



## Constructing the Future School Community - The Scenario of an Interactive, Agency Building and Creative Learning Environment

Jääskelä Päivikki, Klemola Ulla, Kostiainen Emma, Rautiainen Matti

University of Jyväskylä (Finland)

[paivikki.jaaskela@ju.fi](mailto:paivikki.jaaskela@ju.fi), [ulla.klemola@ju.fi](mailto:ulla.klemola@ju.fi), [emma.kostiainen@ju.fi](mailto:emma.kostiainen@ju.fi), [matti.rautiainen@ju.fi](mailto:matti.rautiainen@ju.fi)

### 1. Introduction

The education system at all levels is challenged to respond to external fluctuations such as globalization, technological development, changes in work and work relations, as well as to internally initiated changes, such as the increasing demand to understand students' varying needs and to develop student-centred learning environments. Even though development work in education is on-going, the relationship between formal education and real life appears to be complex. Instead of being at the heart of society, schools and other educational institutions are more like isolated islands. Teachers, educators, educational planners and administrators are asking similar kinds of questions when reflecting on the functionality of the education system: Do we recognize present learning needs? What is future learning? What are the competencies needed as citizens and workers? What kinds of learning spaces and environments support learning for the future? What kind of educational development practices prepare for and promote change in educational organizations?

The role of higher education as a new knowledge producer and as a leader for change is specific. However, higher education is struggling with the same challenges described above. For example, in recent years the relationship between higher education and work has been given increasing attention in higher educational policy and research. It has been claimed that higher education does not produce the competencies needed in working life (e.g. Murtonen et al. 2008; Teicher 2007). European educational policy documents (e.g. European Ministers of Higher Education 2009) call for developing higher education in which students could better acquire readiness and develop their competencies for future work and the changing labour market. The future work of experts has been described as requiring continuous learning, new professional roles, creativity, participation in various groups and networks, and working in unstable conditions (Tynjälä et al., 2006), as well as continuous identity work and agency building (Littleton & Miell 2004; Eteläpelto & Lahti 2008). It is a question of competencies which are more than just knowledge and skills.

Despite the fact that education has the central role of producing qualifications needed in working life, education is also seen as a way of constructing a successful life as an individual and citizen in society. From this viewpoint, the DeSeCo project (The Definition of Selection of Key Competencies) launched by OECD countries has defined the following key competencies which should be strengthened by education in all levels: 1) interactive use of various tools including ability to use language, knowledge and technology, 2) acting autonomously, and 3) interaction in heterogeneous groups.

Teacher education should take a leading role in educating professionals who become conscious of these challenges and have the courage and strong agency for promoting changes. Teacher education may offer the time and space for creating learning needed in the future. In this complex world individuals cannot manage alone and there is an increased need for belonging to communities (Rovai & Jordan 2004). Education should therefore be based on community building processes.

### 2. The scenario of the future school community

According to Dewey school should be able to offer genuine social living rather than cutting itself off from society. For Dewey democracy is a way of life, not a form of organizing or administering. On this basis Dewey defines as one of school's fundamental tasks the development of communality and communal life: democratic living (Dewey 1966, 94-95, 120). Even if Dewey's idea is a widely accepted starting point for schools in democracy, there have been, at least in Finland, numerous problems in creating a stronger participatory culture in schools (Feldmann-Wojtachnia et al. 2010).

We describe our scenario of the future school community in Figure 1. The basic idea of the scenario is that there has to be authentic social (civil) activities in educational environments where learners have an opportunity to participate. It is possible to achieve this kind of participation if we dare to think about time and space in a new way. This demands visionary professionals in the fields of education, architecture and technology.

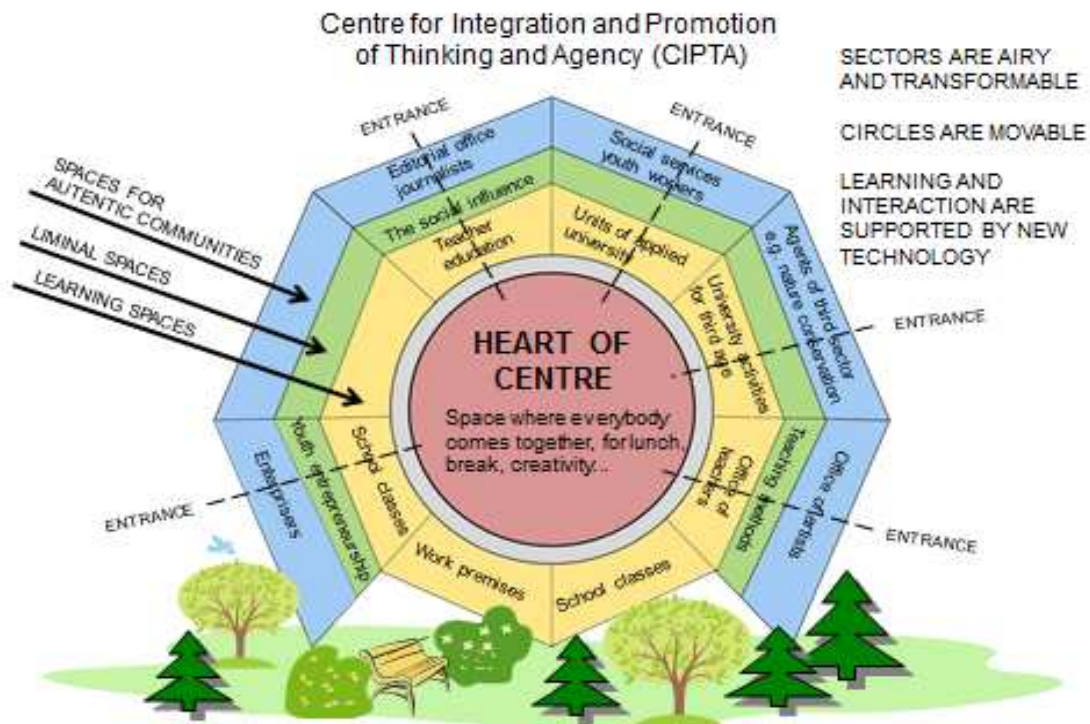


Figure 1 The future school community

The described scenario (Figure 1) is both a metaphor and a concrete model of how the future school community could be structured. In this scenario, the educational system simulates society and constructs opportunities for creativity, new community construction and agency building. This process also includes construction of networks with actors in different fields of society (spaces for authentic communities). These networks enable participation in authentic problem solving and reflection on both one's individual and group identities in safe learning spaces (liminal spaces).

### 3. Experiences of university-level pilot course

In the 2011-2012 academic year we took one step towards this scenario by developing a course entitled PedArt (7 credits) in teacher education at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The underlining idea of this course was to combine pedagogy and art in order to increase holistic welfare in the school by means of creative and interactive practices and through collaboration among class and subject teacher students (n=13), 6<sup>th</sup> grade pupils (n=22), one class teacher and two teacher educators, and artists and experts in other fields. In addition, PedArt aimed to break up the culture of teachers working alone and support sense of community. The course offered an open space for teacher students to work together in an authentic environment planning, implementing and evaluating the contents and methods needed in order to achieve the aims. The duration of the course was seven months and it was a part of a research-based multidisciplinary network project "Interactive teaching and learning" at the University of Jyväskylä.

We found that the PedArt course generated real collaborative will and practices – there was a very strong esprit de corps. In addition, when teacher students worked with children a genuine need for theoretical and practical knowledge was aroused and collaboration with experts was important.

These teacher students also experienced, as measured by a questionnaire, their own agency as strong in several dimensions of agency: their target-orientation and self-efficacy, interest and motivation to study, mastery of knowledge and skills, participation activity, equality experiences between teachers and students, and possibilities to influence their own studies showed high ratings. These results are promising: learning environment where multifaceted collaboration and student-centred activities were emphasized, students became active learners and agents in their own work. They were inspired to design new ways to solve problems and to construct knowledge as a community. Such activity and creativity are needed in future society.



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