



APOLOGIES

First, allow me to apologize for bringing forth yet another “learning” - Mission Based Learning.

Haven't we got enough already: problem based learning, game based learning, flipped classroom learning, team based learning, case based learning, technology based learning, community based learning, just to mention a few...

Why, then, do we need another “learning”?

Well, yes - and no.

We could combine some of the “learnings” above into what we on earlier occasions call 21st century learning.

However, 21st century learning is rather abstract, and combining various “learnings” often lead to less satisfactory mixes of all sorts of incompatible elements, missing out in particular a strong and unique core and profile of the “learning” proposed.

Therefore, having appropriately apologized, we would still like to promote a “learning” called Mission Base Learning.



WHY A NEW LEARNING APPROACH - A FRAMEWORK

We are not proposing a detailed didactics or a complex system. We are proposing Mission Base learning as a framework for learning innovation, applicable in a wide range of contexts.

The need to propose Mission Bases Learning emerges from 15 years of intensive learning experimentation I countless European learning projects at various levels. And, from critical readings of learning innovation research...

The proposed framework or framework draft includes a unique core, a set of strong and clear principles - and incorporates important learning innovation elements from recent European research and policy - however, not as a simple juxtaposition, but integrated in the concept core and supporting this core.

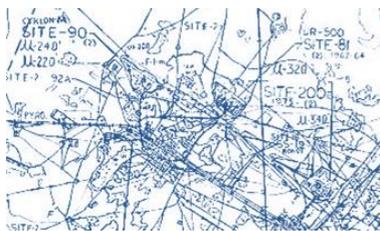
We also see the term Mission as a fresh and useful way of reformulating and re-centering such learning innovation, avoiding long academic explanations and replacing such explanations with clear principles and guidelines.

What works in practice is what counts.

Furthermore, the word and the connotations of Mission link strongly to young people's gaming culture, which might be of importance to counter increasing disengagement in traditional education among young people. But also because the gaming culture offers valuable elements to what we now call Mission Based Learning.

The framework is not that new: many elements arrive from other "learnings", but we believe that bringing those elements together in support of a sound concept core, and subsuming the elements under this core, do represent an original approach worth discussing.

In total, Mission Based Learning represents a radical and dramatic approach to learning innovation, taking seriously what we have learned across decades of what works and what does not. Certainly, what we are doing at the moment does not work at all.



WHAT'S THE NATURE OF MISSION BASED LEARNING

When looking for an expression and a concept that really summarizes, organizes and structures what we understand as good, sustainable and useful learning in 21st century Europe, we came upon the work *Mission*.

Contrary to a deductive scientific justification, our justification was and is based on a wide range of experience with all sorts of learners along 15 years of learning innovation in European collaboration contexts.

We therefore need to admit that our promotion of Mission Bases Learning builds on intuition, mountains of unscientific experience and a set of strong feelings about what is needed.

The term *Mission* is for us associated with many *important meanings*, such as:

- it expresses something important, urgent, imminent you need to do
- it expresses undertaking a complex line of actions
- it involves you personally and professionally
- it includes the idea of creating something new and meaningful to groups of people and organisations
- it is connected to tasks of some volume, scope and size
- it must be carried out along considerable time spans
- it involves many players, alliances and supporters
- it must probably be carried out in steps, as no direct success is possible
- it involves overcoming various obstacles
- it might not succeed in the first attempt, several attempts might be needed
- and it also links to a feeling of cultural innovation and new ways of thinking

The word *Mission* has been used in endless historic and cultural contexts:

geographical, religious, warfare, research, science-fiction and many others.

And, as mentioned, recently strongly connected to the world of digital gaming, the global value of which now exceeds the global value of the film industry, and increasingly defines the lifestyles, cultures, mind-sets *and learning styles* of the new generations of young people.

Mission Based Learning is not defined by any of these connections, but includes elements of them all.

At the same time Mission Based Learning is responding to the open schooling innovation invitation from the European Commission, including fundamentally re-thinking and innovating learning.

An invitation that is not at all followed up by national authorities...

In fact, Mission Based Learning offers a framework for bringing together in structured form most of the learning innovation elements advocated by the Commission and by leading research communities.

Why do we believe that the term Mission is able to organise such a new and complex learning approach?

Because Missions includes all the characteristics of strong, sustainable, relevant and attractive learning, such as:

- learning in relevant contexts and when needed and relevant
- learning in cross-topic contexts
- learning linked to real-life and real-time challenges, including societal challenges
- learning in collaboration with pan-sector community resources
- learning taking place as working through challenges along considerable time spans
- learning combining personal interests, talents and community needs
- learning linked to creating things and to taking action in real life
- learning offering immersion and long-term engagement
- learning creating outcomes and results
- learning continuously combining physical, social and the virtual worlds
- learning fostering initiative, creativity and hard work

Obviously all those characteristics contradict what happens in our educational systems, but that does not make Mission Based Learning less relevant.



MISSION BASED LEARNING - INCORPORATING IMPORTANT EUROPEAN INNOVATIONS AND PRIORITIES

Let us briefly list some of the many important European learning strategies embedded and integrated in Mission Base Learning:

- open schooling
- entrepreneurial learning and initiative-taking
- learning close to science, research and innovation
- learning with the community
- learning in mixed realities
- context based and situated learning
- problem based learning
- digital fluency
- learning linked to real-life challenges and cases
- etc.

The problem is that none of these learning strategies work well in isolation, and none of them work well if implemented in traditional teaching didactics.

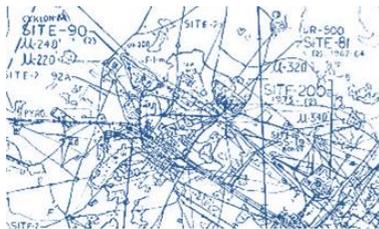
They will continue to play out in a vacuum, in abstract situations and in unlinked structures if they do not find a form to move in, a narrative to communicate in and a script to be guided by.

What makes Mission Based Learning attractive is that it does not simply summarise all these innovative strategies: it offers those strategies a **form**, a **narrative** and **script**, allowing the innovation to play out in real-life.

Evidently, this is perfectly in line with the vocabulary used by the Commission and recent research to characterize the new nature of such learners:

- explorers
- journalists
- scientists
- experimenters
- detectives
- investigators
- entrepreneurs
- creators
- innovators

Ulysses, Umberto Eco, Einstein, Watergate, Philip Marlowe, Agatha Christie, you name it...



WHAT'S THE KEY PRINCIPLES

Let's make an effort to provide some details on the basic principles of Mission Based Learning.

The key principles of such learning are embedded in the very definition of a mission.

Many types of missions are possible and very many directions might be taken, as no manual is possible or even useful. Part of the learning is precisely about the ability to find your own way.

Nevertheless, and no matter how open the missions might be and how many different ways there might be to accomplish the missions, all missions should bring into play a number of key characteristics.

Why is that?

Because these principles are the ones that ensure strong learning, that's why!

If these principles are not respected, the learning will either not occur, or be too weak to be useful and sustainable.

Let's mention the most important principles in creating missions for learning, regardless of the topic addressed:



MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The missions to engage in should be missions impossible!

At least impossible for the normal way we see things, and what can be imagined among the young learners. The point is precisely that engaging in something you are already capable of will not produce new strong capacity, as you will simply repeat what you already can do.

To be attractive and productive, the mission must be difficult, complicated and challenging - but of course within reach of strong efforts..!



DEDICATION

The mission must call for strong dedication - from the learners, but also from the professionals involved. The mission should be so interesting and attractive that dedication is constantly reinforced along the work processes.

Dedication is needed to create learning, not only to reach the goals defined.



IMMERSION

Strong dedication leads to immersion: immersion is a state of mind in which you are totally buried in carrying out the tasks and activities you need to work your way towards to accomplish your mission.

This characteristic explains why not all missions are good missions: if they do not create immersion, they are not strong enough, and little learning will result.



THINK BIG, BUT

This is also why you need to think big!

If we engage the learners in small, trivial and unimportant challenges, we will simply add to their feeling of being unimportant.

The missions must be “big enough” to create respect among the learners and to challenge their feeling of being normal people with less opportunities and resources.

Another reason for thinking big is that the mission must have a certain complexity, volume and duration to create immersion and thereby... learning. Small and punctual activities will not do the job. They will have very little impact on the learning.

Obviously, and it goes without saying, the missions should not be too big: building a spaceship flying to the moon is not a good mission.

The key point is: “big enough” to create immersion and deep learning.



CHALLENGE THE LEARNERS

In other words, the mission must challenge the learners involved, not please them.

They must be challenged with missions that they could not imagine being involved in. The mission itself must be able to create respect and dedication among them.

The missions must be able to overcome their well-justified resistance to “well-meaning” activities from the educational system. They must create a feeling of brand new ways of working and being engaged in challenges that few other people will be offered. The average underdog becomes the alpha dog...



REAL-TIME AND REAL-LIFE

The missions can go in very many directions. The “juice” of the missions is not what they wish to accomplish at the end (the results), but what kind of learning and new experience they create on the way.

However, the missions need to engage in things that take place here and now in the communities (physical, social or virtual), or in emerging initiatives bringing about new things. They must be real-time oriented and link to what is happening here and now. They must also be real-life oriented: missions built on simulations, artificial challenges or purely theoretical activities are not relevant in this context, as they do not create the needed respect, engagement and... deep learning.



TIME MATTERS

Such a mission could be short or long, right? Wrong.

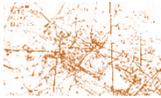
Serious challenges, missions that call for respect, dedication and immersion - and in particular learning - need a certain amount of *time*.

Changing mentality, experience and building new competences in real-life does not happen in a few days or weeks.

It is not possible, of course, to indicate such a thing as the perfect duration of a mission, as missions, resources and engagement levels can be very different. However, strong missions will typically need to be carried out in months, not days or weeks, such as for example 4, 6 or 8 months, and in some cases more if possible.

It is possible to create strong engagement if the learners are engaged in the mission 1 or 2 full days a week along a certain number of months.

Less will not do the job, and the more they are engaged the better.



WHO SHOULD BE MISSION FACILITATORS?

Who are the professionals to support the learners in their missions?

In fact, teachers, academic professionals and social workers might not always be the best mission facilitators, as they carry a big burden of traditional academic mentality towards which many learners have created resistance along their often problematic educational careers.

If such professionals are involved, they will need to struggle their way out of their academic world and bring about a lot of changed mind-sets.

Often youth workers, seniors, sport trainers, community role-models or entrepreneurs are much closer to what it takes to support the learners' mission work.

Such people are often less pedagogical, more direct and straightforward and will be able to establish better, open and more uncomplicated relationships with the learners, built on practical collaboration in the missions.



COMPLICATED

The mission must be complicated, just like good computer games.

Not complicated in the academic sense, but complicated because many activities are needed, collaboration with many people is needed and because only a clever step-by-step strategy will allow moving from one level (activity) to the next.

Whereas many learners will step back in front of academic complications, they do not have to fear this kind of complications.



BALANCING WISHES AND REALITY

It is a basic and absolutely necessary principle that a mission is based on the interest, skills, talents, dreams or aspirations of the learners. If not, the mission will fail big time. No engagement, no long-term dedication and no learning. However, it is precisely a key role of the mission facilitators to prevent any naïve or totally useless mission from taking place.

The ideas of the learners must be balanced and assessed against what makes sense, what is useful, what other people might appreciate and what can result in valuable and well-completed missions.

The mission facilitators must be brave and direct and willing to counter and prevent such naïve or useless initiatives. This is in fact taking the learners seriously, and at the end it will create respect among the learners.

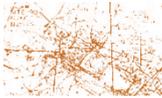


ENTREPRENEURIAL INSPIRATION

Our key words - learning and missions - are of course closely linked to the re-interpretation of what entrepreneurship means.

Unlike in the old days where entrepreneurship was about creating a small business, today entrepreneurship has received a much broader interpretation: entrepreneurial mentality and behaviour has now been made independent of the end result (a small business) and is defined by the entrepreneurial process: taking action, trying out, experimenting, linking to real-life challenges, creating something new - and creating capacity to work through all the phases of entrepreneurial action.

The end result can still be a small business, but also a service, an organisation, a club, a community initiative and much more - or simply strong and sustainable learning.



STEP BY STEP

The key method in our missions is precisely inspired by good and immersive computer games: the mission is complicated and we cannot simply make a big jump and accomplish this mission. Not possible. What, then?

We need to proceed as the good computer games: step by step, level by level. We need to build up the capacity to accomplish the mission.

The art of missioning is precisely to take the right steps in the right order and slowly build up the needed resources, alliances and power to accomplish the mission.

This often includes very many steps, along which we must learn, explore, build alliances, create plans, demonstrate our project, create economy, negotiate and struggle our way towards making the mission impossible possible.

Each successful step represents new resources and new alliances and new opportunities, allowing us to take the next step.

To some extent the needed steps can be planned, but in many cases the stepwise progression will need to be adjusted to what really happens along the first steps.

Such processes and efforts generate strong and sustainable learning...



LEARNING ON THE FLIGHT

A lot of learning will take place in such missions, but this learning is another kind of learning than in the classroom:

- it will take place when it is needed to solve problems at the different levels (situated learning)
- it will take place when the learning makes sense and is important (learning when needed and on demand)
- it will take place closely linked to real-life activities and challenges (relevance)

- it will take place when frustration arises along the mission process (motivation)
- it will be practically useful to the learners (theory and practice closely linked together)

So, the missions turn educational didactics upside down:

- in traditional education you learn in theory for 20 years and then start approaching practice and real-life
- in mission based learning you work in real-life and insert learning elements as needed



INVOLVES MANY 21ST CENTURY SKILLS AND COMPETENCES

Working and struggling through such challenging missions will create very many and very important 21st century skills and competences. In the classrooms most learners will not even come near such competence development...

Along the mission steps you need to analyse reality, seize opportunities, negotiate with community players, collaborate with alliance partners, present your mission with creative media, draw up financial plans and budgets, etc., etc. Evidently those are key competences in the 21st century, highly appreciated by many companies and often more valued now than long theoretical academic educations.

The point is: if we present such learning challenges to the learners in the abstract forum of the classroom, they will step back.

When these learning challenges emerge from the progression towards accomplishing their own mission, the motivation to learn will be 10 times bigger. It's that simple.



WHAT A MISSION IS NOT

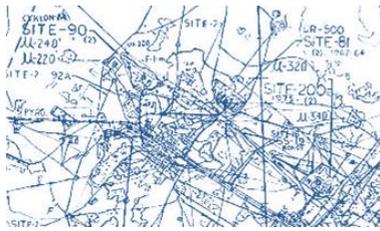
What is NOT a mission, then?

Let us close this small description of what a mission is and should be by indicating what cannot be considered missions (because such activities do not create deep learning):

- any punctual or short-term activity is not a mission
- activities prepared over some time but still simple activities without further perspectives are not missions
- engagement in already existing and running initiatives is not a mission
- involvement in practical activities in the institution or in the community is not a mission
- activities that do not create something new and useful for the learners and for other people are not missions
- simple activities easy to accomplish are not missions

In short: activities that do not create deep learning are not missions.

A mission is therefore defined by the learning it creates among the learners and the dynamic perspectives it offers.



IMPACT OF MISSION BASED LEARNING

So, no matter the concrete aim and result of a mission, it should create the following outcomes:

- new capacity, skills and competences among the learners to break out of mainstream passivity
- the learning must be transferable to other missions and contexts
- the learning created must be sustainable and long-term useful to the learners
- a new mentality among the learners, allowing and encouraging them to engage in similar missions in the future, if and when needed, and preferably allowing them to serve as role-models for other learners
- the mission should bring about a significant change in the learners' attitude to learning, or as a minimum the resources to create such change
- the mission should create something new in real-life, such as in the local community or in virtual communities
- the mission should, to be successful, create something useful or attractive for other people; something that other people would like to use, participate in, buy or in other ways appreciate
- the mission should aim to create sustainable outcomes: what is accomplished by the mission should be continued, transferred or even expanded

