

LEARNING IN A LIVING LAB

*Knowing what to do when you
don't know what to do*

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Contents

Foreword by Designers Labs from Finland	9
Chapter 1 Introduction to Living Labs	17
Chapter 2 A day in the life of a Living Lab	29
Chapter 3 Experiencing your Living Lab	49
Chapter 4 Living Labs as (new) learning environments	63
Chapter 5 The learning community in a Living Lab	79
Chapter 6 Tasks and roles in a Living Lab	89
Chapter 7 Inter- and transdisciplinary learning	105
Chapter 8 Wicked problems: The what, why, and how	123
Chapter 9 Examples of Living Living Lab projects	141
Chapter 10 Creative problem-solving skills	155
Chapter 11 Designing in Living Labs	173
Chapter 12 Future skills and why to develop them now	191
Chapter 13 Authentic leadership	205
Chapter 14 The learning process in Living Labs	225
Chapter 15 Learning in your team	237
Chapter 16 Dive into deeper learning	255
Chapter 17 Personal learning: Who are you?	269
Chapter 18 Self-motivation helps you succeed in a Living Lab	285
Chapter 19 Setting and achieving your goals (for personal and professional development)	299
Chapter 20 Self-management	311
Chapter 21 Assessment in a Living Lab	325
Chapter 22 Choosing to participate in a Living Lab	339
Chapter 23 Research in a Living Lab	357
Conclusion	379
Suggestions for further reading	382
Bibliography	383
Final note	390
Glossary	391





*Half-way between Ghent and Amsterdam, the authors meet in Breda
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Foreword by Designers Labs from Finland

The Living Labs version detailed in this book traces its roots back to 2012 in the city of Oulu, Northern Finland. During this period, Nokia Mobile Phones faced a downturn and eventually closed its research & development centre within two years. This closure led to unemployment and the looming threat of losing thousands of experienced ICT-industry professionals to other cities and even countries. To address this challenge, the City of Oulu established a task force aimed at re-skilling these professionals for employment and fostering the creation of new start-up companies, particularly in the rapidly expanding game industry.

Facing a lack of prior relationships and close ties to academic practices, the first game industry-focused Living Lab, Oulu Game LAB, was launched in August 2012. Subsequently, from 2012 to 2014, three industry-focused labs, collectively known as Oamk LABs, were established, operating until 2019 with an annual capacity of 260 students.

In any developmental journey, there must be pioneers who pave the way. Much like in evolution, subsequent iterations are modified to better suit their environments and objectives. Over the years, the Oamk LABs attracted numerous national and international visitors who became acquainted with its innovative pedagogical model, the LAB Studio Model. Many of these visitors found inspiration in our efforts to revolutionise professional higher education, making it more practical and inclusive. This inspiration, combined with our shared experiences and guidance, led to the establishment of similar labs in Austria, Belgium, and Nepal. In Belgium, Ghent, two courageous educators initiated the 3ID LABs, a modified version with the same foundational principles and pedagogy aimed at addressing societal problems.

The years from 2012 to 2019 taught us a crucial lesson: a Living Lab must truly be alive. Its evolution over time is deeply rooted in the interactions among its people. Internal and external collaboration thrives on meaningful relationships, recognizing the inherent value within. Establishing a Living Lab mirrors the journey of a startup company; the right conditions are vital for its operation and survival, conditions brought to life by the efforts of dedicated individuals. Diversity within the team fosters enthusiasm, and a shared belief in the mission invites all participants to join the learning journey. Sustaining honest communication to build trust among participants is essential, as the learning and development of a lab inevitably occurs through trials, encompassing both mistakes and successes.

We express our gratitude for the opportunity to write this foreword. Crafting this kind of book has proved to be a challenging task — we also tried it not only once, but twice without success. Acknowledging the vast diversity and flexibility inherent in labs, we respect the varied practicalities and methods presented within these pages. Beyond recounting an incredible journey, this book serves as a wellspring of inspiration and guidance for those venturing into the uncharted territories of education and innovation.

Thank you for selecting this book, an invitation to embark on your own adventures, be it in the realm of Living Labs or any other field where inspired learning and innovation crafting converge.

Kari-Pekka Heikkinen, Janne Karjalainen, Kimmo Paajanen, Blair Stevenson and Ulla-Maija Törmälä, Oulou, November 2023

Preface

A letter to myself

Writing letters was my favourite thing as a child. I never sent them, but I always wrote to someone, never to my past self. If I could go back and talk to the person who started at my Living Lab four months ago, I would tell her to brace herself for an incredible journey. There will be obstacles and bends in the road, but with every challenge, there's a new opportunity.

Describing my journey feels impossible; it's an experience you have to live. It engulfs you in its world, making it hard to get out of bed some days, yet impossible to stay in bed on others. You'll hear many words from others, but you'll truly live and embody them.

The most important victory will be discovering yourself and unexpected parts of your character. You'll meet people who become difficult to let go of and learn to work with diverse individuals. Professors become more than just teachers; they become friends who listen and support you.

In the end, if the purpose of this programme is to truly understand ourselves, our weaknesses, and our strengths, then we have all succeeded, emerging either a little broken or a little stronger.

- Florida

Introduction from the authors

Living Labs have evolved recently and are playing a part as higher education responds to the uncertain and rapidly changing world. The world needs creative problem solvers from different disciplines who can work together to find solutions for wicked problems, people who 'know what to do when they don't know what to do'. This book is to help and support those who want to know more about 'learning in a Living Lab'.

When you start to learn in a Living Lab, it may require some additional guidance. Since Lab education is different from regular education, this transition requires some adaptation to and understanding of the Lab environment. It requires new ways of thinking and learning.

This book aims to help as you learn in your Living Lab, to help you reflect on how Lab education is arranged and to give some insights into what might be expected of you. Reflecting on your learning and collaboration processes and experimenting with new approaches can help you get more out of your Lab experience.

Even though Living Labs continue to evolve, they usually include the following components. They are situated in a real-world environment, such as a city, community, or organization, where research, development, lifelong learning, and innovation activities take place in collaboration with end-users or participants. This user-centric approach aims to co-create and test new solutions, products, or services in a real-life context. Each Lab has its own individual approach and context, has its own structure, and uses its own terminology. Taking time to understand how things are different can help you get more out of your experience.

This book is not intended to be, and is not able to be, a definitive explanation of Living Labs. Instead, the authors have made their best effort to describe Living Labs based on their own practical experience (at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in Belgium and Inholland University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands), while still including some insights about Living Labs at a general level.

You will discover that there is plenty of room for discussion about definitions and how Labs work. Please don't expect a fixed definition that will match your Lab context exactly. However, discussing some common themes can be helpful. If you see things differently, let us know. Your critical input and feedback are a very important part of understanding the context of your Lab.

While this book is primarily intended as a guide for learners when studying in a Living Lab, it may also be of value to coaches, lecturers, researchers, educational specialists, and other teaching staff interested in understanding the experience of learners in Living Labs. It may also be insightful for collaborating partners, industry professionals, and other stakeholders who interact with Living Labs.

Acknowledgements

The Labs we work in have evolved over several years within our organizations. We would particularly like to thank the educational pioneers and innovators who had the vision and determination to take risks and experiment when first setting up these innovative learning environments.

As we gathered and generated new knowledge as a group of authors, we found we did a lot of drawing and sketching. Isabelle Vandevyvere, one of the co-authors of this book, who isn't even an illustrator, had a very appealing way of visualizing ideas. So, we asked Isabelle to make a number of sketches in the book. We would like to thank Isabelle for all her work on this. We hope you enjoy the illustrations and that they inspire you on your own learning journey.

Throughout the process of writing this book, we received a great amount of feedback, tips, suggestions, and critical comments from experienced Lab Learners, colleagues, staff, and other professionals. We would like to thank all of those who took the time to give input to the book. Without their help we would not have got half as far as we did.

We started writing this book before the arrival of ChatGPT. Half-way through our writing process, we gained access to this powerful tool. In some cases, we made use of it to simplify text, to get ideas, and to create a clearer structure.

Finally, we would like to thank Owl Press and the designers and editors for their work in refining our text and making it attractive and accessible to a wider audience. Whatever your role, we hope the book will give you some insights into what Labs are, why they exist, and some inspiration on how to succeed when learning in a Living Lab.

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Choosing how to read this book

There are different ways you can read this book, based on the information you need or what interests you. You may be familiar with some of the ideas, models, or concepts in this book. You can review these again or skip them and focus on something else.

Route 1: The A to Z expedition

If you're ready for a comprehensive exploration, follow the book from beginning to end. Study the chapters in sequence and uncover the secrets of learning in a Living Lab one step at a time.

Route 2: Theory enthusiast's paradise

If you prefer theories, ideas, and models, then you can focus where models and ideas are explained to help you connect with your inner academic explorer.

Route 3: Hands-on practical skills

To jump into action, focus on the exercises. Select an exercise that resonates with you and start applying your newfound insights.

The exercises are rated indicating the amount of time they may take, and whether individual, group, or a combination.

Route 4: Quotes and cases for inspiration

For motivation and inspiration, explore the quotes and cases. Lab alumni and staff share their stories, testimonials, and insights. Their experiences can inspire your own learning experience(s).

Route 5: Make your own path

Decide for yourself how you would like to use the book. Combine routes 1 to 4 or create your own pathway.