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EDU/CERI/CD(2009)11

Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

19-Feb-2009

English - Or. English

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION
CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (CERI) GOVERNING BOARD**

INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: THE EMPIRICAL STRAND

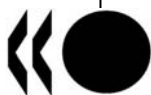
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JT03259941

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INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: THE EMPIRICAL STRAND

1. Introduction

The OECD/CERI *Innovative Learning Environments* (ILE) project is focused on how people learn and under which conditions and dynamics they can learn better. It is identifying inspiring practice to help enrich mainstream education for children and young people. The project aims to inform educational reform by generating evidence from the learning sciences and providing innovative examples from the field with which to help the positive transformation of teaching and learning practices in today's schools.¹

This Note outlines the aims, components and participation in the "Empirical Strand". This is gathering and analysing concrete cases of innovative learning environments – their processes and contexts as well as how they influence learning outcomes and the conditions of their sustainability and dissemination. This is going on in parallel with, and drawing from, the "Analytical Strand" – which is generating a detailed analysis of the current state of the knowledge on learning. The analytical work stands as of value in its own right and is serving to inform the questions and instruments of the Empirical Strand. These two strands will then feed into a deeper reflection on how new forms of learning environment can be more widely generalised, connecting this to policy experiences, conditions and already-existing policy approaches to fostering effective learning environments - the "Policy Strand".

Hence, the project has been designed so that each element – innovation, research, and policy – will closely inform the others. For instance, the research tools used for the project's Inventory and the Observatory (defined below) are being based on key findings of the learning sciences as brought together in the analytical work; these together in turn will help launch the policy reflection. All three elements will feature in the programme of the main international event on ILE in 2009, in Norway at the beginning of September. All participating systems will be invited to take part.

This Note is intended to guide those countries/regions/networks which are already participating in the ILE project or which are considering joining (it replaces an earlier note [EDU/CERI/CD/RD(2008)6]). At the end of the paper there is an outline calendar for the project in 2009. The Annex reproduces the initial proforma template for the submission of cases of innovative learning environments.

2. What are Innovative Learning Environments?

Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs) are defined by CERI as settings in which all the following conditions are met:

- There is a **common approach to the content and organisation of learning at the micro level** by those with pedagogical and leadership responsibilities within these learning environments, *i.e.* they have a distinctive approach to the ways that learners and teaching resources, mediated by different 'technologies' and facilities, inter-relate.

¹ After an exploratory phase with Mexico in the lead, this project was agreed by the CERI Governing Board towards the end of 2007, with a first international meeting in Helsinki 1 October 2008 and its first OECD publication "Innovating to Learn, Learning to Innovate" which came out shortly after.

- They are intentional departures from the large body of general or vocational education in their specific aims and organisation of learning, in order to respond better to the needs of the learners they are aimed at – *i.e.* they are **innovative**.
- They aim at a **broad set of the learning and educational needs of the learners**, rather than catering for very specific types of knowledge or capabilities², and they explicitly address the range of cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-emotional learner development whatever their specific curriculum focus.
- They are learning organisations, formally or informally **evaluating their own practice** for continual improvement.

In addition, for the purposes of this project, ILEs are defined as settings which:

- **Serve the learning needs of children and adolescents** (approximately aged 3 to 19 or some band within that): they may cater exclusively for young people within this age range or for mixed-age groups where either younger children or older adults are also involved.
- They have **lessons for mainstream provision**: they do not depend on such high fees or generous resourcing that they are only relevant for the very wealthy.
- Though defined in terms of learning and teaching at the micro level, they are not so small-scale as to depend on the commitment of one person or a very tiny group - they **rely on more than the contribution of a specific individual(s)**.

Two further clarifications can usefully be made. First, the focus and terminology is deliberately on learning environments for school-age learners, **rather than “innovative schools”**, to emphasise that the innovations we are interested in are at the micro level of teaching and learning. We recognise that many of these will in fact be found within schools or networks of schools. However: i) they will not necessarily all be found in mainstream education but also in learning centres, community- or ICT-based programmes, enterprises, specialist academies for the arts or sport etc.; ii) examples of schools which are innovating in their management or resource use may be maintaining traditional teaching and learning relationships and so would not qualify.

Second, though the ILEs we are interested in address the broad educational needs of the learners within them, they do not necessarily aim at, nor are relevant for, all school-age learners. Learning settings for **specific subgroups** of students (*e.g.* indigenous/native learners, migrants, the gifted or those with learning difficulties) often provide highly distinctive learning environments which are especially effective at meeting the needs of these groups. These cases come within our sphere of interest: they aim at important sub-groups of the school-age population and they are especially relevant when they work in ways that are potentially transferable or adaptable for other groups of students.

3. The Project Fieldwork – The Empirical Strand

This paper is primarily about the empirical strand of CERI/OECD Innovative Learning Environments project. The aim of this key element of the project is to identify and then analyse a number of international

² For example, a learning centre intensively using drama throughout its curriculum is relevant for this project in a way in which a theatre club would not be.

examples of innovative learning environments and to stimulate a discussion of their potential to enrich mainstream education in OECD countries.

As explained in the following sections, the **empirical strand** will identify concrete examples of innovative learning environments from OECD countries and (when possible and relevant) from other places too. Initially, there will be a broad compilation of cases (the “**Universe**” of ILEs). Those cases with particular interest will be reported in more depth and then constitute the “**Inventory**”. There is no fixed number set in advance for these as eventual numbers will depend on the number of active partners in the project and success in identifying good ILE examples. Additionally, 10 to 12 cases will be selected by the project team for detailed case-study analysis: the “**Observatory**”. The steering team at CERI will strive to include a diverse range of innovative learning environments in both the Inventory and the Observatory.

3.1. *The ILE Universe*

Not all cases proposed by participating systems, or suggested by other networks or organisations, or identified by the project team will enter the Universe: in order to be relevant, the cases must all as a minimum fit the criteria outlined above and they must be able to show this by providing a profile description corresponding to the proforma template, especially regarding the organisation of learning.

Only ILEs that can convincingly describe their own learning arrangements and why these are innovative will become members of the project pool: the ILE Universe. It is from this pool that the Inventory and the Observatory will be selected as described below. Participating countries, regions and networks are requested to submit all the cases which they believe meet the definitions and criteria outlined in Section 2. Alongside this, the project team will be looking out individual ILE cases, where these are not being sponsored by a particular authority or organisation, most obviously (but not only) in countries which are not active in the project. It is expected that these will be 3-5 pages in length.

For some of the proposed cases, acquiring even the basic initial template information will take time and involve iterative communication in order satisfactorily to complete the template. Hence, building the Universe will run at least through 2009, and possibly continue into 2010. It will not be necessary to have completed putting together this full project pool of cases before work on the Inventory and Observatory can begin. Additional candidates to add to the ILE Universe can be considered even in the later stages of implementing the Empirical Strand. We anticipate that upwards of 200 cases will eventually be included.

3.2. *The ILE Inventory*

The core set of ILE cases for more detailed description will constitute the Inventory. These meet all the criteria characterising an innovative learning environment as outlined above and they are of particular interest in the innovative approaches to learning adopted; going further, some will be notable in their success in meeting different aims relating to learner engagement, inclusion, and the quality of learning outcomes. They will provide the core detailed information on innovative approaches to learning that will inform the whole project; these cases will also be used for further analysis in the Policy Strand of the work, and a small number will become part of the Observatory (see below). The information on these ILEs will be published on line, and they will also provide the core material for a publication in 2010 analysing different forms of innovative learning environments, their approaches and dynamics.

The project team will consider the ILE cases in the Universe and select those that meet these criteria; it will communicate with the participating countries/regions/networks before finalising that choice.

A total number of 40 to 50 cases to be part of the Inventory has been suggested, but this remains only broadly indicative. As new partners join the project in 2009, they too will bring their own new ILE candidates to be part of the Inventory and even those systems already participating may wish to propose

new cases after the initial project deadlines for submissions. At least one ILE per participating system will become part of the Inventory and possibly several, depending on the fit between those identified in countries and the criteria outlined in Section 2.

Additional data will be gathered for the cases chosen to be included in the Inventory compared with the proforma information for the initial submission of cases constituting the “ILE Universe”. There will be a separate instrument for putting together the more detailed case descriptions, with guidelines of what should be included and how this information can be collected. Hence, the cases selected for inclusion in the Inventory will call for:

- A more detailed description, following a standard framework of questions. These may be 7-10 pages in length (but it is impossible to specify this precisely in advance).
- Where available, additional documentation should be supplied on the ILE case to illustrate its philosophy and functioning (e.g. films, school programmes, web pages, brochures/newsletters, accountability reports, self- and external evaluation data).

Responsibility for putting together this Inventory information, once the case has been selected, will be in the first instance with the **participating system** (country/region/network) putting it forward. Where necessary, translations of additional documentation should be supplied. It is expected that this will be an iterative process and involve the country-based team, the OECD/CERI team, and the case itself.

The project team will be continually alert to suggestions for additional ILE cases to add to the Universe, most obviously in countries other than those actively participating in the project. Where these seem to hold particular interest, they will be pursued with a view to compiling the additional information required so that these might enter the Inventory. Experts and/or Governing Board members in that country may be asked to corroborate information where required.

As the Inventory becomes established, we intend to use it further as the basis for an analysis of the policy conditions under which innovative learning environments exist, develop and disseminate. This will make an important contribution to Policy Strand, and will draw on document analysis and data gathered by means of a survey questionnaire to be developed. The analysis of these survey data will be used to provide a broader understanding of the context and potential of innovative learning environments to be implemented on a wider scale, addressing such questions as:

- What makes the setting “innovative”? How did it become “innovative”?
- What kinds of policy support/barriers define the history and daily practice of the ILEs?
- To what extent does it make use of research findings? Of evaluation results?
- To what extent do the innovators plan for the broader dissemination of their knowledge? Would broader dissemination be possible/suitable? Under which conditions/costs?

Participating systems will be asked to prepare short background notes on policy context as input to this survey analysis and to the Policy Strand.

3.3. *The ILE Observatory*

The Inventory of cases, proposed from diverse sources and selected by the project team as good examples of ILEs, will provide the basis for the more in-depth case study analysis of the Observatory.

These will permit the detailed analysis of learning processes at the micro-level. As far as possible they will seek to relate innovations in learning content and organisation to outcomes. They will also permit the more detailed charting of context and conditions. The horizontal analysis of all Observatory cases will be published (whether in the same volume as the Inventory analysis or separately has yet to be determined).

A maximum of 10 - 12 cases will constitute the Observatory. Hence, they will not be drawn from all participating systems but instead will be selected according to a number of criteria – for example, their intrinsic interest as innovative learning environments; the spread and diversity of the cases available for in-depth study; the presence of rich evaluation data and research; as well, of course, as the willingness of the ILE to experience the additional engagement implied by the case study methodology.

These cases of innovative learning environments will be examined through a mixed-methods approach and will draw on multiple sources of evidence. Teams of two to three experts (at least one national and one international) will conduct the field work in each case. A case study protocol containing field procedures and questions to guide data collection will be developed to provide a common framework for all the case studies. It is intended to begin with a pilot(s) that will permit the refinement of the instruments and methodology, with a view to conducting the case studies between the latter part of 2009 and into 2010.

The data collection will begin with an examination of existing documents about the selected innovative learning environment. Participant observations during the field visits will help to observe specific behaviour patterns and characteristics. Interviews will be conducted with leaders, teachers, facilitators, students, parents and community partners to get multiple perspectives. Teachers/facilitators, administrators and students, for instance, will give detailed insights into the “organisation of learning”, *e.g.* curricula, teaching and learning methods, grouping and the timing of learning, use of technology, and assessments. The studies will use “thick descriptions” to allow for a detailed understanding of the innovative learning processes taking place. After this is completed in all cases, a secondary analysis of the full Observatory set will be conducted to identify their similarities and common features.

The case studies will also analyse “context variables”, such as the influence of policy, community or families. They will closely examine the internal operations of each innovative learning environment and will look at their geographical, cultural, organizational and historical contexts. Persons in leadership positions, for example, will be asked about institutional context variables, such as local or national regulations, financial resources, human resources, material resources, geographical conditions and cultural influences. The survey questionnaire used for the Inventory cases will also be applied to enrich the detailed case studies with information on policy conditions under which learning takes place.

3.4. *In summary*

In summary, the project's empirical strand will have:

- A **Universe** of numerous profiles of ILEs gathered from different sources and countries, which meet the criteria for inclusion and which are able to furnish basic information according to the proforma template (see Annex).
- An **Inventory** with a more limited number - eventually 35-70 – with more detailed information, especially regarding the organisation of learning and how this is innovative within its own system. These will be drawn from each participating country/region/network, and will be supplemented by others identified by the project team. Further analysis of the policy context of the Inventory cases will subsequently be conducted.
- An **Observatory** of 10-12 cases for in-depth multi-method case study analysis, focusing on the micro-processes of learning and its organisation, relationships with outcomes, and wider context.

4. **Participation in the Project**

The aim of the Innovative Learning Environments project, especially in its Empirical Strand, is to identify the most interesting cases of ILEs and to understand them thoroughly within the terms defined above. This means casting the net widely. The project depends on the very active participation of those countries or regions/states which join, but it also depends on reaching out to other networks or organisations which are innovating in 21st century learning activities. It even means looking out individual ILE cases where these are not being sponsored by a particular authority or organisation, most obviously (but not only) in countries which are not active in the project.

While other organisations and innovations may thus be associated with the project, the core participation will be by countries or regions/states, where there is responsibility for providing education. It is expected that this participation will be **active and on-going**; without this, the ILE project will not enjoy the necessary contact with innovation and expertise on the ground. To begin with, this means providing basic project information and engagement: **finding the most interesting, relevant examples** of ILEs within the jurisdiction or network (and from elsewhere where these are known); **nominating experts** and providing papers, relevant studies, etc.; **participating in the international meetings** (probably 3 such meetings until the end of 2010).

Beyond this basic input, a more active role is required beyond identifying cases, coordinators, and experts. Participation means:

- **Ensuring completion of the proformas for nomination of ILEs** to the basic Universe of cases, initially in accordance with project deadlines in early 2009 but also subsequently if new cases arise which deserve the project's attention. This may be an iterative process if initial reporting of the ILE cases is incomplete;
- **Taking lead responsibility for describing those cases within its jurisdiction which have been identified to join the Inventory**, using the instruments and guidelines to be distributed separately;
- Where an Inventory ILE has been identified by the project as one of the small number of case studies for the **Observatory, additional support would be highly appreciated** (see below);

- As the project moves into the Policy Strand (not the main subject of this paper), the participating countries/regions will be asked to prepare a **background policy note** to contribute to interpreting the context of their ILEs;
- At subsequent stages, a participating country/region may wish to organise **its own discussion and dissemination events**, with the participation of the OECD and possibly other jurisdictions within the project.

A participating system in the ILE project is thus: *engaging with international experts, innovators and reformers who are similarly in search of 21st century learning arrangements. It means to address innovations in one's own system and in others, and to engage with leading researchers with a shared focus on re-shaping schooling. It will mean to help shape the reform agenda in one's own system by bringing into play a rich set of international findings and networks.*

To participate in the Innovative Learning Environments project does not involve making a direct financial contribution to the OECD, unless the country, region or organisation wishes to play a leading role (below). However, it is expected to cover the costs of engagement – bringing together the necessary expertise in their own system, preparation of documents, and participation in the main international seminars and meetings.

If an ILE case from a participating country/region is selected to be part of the Observatory, it is hoped that the country will also help to organise and finance part of the field work. The cost for each participating country/region might include local travel, accommodation and meals of the expert teams and, if necessary, interpretation during the field visits. Details of funding needs will be discussed on a case-by-case basis.

Those countries which would like to play a **lead role** beyond these forms of participation just described may do so by hosting certain events, such as advisory group meetings or conferences, or they may make a direct contribution to the international overhead costs of the project. These will be warmly welcomed and will allow the contributing system to be internationally visible as taking a lead in this key area of reform.

5. Project timing

Timeline for 2009	
October 2008 - February 2009	<p>Systematic efforts to encourage project participation, compile ILE cases, develop instruments, and identify funding sources</p> <p>First submissions of ILE cases by project participants, initial visits to participating systems.</p>
March – May 2009	<p>Meetings of steering team (CERI plus small group of experts) to consider cases and instruments, and review Analytical Strand (March and May).</p> <p>Feedback to participating systems on selection to Inventory with guidelines for information reporting.</p> <p>Progress presented to CERI Governing Board (April 20-21).</p> <p>Further cases identified and submitted; further visits to participating systems; pilot Observatory case identified.</p> <p>Active pursuit of supplementary project funding</p>
June-August 2009	<p>Completion of the Analytical Report</p> <p>Consolidation of Inventory</p> <p>Papers prepared for Norway conference</p>
September 2009	<p>Major project meeting (Norway) with participating countries/regions/networks and research reviewers and experts, with first discussion of the Policy Strand.</p> <p>Possible second Observatory Pilot</p>
Autumn/Winter 2009	<p>Inventory cases published on-line</p> <p>Observatory launched</p> <p>Main ILE Analytical Report on Learning Principles published</p>
2010	<p>Completion of on-going analyses, plus reports, seminars, conferences.</p>

**ANNEX
TEMPLATE FOR POTENTIAL “ILE UNIVERSE” CASES**

Name of the Innovative Learning Environment (ILE):

Location/Address//Website (if available):

ILE submitted by:

Questions answered by:

- A. A leader of this case
- B. A teachers/facilitator of this case
- C. A students/learner or family related to this case
- D. Someone from the local, regional or national education authorities
- E. Others (Please specify)

Rationale: Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

Background: Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

Learning Aims/Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE: What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners’ social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

Learners: Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

Teachers/Facilitators: Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

Organisation of Learning in the ILE: How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Learning Context: In which contexts does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how? Are parents involved?

Funding: How is it funded?

Outcomes Evidence and Assessment: Is there information regarding the learning outcomes achieved, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes, and what does this cover? How is learning assessed?