The eScouts - Intergenerational Learning Circle for Community Service[1]

Introduction

Intergenerational learning proves to be an effective strategy for encouraging responsibility and motivation, providing emotional and social support to various generations, therefore helping them to enjoy a quality life. "The goal of numerous intergenerational programmes is not primarily oriented towards the needs of the young or the needs of the elderly people, but rather towards increasing the quality of community life"[2].

This eScouts project[3] is a good example of transnational partnership (Germany, Spain, Poland, United Kingdom, Italy and Bulgaria) and is featured in the Initiatives database of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2012) on the EUROPA server of the European Union. Intergenerational Learning Circle for Community Service eScouts is aimed at developing an innovative intergenerational learning exchange between elderly and youth volunteers, centred on the development of the digital competences for the eldest and on the guidance to the youngest of how to better face their upcoming adult life challenges, using ICT as a vehicle for the promotion of solidarity and exchange.

This intergenerational experience takes place through a variety of local stakeholder organisations (public internet centres, youth and elderly associations, etc.) with a view of producing a transversal impact over the communities they are serving.

The eScouts project

The Intergenerational Learning in Blended Environments and Spaces (ILBES) methodology is a new approach developed ad hoc for a learning circle in which the youth supports senior people in ICT usage and, in return, seniors mentor youths in their efforts to access to the labour market and to face the challenges of the adult life. It aims to complete a cycle of learning, exchange and conviviality. The teaching and mentoring are mediated by ICT means (social web applications) and Blended Environments and Spaces.

ILBES was developed as part of eScouts and is inspired in two proven learning methodologies, which are combined for the first time - *Community Service Learning* (CSL), aimed to maximize the development of individuals' potential and their active participation to society, and *Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection* (PAAR), which brings together action and reflection[4].

ILBES methodology, as based on certain ethical principles/practices and learning methods, as well as on (informal, comfortable) training settings that enhanced learning exchanges between the participants, has been very effective in giving value to the life and work experiences of the participants and to encourage a sharing process. It has also given proof of the empowerment of the large majority of the participants, regarding their different roles and the expected learning outcomes.

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[1] Slavina Lozanova, Boian Savtchev. Assist Net. Bulgaria

[2] Krašovec S., Kump S. (2010) The Concept of Intergenerational Education and Learning, In: Intergenerational Learning And Education in Later Life, Ličen&Gubalová (Eds), University of Ljubljana

[3] http://www.escouts.eu

[4] http://escouts8.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/escouts-d3-2-methodological-frameworks-harmonisation.pdf

the large majority of the participants, regarding their different roles and the expected learning outcomes.

ILBES methodology is rooted on five principles. The first consists of valuing the space or the environment where the communication is taking place. For example, the youth or elderly centre and the neighborhood where it is placed. The second is the appreciation of the value that participating in eScouts can bring to society. The third and fourth refer to the extent to which youths and seniors feel empowered by their participation in intergenerational activities and by the exchange with other generations. Finally, an ethical dimension guides any eScouts intervention, always looking to produce some kind of societal good.

The expected outcome of ILBES is a community service-oriented action, reflection and learning, i.e. a collaborative process of committed actions and reflective learning for personal and community development, where learning is an effect of experiencing reflectively (CSL does by learning and learns by doing, PAAR acts and reflects to turn negative into positive). In it, social innovation is supported by e-facilitation, social media and user-generated content. Group reflection (done publically, rigorously and systematically) rather than solo self-reflection is promoted, since change and improvement with regard to the starting point of each intervention should be the effect of the collective rather than individual actions and views.

As the local implementation demonstrated later, the basis in terms of training programmes, methods, contents and materials for the "young facilitator developer of intergenerational dialogue" and the "senior mentor developer of intergenerational dialogue" have been set by this methodology after its testing. Motivational levels and satisfaction of the key-training actors have been high[5].

The implementation of the project includes three main phases:

- Train 16-25 year olds to become ICT teachers of the digital excluded elderly, with a "Community Service – Learning" approach.
- Train retired people over 55 to become mentors for the youth to better face work and life challenges.
- Train facilitators of intergenerational learning of each country of the consortium to be the key actors and mediators of those two groups.

Beginning in 2012, the eScouts project team started working on the test phase of its training modules, created for the Intergenerational Learning Exchange programme for social inclusion. Over 500 people from all partner countries (Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Poland, Germany and UK) were involved in this phase of the project, based on the high expertise of consortium members, with their shared awareness of the importance of devising and testing intergenerational learning circles within the community.

Conclusion

The intergenerational learning cycle has mobilized 124 young facilitators and trainers of digital competences in a group of 355 seniors, a selected group of whom acted in the second half of the training cycle, as mentors to the youth in their access to the labour market and the challenges of adult life, completing in this way a cycle of learning, exchange and conviviality.

At the same time, it promotes key-European values and lifelong learning skills: civic and social, digital, learning to learn, cultural awareness and expression, entrepreneurial (in the sense of the spirit of initiative). In general terms, the project is seen as highly innovatory and necessary, given the specific problems that both youths and the seniors experience in nowadays societies and considering the scarcity of educational/discussion activities addressed to both of them.

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[5] http://escouts8.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/escouts-final-publication1.pdf

The eScouts intergenerational learning model doesn't simply shift power from one generation to another (e.g. elderly to youth). It enables the constructive power to act to circulate and flow between generations in a mutually enhancing way.