

# Learning@Europe



## Learning@Europe in a nut-shell

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## Learning@Europe in a nutshell

*This document gives a brief overview of Learning@Europe and its basic components; other documents describe individual features in more detail.*

### Introduction

Learning@Europe (L@E) is an educational experience providing effective pedagogical value through an innovative pedagogical paradigm, a unique use of advanced technologies, original content (about history) and international collaboration among European schools.

The experience provides a **European value** in two respects: it fosters distance collaboration among students of different European countries, and provokes understanding, curiosity, and attention for the problem of identities (and the historical processes determining them) in Europe.

While generating acceptance for different identities, L@E indirectly paves the ground for a European citizenship, in that it also fosters a better disposition to acquire a new identity: the European identity.

The **innovative pedagogical approach** of L@E combines several factors: interviews to international experts (about historical processes leading to national identities, in each country and in Europe), online sessions in which 4 classes at a time meet in a three-dimensional (3D) world, forums for asynchronous cooperation, quizzes and questions, homework to be carried on in a collaborative fashion.

A combination of advanced **technologies** blends in an effective experience. The most original aspect is the use of **3D multi-user virtual environments**: each user (two per class) is visualized through a graphic object called "avatar". Users can move their avatars, chat with other users, explore the 3D environment, interact with objects, etc.

L@E 3D environments are used for discussions, games, and presentations of the students' works: they are a powerful motivator, a key ingredient for engagement and excitement.

Electronic **forums** allow classes to work together with foreign peers, and also to be in contact with "experts", who take turns in answering the students' questions.



In its 3 years of deployment, from 2004 to 2007, L@E has involved a total of 284 classes, with nearly **345 teachers** and more than **6,000 students**. Large amounts of data have been collected and made publicly available through the website. Almost 90% of participating teachers rated the **global educational impact** of the experience above average; high improvements were reported in the students' knowledge (of history and historical processes), skills (use of technology, group work, English as a second language) and attitudes (general increase of motivation, curiosity and respect for other identities).

L@E has generated a remarkable number of scientific publications, presented at prestigious **international events** in Europe and North-America; it was presented to the European Parliament in Brussels (May 2006); it received approbation from several educational authorities at national and regional level in Europe, and it has been presented at numerous events in more than 10 European countries, U.S.A. and Canada.

We illustrate below the most important features of L@E, deferring the reader to specific documents for details.

### European Value: Identities in Europe

In Europe the notions of "nation" and "national identity" have assumed a peculiar meaning, hardly distinguishable from the concept of "country". They also played a decisive role in determining the current political configuration, guiding the historical processes that led to the formation of countries coinciding with nations, and with specific **national identities**. These processes have at the same time many common features and specific characteristics. Also, the notions of "nation" and "national identity" have evolved over time, often intermixed with other identities: regional, local, religious, linguistic...

L@E allows European students to better understand the historical processes underlying their **own “identity” as a nation**, but also to learn basic facts about the development of other identities across Europe. In most cases this is an absolute novelty to them, since - with few exceptions - history curricula in Europe lack international flavor: while digging deeply (often with stereotypes) into one’s own national identity, they fail to provide even basic information about the **history of other European countries**.

In addition, L@E provides the conceptual tools to understand some characteristics of **historical processes** (e.g. their arbitrariness), particularly of those that led to the modern configuration of Europe.

Learning happens in a collaborative fashion across national borders: **collaboration** motivates students to proudly explain their national identity to foreign peers, but at the same time raises curiosity (and somehow acceptance) for other identities and “histories”. In addition, the very fact of working together with students of other countries leads to a better understanding of different cultures, different backgrounds, different life-styles, and at the same time to the “discovery” that students are not so different across Europe.

The combination of all the different factors leads to the shaping of a better European citizenship: L@E does not take any explicit stance about the process of integration in Europe, but implicitly and de facto puts the students in a trans-national situation, where borders and barriers become blurred. The underlying motif is that everyone has several identities, and one additional one could be added: the **European identity**.

### Pedagogical Approach: an Innovative Paradigm

The educational paradigm of L@E is a quite original combination of several factors. While the data collected so far and participants’ feedback confirm substantial educational benefits in a L@E experience, it is difficult to understand exactly which components are responsible for the achievement of specific goals.

In the following we briefly list some relevant features of this educational paradigm:

**Blended learning:** most of the actual learning happens in the classroom with “traditional” methods: reading, studying, discussion. The “e-Learning” components and cross-cultural interactions enrich these activities with new meanings and motivation.



**Teachers as facilitators:** while students are the real protagonists of the action, teachers are crucial for a successful L@E experience: they organize learning activities and collaborative work, they supervise and reward the students.

**Motivation, engagement, competition, group work:** one key success factor of L@E is that the excitement of games and competition provides motivation and engagement for the students’ work. In order to win the games students must learn the contents, work in groups, and collaborate with remote team partners.

**Quizzes, questions, homework, English:** during online sessions and games quizzes test the students’ factual knowledge, while open-ended conceptual questions require a deeper understanding of the materials; assignments and field work force students to apply what they have learned. All communications take place in English, the “lingua franca” of modern Europe.

**Interviews:** this original, challenging content presents history with a modern scientific approach, at high academic standard; by presenting a variety of

opinions and approaches, the interviews reflect the arbitrariness of interpretation of complex historical phenomena (in opposition to the simplification typical of school textbooks).

### Content: Interviews

The core content of L@E (about 50 documents) is a set of interviews to European experts of history, sociology and political sciences. A committee of international scholars supervised the planning and production of the interviews: oral transcripts were edited and refined, but still retain the question-answer format and the flavor of a spontaneous conversation.

Part of the interviews cover general **trans-national issues**, such as “patterns” in the development of national identities, the meaning of linguistic unification, the role of welfare, the concept of nation-state, etc.

Other interviews describe the **development of a nation-state in one specific country**. Interviews currently cover 12 countries: we are expanding them with the goal of covering all the 25 member states, and also other states not (or not yet) belonging to the European Union.

L@E also provides **auxiliary materials** to support comprehension of the interviews: a set of maps and chronologies describe the main events, places and characters that students need to know about the history of countries other than their own.

## Technology: 3D Worlds, Chats, Forums

The educational paradigm of L@E is based on collaborative technologies.

The most peculiar technology is clearly the set of **three-dimensional shared environments**: in an artificial world several users connect and participate to collaborative activities. Each user is “visualized” via a graphic object (called “avatar”): avatars can move around, fly, interact with objects and other avatars, chat, etc.

WebTalk3, the technology used for L@E, is the third generation of an effort started in 1999 with an award-winning virtual exhibition for the Museum of Science and Technology in Milan, and later for SEE–Shrine Educational Experience, in cooperation with the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Over the years it has been improved and refined, to become the effective collaborative platform of L@E.

**Chats** are used in two ways: for fast collaboration in the 3D environment (where everything moves very fast); for more thoughtful cooperation in a “chat room”, used in parallel with the 3D sessions, to engage students with deeper questions and discussions.

**Forums** support “asynchronous” collaboration: reply times range from 1-2 hours to a few days. Team partners of two different classes cooperate in the forum to elaborate collaborative assignments. On the forum students can also post questions directly to the experts, who will answer in 1 or 2 days: this has proved a powerful tool in the hands of the best students, who can ask professional historians to clarify certain processes and phenomena.

Overall the technology used by L@E provides a sense of “**virtual presence**”, that is, a strong feeling of “being there” with other people in a virtual situation. Virtual presence is a powerful ingredient for providing engagement, motivation, and overall success.



## Games and Competition: Quizzes, Questions, and Assignments

The overall approach of L@E combines complex quality content (the interviews) with two original ingredients: competition and games.



Competition does not aim at demonstrating “who is the best”, but rather it provides playful **motivation**: being in team with a remote class and competing against another team (of two other remote classes) is a powerful way to engage students - and also teachers, who want their pupils to make a good impression. Trying to win is natural, and provides the motivation for learning. The real winners are not determined by the scores, obviously, but by the learning process; still, scores are part of the fun.

During synchronous online sessions **games** have an important role: besides providing excitement, they also force students to acquire familiarity with technology, group work, team building, etc.

Games are always associated to **quizzes and questions**, and subsequent discussions. Quizzes are fast questions about facts,

and require prompt answers. Open-ended conceptual questions are more complex and require a deeper understanding of the interviews.

**Assignments** encourage students to link what they have learned to the society and the cultural environment around them. These activities require students to collaborate with peers of different countries: this forces intercultural understanding and motivates the use of the forums. Assignments come in different level of difficulty: some are rather “action-oriented”, while others are more “intellectual”; this allows teachers to assign tasks to students according to their skills and preferences.

## Monitoring the experience

L@E has been systematically monitored in order to assess the validity and effectiveness of the experience.

Data have been collected from teachers, students and tutors, mainly through the following monitoring tools:

- Surveys to teachers (on expectations, after each session and at the end)
- Surveys to students (on expectations and at the end)
- Logs of all chat discussions and forums
- Interviews and focus groups with teachers

- Tutors' reports of every session
- Direct observations and video recording of students in the class during online sessions
- Screen-captured videos of session interaction

All the data collected and the final reports are publicly available through the website. Independent "consultants" have been asked to review the data and express their opinion. Cooperation has been granted by Jennifer Preece (University of Maryland), Thomas Reeves, and Michael Orey (University of Georgia).

### Past Experiences: 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07

Up to now, L@E has been delivered to 284 classes (approximately 6,000 students) in 18 European countries. In detail:

- in year 2004-05 to 48 classes (approximately 1000 students) in 6 European countries
- in year 2005-06 to 156 classes (approximately 3,400 students) in 16 European countries.
- in year 2006-07 to 80 classes (approximately 1,600 students) in 16 European countries (Croatia and Sweden joined in, while Hungary and Norway did not renew their participation).

The experiences have been systematically monitored, and data validated the effectiveness of the experience. Almost 90% of participating teachers have judged L@E a highly rewarding experience.

Educational benefits have been rated high on three main fronts:

- **Knowledge acquisition:** better understanding of one's own history, foreign histories, the complexity of historical processes, etc.
- **Skills development:** group work, use of English as a second language, a new learning paradigm based on advanced technology, learning in an international environment, collaborative learning, etc.
- **Change of attitudes:** increased motivation for learning history and learning in general, improved perception of national identities, increased curiosity and acceptance for other identities, etc.



While details vary from school to school, the overall pattern shows a highly successful experience, often well beyond expectations.

Problems mainly concerned organizational aspects, and especially the scheduling (during each online session 4 classes must be online on the same day at the same time), workload (sometimes underestimated by teachers), and access to technology (e.g. security firewalls). Support from the principal and the colleagues also turned out to be critical in order to ensure a successful participation.

### The Future

Learning@Europe is not anymore an experiment: it can become a permanent service for European youngsters, helping to create European identity and European citizenship. To reach this goal, a number of facts are needed:

- **Recognition at European level** (Commission, Parliament, Agencies,...) of the validity of the service.
- **Promotion among the interested parties** (youngsters, teachers, administrations, ministries,...) in order to widen the participation in the 18 countries involved so far, and even beyond that.
- **Financing the cost of participation**, which can be estimated around 20 euros per participating youngster (i.e. 440 euros per a class of 20 youngsters).

All the above is more difficult than it may be expected, considering the results achieved so far. The costs of physical contacts for example, are incredibly high in Europe: a round trip from Italy to Latvia, for example, costs twice as much as a round trip from Italy to New York. This makes it very difficult to organize physical meetings to meet people, to reach agreements, etc. Also, strangely enough, in Europe it is easier to find financial resources for "new developments" of experimental actions, than for a running a service that has proved to be valid and effective. The above said, we have set the following goals for the year 2007-2008:

- 18 countries
- 200 classes
- More than 4,000 students participating and more than 300 teachers involved

If you think that you may help us to achieve this, do not hesitate to contact us: **we need the help of whoever may help.**