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Panel discussion: Lifelong learning and sustainable rural development

Methodology for lifelong learning

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Introduction

At the end of the project, and after following through the planning phases of the training to be transferred, and looking at the results of it now delivered, it is easy so say, that yes, what was done in the Euracademy project is transferable to other contexts and to a different target group. But a few summarising words about the methodology used and the challenges put to it, are in order.

The training methodology of the Euracademy project was planned for rural developers; mid-career adults, who work as animators and intermediaries between the local actors and entrepreneurs, administrators, trainers and researchers. For Trans Rural project, the target group was different, rural SMEs. *So how do the learning material and methods bend to benefit this new group of learners with their special needs and expectations? What does it mean for this type of training when provided in rural areas? How does it challenge the training, if the participants have a limited access to ICT or have previous experience from quite traditional education systems?*

There were three key choices made for the Euracademy methodology for providing learning opportunities:

1. Remember the special features of the learners, as adult learners in general:

- are independent,
- are used to making decisions themselves
- are responsible for their lives
- still need guidance and support, but in a different way from the younger learners
- have previous experience from education, work-life, hobbies
- find it motivating to be able to connect new knowledge to the one they already have
- don't need to memorise so much, instead they aim to understand
- want to be able to immediately use what they learn

- are motivated by finding solutions to the practical problems of real life
- want to be respected and treated as equals – not taught in the traditional sense
- may have difficulties in combining studying, work and private life
- without a strong motivation and support it is easily the studying that suffers
- may have problems with getting started with their studies
- may have doubtful attitude towards studying
- like to study in groups, discuss and share ideas and experiences
- need also to have individual preferences respected

Special for Trans Rural: In addition to all the above, with SMEs, time as well as the usefulness and practicality of what is studied and learnt are essential components. So, whatever training is provided and whatever methods are used, should be well planned, structured, to-the-point and combine theory and practice in a meaningful, applicable way thus supporting their motivation to study and learn more.

In addition many SMEs are ventures of self-made men and women, who don't necessarily have a lot of experience in studying, or it has happened a while ago, so some extra effort is needed to support them to get started and find ways to update their study skills, e.g. using ICT-tools.

2. Use blended learning, meaning providing learning opportunities in various different ways using different methods, materials etc:

- studying individually
- in pairs or in groups
- listening to lectures
- working on the distance learning platforms
- self-studying set materials
- solving problems by given instructions and e.g. collecting material for that by oneself

The mix of methods used need to be chosen to support the learning process as well as steer the process towards the objectives aimed at. For adults, blended learning is motivating, because it keeps studying versatile, and persons who have different learning styles, habits or experiences may both use the methods they are used to already, but also discover new ways of doing things.

Special for Trans Rural: Using many different, complementing methods doesn't only support the differing learning styles of the participants, but may help to cope with the possibly inadequate study skills, and it offers learners, like SMEs' owners and workers, the opportunity to choose the way they want to learn and also do their studying when they have time for it. If e.g. there are no connections needed to use ICT-supported tools or some of the participants lack the skills to use them, other types of methods and materials should be available instead, emphasis being on learning and not on the tools or methods used as such. The use of ICT in rural areas open up new possibilities, but it is not the only solution. If the participants have experience of quite traditional ways of studying, the versatility of blended learning and the notion of self-directedness often combined to it, may seem challenging and difficult at first, so personal support and guidance should be easily available in many forms. The training provider should be quite sensitive to these needs, because the easiest thing for the participant is to quit their studies if they feel it difficult – instead of asking for help and advice. As mentioned before, we assume that the adult learners are responsible themselves for their decisions, but observing, noticing and helping with difficulties in learning is also a responsibility of the training provider as the professional of training and education.

3. Support cooperation, interaction and networking inviting the participants to:

- study together
- discuss

- share ideas
- use their imagination
- tell about their experiences
- decide together how to proceed and divide the tasks.

This way the participants are guided to communicate with each other and they learn to know the other participants and their interests and goals. Together with other ways of creating relaxed, comfortable and safe atmosphere to the learning situations, all this is motivating and encourages the participants to open up, give and take and learn better through positive emotions.

Special for Trans Rural: When adopting this approach for planning learning opportunities, it also has a significant influence on what kinds of methods, materials and tasks are used, and how the blended learning process of adults will run. But the success of it depends on both the participants in the training and on how we, as training providers, manage to assist them in creating good atmosphere and mutual trust in the group. Rural SMEs are usually small businesses that share similar problems, so they need to learn from their peers, share the challenges they face and create networks for cooperation, welcome benefits and possible by-products of training. But what if there is no culture of cooperation between the different SMEs? If the participants don't even know each other and each other's businesses? What if they are competitors?

These issues are not impossible to overcome but again it calls for sensitivity of the training provider when planning the process and inventing ways to encourage the participants to engage themselves in cooperation and interaction. In the best case, these questions have only minor relevance, but as the training provider plans the training after finding out the training needs of the target group, also the local framework and the present culture for providing and receiving training needs to be taken into consideration and respected to some extent – otherwise the quite healthy resistance for change will overcome even the best of intentions. Again the emphasis is in finding the best ways for the target group to learn using their present situation as the starting point, and making gradually maybe at first small changes.

When putting the methodological ideas into practice, in the Euracademy training model there are five phases, both in the Summer Academies and in the Distance Learning Courses: orientation, introduction, theory, practice and evaluation. These three are complemented with the overlapping guidance. Orientation includes studying the Thematic Guide before coming to the Summer Academy, reading the Participants' Handbook, writing one's own case and providing also a CV or other presentation of oneself to the other participants. The first day is spent for the introductions in the Summer Academy. In the Distance Learning Courses orientation and introductions are combined for the first week of the course. In both cases the facilitators assist.

The Thematic Guide may serve as orientation material, but it also creates the common ground for all the participants and is the backbone to which the lectures and additional material are connected to when moving to the theory phase. Cases, either those included in the Thematic Guide or those of the participants, are the links to practical life at the same time giving concrete examples of what is discussed in the Thematic Guide. Study Tours and Study Tour Reports in the Summer Academy are also a part of the practical phase. At the end of the Summer Academy and the Distance Learning Courses, the evaluation phase is both looking back and forward, assessing what has happened and what is the value of it and what are the plans for the future, what has been learnt and what was thought as useful.

Working in small groups by using different methods, presenting the results of different tasks to others and evaluating and planning the future together are all used throughout the training packages supporting cooperation and interaction. Guidance from the facilitators is available through the whole training period, them being more involved in the beginning and after a while giving more room for the participants and their synergies. Ideally, the facilitators are just observers, who may step in occasionally if asked or they find a good reason for that letting otherwise the participants steer the

process in the line of the given instructions, but quite often more involvement is needed or at least expected from them by the participants.

The same elements are found in the three transferred cases, but with adaptations to meet the needs of the special target group, the SMEs, and taking into account the local conditions. In all the countries the contents of the Thematic Guide were evaluated as relevant and were used as the basic material, but was also (e.g. in UK) quite much restructured and complemented with additional material produced to better meet the needs of the target group. Cases were found useful in all the three countries, and they were used both as study material (especially in Romania) and as tasks for the participants to write and to reflect a situation interesting to them (Norway).

The structure of the training courses was much the same in all the three countries with 4-5 workshop full or half- days, during 2-3 months, and with tasks and assignments between the workshops – apparently good enough pace for the SMEs to be able to participate to the face-to-face parts of the training and proceed with the given learning tasks. In Romania, a fixed tutors' team delivered the training in the workshops as well as provided facilitation to the participants, but in Norway and UK external experts visited the workshops and provided insight to different topics. Using the same tutors has its benefits, as it creates continuity and coherence to the training, but with visiting experts new perspectives are quite easily opened. If thinking of making the participants feel assured that the basic elements of the training have continuity, when the facilitators or coordinators of the training stay the same, the visiting experts with a relevant message are usually a welcome addition adding fuel to the learning process and not disturbing it. Interactive methods and group work were also used in the workshops, and according to the evaluations the feedback of the participants was positive, proving that benchmarking through communication and trying to find the mutual interests to be shared between even the possible business competitors is better than just hiding alone in their own corners.

In Norway the ICT-tools were used most for delivering the training, as e.g. two of the four workshops were virtually distributed. It showed, that as soon as the infrastructure allows it, training is possible to be organised for rural areas in distance form, thus saving time from travelling, making it possible for even smaller groups or individuals to participate, and making it also possible for the training provider to reach an adequate number of participants from a larger area. But to be successful, this requires reliable technology, good planning and information and also good support and guidance services; possibly some kind of local support structure for the participants both with the technology and the studying. As the expert presentations in Norway were videotaped and streamed, that made possible for also those who were not present in the distributed workshops, to watch the presentations afterwards on better time or for others to watch them again, if they wanted. ICT-tools were also used for executing tasks and delivering materials as well as getting help and doing evaluations. In Romania, the Thematic Guide was delivered in CD format to the participants and the training provider had an internet connection available for those who wanted to use it but didn't have the possibility at home.

Guidance and support was available in all three countries, either as face-to-face meetings or through different ICT-tools (e-mail, learning platforms, newsletter).

The "Euracademian" approach for methodology when training adults and the material produced for training animators proved to be applicable also to the training of SMEs in different contexts and also flexible enough to adapt to the local conditions. Learning throughout life is the core issue whether it happens informally, at work, in the networks or in more structured learning situations, and the objects are to improve one's skills and knowledge. The challenge is to make the potential learners aware of it, and to be inspired to use and improve their capacities. When organising learning situations, courses and study programmes, the three principles of the Euracademy methodology give room for different models, but they also invite to experiment or invent

something different and new, hence better meeting the needs and learning styles of those in the adulthood phase of life.

