



Event Report

S24/09

Beyond chalk and talk: creativity in the classroom

Brussels Debate – 30 March 2009

Summary

People must be stimulated to innovate and think creatively in Europe's future 'knowledge' society, and this requires rethinking the role of education and changing formal teaching structures, speakers told the second Brussels Debate organised by the European Policy Centre and the European Commission as part of the European Year of Creativity and Innovation. The Commission is exploring the best ways to encourage people to be innovative, have initiative, autonomy and leadership, and develop their entrepreneurial talents.

Full Report

Odile Quintin, Director-General for Education and Culture, European Commission, speaking at the second Brussels' Debate of the European Year of Creativity and Innovation 2009, stressed the importance of maximising every European citizen's potential.

While the economic crisis that has rocked Europe demands immediate short-term measures, one must not ignore the long-term challenge of shifting from a society that produces objects to one that produces knowledge.

The financial turmoil makes it more vital than ever to input skills, creativity and innovation into the European economy, and to help the workforce maintain and upgrade its skills. The Commission has been investigating what new jobs and skills our 'knowledge society' will need, and how to foster creativity in Europe's learning and working environments.

The nature of work is changing, becoming less hierarchical and more collaborative, with less routine work and more independent thinking. More people need 'know how' and soft skills – to think creatively, organise work independently, work in teams and communicate. Ms Quintin said the Commission is exploring the key competences that people will need to thrive in a knowledge society, where the emphasis will be on creativity.

We need to rethink education, focusing on skills not knowledge, so that schools switch from teaching a static body of knowledge towards more individualised learning that stimulates an appetite to learn. The role of the "school leader" is fundamental, so all teachers must be trained to have the right skills to take part in this process. At the same time, creativity, initiative-taking and entrepreneurship, and cultural and civic skills develop best in "learning partnerships" that extend beyond the school gates.

EU Member States can learn from each other how to stimulate innovation and creativity, and the Commission is exploring the idea of a 'benchmark' to help education systems promote this.

The Commission is also supporting partnerships for lifelong learning, building links between business and vocational training, and exploring how universities can offer

“flexible knowledge” for a fluid labour market. University-business partnerships should help remedy the lack of a “technology-transfer” and turn ideas into innovation and these “partnerships of talent” form the backbone of the European Institute for Innovation and Technology.

The Commission has also selected 23 ‘Ambassadors’ from business, academia and culture to exchange ideas and encourage interaction between the different disciplines. Creativity may be difficult to pin down, but it must never be boxed in, said Ms Quintin, and the world of non-formal education can aid formal education to boost people’s creative abilities.

Eduardo Marçal Grilo, Member of the Board of Trustees, Gulbenkian Foundation, Portugal, stressed the importance of “basic education” in maths, science, language, history and new technology for stimulating creativity and innovation. This body of knowledge, which must be “taught and learned”, is as important as learning ‘skills’.

Reading and acquiring knowledge from books is of “enormous importance”, he said, as those who read books “learn better”, so schools should introduce children to the pleasure of reading.

To be able to contribute to society, people must learn personal organisation, discipline, leadership, initiative, the ability to work in a team, have a critical faculty, be able to develop scientific methodology and take risks. People also need entrepreneurial skills, but these cannot be taught, as a successful entrepreneur has to be autonomous, have initiative, not be afraid of new ideas and be innovative.

Sadly, we live in a society where we are losing our core values of democracy, ethics, tolerance, and respect for truth, other people and the rule of law. If people have real knowledge, skills and values, they can play their role fully as citizens.

To be innovative, people need to have initiative, autonomy and leadership, take a critical attitude towards routine, and work to improve themselves. Innovation cannot be taught, but people need to be open to new ideas and new ways of thinking and have the opportunity to learn creatively.

One must develop a culture of excellence, said Mr Grilo, evaluating schools and teachers, and ensuring they have strong leadership, with a well-trained, stable staff. One should not just concentrate on the “education system”, but should encourage each school to be autonomous, with its own objectives and a diversity of approaches.

Life-long learning is now the paradigm, as the old model of restricting learning to schools is finished, and work and study is a continuing process.

Lluís Martínez-Ribes, Associate Professor of the Department of Marketing Management, ESADE Business School, Barcelona, said one must look at innovation and creativity from a “human angle”, and in his work he stresses that human values are an intricate part of knowledge.

In a knowledge society, one must focus on the students and encourage interaction between them to enable them to be “protagonists of the learning experience”. He stressed the need to develop skills and “competences”, taking account of the context and of the way society operates, and how it is constantly changing.

The future is unpredictable and to innovate, one must look at life from many different angles. The nature of publicity and marketing is changing – it used to emphasise the need to be better than everyone else, whereas now it emphasises the need to be part of humanity.

We need to break down the way knowledge is classified, said Mr Martinez-Ribes, and blur the borders between topics. Whereas there used to be clear differentiation between engineers, law and business, now students need to learn about philosophy, society, culture, poetry, ethics and neuroscience.

Dirk Van Damme, Head of the Centre for Education Research and Innovation at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), said calling for change does not mean being negative about the past or the present – it is not true that schools do not innovate or merely concentrate on learning by rote.

Europe's economic and social progress has depended on the quality of education and its emphasis on challenging convention. There has been an enormous educational revolution over the past 40 years, with educational attainment increasing in an unprecedented way, but we now need to challenge the current dogma.

Education has always had an important social function, but traditional schools have tended to raise some students to the top and leave others at the bottom of the social pyramid. The difficulty is that parents prefer this traditional, authoritarian view of education, which stunts creativity and innovation.

Schools should encourage the harmonious development of the individual, but not simply concentrate on teaching so much "knowledge" that other elements are squeezed out. One must move to a positive learning environment and a "trans-discipline of knowledge".

Facilities in universities, those "conservative bulwarks of knowledge" should be abolished in favour of a trans-disciplinary approach. One needs to move beyond the paradigms that divide subjects up, as the most interesting learning takes place at the boundaries of disciplines, while questioning received wisdom is the essence of creativity in education.

Obviously this new form of learning will be expensive and governments should not underestimate the cost of innovation in education. Mr Van Damme also warned against allowing innovation to be an excuse for mediocrity, as learning can be difficult. If one wants creativity and innovation in education, it must be of the highest quality.

Discussion

Pressed on the need to maintain excellence in education, Commissioner Quintin said that at present, "excellence" in universities is based on research ability, but the Commission believes that universities should be ranked on their teaching and their contribution to the local community, as universities and schools have multiple functions.

Mr Martinez-Ribes felt that definitions of excellence are too limited, as they are based on content in a particular field, but knowledge changes and is "a never-ending story".

On the role of teachers, Mr Grilo did not agree that they should act as "facilitators", as their role is to teach and they need to be properly trained in particular subjects. Children's early years at school determine their later education, so a teacher's role is to impart basic knowledge.

Mr Van Damme believed that one should not just apply learning-centred education, as people learn best during the interaction between the teacher and the student. He felt that this explained why some distance- or e-learning had not worked. Mr Martinez-Ribes said some subjects can be learnt at a distance, but some competences must be taught face-to-face.



Asked how one could be creative in education, Mr Van Damme said creativity can play a role in many fields of knowledge and he was concerned that it had been pushed out of the school curriculum.

Questioned on how to encourage innovation in schools, Mr Grilo said one had to choose leaders who understand what innovation means, open the school to people from outside to bring in other views, and insist on experimental work that stimulates innovation.