

Comments on the Communication of the European Commission on “e-Learning – Designing Tomorrow’s Education” (COM(2000) 318 final from the 24th of May 2000)

Before looking at the single issues more closely, we want to recapitulate the matter of concern as well as its context:

- The challenges for Europe by “globalisation and knowledge-driven economy” as well as “using the possibilities for employment in the knowledge-driven economy”;
- The Union has “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”;
- To strengthen the efforts of formation and training in a coming “knowledge-based society” to “guarantee the optimal integration (of the citizen) into the economy”;
- To help the Unions’ citizens to master the new technologies and to be “digitally literate”;
- To use “the innovation potential of the new technologies to work for the requirements of and the quality in lifelong training, and for the development of teaching practices” as there is “an historic opportunity for Europe, for its citizens can get to know each others cultures, languages, traditions, creations”;
- The communication concludes: “If we want to adapt and to modernize our education and training systems, then any obstacles must be removed quickly in a concerted manner”.

1. Remarks and Queries

The efforts of the Commission, within the debate of the economic and social upshots and consequences of globalisation, also to deal with the question which key qualifications Europe’s citizens need to meet the demands of modern society and to find “their spot” in the world, has to be remarked positively and merits to pay attention to. It is remarkable that the Commission is currently working on a series of initiatives concerning education, lifelong learning and active citizenship. The Commission relates them to the economic and social challenges of the present.

The Commission aims at being able to keep pace with the global economic competition and taking up the leading role. To accomplish these objectives, educational efforts have to be adapted to the changing technological requirements. Because of that, the first question arises that these aims are not “pure” anymore and do not constitute a purpose itself anymore, but are totally subordinated to the occupational-political and social-political initiatives of the Union.

The objective of education is here “employability”, “empowerment and increased flexibility” of the individual in service of the labour market, briefly: the optimal integration of the individual into economy, correspondingly, the adaptation of the single person to the quickly changing conditions of economy and the labour market. With that though, education becomes part of a functionalism concentrating exclusively on vocational education or training. For a conventional understanding of education, a “pure” conception of it, there seems to be no space anymore.

The different implicit hints to a “levelling out”, an “adaptation” a “going Europe” of the educational systems appear to be at least misleading. The question arises, whether “harmonisation” is inherent here, in spite of the reference to the competence of the single member states within the area of education. If that were the case, then the hallmark of European identity, namely the plurality of European cultures, which has been stressed so often and which is closely related to the educational systems, would be called into question.

2. Explicit Comments to the Four Main Lines of Action

To the four main lines of actions, which have been mentioned within the communication, namely:

- a. The efforts for improved infrastructure of schools with information and communication technology (ICT)
- b. training effort at all levels
- c. the development of multimedia contents and services
- d. the restructuring and networking of schools, universities and vocational centres to “centres for acquiring knowledge”

we would like to formulate the following questions, respectively, to stimulate to the following reflections.

1. Timetables

We consider the timetables of the communication as being unrealistic, not only in terms of the hardware, but especially in view of the development and implementation of appropriate curricula. The timetable is not straight, awakes wrong expectations and finally levels out all efforts for appropriate and tailored didactical concepts.

2. Existing Initiatives within the Member States

The communication does not bring to light, in how far the existing initiatives within the member states should be entangled with the initiative of this communication, respectively, in how far the already existing level of ICT-equipment of schools has been taken into consideration. The question arises, whether at this point compensatory measures would be more than sufficient. On top of that the costs for the within the communication mentioned desired provision of schools with ICT-equipment have to be considered not as single costs, but due to a constant and rapid revival of ICT as structural costs. Looked upon from this perspective, the mentioned use of financial means of the structural funds appear to be quite daring.

3. Objectives – Methods – Didactical Means

Under point 3.2., the communication hints at the application of ICT within the sphere of formation and vocational training which forms a crucial pedagogical challenge within all areas of pedagogy (organisation, procedure, structure, contents). At the same time a number of questions are not answered:

Should ICT be taught as a new cultural technique – such as writing, reading and calculating or should ICT be deployed as new didactical means (obligatory) across all subjects with learning methods matched to it? Which criteria should mould the actions? How should old and new cultural techniques complement each other?

4. Multimedia Contents

Subsequently, it can be queried about the multimedia contents for the different teaching and learning situations. From our perspective the communication lacks attention for the fact that the working out of (multimedia) learning materials cannot take place within a vacuum, but will have to be matched with pedagogical objectives and didactical methods. As above mentioned: different learning situations require diverse materials.

6. Acquisition of Competences

The communication stresses the necessity of the acquisition of ICT-illiteracy of teachers and pedagogues, correspondingly, the necessity to put more emphasis on ICT throughout the educational process of pedagogues. It has not been born into mind that a great number of people do not wish to have access to it or even vehemently refuse it. Such attitudes of denial is widely common among the group of people who find themselves within the last third of their working life. Such attitudes of refusal can especially be discovered among teachers. If entire groups shall not simply be excluded, appropriate, refined and prudent action lines are required.

6. Benefiting of already Existing Competences

The communication has revealed too little that young people and young grown-ups already retain the required capacities and skills for handling ICT in general. Due to their skills and competencies, they also have different ideas of e-learning than pointed out in the communication. If developing the future potential of young people is intended whereby the young person is considered as important resource, then the young people's skills and expectations have to be taken seriously.

7. Participation

The concepts barely show elements of participation. These concepts are in some respect directive and try to make one believe that the right and necessary steps had already been recognized and would merely have to be applied by now. Therefore, the conception is primarily oriented to the offers but not to the demands, which would, especially in the view of the possibilities of the new ICT, be feasible.

Dimensions of critical of society and social-ethical dimensions and implications of the establishment of new ICT are only inadequately taken into account.

8. New “Centres for acquiring knowledge”

Point 3.4 of the communication refers to the transformation of schools and universities into “centres for acquiring knowledge”. The possibilities of networking of European teaching and research capacities as well as the joining up of current educational institutions and distant learning can thus be linked with that. Leaving the fact of the diversity of educational systems

of the member states out of consideration, the question arises, if school – and more broadly spoken, education – is not reduced to the acquisition of knowledge and all other essential aspects which are necessary for society are cut out. It may be that this is connected with the difficulties of the transmission of not functional, social skills and competencies through the ICT.

In this context the other actors of the educational landscape seem to be totally barred, such as within the realm of adult education. It can be questioned in which way new (commercial) suppliers of education and continuous education are to be integrated.

3. Concluding Basic Principles

1. Which Vision?

Above and beyond the concrete questions and remarks to the four main action lines, we would like to pronounce the following:

The main deficit of the communication appears to be the absence of a vision of education, to which the matters of concern of the e-learning initiative could be fit in, and which goes beyond economic necessities. Only within the conclusion the communication states that (...).

The communication's characteristic style is preset as a chase making up ground. The fascinating opportunities of (re)structuring communication, the possibilities of revitalizing communicative processes, of networking and of discourse are just uttered marginally, too.

The communication is also lacking a conceptional framework, this is to say, an extensive pedagogical concept so as to set the objectives into practice. A better coherence of the different initiatives of the European Commission in the field of Education & Training – for example by a framework – would be helpful to understand and judge the merits of these initiatives.

2. Who is in the centre of attention?

We would have hoped that the communication expresses more clear and distinctive that in the end the human being and its different dimensions (economic, social, cultural, spiritual dimension) stands in the centre of all efforts. We would like to see a system of formation and training in Europe that shows interest in these different dimensions of “being human” and the resulting needs. To cite the title of a green-book of the European Commission: “People first” – or technology?

3. A Contribution of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church as such but also the different Catholic Organisations in the fields of Education & Training, active in the Member-States of the European Union, possess rich experiences and practical knowledge which has evolved over a long period of time. They have also established networks and the exchange of models of “best-practise”. They are willing to share their experiences with the European Institutions so as to contribute to a better construction and an extended integration of Europe.