

STRATEGIES AND METHODS FOR SUSTAINING AND IMPLEMENTING LIFELONG LEARNING

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Abstract

If we are to consider all the challenges present society faces us with, daily life can very easily prevent individuals from getting involved in lifelong learning. Beyond the obviously well indented aim of this educative process, we must analyse the target audience in order to maintain an updated and relevant offer, directly addressed to the learning needs of the beneficiaries. Not last, the materials involved and the approaches used in lifelong learning have to be adapted to the affordances and interests of the target audience as well as to the mediums used for implementation. The project presented within this article, Office InterActors, illustrates an innovative manner of work through all the development and implementation criteria it includes and refers to, starting from the stage of material development up to the implementation of activities.

Keywords: lifelong learning, awareness raising, European projects, piloting and validating materials

Lifelong learning – goals, means and implementation strategies

The goal of lifelong learning is that of valorising life experience for learning and through this, to help individuals develop new skills and abilities updated to accommodate changes in contemporary society. There is a shift of focus within this process which is primarily suggested by its name – lifelong *learning* (as opposed to *teaching*). Emphasis is being placed on awareness raising. This is considered to be one of the most important steps in developing life skills and abilities. Providing support for clear understanding of personal learning styles and learning needs enhances individual undertake of lifelong learning processes.

Ensuring intake is of far greater importance than providing input. Rather than a process limited to a set of teaching-learning activities, lifelong learning should be regarded as an attitude towards processing daily experience, a motivation for maximising all aspects of life experience.

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Finding ways to contribute to personal intake and understanding of individuals, should not be rigid and should under no circumstances depend upon a curricula developed prior the selection of end beneficiaries. This means lifelong learning should be directly tailored for those who will benefit from it, one way or another.

Activities in lifelong learning are not meant to teach. They should guide beneficiaries in finding their own path towards continuous learning processes which will then support their personal and professional development. This is one of the reasons why lifelong learning focuses on abilities and not on concrete information to be transferred to the audience. “*Give a man a fish and you feed him for one day, teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.*” – this can very easily stand as a motif for lifelong learning. The more individuals come to understand the importance of continuously updating their experiences and guide them towards reflection and new learning, the more they will be able and motivated to get involved into LLL.

Implementing lifelong learning should therefore follow all the ideas mentioned so far. Above all, lifelong learning should provide authentic collaboration experiences and opportunities to use, process and reflect upon daily experiences. This will build learning and will therefore replace the traditional, formal, teaching-learning process. Replacing information transfer with hands-on experiences involves beneficiaries in experiential learning.

The means of implementing lifelong learning can describe a wide range of activities. However, despite this variety, all activities in lifelong learning should include aspects such as:

- A database of resources – including the life experience of the beneficiaries
- Flexible implementation plan – which can easily be moulded upon the needs of the beneficiaries
- Focus on reflection and internalisation of the learning process
- Authentic context and background for the activities and the topics selected (with the help of the beneficiaries or based on their learning needs)
- Problem solving situations – which stimulate the intellect and imagination
- Links to the authentic background within which beneficiaries activate (socially or professionally) – to facilitate implementation of the new learning

Implementation strategies should cover aspects such as:

- Careful material selection and development – it should be staged into: needs analysis, material development, piloting, feedback

and adjustments, final material production, continuous updating according to the new beneficiaries and implementation tools and mediums

- Elicit and involve personal life/ work experience – to better illustrate ideas and lead beneficiaries into discovering/ building the new learning themselves
- Create opportunities for authentic collaboration – develop tasks or general frames for activities which present beneficiaries with a real need for collaboration
- Make use of practical intelligence – relate to skills and abilities relevant for beneficiaries rather than information/facts which can be accessed in different sources.

Office InterActors – general information

Office InterActors, that is in its full name, Developing Transferable Basic and Professional Skills for Business and Administration through Internet-based Problem-solving Role-play, is a Leonardo Da Vinci, transfer of innovation project which runs for two years between December 2008 and November 2010. The project is coordinated by the EuroEd Foundation in Iasi, Romania and involves other six European partners:

DHE Solutions Ltd., Lancaster - the UK,
Educational Programmes Consult Ltd. - Sofia, Bulgaria,
GRETA du Velay - France,
Higher Institute of Secretarial and Administrative Studies - San Sebastian, Spain,
Kindersite Project Ltd. - New Barnet, the UK,
Soros International House - Vilnius, Lithuania.

The aim of Office InterActors is to create a flexible course structure to support beneficiaries develop basic and professional skills in Business & Administration, transferable from study to work and from one work setting to another:

1. foreign language (English and French as widely spoken, plus Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Basque)
2. ICT skills (including use of the Internet and Web 2.0)
3. teamwork and negotiation (also in international teams through online collaboration)
4. general and professional intercultural awareness and knowledge
5. entrepreneurship
6. self-management skills and motivation for lifelong learning.

The methodology used in the project has been previously tested in the Leonardo da Vinci project “InterAct – Developing New Basic Skills at the Workplace through Internet-based Problem-solving Role-play”. This methodology engages blended learning using fictitious scenarios, face to face and online communication to create a model of educational process for both professional and personal development of the beneficiaries. Online collaborative learning and problem solving techniques are essentials for authentic work experience which beneficiaries can then look at and turn into reflexive intake and input for the others they are going to get in contact with at their actual work place.

Working with adults involves as much effort to draw their attention and stir their interest as in the case of young learners. Adults have very well structured sets of criteria for the courses they participate in, which means that successful courses will have to accomplish their expectations. Beyond relevance, the manner in which input is presented and introduced must be attracting enough to get their interest after working hours. Another important aspect is that beneficiaries have to be aware of their own intake as individuals and focus on their benefit from this new gain from both a personal and professional perspective. The element of surprise in Office InterActors scenarios will keep a high level of motivation. Also, tasks will turn their learning into a complex process of observation, practice, negotiation and reflexion.

The main products of the project are the two rounds of courses for the adult students which provide opportunities to develop new skills and abilities including the core ones for the business domain but also complementary ones among which: knowing other cultures, ICT skills, national and international communication and negotiation. Prior the first round of courses the teaching material was developed tested and evaluated by the entire team of partners and evaluators so that the final form of the course would suit the needs and local specificities of all international groups of beneficiaries. Tutors for the two rounds of courses and for other institutions willing to organize Office InterActors courses were trained in two training sessions:

1st – Internal Tutor training. February 2009 in Iasi

2nd – Integrated training and international conference, February 2010 in Iasi.

All the meetings, be they project or tutor meetings, already have and will continue to offer the partnership the chance to have face to face meetings to evaluate the courses and make the necessary adjustments only after a common agreement.

As a means of implementing the courses and also a support for dissemination, the partnership has created a website for the project: www.officeinteractors.eu and they have also customized a Moodle platform

to serve as a working place for the beneficiaries: www.euroed.ro/online. These online tools create a most useful bridge to gap the distance between the partners and the international groups in the training courses. Not only do they offer the support for the tasks to be accomplished but beneficiaries are also provided with auxiliary tools such as tutorials on how to use the platform, examples and links to additional information. For a better communication channel there have been created forums and chat spaces which can be used within the tasks as well.

The beneficiaries of this project are structured in three categories as follows:

1. educational / VET professionals and institutions interested to include the Office InterActors model in their educational offers
2. employers and umbrella organizations representing employers, interested to invest in the training of their staff, apprentices or new recruits
3. students studying Business & Administration, recently graduated employees and would-be employees.

LLL & Office InterActors

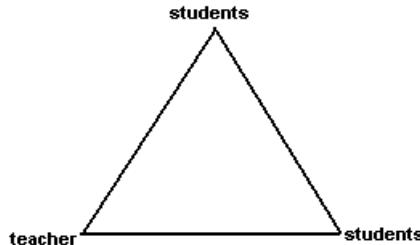
Learning never ends. The better we do it the more it lasts and supports our future actions. Subsequently, one would say, teaching is of equal importance. Creating an authentic, living connection between the two, teaching and learning, is, I believe, the one key to successful acquisition and development of needed skills and abilities. The question then remains, how do we manage to create and maintain the “living connection”?

There are, in my opinion, a few key points that need to be addressed in order to assure a qualitative teaching-learning process:

- Motivation/interest
- Alignment of the provided input to the expected and needed input
- Contextualization and authentic practice of the skills and abilities developed within the schooling process

Our client, our master – A very well known practice policy says so and tracks back the major interest service providers have always taken in offering the best to their clients. The project Office InterActors offers an updated experience for both students and teachers. At a first glance the project may seem to focus more on the teaching details: what, how and the entire range of means to successfully deliver teaching. Still, once you get to understand the mechanism of the project, it is obvious that there is more to it than the actual teaching of information. Office InterActors is about *learning*. We, the ones working on this project, strongly believe that learning comes from within the person and exterior only causes would never suffice for real

learning. We have therefore worked on a structure and content that would enhance learning to happen in a tridimensional, continuously developing relation. To better envisage this relation we can put it in the shape of a triangle like this one:



Teachers are not necessarily on the top of the triangle due to the fact that the two processes, teaching and learning, have been so carefully bound to complete each other. Teachers can indeed act as the leaders on some occasions but the center position will consequently be taken by each of the groups presented above. Thus, they can all act as presenters of information, facilitators, stake holders, advisors and evaluators. The importance of peer communication and support is underlined by the presence of two groups of students. The structure of the course itself implies setting groups and teams of beneficiaries who will then work together on the given tasks. All national groups will be structured in "business consultants" and "entrepreneurs" groups which correspond to two skill levels: basic and advanced. We can thus better delineate the proficiency level in all sorts of abilities and skills specific to the domain beneficiaries work in. This action has been taken to create a pattern that would allow for a good functioning of the national and international groups. The sequence of tasks also provides them with common tasks that bring together the results of their work and thus offer it a logical structure.

Motivating beneficiaries becomes easier if they are asked for opinions and for their own contribution in the teaching process. Teaching is turned into learning as teachers and all the staff involved in facilitating the courses is using the results of learning to adjust the WHAT and the HOW of the next round of courses.

Personal experience is the most important and valuable base a course could valorise to get started with and then to carefully mark each important step in the development of the courses.

Information in the courses is staged released and provides beneficiaries with details on the objectives of the tasks, the competences and skills they will work on while accomplishing them.

Aligning the given input with the expected input is but another basic rule for successful education. Unless you offer beneficiaries what they need and you provide this in the most accessible way, no one is going to value the information despite its complexity and relevance. Leaving room for customizing the teaching material is another important aspect the project partnership has looked into. Beneficiaries have their own personal online spaces on the platform where they can offer more information about themselves and about their own expectations from the courses. Having a balanced input in terms of relevance means more than adding to the content list of the course readymade proposals. The content and the direction of the courses has to be (and has been within the OIA courses) clearly presented to the beneficiaries. Blending traditional, face-to-face meetings and online collaboration has to be a smooth process guided by coherence and cohesion.

Authenticity is vital to transfer abstract information into concrete practice that would model the implementation and use of newly developed skills to be put to practice in the work environment. The international background beneficiaries have at their disposal enhances contextualization of information allowing beneficiaries to realistically perceive the entire international picture of the issue discussed, comparing it with their national and local specificity. This will also give them a global view and a better command of the intake.

Conclusions

With all these aspects adjusted for the target groups and for the objectives of the courses Office InterActors offers both beneficiaries and the entire team working on the project a newly and rewarding experience in terms of findings, implementation and concrete products. Adult training and lifelong learning can so easily be turned into a daily habit and personal development for all those involved in the courses. Online communication and personal experience are perhaps the two basic tools needed to start a training session that would then turn into a clearly shaped course ready to meet the needs and expectations of the beneficiaries.

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