INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
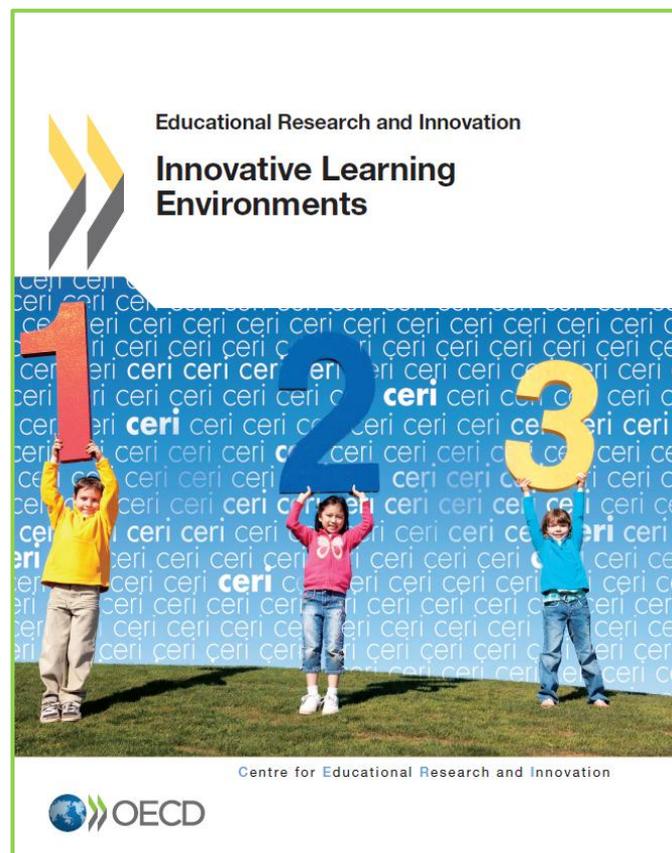
The Importance of Innovating Learning

The **Innovative Learning Environments** (ILE) project grew out of earlier CERI work on "Schooling for Tomorrow" but represented a substantial departure from it, with its focus on learning rather than schooling and on beginning first with the micro level of learning environments before extending the view to more systemic implications.

It has taken as its core concept the "learning environment" instead of conventional educational units of analysis. This is because, first, "school" and "classroom" are institutional units, not defined in terms of learning *per se*. Second, a great deal of the learning of young people takes place outside schools and this trend continues apace, particularly with technological advance.

Why focus strongly on learning? Why innovation?

Many reasons justify the relentless focus on learning. Most generally, as knowledge has become central to economies and societies, the spotlight has necessarily shifted to learning – without it, information cannot become usable, actionable knowledge. The enormous potential of technology also invites the rethinking of learning and teaching possibilities. At the same time, the familiar difficulties encountered by educational reform to make a fundamental impact on outcomes invites a fresh focus on learning itself, and the environments within which it is generated.

Why innovation? Most obviously, the world is changing rapidly, and if anything, the pace of change is quickening. In this context, education has to be open to change and this calls for innovation. A wide set of indicators suggests that most systems are not performing well enough and this means being ready to exercise profound scrutiny of existing models and arrangements, and being ready to innovate. Yet, 21st century societies are not just looking to improve education to meet longstanding goals but are placing the bar ever higher for what is expected. Education and schools in particular are expected to promote deep learning and understanding, foster 21st century competences, and lay the foundations for lifelong learning.

Educational Research and Innovation

Innovative Learning Environments

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The Project Approach

The distinctive contribution of the ILE project is to analyse numerous international examples of innovative ways of organising learning at the micro level (learning environment) and how this connects to the meso level (networks and communities of practice), as well as strategies for implementing learning change at the macro, system level.

The project has been realised through three over-lapping phases or strands:

- *Learning Research*: understanding the fundamentals about learning using international expert knowledge, and how such fundamental knowledge can inspire practice.
- *Innovative Cases:* immersion in what innovative practitioners have actually been working with around the world in their own settings and communities.
- *Implementation and Change*: the most directly policy-relevant strand, exploring alternative approaches to growing and sustaining innovative learning, and monitoring developments over time.

The goal has been to identify innovations and strategies and use them as key inputs to developing over-arching frameworks and concepts, as well as user-friendly materials, all aimed at educational leaders and innovators.

Equally important, the second and third strands have been carried out in close co-operation with a wide range of systems and initiatives in countries, drawing from their examples but also contributing to their innovations and providing international materials for their use.

In 'Innovative Cases', 125 cases were gathered from 29 systems in 23 different countries with 40 of these developed into fully-researched case studies.

In 'Implementation and Change', over 25 systems have actively contributed with information on their strategies to grow and sustain innovative learning.

Key Findings and Frameworks

The Nature of Learning and the ILE "Learning Principles"

In *The Nature of Learning,* leading researchers from Europe and North America took different perspectives on learning, summarising large bodies of research and identifying their significance for the design of learning environments. The target audience has been educational leaders, teachers and policy-makers, as well as other researchers.

The transversal conclusions from these different contributions were synthesised in the form of "learning principles".

These propose that learning environments, in all their different arrangements and strategies, need to:

- Make learning central, encourage engagement, and be where learners come to understand themselves as learners.
- Ensure that learning is social and often collaborative.
- Be highly attuned to learners' motivations and the importance of emotions.
- Be acutely sensitive to individual differences including in prior knowledge.
- Be demanding for each learner but without excessive overload.
- Use assessments consistent with their aims, with strong emphasis on formative feedback.
- Promote horizontal connectedness across activities and subjects, in- and out-of-school.

This adds up to a demanding agenda of far-reaching innovation, because ILE proposes that all these 'principles', and not just a select few, need to inform design. For the many schools and classrooms who currently do not meet these principles, this constitutes a significant challenge.

INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The ILE framework

Innovating the "pedagogical core":

The key elements in the core are: *learners, educators, content* and *resources*; innovating any or all of these is fundamental. Organisational dynamics and choices connect these elements, with the framework highlighting four: *regrouping teachers* and other *educators*, *regrouping learners*, *rethinking learning time*, and *innovating pedagogy and assessment*.

Learning leadership, design, evaluation, and feedback:

Leadership is essential to direct change. The professional development of educators is, therefore, critical. Meaningful evaluative knowledge should be constantly fed back into revised strategies for learning and further innovation.

Extending capacity through partnerships:

The contemporary learning environment should develop strong connections with other partners so as to extend its boundaries, resources and learning spaces, bringing in families and local communities, businesses, cultural institutions, and/or those of higher education.

Implementing the ILE learning principles:

The ILE principles should run through all these different layers, activities and relationships, and are at the centre of the framework.

Learning Leadership

Learning leadership is critical for reform and innovation because leadership is so influential of direction and outcomes. Learning is the core business of education and thus the paramount form of leadership is to help create and sustain environments that are conducive to good learning.

Learning leadership is about engaging in the design, implementation and sustainability of powerful innovative learning environments. Learning leadership is exercised through distributed, connected activity and relationships. It includes different partners and needs to be exercised at different levels of the overall learning system.

Learning leadership puts creating the conditions for 21st century learning and teaching at the core of leadership practice. The core work is to ensure deep 21st century learning, whatever the environment. This requires highly demanding teaching repertoires for everyone to keep learning, unlearning, and relearning.

Learning leadership requires creativity and often courage. Innovating, designing, bringing others on board, and redesigning all call on the exercise of creativity, as well as the courage to take risks.

Learning leadership models and nurtures 21st century professionalism. Through professional learning, inquiry and self-evaluation, learning leaders are themselves high-level knowledge workers.

Learning leadership is social and connected. Interaction is the essence of leadership practice and depends on carefully crafted collaborative activity. Learning leadership develops and is sustained through professional learning communities and networks – the critical "meso" level.

The more learning environments innovate, the more learning leadership will come from diverse non-formal partners, in ways that make growing pedagogical and organisational demands. Learning leadership and professional learning communities must incorporate and extend to a range of different professionals, partners, and communities.

Learning Leadership (cont.)

Transformative learning leadership involves complex multi-level chemistry: systemic innovation and sustainability depend on learning leadership at different levels.

Learning leadership is needed at the system level. This may be to create the initial direction for innovation or it may respond to local change. There is a key policy role in creating the conditions for active networked professional learning, and for coherence between different demands within systems.

The Future of ILE

ILE is completing its analytical and system-based work in 2014.

The concluding meeting of the ILE coordinators will take place on 5 November, immediately following the main 'Innovation, Governance and Reform in Education' Conference.

Completion of the main reports from the third 'Implementation and Change' strand will take place following the conference, to appear in 2015.

The remaining 'Monitoring Notes' from systems will be posted on the ILE website.

There are three main reports or outputs to come:

- The final ILE report from 'Implementation and Change'
- The ILE 'Handbook' bringing together project tools and materials on: a) the learning principles, b) the ILE framework, c) learning leadership, d) evaluation of innovative learning, and e) transformation and change
- A chapter in the forthcoming **OECD *Education Policy Outlook* 2015**

There will be further dissemination activities in 2015, including a series of events in Durban, South Africa, 13-16 April.

ILE Publications

Full publications

Innovating to Learn, Learning to Innovate, (2008), Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing.

The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice, (2010), Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing (edited by Hanna Dumont, David Istance & Francisco Benavides.

Innovative Learning Environments, (2013), Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing.

Leadership for 21st Century Learning, (2013), Educational Research and Innovation, OECD Publishing.

OECD official working papers

Cheng, E. C. and M. L. Lo (2013), "Learning Study: Its origins, operationalisation, and implications", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 94, OECD Publishing.

Zitter, I. and A. Hoeve (2012), "Hybrid Learning Environments: Merging Learning and Work Processes to Facilitate Knowledge Integration and Transitions", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 81, OECD Publishing

Van den Broek, G. (2012), "Innovative Research-Based Approaches to Learning and Teaching", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 79, OECD Publishing.

Also

"OECD Work on Technology and Education: innovative learning environments as an integrating framework", *European Journal of Education*, *Vol. 48, n°1,* March 2013

"A new international OECD project on learning – 'Innovative Learning Environments'" *The International Journal of Learning,* Vol. 16, 12, 2009.