



25 years of EARLI: reflections on the development of a scientific community

The European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) started in 1985 as a small gathering of 140 researchers at the University of Leuven, in Belgium. Before that time, research in Europe was organized and supported only at the level of individual states. Language, culture and the different traditions of the various educational systems were widely thought of as barriers for meaningful collaboration or any co-ordination efforts. Since then, EARLI has grown into a dynamic scientific community that attracts more than 2000 participants from over 40 countries at its Biennial Conferences. Since 1989, *Learning and Instruction* has grown into one of the most influential scientific journals in educational research. *Educational Research Review*, the second EARLI journal was initiated in 2005 and has been growing into a noteworthy publication forum mainly for scientific review articles but also for position papers on issues that are of interest in educational policy development.

Reflecting back on these 25 years of development for EARLI, provides some useful insights on how scientific communities can develop through sustained initiative, shared values and specific community development activities.

Scientific Community Values

EARLI has relentlessly pursued academic rigour as a value that defines the quality of both the procedures and the research outcomes that are reported within the community. At every conference planning committee meeting there are extensive discussions about the review criteria for evaluating submissions, the rejection rate and the quality of prior conferences. Both journals have a sustained 80% rejection ratio and broad panels of reviewers to safeguard the anonymity of the double blind review processes but also the level of expertise required to evaluate a broad range of manuscripts that range from motivation to learning processes, to teaching in diverse contexts and teacher education.

EARLI has promoted a vision for research that is focused, purposeful and relies on cumulative progress. The assumption that it is possible to attain cumulative progress in the underlying ideas underpinning the function of social systems has led to a



widespread emphasis within the community on the elaboration of theoretical structures and on the design of empirical research with the methodological rigour necessary for validating or refuting theoretical claims.

Finally, the EARLI community has consistently relied on openness as an important value that has served the need to seek strength in diversity, to accommodate many languages and cultures and to promote critical evidence-based and clearly argued dialogue across the specific constraints of individual educational systems. Every activity is announced openly to the membership through special calls for proposals or expressions of interest. All review and evaluation procedures for each activity are aligned with the broad mission of EARLI to promote an active research culture in the field of learning and instruction. Among its members, the various management structures have always been open to critical discussion, have encouraged broad participation from the very beginning and have also, over the years, found ways to encourage individual initiative for the benefit of the community. The tolerance of a broad range of theoretical and research paradigms within the community is another feature that has emerged through the value attached to openness and the strength associated with the continuous evolution that comes with openness.

Sustained initiative, Co-ordination and Management Structure

Over the years, EARLI has developed a set of parallel structures that manage the organization and, on the one hand, provide for the necessary continuity but also safeguard a culture of continuous innovation through sustainable change. There is an elected Executive Committee that is responsible for major policy development and for representing the association to the outside world. Each member of that committee has a specific portfolio of responsibility for their two years of service. There are more than twenty Special Interest Groups, each with two elected scientific co-ordinators and an elected junior researcher as an associate co-ordinator. SIGs receive support for specialized activities that take place in the interim year between EARLI conferences. There is a permanent EARLI Office with a Managing Director and specialized staff who assume responsibility for implementing the decisions of the Executive Committee but also for maintaining the day-to-day communication channels with the membership.

This elaborate management structure has enabled the EARLI community to build scientific socialization processes with broad acceptance and support amongst its members. Explicit emphasis is placed on including young researchers in all initiatives. Some activities, such as the Advanced Study Colloquia and the Junior



Researcher Conference, were specially designed to enhance the contribution of young researchers and to promote intensive contact between experienced and junior researchers. As a result, EARLI has provided a professional home, sustained throughout the life of researchers across many countries with a commonly shared set of values and broad research goals. It has also fostered many examples of productive scientific collaboration that is totally focused on developing ideas across a broad range of contexts.

Community Development Activities

One of the important achievements of EARLI that has supported its ongoing development as a scientific community has been the ability to initiate new activities at an appropriate time to make them sustainable and worthwhile in terms of adding value as a forum for facilitating scientific endeavour. There are elaborate thought processes that go into designing a new journal, making changes to the structure of the main conference, creating a new award for young or experienced researchers, identifying a topic for a new addition to the book series or developing advanced study colloquia as a forum for focused interaction between experienced and young researchers. The introduction of a new activity has always been extensively debated with respect to the resources, the effort and the support from members required to make it sustainable as well as the extent to which the overall idea is clearly aligned with the broad mission of EARLI. As a result, the numerous activities currently promoted by the association have evolved gradually over the years and have come to support the continuous development of a dynamic community of researchers in Learning and Instruction.

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