

# 1. LEARN:LINE - AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT ON THE WEB

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## ABSTRACT

*On the basis of the "Proposal for the Pedagogical Role of the NRW-Educational server", learn:line was developed as a platform to the exchange of information, as well as mutual communication and co-operation. learn:line officially started on February 17th, 1997 on the Web (<http://www.learn-line.nrw.de>).*

*Work areas relating to particular topics are characteristic of the NRW-Educational Server. They represent a kind of learning arrangement and provide an infrastructure for encouraging learning. Within a work area users will continually come across a selection of the following modules: media center, notice board, foyer, seminar room, conference room and work room.*

*Such work areas can be used to help the planning and analysis of the educational process, to increase co-operation between teachers and with others, to support existing and to try out new forms of further education and consultation, and in particular, to support learning processes - i.e. as a new medium for specialist and interdisciplinary learning.*

*The paper shows - in two examples - how, by using this new medium, a higher quality of learning and working in schools can be achieved - by teachers and pupils: 'Learning with new media' - a work area especially for teachers need and 'Young People' - a work area especially for pupils' need.*

## Keywords

**Collaborative Learning, Communications, Internet, Learner centred Learning, Open learning**

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## 1. Introduction

In June 1996 the *Landesinstitut für Schule und Weiterbildung* published the "Proposal for the Pedagogical Role of the NRW-Educational server" (LSW, 1996). Developed on this basis learn:line (<http://www.learn-line.nrw.de>), the North Rhine-Westphalian Educational server, officially started at 17th February 1997. Learn:line is designed as a platform to the exchange of information, as well as mutual communication and co-operation. As is testified to by all participating parties, the true value for learning is only seen once these three processes are brought together and the building of a "virtual house of learning" becomes possible.

Participants were aware from the very start that the possibilities now on offer can be used e.g.

- to help the planning and analysis of the educational process,
- to increase co-operation between teachers and with others,
- to support existing and to try out new forms of further education and consultation,
- and in particular to support learning processes - i.e. as a new medium for specialist and interdisciplinary learning

## 2. Work areas - characteristics of learn:line

Work areas relating to particular topics are characteristic of learn:line. They represent a kind of learning arrangement or provide an infrastructure for encouraging learning. According to our intention to learn and teach within meaningful and specialised contexts, each work area concentrates on a particular topic.

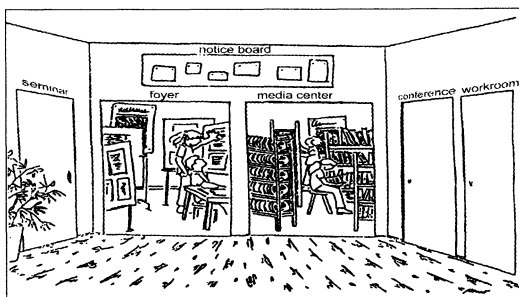


Figure 1: A work area.

Within a work area users will continually come across a selection of the following modules: media centre, notice board, foyer, seminar room, conference room and work room.

- In the *media centre* information and materials are to be found that are fundamental to the work area. Or links to other sites will be opened that seek to make others think about and contribute to work on the topic. This could involve the use of texts or diagrams, but also perhaps audio or video cassette recordings, computer programs etc.
- The *notice board* can be used to ask questions on the topic, for example, or to provide answers to questions that have already been asked there, or to come into contact with others. The *notice board* acts as a kind of "information exchange" for the work area.
- The *foyer* is there to help with the organisation of projects and to act as a platform for those people who wish to contribute something to the topic. Here, people can make progress reports, present the results of their work and lay these open to criticism.
- The *work room* can be used for working together on documents, or to collate materials worked on by separate parties.

The *seminar room* and *conference room* are more like "meeting points" and, therefore, require that the participants are at their computers at the same time.

- In the *seminar room*, for example, different groups can meet up for so-called on-line conversations (chatting room) where they discuss questions and problems relating to the topic.
- In the conference room video conferences relating to the topic can take place.

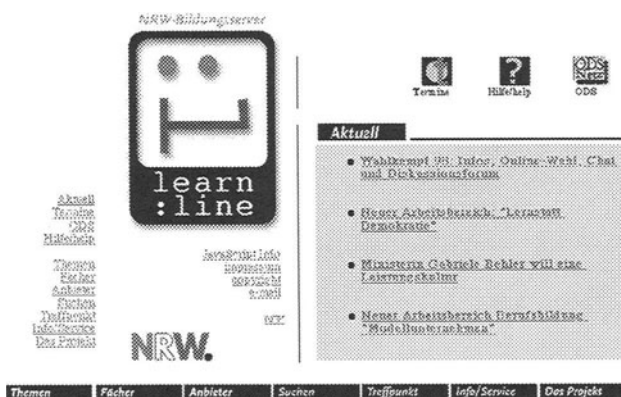


Figure 2: The learn:line-homepage (10.06.1998).

On February 17th, 1997 the NRW-Educational Server, now named learn:line, officially started on the Web (<http://www.learn-line.nrw.de>).

Under the heading *Fächer* (subjects) there are different work areas available e.g. for foreign language learning, mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, history, geography, economics. Under *Themen* (topics) you will find work areas for interdisciplinary learning (see Figure 2).

From the following **two examples** it will be shown how, by using this new medium, a higher quality of learning and working in schools can be achieved - by teachers and by pupils.

### 3. A work area especially for teacher's need

Under the heading *Themen*, interested parties can gain access to the work area *Lernen mit Neuen Medien* (learning through new media). Teachers in particular, who e.g. want to arrange a media corner in their classroom for a specific topic or subject, can obtain information here about new media available on the market for learning.

Via the *media centre* they can log on to the database, SODIS (Software Documentation and Information System). By carrying out the necessary research they can look at the new medias currently on offer. They can also call up detailed reports for the individual documented media.

In this work area, however, particular attention is paid to the exemplars - the new learning media that the examiner is convinced will improve the quality of work and learning at school. These very media can support teachers who base their lessons on concepts developed by the latest academic researches on learning processes. They also support those teachers who consider a pupil's interests and previous experiences to be the most important aspects of the learning process and who aim at equipping the pupils with basic competencies in and across the curriculum and the basic motivation for a lifetime of learning

Whether now organized by subject or type, in any case more diverse additional information will be accessible in *media centre* examples, supplementary literature, pointers to other work areas which use/discuss the use of these media etc.

On the *notice board* questions are to be found which have come up from the use of these new media, as well as other people's tips and suggestions. In stages, opportunities are taken advantage of to communicate and to exchange ideas and experiences with one another. In the *foyer* teachers report on their initial experiences with these new media.

This learn:line work area could increasingly develop into a kind of "meeting point" for the employment of new media, via which those people interested in exchange information, ideas and experiences with one another, provide each other with stimulus, mutually benefit from each other's findings and co-operate with each other.

#### **4. A Work Area especially for Pupils' Needs**

This second example will show the use of learn:line in English lessons. Learning to speak a foreign language can best be done in a classroom situation in which each pupil determines the lesson's topic within a set framework and decides on suitable exercises according to his/her individual interests, preferences and previous experiences. Each pupil should then be allowed to work independently. Instead of just using the language in fictitious role-playing situations, they should also try "real life situations". For this, chances to speak and to write are needed - real communication partners and the opportunity to really exchange views and experiences with each other. The planning and carrying out of a school trip to a partner school abroad, for example, is a typical, yet rare or even a one-off opportunity for the individual class.

In such open teaching periods, pupils get into small groups, divide work up between themselves and work towards creating a final product - that is to say, the results of the lesson are visible products which hold some significance for the youngsters and which may also be acknowledged outside the classroom. Good examples include newspapers, information brochures, guides for partner schools, small theatre productions etc.

The teacher is no longer the focal point of the pupils' attention and rather than being the provider of information and telling the pupils where they should be heading, he/she should merely act as an advisor to his/her pupils. This places great demands on teacher's subject related knowledge and requires a large degree of flexibility. The preparation time and effort needed for a pupil-orientated group lesson is usually greater than that required for a conventional teacher-centred lesson. This is because the teacher cannot know in advance which aspects of the lesson will interest the pupils, to what degree the pupils will require help, or even if the pupils will show any interest whatsoever.

In open teaching periods, it is absolutely essential to make available a wide range of authentic materials which deal with as many different aspects of a particular topic as possible and also take into account different people's interests and allow the individual to follow his/her preferred learning path. In addition to this, the level of work achieved by different groups will vary. Therefore, materials in language of varying difficulty should be provided.

After the project has been agreed upon, all participants (pupils and teachers alike) create a pool of material on the topic: English literature, newspapers, magazines, information leaflets from foreign institutions and firms etc. Authentic multi-media material is increasingly being offered on CD-ROM - e.g. encyclopaedias in the English language. And now, learn:line is available on the Web.

Here, one possible scenario : Let us imagine the classroom situation in a year 10 class. In a class discussion the pupils decide to set to work on the project "Freetime, Lifestyle, Worries and Problems of Young People in GB, USA and Germany". Different groups are formed to work on the various aspects according to pupils' interests. The objective could be to pinpoint national similarities and differences in

order to analyse one's own way of life in the light of this background information. The individual groups will present their results to the others at the end of the project period and will stimulate a concluding all-in group discussion.

Perhaps we find there is a group which has not yet come up with any suitable ideas on a particular topic. "Young people's problems, that sounds interesting" might be the vague idea of the group members. So, stimulus is now needed to put this group's topic in concrete terms as well as to keep the discussion within certain boundaries. The teacher has spotted the situation and ensures that the group gets access to the on-line computer for a specified length of time at the beginning of the group work phase.

The youngsters are familiar with "Smiley" (the logo of learn:line). They know that on the learn:line homepage there are links to websites on various subjects and topics, and by various institutions. They opt for a look at the usual offer available in learn:line under the slogan, "We'll look for something for English!". Under the heading *Fächer* you will find the work area - indicated by a red box alongside the heading - named "Young People". By clicking you reach the front page of the work area, where you can read the summary which gives an overview of the content and objectives of the work area .

The juveniles know that the basic information on each topic is put in the media centre. On the first page here they find a potpourri of various aspects - for example, "Alcohol in the Family", "Inline Skating", ... and "Reading and Writing". A click on the last entry brings them to a page where various electronic magazines in English language are listed on the Internet, which are specifically concerned with young people and which for the large part have also been written by young people.

Each entry is also accompanied by a small piece of commentary in which the 'moderator' of the work area summarizes the entry's contents as well as assessing its quality and its suitability for use in the classroom. This service enables the user to evaluate whether or not the entry is suitable for its intended purpose. In this way, finding one's way about the Internet - a veritable 'bazaar' of innumerable possibilities- is made that much easier and the time needed to assess the quality of a particular entry is reduced.

Using the available commentary, the youngsters do, of course, discuss the way in which to proceed. Working with the computer, therefore, leads to a situation in the classroom in which the pros and cons of the material on offer are discussed by the pupils. They learn how to argue, how to consider their own position and how to react to the arguments of others. In doing this they build up their own knowledge while improving their ability to work well in a team situation.

The group finally decides on an entry that has the title "Children's Express" (CE) on the basis of the commentary belonging to it - a children's magazine, which is financially and ideologically backed by UNICEF.

Every month, young editors (13 years old plus) do research on various topics. The quality of language is extremely varied according to the age and ability of the author and therefore also gives younger pupils the opportunity to look critically at authentic texts and discuss these with native speakers. Following a discussion on the wide topic area, the group decides to analyse in greater detail a special section in the March issue with the title, "CE's Special Report on Child Labour in Bangladesh".

In these articles the pupils have access to materials that are authentic from both a language and content point of view and that are concerned with the real life situations of people of their own age, thereby affecting the reader and encouraging the pupils to make a stand and undertake work on associated further activities.

In our case the group members could show to what extent they have been affected by writing an e-mail to individual authors or by sending in a letter to the magazine which can then be read by all readers of CE. With the help of the Internet, communication possibilities extend far beyond the boundaries of the normal classroom. Reading has led to the group undertaking research themselves into whether there are young people in Germany, in GB and in the USA who are also forced to labour. They want to record their results in the English language on their own websites. In this way interested parties from Great Britain and the USA can understand and, if need be, add to the information.

To obtain their own research material the group can, amongst other things, access German and foreign newspapers on the Internet. On a professionally laid-out index page under the heading "*Anbieter/Institutionen*" (provider/institutions) in learn:line, over one hundred newspapers from all over the world are referred to, which have offers on the WWW. Such services that already exist on-line which help you find your way about the Web are being made accessible to learn:line.

Learn:line also refers to individual American and English newspapers under the heading "*subjects/ learning areas*", as these can particularly enrich the English lesson. Here, each reference comes complete with a commentary which, amongst other things, tells you whether or not you have to pay for the entry and whether or not there are archives available so that past articles can be retrieved. Furthermore, the commentaries contain tips on teaching methods when using the entries.

The *foyer* in the work area "Young people" is the place where young people can have their pages published worldwide and where they can lay these pages open to discussion. This is how they get themselves heard and get some publicity for their work. By creating their own pages on the Web and exchanging opinions with other readers, the pupils' linguistic ability will improve and they will also learn more about the media.

The *notice board* acts as a platform on questions to do with people making their own contributions to a work area. It is easy to use, so "beginners", too, can quickly find their way about. The creator of the work area structures and takes care of the *notice board* as well as the *foyer*, makes suggestions for further contributions and, if need be, offers advice to the user.

In another letter our group draws the CE readers' attention to their own entry in learn:line. In *notice board* the group puts forward questions and theories for discussion. They also hope to receive contributions from the USA and GB, and perhaps also from other websites created there by others.

During the lengthy group work period, short plenary sessions take place regularly. The groups then inform their classmates of the progress they are making, get advice on any problems that have come up and discuss any suggestions made by others.

## 5. Learn:Line 1st Just Beginning...

The above example is (as yet) a made up one. Learn:line has only officially been on the Web since 17th February 1997. However, one thing is clear already: no other medium for the foreign language lesson is in a position to offer opportunities like this for receiving up-to-date authentic texts and for communication between genuine partners with such little effort. The wide range of materials on the Internet, the references to interesting entries and the stimulus given to pupils encouraging them to work actively and creatively on the learn:line work areas take away much of the burden on a teacher by providing for a classroom situation where the youngsters work together in small groups. In this way, learn:line supports those teachers who base their lessons on concepts developed by the latest academic researches on learning processes.

If we succeed in extending the learn:line project with regard to the varying interests and topics of educational institutions, and if pupils as well as teachers learn how to use these new possibilities competently, then new opportunities will really begin to present themselves in the field of learning and work in schools, in institutions of further education and in professional education and training.

## 6. References

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## 7. Biography

**Wolfgang Weber** was born in 1954, and studied mathematics and biology at Bielefeld University between 1973 and 1979. He was a teacher at Gymnasium and Gesamtschule between 1979 and 1990, and made a study of computer science between 1988 and 1991. From 1990 to 1997 he was deputy head of the Advisory Centre for New Technologies at the State Institute for Schools and Further Education of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Since 1996 he has been project manager of learn:line, the North Rhine-Westphalian educational server. Since 1997 he has been head of the Advisory Center.