

EARLI 25 (European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction):

A EUROPEAN SUCCESS STORY

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I was privileged to attend in June 1977 an important NATO International Conference on “Cognitive Psychology and Instruction” organized in Amsterdam. The aim of the conference was to promote exchange between cognitive psychologists and educational researchers who were interested in the use of methodologies and theories of cognitive psychology to understand and address fundamental problems of instruction (Lesgold, Pellegrino, Fokkema, & Glaser, 1978). The majority of the presenters were North Americans who knew each other quite well, whereas many European participants met there each other for the first time. This was typical for the European situation in those days, probably mainly due to language and cultural barriers. When I started in the late seventies to attend the AERA meetings and to visit American research centers like the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, I regularly met European colleagues whom I never encountered in the “old world”.

There was thus an obvious lack of a European formal forum for researchers in learning and instruction, and consequently the idea and plan slowly matured to create such a meeting space. In this respect I was strongly stimulated and supported by the late Dick Snow of the School of Education of Stanford University, in those days one of the few American scholars in the field with a strong interest in the European scene. In the early 1980s Snow stayed for a two year period as liaison scientist at the London Branch of the US Office of Naval Research. Observing of and reporting about European research in the broad field of psychology, especially instructional and differential psychology, he travelled throughout the continent and identified in different countries senior as well as promising junior scholars doing interesting research on learning, development and instruction, but who had not many contacts with their colleagues in other parts of Europe. In December 1983 Snow and I decided to go for the organization of a conference as a lever for launching a European forum for exchange and discussion of research ideas, methodologies and results relating to learning and instruction.

Working on our plan we discovered a related initiative of two Dutch colleagues, Hans Lodewijks and Robert-Jan Simons, namely to start a European journal in educational research. In that perspective they were also contacting scholars in different countries. After some negotiation we joint our efforts in the spring of 1984 and decided to go first for a conference and the establishment of an organization; the plan for launching a journal was postponed. This resulted in the organization of the first EARLI conference in Leuven, Belgium from 10 to 13 June 1985 with the financial support, mainly from SVO (the Dutch Foundation for Educational Research) and the London Branch of the US Office of Naval Research. During the preparatory work for the conference we were very pleased with and encouraged by the many positive, even enthusiastic reactions of European, but also non-European colleagues to the EARLI idea. One may wonder why the first conference took place in Leuven and not in The Netherlands. As I mentioned as a joke in my opening address of the conference, the answer is very simple. Dutch colleagues like very much conferences in the Flemish part of Belgium, the argument being that even if the content of the meeting is not terrific, at least the food and the beer are excellent.

The first conference brought together 140 scholars from 11 European countries: Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, United Kingdom and West-Germany. They were joined by five distinguished American researchers: Bill McKeachie, Bob Glaser, Lauren Resnick, the then President of AERA David Berliner, and of course Dick Snow. The conference was organized around six topics that were at that time central in research on learning and instruction: developmental processes, cognitive-motivational interactions, problem solving, instructional and social interactions, discourse processing, and individual differences. It is interesting to compare these topics with the current list of EARLI Special Interest Groups. For instance, themes like conceptual change, metacognition, assessment, and learning and instruction with computers were not yet in the foreground as today; research on e-learning was still in its infancy but assumed enormous proportions in the years after the first EARLI conference.

The 1985 conference ended up with the foundation session of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction. The foundation of the organization was enthusiastically supported by all conference participants and the first Executive Committee was (undemocratically) installed and consisted of the following people: Erik De Corte, University of Leuven (President); Hans Lodewijks, Dutch Foundation for Educational Research (Secretary); Pieter Span, University of Utrecht (Treasurer); Noel Entwistle, University of Edinburgh; Michel Gilly, Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence; Heinz Mandl, University of Tübingen; and Roger Parmentier, University of Ghent.

The first issue of *EARLI News, Newsletter of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction* appeared in March 1986, and reported extensively about the conference. The Proceedings of the first EARLI conference were published in 1987 in a volume entitled *Learning and instruction: European research in an international context*, edited by Erik De Corte, Hans Lodewijks, Roger Parmentier, and Pieter Span, and jointly published by Leuven University Press and Pergamon Press. In an interesting review of the book published in the *Educational Researcher* (1987, Volume 16, # 6) and entitled "The European connection" Tom Shuell (State University of New York at Buffalo) commented: "In nearly all of the papers the European perspective is evident, and in reading through them it becomes clear that the seams of the scientific cloth are located in somewhat different places on either side of the Atlantic. Perhaps the most obvious difference between the European and American perspectives is the European tendency to view research problems more broadly and to integrate topics studied separately in American research (e.g., developmental differences and individual differences). To a large extent, the two perspectives complement one another, and considering the similarities and differences between the two can be a refreshing, and worthwhile task." (p. 45)

The first EARLI Executive Committee (EC) gathered in Paris in October 1985, where Heinz Mandl accepted to organize the second EARLI conference in Tübingen from 19 to 22 September 1987. Already at this EC meeting the plan for a journal was taken up again. Attempts to cooperate with the *European Journal of Psychology of Education* that was launched in 1986 failed, especially because at that time this journal adhered strictly to its bilingual (English- French) character. Negotiations at AERA in San Francisco in 1986 with the *International Journal of Educational Research* were more successful. Accompanied by the famous local beer "Anchor Steam", an agreement was made with Pergamon Press involving that each volume of IJER would contain two thematic issues devoted to research on learning and instruction under the editorial control of EARLI. In that perspective Erik De

Corte was nominated as one of the editors of the journal and Heinz Mandl became a member of the Panel of Consultants. The agreement also stipulated that all EARLI members would receive the 6 yearly issues of IJER as part of their membership dues. In 1987 the first EARLI-issue of IJER appeared entitled “Acquisition and transfer of knowledge and cognitive skills”.

The success of the Tübingen conference confirmed the importance and the need of a European platform for research in the domain of learning and instruction. In contrast to the first invitational meeting this conference was based on an open call for papers. The review process by the organizing committee resulted in the acceptance of 244 contributions representing 24 countries. Since Tübingen EARLI conferences have continued to be organized biennially moving around Europe, and throughout the past decades EARLI has grown and developed into a dynamic community of over 2000 researchers in the domain of learning and instruction. Besides Europeans the organization attracts many scholars from all over the whole world; for instance, in terms of number of members per country the USA currently ranks third. Over the years the number of countries represented has increased to about 40. It has to be mentioned that there are substantial differences between the countries with respect to the size of the membership; for instance, Finland that was even not represented at the first EARLI conference, ranks currently fifth, whereas France is very poorly represented. The growth and development of the association has been strongly facilitated and stimulated by the establishment in 1997 of the permanent EARLI Office located in Leuven, and currently having a staff of five people under the management Filip Dochy.

In the early years of EARLI the idea was raised to have a conference every year. Looking backwards it has been an excellent decision to stick to the biennial rhythm which certainly increases the chances of encountering research novelties at each meeting. However, this does not mean that there is lack of activity in between conferences. Indeed, already in 1987 six Special Interest Groups were established within the organization, and over the years the number has grown to 22 SIGs, “Neuroscience and Education” being the last newcomer. With the support of the EARLU Office most of these SIGs organize their own meeting in the year between the biennial conferences; for instance, in 2010 18 SIG meetings took place, ranging from Northumbria to Tel Aviv.

Another important initiative was taken in the mid-1990s, namely the foundation of JURE, the network for Junior Researchers of EARLI with the aim of representing and supporting research students on matters that are of special interest to them. Since 1995 a JURE pre-conference has been organized in conjunction with the biennial EARLI conference. But also for the now about 450 JURE members a conference is organized in the year in between EARLI conferences. Besides interaction with their JURE colleagues, those meetings offer interesting opportunities for the young scholars for exchange and discussion with senior researchers.

Since the late 1980s significant steps have also been made in EARLI’s publication policy. The constructive cooperation with Pergamon Press took a new impetus in 1989 when it was decided to start a real EARLI flagship journal *Learning and Instruction*, replacing EARLI’s yearly contribution to the *International Journal of Educational Research*. Erik De Corte whose term ended then as President accepted to act as the first editor of the journal, with Lieven Verschaffel as editorial assistant. The first volume of *L&I* appeared in 1991. Thanks to the hard work of the successive editors – Roger Säljö, Neil Mercer, Wolfgang Schnotz and Anastasia Efklides - and their team, the journal’s scientific status and reputation has

continuously increased over the past two decades, and is now world-wide recognized as one of the top-journals in our field (with currently an impact factor of 2.372). I'm sure that the new editorial team led by Lucia Mason will succeed in the challenge to keep up the high standard of *L&I* and even in improving it. But in 2006 EARLI has successfully launched a second journal *Educational Research Review* with Filip Dochy as the first Editor-in-Chief; at the start of 2010 Päivi Tynjälä took over the helm supported by a new editorial team. While *L&I* publishes merely high-quality empirical studies, *EDUREV* focuses on review articles and theoretical papers. In addition to the journals EARLI has also launched already in 1998 a book series "Advances in Learning and Instruction" published by Pergamon Press. A few years ago the series was taken over by Routledge under the new title "New Perspectives on Learning and Instruction"; currently Mien Segers acts as Editor-in-Chief. Keeping up with the ongoing technological developments, from 2011 on both journals and also the book series will start providing, besides the paper copies, also electronic versions of the issues.

So far the EARLI Office was housed in the premises of the University of Leuven. A major step in EARLI's development, a crowning as an organ-point of the association's Silver Jubilee, is that recently it has acquired its own office space in downtown Leuven.

Currently it is generally recognized that EARLI is the most important educational research platform in Europe, and one of the most valued forums world-wide. Regular American visitors of the EARLI conference have repeatedly told me that they prefer it to the Annual AERA convention; of course they like to come to Europe, but – as I often have heard - the main reason is the high scientific quality of the meeting besides the fact that it is well-organized and medium-sized. But why has EARLI become a success story? One reason is certainly that in the mid 1980s the Zeitgeist in Europe was mature for the creation of such an organization. However, the major explanation lies in the hard work and strong devotion of all those scholars who have been involved in building and further elaborating the association in its different aspects and activities. The central driving forces thereby have been the successive Presidents and their Executive Committee, since 1997 strongly supported by the EARLI Office staff. Over the 25 years the association has succeeded in developing a solid management structure, and this has facilitated the gradual emerge and consolidation of a strong and dynamic scientific culture. As expressed rightly by the EARLI secretary, Costas Constantinou (2010), major shared values that have made this possible are: continuous pursuit of sustained academic rigour to guarantee and keep up the scientific quality of the conferences and the publications; the promotion of a focused and purposeful perspective and vision on research that relies on cumulative progress; and the creation of a community based on openness that allows to pursue strength in diversity, to accommodate cultural differences, and to promote constructive dialogue across specific constraints of distinct educational systems.

I'm sure that all readers will join me in wishing EARLI sustained scientific success in the coming years, and I hope that the association will succeed in the coming decades in making a substantial contribution to the innovation and improvement of education throughout Europe. And, for those readers who have not yet done so, it is never too late to join EARLI.

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Pictures: Erik De Corte and Richard E. Snow (June 1985)



Participants in the First EARLI Conference in front of the Gothic City Hall of Leuven (June 1985)

