



School Innovation Through Teacher Learning: the LLwings Project

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In a time of fast transformation and increasing complexity, education is challenged to maintain its role as a key force driving social development and economic innovation and an equalizing leverage.

Teachers play a key role in making school an effective learning environment where students are helped in developing autonomy and ownership of their learning experience - through the leverages of motivation, pleasure and understanding of the sense of what they learn – elements which prepare for a systematic engagement in lifelong learning and active citizenship once formal schooling is over.

The teaching community is thus central in the innovation of European school systems to *fit for the future*.

This is the key belief of the LLwings project (LLP programme of the EC) - aimed at supporting innovative teacher preparation in the intertwined areas of “Learning to learn” and motivation of students, recognized as cornerstones of successful school education. This includes a specific attention to teachers’ ability to value and integrate informal learning in school, in order to value students’ life-wide background and make curricula more meaningful to them.

By investigating innovative grass-roots initiatives in Europe and talking to teachers, practitioners and school stakeholders, LLwings has identified a set of teachers’ competences which relate to an innovative concept of school built around the life-wide learning experience of its students.

These competences are now the focus of an eLearning system for teachers based on collaborative learning and designed to favor joint reflection on their attitudes, beliefs and practices, being offered material and input to develop themselves their own learning path and contribute to school innovation in Europe.

Top-down imposed innovation barely works in school. Bottom-up cooperation amongst teachers is instead expected to shape viable, context-based innovation and elicit relevant elements which LLwings will bring towards national and European reform agendas in Education.

1. The challenge of school education for the 21st century

In the challenging scenario of the knowledge society and with a harsh socio-economic crisis harming Europe, education is more than ever regarded as a key force driving social development and economic innovation and an equalizing leverage.

School in particular – as the “universal” gate to citizenship and social inclusion - is now demanded to prepare people to cope with the challenges of a changing environment and increasing societal complexity, equipping pupils with autonomy and critical capacity to become at one time active and critical citizens and employable and flexible workers.

This includes a new attention to transversal competences rather than crystallized knowledge as the focus of school education. Such an approach is meant to enhance autonomy and ownership of the learning process on the part of pupils and prepare them to be autonomous and critical learners (thus citizens) rather than obedient recipient of knowledge.

Such a paradigm shift – which is gaining momentum in policy discourse – entails a new vision of school as a learning environment which favours the self-expression of the learners, in view of liberating his/her autonomy and creativity. It deals also with new conceptualizations of school - as a learning space and in its continuity with the world outside- on which new approaches to teaching/learning are expected to build in order to become more competence-oriented and relevant to the learners.

In particular motivation and engagement with one’s own learning process have been recognized as cornerstones of successful education acting as a gate to lifelong learning, by favouring ownership and understanding of the learning experience and commitment to engage in further learning.

Motivation goes through a sense of protagonism of the learning experience and requires thus strategies able to understand and fruitfully build around the life-wide background of the learners, taking into account how this affects stimulus, attention, construction of meaning for different learning groups.

Making school fit for the future is however one of the most critical challenges in the education field, as innovation needs to come to term with deeply rooted models of education, which are traditionally set around the teacher and the subjects and reproduce learning environments of the traditional type (the timetable, the classroom, transmissive approaches and traditional assessment practices).

It is a widely shared belief that teachers play a key role in any innovation process which is likely to transform school education and impact on the way people experience learning at an early stage in life and are prepared for lifelong learning. Their own attitudes and competences are thus key to leverage transformation in school, starting from their daily practice in the classroom to bring forwards system change.

LLWings - *helping teachers in building wings for lifelong learning for their students* – is a 3 years european project – which explicitly addresses school teachers (and staff) in order to equip them with advanced competences to make learning meaningful for students and favour their autonomy as learners and citizens.



The LLWings consortium believes that teachers play a key role in making school an effective learning environment where students are helped in developing autonomy and ownership of their learning experience - through the leverages of motivation, pleasure and understanding of the sense of what they learn – elements which prepare for a systematic engagement in lifelong learning and active citizenship once formal schooling is over.

With this belief, LLWings focuses on introducing new elements for teacher preparation - in the form of innovative teacher competences to be developed in an eLearning platform – conducive to teaching practices (and attitude) more focused on learning to learn and motivation of students as recognized cornerstones of successful school education. This includes a specific attention to teachers' ability to value and integrate informal learning in school education, in order to value students life-wide background and make curricula more meaningful to them.

2. Teacher Learning as a way to school innovation: the LLwings results

During the first project year, LLWings has mainly focused its work on intensive research activity addressing the current status of school education and teacher training systems in Europe and investigating innovative practices and initiatives from which to learn in order to produce - through transnational research and comparative analysis - valuable and grounded findings forming the basis of its main outcomes: the eLearning system with the training modules for teachers – based on the teacher competences identified – which will be piloted over the next year.

2.1 Understanding current needs in Europe

A preliminary effort of the project has been dedicated at investigating current teacher training provision in Europe, so to identify as to what extent (and how) European education systems value learning to learn and motivation of students, and how they translate this commitment in the education and training of their teaching bodies. This work ended up in five country reports (Italy, France, Greece, Finland and Spain) and a EU level report providing the European perspective on school transformation and innovation in teacher education.

European countries with highly different education systems and cultural backgrounds are working to align themselves to the European agenda for Education, with its focus on key competence development in school and motivation of students as ways to raise active (and employable) citizens and fight social exclusion. This invests also teacher education and training, which in several countries is undergoing a comprehensive reform or is the object of a specific innovation effort. In this move towards common goals, several aspects - which are not only of a pedagogical nature - affects the process of innovating school systems (and of putting more focus on learning to learn and motivation of students)

What seems quite common to the country investigated is a certain degree of discrepancy between policy discourse and official documents provision and innovation capacity in daily practice. Not really surprisingly, a “scalability” problem seems to affect education systems where a lot has been done at the grass-root level (innovative practices, highly motivated teachers, successful teacher training initiatives) though with a difficulty in mainstreaming and up-scaling innovation in the whole system (hereby failing to ensure also “equality in excellence”).

Overall, the LLwings concepts enjoy a general consensus in the current policy discourse and in the reflection of practitioners, and much is on the way to make them explicit foci of school education and curricula (thanks to the contribution and pressure exerted by the EU policy in the field). A lot is also being done, since far a longer time, in terms of grass-root initiatives at both level of innovating school practices and providing effective occasions of teacher training to support the former. These initiatives are usually based on a concept of proximity and base their success on the capacity to identify and meet local needs and diversify strategies accordingly.

Adapting timely to changing environments and needs is however one of the hardest challenge for education systems. In that respect new governance paradigms need to be sought in the mid-term to ensure that the relevant objectives in school and teacher education can be met evenly on the territory but avoiding that top down approaches hamper necessary diversification and exclude stakeholders from designing innovation [1].

2.2 Key teacher competences for learning to learn and motivation: the LLwings framework and approach

Whilst the work above addressed the “institutional picture”, a specific effort has been devoted by the project consortium at identifying and investigating interesting initiatives and grass root experiences in Europe in order to learn from successful practices of school education and teacher training what is essential to make school a better place for learning.

The analysis of a wide set of innovative experiences in Europe – including those from the “informal” environments – has been essential to unveil which key teacher competences are behind successful stories and how they should be better developed to ensure authentic change in teacher attitude and beliefs, able to impact in everyday school practice.

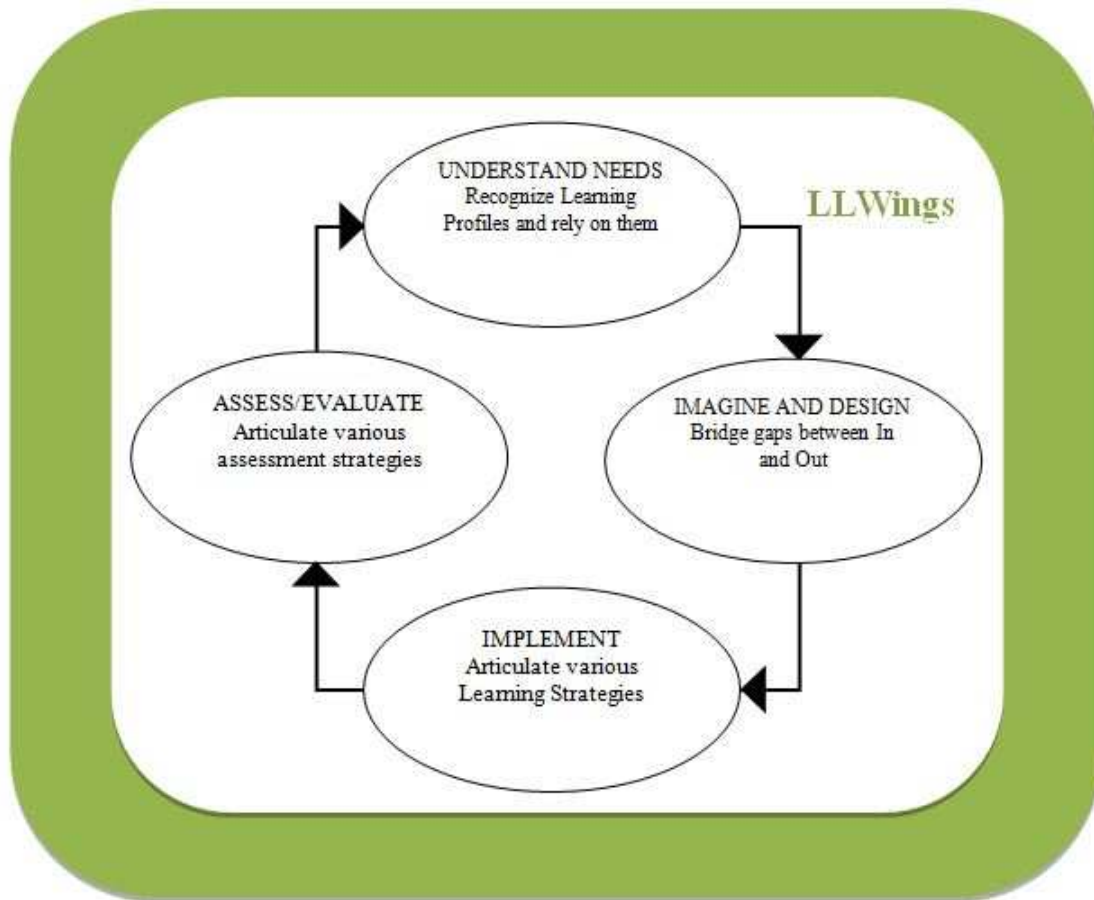
By integrating its research results, the LLwings consortium has identified a group of four teacher competences in the area of students' motivation and support to learning skills development. The LLwings teacher competence framework maps teacher competences around the loop of the “teaching life-cycle”, including four key phases: (i) identification of needs; (ii) design; (iii) implement; (iv) assess/evaluate.

For each of these phases, LLWings has identified a set of competences which are specifically relevant for the objectives of developing learning to learn skills in students and enhance their motivation, valuing the informal learning dimension. These set of four competences – showed in the picture below - are related to the concept of



“articulation capacity”, stemming for the passage from a standardized school model to one which is built around the learner in continuity with its life-wide learning experience and which entails a change in the traditional role of the teacher and related self-perception [2]

Figure 1 LLWings Competence Framework



The competences identified are the object of a set of learning modules for teachers which the consortium is now developing and which will be a key component of the LLwings learning platform for teachers.

The latter is conceived as an open environment where teachers will be able to manage their own learning process "à la carte" and act as autonomous reflective practitioners to enlarge their competence in the field of students motivation and learning to learn by means of reflection and collaboration with peers.

The learning process is thus based mainly on collaborative learning and exchange among teachers with a set of training modules for individual learning as a complementary minor dimension, so to best value the collaborative process and offer a "resource hub" for individual and professional development rather than an over-structured training path.

It is in the belief of the project that teachers involvement in designing the process of change in school education (including their own role) is a *conditio sine qua non* for innovation to take place in school and become viable as built around teacher learning and commitment.

The "Learning to Learn" imperative has recently become a refraining slogan of education policy and teachers are considered as key actors in such process, as those who shall understand, endorse and practice change in the classroom. However any change in school which is imposed from top-down requiring teachers to change without involving them into imagining and designing transformation seems to lose chances of success. LLwings supports teacher autonomous learning and bottom up cooperation as the way to shape viable, context-based innovation in school and as a model to support transformation in education systems.

References

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