SUPPORTING THE wEak-LEARNER
IN E-LEARNING CULTURES

Jan Gejel, The Social and Health Care School Aarhus Denmark

A personal approach...

This is not a scientific paper. It is more like a personal approach to some very complex problems: how to deal with the fact, that a very large part of the European population have no wish at all to reenter the fields of (e-)learning.

The suggestions presented in this paper are very much based on the inspiration from the work of Seymour Papert, MIT Media Lab US, and from the global youth inclusion project *Computer Clubhouse Network*, launched by MIT Media Lab some ten years ago.

Lifelong learning for *everybody*?

We all know the visions about lifelong learning and about the information society for *all*. We have now come to a point, where we pose the question about the *quality* of e-learning. Just like we pose the question of the *quality of life*. We do that because these qualities are not self-evident.

In the next couple of years we will experience some serious problems about the quality of e-learning in relation to large groups of the population. It is a group *we* would like to *include* in the information society, which means that *we* would like to get *them* engaged in lifelong learning.

This very large group of the European population consists of people from 15 to 70 years of age with poor educational backgrounds, dropout problems, negative school experience and resistance against or unability to work with informational knowledge.

We use several names for different parts of this population: the low educated, the excluded, the dropouts, the underserved and so on. What characterizes the group as a whole might be *the lack of personal learning competencies and the lack of interest in learning*. They could, from *our* point of view, be called *weak learners.*

Now this group is very complex: young drug addicts, midaged busdrivers, unemployed immigrants and a lot of people suffering from negative classroom experience. The important thing here to reflect on is the mental model, that defines what *learning weakness is all about* – and thus what learning is all about.

It is quite easy to see, that the mental model, responsible for these judgements, is the classic formal knowledge model: knowledge is about abstract thinking and the ability to synthesize the elements of experience into the abstract language of theory.

<u>In fact the apparent lack of a interest in learning is perhaps a consequence of a number of original abstract knowledge judgements based on the classroom model.</u>

Let us, then, try to describe this *weak learner* in general – knowing that they are of course very different indeed.

The "weak" learner

The most important statement about these "nonlearnes" might be, that they think and act in spoken language, that this language is based on a narrative discourse and that the point of views are personal and subjective.

These learners avoid the written language and the abstract, formal scientific and objective discourse, that is the ideal of the modern educational model.

When they share their experience with other people, they prefer to talk about them face to face and they communicate the content in the form of telling stories – very personal stories and very realistic stories.

They do not – as does the academic – synthesize the experience to some abstract structure of objective and general value. And they certainly do not write a paper about this experience.

As you can see – this learning or mental style is not exactly what e-learning is about. But these spoken language competencies are extremely important, when you as a social worker meet an alcoholic in his home during a crisis. Because the alcoholic tells stories as well – the alcoholic *is* a story...

The resistance against abstract thinking is not a conscious choice. It is a result of a lifetime – and a result of a rendez vous with a classroom, that resulted in a lack of self-esteem, in anxiety, learning blockages and even social hatred.

The cultures of ICT and e-learning

Now let us on the other hand try to describe the cultures of computerbased learning.

Working with computers is in itself a very abstract process – regardless of the content of the work being done. No matter how creative the content of the work might be, computer work is a uniform and very limited form of activity based on a very limited use of the person as a whole. So computerwork as a *form* looks more like studying books, than driving a bus or talking to an alcoholic.

And even the content processes are abstract: they demand e very high form of formal logic, obeying rules and working in concise, metaphorical structures. Apart from a few illustrations, often just being produced to give the interface a slight touch of aestethics or entertainment, computer work is fundamentally searching, reading and writing texts. And very often writing to a large and unknown audience - so you must be good at spelling and expressing yourself, if you deliver content to a website or participate in an online forum!

Now, we might argue that the most important element in online learning is the *dialogue.* But for the low educated the dialogue is abstract: it is performed in written language and it is very slow and formal compared to the live dialogue between people in "real life situations".

The people behind the online dialogue are reduced to the messages, they post to the conference.

Again: this might be appropriate for a student studying roman history or math, but it is less appropriate for those "students", who in a few month will be thrown into the jungle of the dark side of modern culture.

And even within a very successful online dialogue, you're supposed to talk about the topics of the course – not about yourself. You are supposed to be more and more objective during the educational process.

So compared to the real life work of many of these "weak learners" computerbased learning has a rather sterile reputation: abstractness, formalism, textbased, informational, systematic, technical and so on.

<u>Let me conclude here, that e-learning in fact should make things worse for these "weak" learners. It seems to be exactly the opposite of what they really need. Despite the big differences between the classroom and the virtual rooms, these nonlearners are facing exactly the same form of abstract discourse in the e-learning environments as they experienced in the classroom.</u>

From weak learners to strong e-learners?

Why do we bother, then? Why not leave these unsuccessful learners to the shadows of the classroom and the pseudodrama of their personal tales. And to their passive media consumption – and let the higher educational student benefit from the online goldmines of e-knowledge?

There is three reasons for not doing so. A political, a social and an educational.

The political and social reasons are evident: a democratic society cannot accept to leave one third of the population to media illiteracy. Even the most cynical politician knows, that this would lead to economic and social disaster.

The interesting issue in this context, though, is the educational reasons for not giving up on these groups of nonabstract learners.

We just stated, that these people suffer from a lot of negative experience from the classroom and from the traditional educational system in general. So they have got nothing to loose with e-learning, one might argue.

The truth is, that there is a lot of *potential* in computerbased learning – and this is also true for the groups of nonabstract learners.

The problem is to understand what kind of qualities we are talking about in relation to these groups. And that brings us into the center of out topic: *how do we support these nonlearners in the e-learning environments*?

And furthermore the problem is to *reflect on our own mental models*, deeply rooted in the formal-abstract discourse, so that we can learn to design e-learning environments, that support the narrative, personal and practical oriented learning styles. And this is why I'm rather critical towards debates based on the experience of e-learning in higher education. *The experience of the nonabstract learning styles must be represented and acknowledged within the e-learning communities*.

Now, let us turn to some of the creative potential of the e-elearning environment.

Design elements for nonabstract e-learning environments

Let us establish some interesting relations between the learning needs of these groups and the potentials of e-learning.

First of all this group of learners need a mixed learning space. They need what we often call *blended learning*. They need to work with practical problems and they need a lot of face to face dialogue. So we must create models of blended learning, learning in diversity, alternating processes integrating on campus, on the job and online learning. We must learn to create models, that integrate the online environments in a fundamentally action based learning space.

We have discovered that many of these learners, after a certain hesitation and resistance, felt personally supported by the mentoring within the online dialogue. They did not like to expose themselves to large numbers of unknown online readers, but after some time they enjoyed the privacy and intimacy of the online dialogue with the mentor, teacher or e few members of the online group.

So the problems of written language was transformed into the possibilities of a private written dialogue, within which the learner felt safe and slowly began to engage in depth-reflections – not just in relation to the content of the course, but also in relation to the more personal attitudes towards learning.

So in this case the feelings of shyness and performance anxiety from the classroom was successfully exchanged with the experience of safety and privacy within the online dialogues.

These learners prefer storytelling to information and formal thinking. So we should learn to deconstruct our own academic models and try to design narrative based learning processes.

In fact one could say, that these learners prefer *art* to *science*. They tell stories about their life and they see a lot of movies, based on visual narrativity.

One of the great and very naiv misunderstandings here would be to conclude, that these learners should look at pictures instead of reading texts. Just like small children. This won't do, because the text is the most important communicator of meaning in our culture. The problem lies elsewhere. The problem is the *nature* of the text, not the text in itself: does the text work in abstract formal language, or is the text organized as a story with a storyteller or a character to identify with? And furthermore: is the learner supposed to write abstract papers or can the learner write a story, mixing personal experiences and narrative organized experience?

There is knowledge in a novel, just as there is knowledge in a scientific magazine.

The knowledge in the novel is closely connected to personal emotions and experience, to life, and in fact therefore *closer* to life.

What kind of knowledge is needed to work with an alcoholic?

As Habermas put it some years ago: in formal abstract thinking the *Systemwelt* prevails over the *Lebenswelt* and forces its logics upon it. In the narrative language it is quite the opposite. So the differences between the abstract formal and the narrative learning style are enormous.

The personal approach is important in yet another way. The technology of ICT is often said to be too difficult or too unhuman. But giving room for the personal approaches in the learning processes, it often appears, that these nonabstract learners have some talent or gift, they have been hiding for some time. Very often it is possible to connect these talents to creative computerwork and very often this is the most successful way to develop the necessary personal ICT competencies. The personal interest and the personal need creates the will to learn. This kind of creative ICT training works much better than the traditional *abstract* ICT courses.

We should also encourage the learners to take part in the production of learning material, rather than letting them consume readymade and in a certain sense abstract products.

But, unfortunately, the e-learning environments are not developing in this direction. This is why it is so important to discuss, what *quality* really means for these populations groups.

Leaving the formalism and abstractness of the ICT training

These learning principles have major consequences for the design of the ICT training for these groups. Many of the weak learners have never used a computer, most of them are unexperienced learners and many of them believe that they will never learn to work with ICT. And they are trying to cover up their low self-confidens by announcing their total lack of interest in computer work. At this point we must hesitate. A lot of young dropouts are very skilled in computerwork – but they are indeed very poor learners. So the ability to use computers do not necessarily imply the ability to learn.

This is important, because the main purpose of the courses and activities in e-learning is about *learning competencies* – not ICT competencies.

Therefore I believe that we must focus on the learning competencies of these learners, not the computer competencies.

That is why I believe, that we should avoid the isolated ICT training and integrate the ICT training in the professional courses – and allow the learners to make a personal approach to the computer tools.

When the learners feel the desire to learn to master some digital tool, we must support them in learning to work with that specific tool. This means that we should design very flexible courses – but isn't that what its all about: flexibility, personal approaches and differentiation?

There is, I believe, another misunderstanding here:

The defensive response to these learners' poor ICT skills has often been this: give them the most simple tools and give them some simplified LMS-platform with a lot of automatic facilities. Then they just have to learn a limited number of simple actions and procedures. *Perhaps we could even free them from the burden of learning...*

This will only confirm their feeling of being second class learners and citizens and this attitude will most certainly destroy the small amount of learning desire, still present in these classroom haunted people.

I think we should choose a much more offensive answer to the development of ICT competencies.

If we create a learning environment with a lot of flexibility and we allow the learners to find their own way around the computer tools, then we do not need to use the defensive strategies. Give them good and creative tools, and let them enjoy the growing self-esteem, that is a consequence of the new mastering skills. If they hate graphics and love to build databases, then let them do so and support them all the way. And offer them the best professional tool.

Now let us leave this very narrative discourse of mine and turn to a more systematic answer to the question: *what is quality in e-learning about for these learners and how should we support them?*

Quality principles for the design of e-learning environments for low educated or nonabstract learners

Let me try to be pragmatic and present a list of important issues about the meaning of *quality* in supporting the so-called weak learner. I will state these principles in such a straightforward way, that they can be used for further discussions:

- We support the wEak-LEARNER by establishing online environments, that allows the presence of the personal and emotial discourse; this is necessary if these learners should develop a fundamental will to and desire for learning
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by building online dialogues based on narrative and not on the formal informational discourse
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by developing privat and safe online rooms, in which these learners slowly can build up there self-confidens in close dialogue with a mentor, teacher or small online group
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by avoiding to put them in situations of exposure; this would keep the learners from experiencing that very satisfaction of successful self-expression, that is so important to their e-learning competencies
 - We support the wEak-LEARNER by establishing online environments, that avoids the culture of the sterile, technical and alienating internetsystems; we should create human and realistic online scenes, in which the participants are allowed and invited to make mistakes
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by creating learning processes very close to their professional and personal life, instead of creating processes based on abstract and formal knowledge
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by integrating the ICT training in subjective meaningful learning processes, instead of isolating the ICT training into special and therefore abstract courses

- We support the wEak-LEARNER by integrating the development of <u>personal information society competencies</u> whereever it is possible: the competencies to *include themselves* is far more important than their *being included by us*
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by inviting and inspiring them to become active users of the different media, instead of passive consumers: we should not make the mistake of keeping them from *difficult tools and processes*; this will only confirm their lack of self-esteem; they should be allowed the time and space to explore tools and processes, they become personal interested in; *technological fluency* is the overall goal
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by letting them <u>take part</u> in the production of educational material, websites and other online resources, instead of presenting them for readymade objects
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by inviting them to work with <u>design </u>processes to develop their understanding and active use of the diversity of expression and media
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by integrating small and easy accessible online notebooks or logbooks and inspire them to write stories from their job, course activities or personal life; the most important mentor activity is to develop this ongoing commenting into <u>reflections</u>
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by avoiding traditional pedagogic approaches; in a way e-learning means <u>the end of the traditional concept of pedagogy</u>, that is strictly linked to classroom teaching; the online mentor should be *co-operating* with these e-learners instead of *teaching them*
- We support the wEak-LEARNER by establishing <u>blended learning</u> environments, because the personal and emotional approach is crucial to these groups of learners; thus we should allow time and money for a number of on campus workshops during the courses
- Finally we support the wEak-LEARNER by working with the following <u>threefold displacement</u>, that should be build into the online courses for these target groups: from <u>formal</u> text to <u>narrative</u> text, from <u>text</u> to <u>design</u>
- and from <u>computer work</u> to <u>real life actions</u>.

The learning of learning...

The majority of e-learning environments are designed for average learners or further education learners.

The so-called wEak-LEARNERS, however, must *learn to learn and learn to e-learn at the same time*.

The e-learning environments designed for immigrants, young drop-outs, people with very little educational experience, just to mention some of the population groups with special learning needs, should be able to evoke the learning desire of these people. Make them wish to learn.

Mainstream e-learning environments will not be able to produce these specific motivational effects.

The design of e-learning for the wEak LEARNERS should take into account this complex challenge: the e-learning set-up cannot be *based on* presupposed learning competencies, but should, on the contrary, *produce* such competencies...

We believe that quality e-learning for low educated should be based on principles such as the ones listed above.

Author

Jan Gejel (E-learning consultant)
The Social and Health Care School Aarhus
Olof Palmes Alle 35 8200 Aarhus N DK
jan.gejel@skolekom.dk