

LABLEARNING

MEDIA BASED EMPOWERMENT FOR DISENGAGED YOUTH



THE LABLEARNING GUIDE COLLECTION



NR 15

Lessons Learned from LABlearning Practice

Evaluators summing up

The LABlearning Guide Collection offers inspiration, tools and principles to establish empowermental media based learning facilities for disengaged youth.

The Guide Collection offers around 20 different guides, including the full collection of guide material. The media based learning initiatives are contributing to re-thinking learning and to the creation of 21st century learning opportunities for young people.

The LABlearning Guide Collection is synthesizing theory and practice from such approaches as media learning, game based learning, project based learning, entrepreneurial and community based learning. The Guide material emerges from extensive literature studies, the Intel Computer Clubhouse Network's 20 years of experience, as well as from LAB practice in Catalonia Spain, Holland, Italy and Denmark.

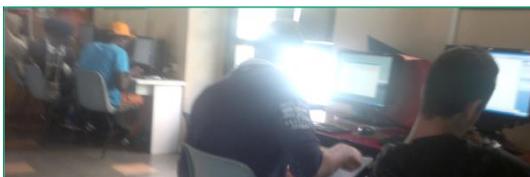


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Lessons Learned from LABlearning Practice

The LABs run within LABlearning have been qualitatively documented and their stories narrated through the voices of their key actors: the learners, the educators and the community. Bringing together the stories of the seven LABs, a few common features emerge about the characteristics and outcomes of the LABs. They are presented below (n° 1 to 5) with the expectation that they will help other people to take up, apply and improve the LABlearning approach. The stories also highlight a number of critical elements for the success of the LABs. They are also discussed here (n° 6 to 10), as they will provide guidance in the implementation of future media labs with at-risk youth and early-school-leavers.



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. . . 10 lessons from the LABs

1. LABS ENHANCE MOTIVATION ON ALL SIDES

The LABs evaluation revealed that they were exciting and rewarding experiences that created **high motivation** and engagement among learners and educators alike.

As some participants put it, this was a learning setting in which for the first time they could be “active” and “take responsibilities”. Most of all, they appreciated that “you are allowed to do what you are good at and can contribute to the common project using your best skills, ... not being told what to do”.

The rhythm of learning in the LABs can become fast, making the activities more challenging and engaging. Besides, you can “learn through playing” or by doing other things that are seldom accepted in traditional school classes. For instance, engaging the students in Assen in the elicitation of requirements and in design (not only in testing!) of the web application due to support their college experience, **untapped a huge potential** and generated ownership and participation. Involving the young people in Ancona in the preparation of the final exhibition of the LAB’s results was also an important learning experience for them. Students very much appreciated the LABs “being different” in these and other respects.



2. LABS FOSTER EMPOWERMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

The LABs offered all participants an opportunity to learn in a new way (they were clearly presented at the start as a “hard fun” learning experience) and to develop transversal life competencies and skills such as communication, working with others, digital competence etc. Especially for the most disadvantaged learners (dropouts and unemployed people), these opportunities have had an **important empowering effect**, making them feel able to face new challenges in life.

This did not come easy, however. The majority of young people in the Salt LABs were not used to take the initiative, make decisions and accept responsibility. Hence mentors had to make a **big effort to promote confidence and self-esteem** in the youths and make them feel capable of contributing to the activities. Motivating participants day after day, once the novelty of the LAB (the “Las Vegas effect”) had faded away was very **hard work** also for the mentors in Ancona.



3. LABS BREAK DOWN COMMUNICATION BARRIERS IN A *DIALOGICAL CLASS*

In all LABs teachers and mentors documented “more dialogue” during the activities, both among peers and between teachers and learners. By design, LABs tried to break down traditional teacher-student communication modes and to promote a new teaching and learning pact. This entails greater bi-directional communication and a shift from teachers asking students questions to the other way around.

The joint exploration and learning that occurs when using a new technology and undertaking a new project (**every project is in fact a new venture**) stimulates that shift and increases dialogue. Group work also stimulates a lot of peer communication. It is not always easy (in all LABs, a few participants did not enjoy and tried to minimize working in groups), but most times it is productive. This was indeed a discovery for many participants, as reported from Aarhus.

Where a structured project-based learning (PBL) method was followed (such as in Reggio Emilia), communication activities and the development of communication competence are a crucial component in each project phase: presenting a group’s project idea, then the work plan and finally the results. Also in Assen the Lego Serious Play methodology entailed that LAB’s participants built, used metaphors and shared their stories and insights. The focus on media projects in itself enables new communication experiences and reflections. These become the content of further dialogues among peers, with teachers, mentors, media experts and ultimately with people in the broader community.

Providing a space where students can be creative and can communicate freely, turned out to be a good bet (especially in Assen): **some teachers were “surprised” by what they could get from their own students**. Significantly, such a free space never resulted in recrimination or destructive comments. Based on the LABs experience, groups work best when they are small (3-5 people), so that communication is smoother and nobody remains in the background.



4. DIGITAL MEDIA ARE THE CATALYST, NOT THE CORE

As expected and intended, digital media proved an important motivation driver in most LABs, but learning outcomes went far beyond simple media use.

Young people like digital media and use them a lot and they are aware that they will be in some ways fundamental for their future. Using digital media makes it possible and gives value to the application of young people’s existing IT skills and helps improving them. The former is an important lever to create interest in the LAB’s activities; the latter is in itself a valuable result.

Actual media production skills were in fact lacking among the LABs’ young participants - their regular media use being limited to messaging and downloading: **young people do not know how to learn with digital media, how to use them for learning**. The LABs created different opportunities to experience this by making the use of technology functional to the development of a meaningful media project or to the production of cognitive artefacts. This of course required a lot of “**didactical re-thinking**” by the educators of their teaching practices.

The support of competent media experts was thus found paramount in this kind of activities. At the same time, young people often outgrew their teachers or mentors in technical skills, contributing to generate the more fluid and peer-like teaching and learning relationship and communication seen above.

In all cases, though, the use of digital media was a catalyst for meaningful and extended interaction that led to the achievement of relevant motivational and learning goals, far beyond simple technical skills.



5. LABS PROVIDED AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE A NEW WAY OF LEARNING

The LABs proved effective also in terms of learning. Besides rapid improvements in technical proficiency achieved by most participants, students discovered a new way of exploring and communicating meaning. Students “find and communicate knowledge in new shapes” ...they “express attitudes, feelings and values”, things that apparently find little space in other learning settings (Aarhus). In some LABs where students worked with their body and senses, the aesthetic dimension became central to the learning experience. One mentor from Aarhus states that, “it was definitely **the visual dimension** (...) that appealed to many of the students. They said it was just the right way for them to learn”.

The importance of the visual dimension came up strongly also in the LABs in Ancona (photography, image editing and video games) and in Salt, where LAB activities were entirely focused on video-making. Learners appreciate this work especially because they perceive and see by themselves the quality of final outcomes and the progress they make towards it.

Except for technical skills which generally have improved, at times also significantly, LABs’ achievements in terms of content learning are mixed. Most LABs in fact aimed primarily at enhancing the participants’ motivation and had no specific content learning targets. In Reggio Emilia however the LABs and the PBL method were integrated in the school curriculums and the LABs’ outcomes were successfully addressed by formal assessments. The LABs approach promoted by LABlearning should thus be seen as one key ingredient of a new approach to education, but should be cautiously matched with existing educational and schooling practices and not expected to replace them as a whole.



6. MANAGE TIME CAREFULLY

Media projects very often take longer than expected to start, to implement and to complete. This may be due to their rather unpredictable creative component, to the learners’ limited technical skills, to the efforts and time required to overcome them and to other reasons.

Depending on circumstances, this led to the learners complaining for the lack of time to properly develop and complete their projects (for example in Aarhus); to other learners (especially the weakest ones) getting demotivated for the lack of tangible output of their efforts (Link LAB in Salt); and even to some participants dropping out of the LAB (in Ancona), given the intensity and long duration of the required engagement.

Media project planning and **time management** in LABs activities should thus be dealt with carefully, taking into account that “production” in the classroom or any other learning context has different rhythm and requirements than traditional lecturing. In particular, we suggest to allow some back-up time, and to carefully consider (a) the learning time for technical skills, (b) the unpredictable variations of creative work and (c) ways to visualize early and intermediate project steps into tangible products.



7. LEARN ABOUT YOUR LEARNERS

Although all the young people involved reacted positively to the LABlearning offer and were happy about the experience they made, their different educational background and living conditions did matter.

In the Link LAB in Spain, participants had no high school diploma, they were out of any formal education system and were unemployed. Compared to the other LABs in Salt, this group was reported having a very low level of motivation, more difficulties in learning, thus representing a “tougher” target group. The biggest obstacle found in Salt, in fact, is the generalized lack of motivation among young people resulting from the economic context and the perception that no alternatives exists in their life. In Drenthe College (Assen) the AKA students¹ involved in the LAB tend to have very low motivation and low self- esteem, and feel challenged by a job market that requires creativity and professional competences. They indeed eventually came up with challenging ideas and some interesting insights, but they clearly had difficulties to ‘think outside the box’ during the LAB, which was not an issue with the other groups involved. In Ancona, a few early LAB participants eventually dropped out for the cost (and time) of travelling to Ancona twice a week from their home village, for family duties (taking care of younger siblings) and other reasons.

We suggest **spending time learning about the target group(s)**, both formally (for example, through a survey) and informally, spending time with them and learning about what is relevant for them and what their expectations are. This will help designing more impactful and enjoyable LABs experiences.



8. PREPARE TEACHERS AND MENTORS TO FACE NEW DEMANDS

The main conclusion of the LABlearning experience (and of many other as wells) is that the key factor for achieving good results in innovating education and combating early school leaving is not technology use in itself, but the method that makes digital media useful learning tools by embedding them into project-based and autonomous learning activities. Digital media are good catalysts for generating an open and effective learning environment, but do not produce this by themselves. **The role of teachers, mentors and other educators is vital.**

The transformation in learning that the LABs encouraged and witnessed, place new demands on educators as their role becomes that of helping structure knowledge rather than just bringing it to the students. Besides, as mentioned before, when working with young people at risk, educators had to make big efforts to promote their confidence and self-esteem, stimulate their initiative and enhance their motivation.

These demands call for a sound training of teachers and mentors both on educational and technological aspects, and for the establishment of support services on these matters, including the offer of continuous learning opportunities.

The LABs experience also showed that in such experimental endeavours (and each single LAB had and will have its own story), it is helpful to have one person managing the actual activity with the young people, and another one observing

¹ AKA is a level 1 form of vocational education for students that experience difficulties in finding their way in the labour market or to college.

and collecting feedback.



9. LINK UP WITH THE BROADER COMMUNITY

The key sparkle for LABs is relevance: what is being produced matters - not only to learners and educators, but also to the community, that is, to “the world” out there. Especially the experiences outside of the formal education system, as in Ancona and Salt, clearly showed the importance of establishing links between the LABs’ activities and the broader local community.

The links can take various shapes: collaboration with social and youth services; dialogues with the schools attended by some of the LABs’ participants; involvement in LABs’ activities of significant local actors (as was the case in Salt with Bakari, “street leader” and singer of a well-known local music group); and in particular running public final events to present the products of media projects.

These links are important for different reasons. They provide a sort of external legitimacy to the learning process of the LABs and give emphasis to their achievements. They can become part of and enrich the learning experience of the young people, e.g. by offering authentic problems and content to work on, by stimulating the development of communication and organisational competences needed for setting up and running an exhibition and so on. They can be a pathway to sustainability and deeper impact of the LABs through the dialogue with the formal education system and with local public services. They offer the local community an opportunity to see the young people under a different light, hopefully prompting its members to rethink about their “youth problem” and develop trust.



10. CONSIDER THE LAB’S SOCIAL STRUCTURE

A LAB is also a group engaged in a project over a rather long period of time. Properly managing social structures within the group is paramount to make the effort at the same time sustainable and successful.

Experience tells that each participant should find its own role, so that small teams of 3-5 people work best. A ratio of 1 educator each 5-10 people seems adequate, even if this can vary depending on the participants and their degree of autonomy. Also, educators should have a defined role, connected to the process, to supporting individuals, or to technical skills. Such competencies overlap in the practice, but having a clear reference for each of them makes things clearer (also among educators themselves).

The engagement of local leaders that share the project’s goals and approach can provide a big help, not only in linking up in the community, but also in making the social environment consistent and productive.

Much more on www.LABlearning.eu

The LABlearning consortium offers

Counselling on media laboratories for disengaged youth for national and European educational policy-makers

Collaboration on the establishment of media laboratories in formal and non-formal contexts for institutions and communities

Training in managing media laboratories for disengaged youth for teachers, mentors and youth workers

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The LABlearning consortium offers its services on non-profit basis and always links the media laboratories to 21st century learning.

21st century learning in action

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LABLEARNING



MEDIA BASED EMPOWERMENT
FOR DISENGAGED YOUTH



Penja un vídeo



Experience the direct voices of the young people on



With English subtitles

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The 37 minutes video **Joves i Futur** is created, designed and produced by young people in Salt-Girona Catalonia participating in the EU LABlearning project. Their work is much appreciated, as are their open statements in the video.

The project wishes to thank both the youth teams and the mentors working with them!

The video, other videos and 20 different LABlearning Guides are openly available on

www.LABlearning.eu