

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

eTwinning between past and future

3rd eTwinning conference

Brussels, 23 February 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends of Europe,

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Dear Teachers and Children, the future of Europe,

I am happy to welcome you all to the eTwinning annual conference, so visible and dynamic, and in particular the teachers from Bulgaria who are participating for the first time. You know, I use to say that enlargement makes our Union more European.

Next year, I hope I will also be able to welcome your colleagues from Romania and Turkey. We are confident that the eTwinning National Support Services will soon be in place in those countries.

You know well that I regard your conference as an important item, not only on my agenda, but also on Europe's agenda; in fact, I have not missed any since the beginning of my mandate.

At the inaugural conference of 2005, eTwinning was a bright idea full of promise.

Last year—when I had the pleasure to hand out the first eTwinning prizes in Linz—the idea was taking shape and was beginning to stimulate best practices across Europe.

Today, eTwinning has completed its first school year and I am proud to say that it has graduated with flying colours. Félicitations! This is your graduation.

Thanks to your commitment and enthusiasm, the action has kept all its promises: projects have grown in number and variety, and the co-operation between teachers and pupils is becoming deeper.

eTwinning is helping to broaden the horizons of many classrooms where pupils can have a real experience of Europe. With eTwinning, we can open the space. Open-heartedness and open-mindedness are key to open Europe up to the future.

I am convinced that it is also helping to increase the motivation of many of you and your pupils, and has positive effects on your schools.

eTwinning is about co-operating, learning from each other and progressing towards common goals. These core elements around which eTwinning is built are at the very basis of the overall EU policies on education.

As you know, the Union does not have—strictly speaking—a ‘common education policy’.

In Europe, education is primarily the concern of national and regional governments. Through educational systems, our mosaic of traditions, languages, and values are handed down from one generation to another.

This is important to preserve Europe’s cultural diversity, which is one of our most cherished assets. Diversity in Europe is a definition, not a problem; but we need to know it, to understand it and to cherish it.

At the same time, educational systems differ considerably in structure, both within and between countries. Across the Union, learning is funded, managed, and provided in many different ways.

As a consequence, it is also a good thing that the different systems are linked to each other so that healthy exchanges of practices and ideas can take place.

Europe-wide action is the best way to set up these links, and this is where the European Commission comes in.

Our work aims to create the best possible conditions for collaboration and for the identification of common targets.

The Commission's many actions and programmes have one overarching goal: providing a truly European outlook for Europe's different educational systems.

This means creating a platform for consensus, comparison, benchmarking and policy-making that all Union members can agree upon and use.

How they use it and to what extent, remains—of course—the prerogative of national and regional authorities.

I believe that a European outlook is the best way to raise standards across the Union, remove barriers to learning opportunities, and meet the educational requirements of the 21st century.

In pursuing these goals, work on education—including actions such as eTwinning—will benefit economic growth and social cohesion; that is to say, the ultimate objectives that the Union set for the current decade.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Only a few years ago, these remarks would have been unthinkable. Let us not forget that the Treaty of Rome—of which we are celebrating the 50th anniversary this year—did not even mention education. We started in the early 50's with coal and steel, then came economy, Euratom and the agriculture. Now we have the common market and the euro, and more and more is going on around education and culture.

The first EU programme in education was Erasmus, which was launched in 1987 and has since become perhaps the flagship programme of the entire European Commission.

Programmes for schools, universities and adult education were progressively introduced in the 1990s, after the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty.

These programmes have had an enormous impact; as a few figures can show:

- Over 1.5 million university students have travelled and studied abroad with Erasmus, and we want to reach the same volume in the next six years.;
- 40,000 schools have participated in Comenius projects; an action that has directly involved more than three million people; and
- More than 370,000 students have benefited from Leonardo da Vinci grants for vocational training abroad.

The year 2000 saw a quantum leap. At the European Council in Lisbon the EU national leaders realised that the long-run success of the Union would depend on our ability to meet the challenge of knowledge.

The conclusion was simple: our education and training policies should move towards the centre of the overall EU strategy. Educated people find much more easily constructive answers to the globalisation.

This implies a double focus on research and education. Research is needed to generate new knowledge; education is necessary to extend and enrich Europe's human capital.

By 2002, the role for education in the agenda was further specified. We now have the ambitious target to turn Europe's education and training systems into a world reference by 2010.

This daunting task breaks down into three main items:

- quality and effectiveness;
- universal accessibility;
- openness to the wider world.

These points are the cornerstones of the Union's policy for education and training. Sustained political will, sound investments, and reasonable reforms are required to reach these goals.

Europe's learning systems need updating to keep pace with the world and information and communication technologies can be of great help because they can speed up change. The Bologna process attracts countries from outside Europe; Erasmus Mundus has become one of the most important wings of our openness to the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me tell you what I like most about eTwinning and then I will close with a look at the future.

Perhaps the most original thing about eTwinning is that it concentrates its efforts in providing schools with tangible and intangible infrastructures for putting *their own projects* in place. eTwinning is very much a teacher-driven action.

I like this feature because it allows us to set a process in motion with the least possible distortion. eTwinning makes it easier for participants to cooperate, but the programme does not specify how; teachers and schools administrations are free to find their own ways.

eTwinning is very easy. I also like its flexible administrative structure, the Central and National Support Services – I thank you for your work -, and the regional networks of “eTwinning ambassadors” that have been created in many countries.

Among other things, this recognises the fact that school education is often a regional responsibility and brings what we call the “European dimension” closer to the end-users of eTwinning at the appropriate level.

Finally, eTwinning is a commendable attempt to turn one's connection to the Internet into a two-way street.

Personal computers are fast becoming entertainment centres, but the vast potential of the Net as a means to broadcast one's ideas to the world remains largely untapped.

Studies show that the Internet is used at school much more for information than it is for communication.

So, in my opinion, the best single feature of eTwinning is its attempt to put back the 'c'—communication—in the acronym ICT: 'c' is more important than 'i'.

A re-balanced use of the technology can work wonders for genuine co-operation in Europe. eTwinning shows that thanks to ICT, a real sense of belonging to the Community can become an everyday experience in the classroom.

The positive effects are far-reaching, because they affect young students in their crucial formative years.

As to the future, I am sure that eTwinning will continue to grow and reach its full potential.

For the next school year, we expect 3,500 new projects involving 8,000 schools and 130,000 pupils.

2007 is a very important year for eTwinning. Until now it was part of the eLearning Programme, which has already come to an end. For the next 7 years, the action will continue under the Lifelong Learning Programme. Lifelong learning is a necessity, not a luxury: without lifelong learning there will be less and less lifelong earning.

eTwinning is now one of the actions of the new Comenius programme and this is very good news, since it will allow a better exploitation of synergies. Many schools which take part in eTwinning are also involved in Comenius partnerships, and eTwinning is used in many cases as a way of giving continuity to funded Comenius projects, as a tool for facilitating the collaboration in an existing Comenius partnership or for preparing the participation in a future one.

eTwinning is becoming popular among teachers and school authorities. There is a growing demand to extend its principle to more countries and more sectors, such as training, higher education, and adult learning.

Another aspect is the professional development of teachers. Teachers are the multipliers of knowledge. Over 1,500 teachers have already taken part in European training sessions and thousands more in national training sessions. It is also clear that knowledge and skills are spreading through peer learning.

This means that eTwinning is being integrated into national systems and in many schools' strategic planning.

These are very positive developments which I encourage to expand in the future. There is no clearer recognition of the tangible benefits that our action brings to teachers and pupils alike.

Looking even further, I would like to mention here 2008 as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue: I am sure that eTwinning can expand also towards intercultural themes and will be able to create a lasting dynamic in this field, which is crucial to European young generation and citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

eTwinning is an innovative and effective means to bring the idea of a united Europe to the young in the crucial stage of their personal and social development.

Your presence here, very visible and numerous, and the good work you have accomplished so far, is a much needed sign of encouragement. It shows that the EU can be the source of good news as well.

I am grateful to the eTwinning Central Support Service—European Schoolnet—and to the National Support Services. I want to congratulate the new Director, Marc

Durando, on his appointment and wish him the best for the future. They have been instrumental in making eTwinning well known, in disseminating good practice from the projects and in helping teachers to put their ideas into practice.

But I would like to devote my last words of praise to the teachers and to the pupils. It is you who have made eTwinning a resounding success, thanks to your enthusiasm and your hard work.

I am grateful to all of you and I encourage you to keep up the good work and be more and more creative.

My last idea comes from Jean Monnet talking about the future: he said "I'm neither pessimist nor optimist, I'm determined". I wish you this determination for your activities.

I wish all of you a very successful eTwinning conference and a pleasant stay in Brussels.

All the best!