and learning is closely related to current and future education policy. The direction of educational policy makers should be:
 - to concentrate on reducing inequalities, rather than increasing opportunities;
 - to strive for a just society, with increased participation through more education;
 - to look for evidence of how learning experiences influence society and society driving change in learning experiences;
 - to calculate whether it is more profitable to educate people to cope with challenges that exist or to provide learning experience for people to become leaders of challenges.

Finally, the wider the learning environment that the school offers its students, the better the learning experience for constructive citizenship that will be created. The development of the ability to convert uncertainties and challenges of society into priorities and benefits for the individual will be more successful.

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