![IT's social logo]

The project IT's Social! promotes new education approaches in the European Health and Social sector for the training of disadvantage groups.
A number of projects are being developed to help to face the structural change and the introduction of new technologies in the European Health and Social Sector (3rd sector). From April 02 – May 04 the project "IT's Social!" developed new training and education approaches for third sector organisations.

By introducing the ICT as training and communication instruments, the initiatives seek to promote innovative ways of training and to facilitate the access to lifelong learning for disadvantaged people normally being kept out of traditional learning schemes.

Behind these projects, some pertinent questions about the role of e-learning as a useful tool remain open to debate:

- can lifelong learning and communication be enhanced by the ICT?
- Can ICT provide efficient tools to facilitate access to lifelong learning for disadvantaged people?
- Is the internet actually useful for bridging the gaps between traditional learning schemes and lifelong learning initiatives?

By the example of the two-years project that was funded by the EU as a Grundtvig 1 (2001) project, the transnational network partners from 8 organisations from 5 European countries tried to give transferable answers to these questions.

In the framework of "IT's Social!" (the title stands for: "Introduction of the ICT in social sector organisations in Europe") those organisations working in the third sector have been familiarised with modern learning and knowledge management systems. Main focus of the common work of the partner organisations was put on the development of web-based learning sequences that were placed on an open source-based learning platform.

In that the methodological and didactic development and the exchange of experiences regarding the use of the new media (along with the development of the learning platform) represented the main aspects of the project. The learning and communication platform was developed during the first half of the project, was presented as a prototype in November 2002 and has been used and gradually adjusted by the partners.

"Ultimate beneficiaries" of the project are the different groups of disadvantaged persons of the partner organisations, i.e. migrants, handicapped people, sick and

socially disadvantaged people. The project was supposed to give them a better access to modern job and learning environments and to create an appropriate range of learning and information conditions.

Objectives: the improvement of the access to education for different groups of disadvantaged people

Overall objective of the project was the improvement of the access to education for different groups of disadvantaged with the use of additional IT-based learning units. In the centre of the development work there were modular, demand-oriented learning units in the sense of lifelong learning. The improvement of the availability of training units for the disadvantaged was the main objective of the project work. This was to be attained by creating an IT-based information and training platform which was especially designed for the target groups and where specific training and learning modules were provided. This platform, which is free of charge and which can freely be worked on, helped to achieve a further sub-objective: the development and the use of an affordable and manageable instrument for the supervision and education of groups of disadvantaged as well as for institutions of the social economy.

As further sub-objective specific teaching and training units were developed which were particularly adjusted to the individual situation of the disadvantaged and harmonised with the existing training offers. Taking into account the IT-competencies of the target groups, it turned out very fast that only a blended learning approach could have really been efficient. In order to grant an easy implementation of the learning environment and a failure-free use of the system for teachers (tutors/experts/staff members of the supporting and self-help institutions) and participants (disadvantaged) these systems had to be thoroughly introduced and the educating personnel had to be trained and instructed.

Project Results: the combination of presence and IT-based learning units

The project promoted a demand-oriented training approach, in order to support the different target groups and their learners, which enables them to compose their individual training programme. Decisively important for the success of the project were not only the training outcomes (learning platform/curricula and training modules) but also the necessary services regarding the introduction and maintenance of the learning system.

According to those partners who have been working with tele-learning elements for several years IT-based learning units generally represent additional learning offers, i.e. they mainly work in combination with presence units and/or project works and other methodological approaches. In addition to the presence units the project created a multi-media based, interactive and co-operative learning environment for the target groups. This was supposed to be the basis to get into modern working and learning surroundings (familiar surroundings, mixture of learning and doing) for the beneficiaries. Within the learning management system (LMS) the trainers can administer courses as well as teaching and learning modules and can elaborate teaching material and tests. An exchange among participants of a course and trainers was guaranteed by the electronic communication platform of the LMS.

In order to allow a target group and regionally specific comparability fundamental objectives regarding common cross-partner and -group learning targets were defined. Furthermore fundamental methodological approaches for tele-learning in training for trainers were worked out. Here the precise adjustment regarding the combination of presence and IT-based learning units (modules) was of vital importance. These were fixed in a curricular pattern by each partner. The different learning modules were organised in courses. A learning module consists of a description, where applicable a definition of the learning target and concrete tasks. The partners developed learning material (or in cases of more complex animations had them done) and integrated them into the learning modules. The learning modules were then allocated to the respective learning groups and to individual learners.

Our experience has shown that learners with average acknowledge are able to handle the LMS after a 4-hour briefing. Even though the educationalists' area is more complicated, after an intensive workshop, all partners reached a level where they could create learning units despite the fact that none of them was a computer professional. During the last project months all project partners carried out blended learning courses with their target groups on site.

Results, Lessons Learnt and Perspectives

Generally it can be stated that all organisations look favourably upon the fact that learning opportunities were widely extended by the introduction of blended learning. The advantages of a high flexibility (regarding time and place of learning) as well as the use of modern media are in the centre of these judgements. Just to give an example: the central filing of learning modules offers the possibility to the Welsh partner to appoint young mothers as learning assistants who work on the tasks of the learners from their own PC at home. Furthermore, all web-based learning units can be centrally administered, so that they are available in all schools.

Technological challenges were fulfilled entirely, be it problems with Polish letters or the uploading of complex interactive web-sites for learning purposes. With regard to the user-friendliness and ergonomics of the platform there were mostly positive comments. The learners found it easy to get used to the platform and got along well. One basic practical problem (despite all sophisticated ICT) remains: the availability of a PC and an internet connection among the target groups. Therefore, many training units had to be carried out in institutions with PC-equipment. This is particularly serious for older learners. But here a positive side-effect could be noticed as older people got an approach to computers because it dealt with problems particularly concerning them. In these cases as well the user-friendliness of the LMS had positive effects for its acceptance.

An interesting result refers to the degree of development of the learning objects. In the preliminary stages it was assumed that the motivation of the learners is extremely good if an utmost amount of multi-media material is used. For this reason the French partner MSPB developed (with much programming effort) a flash animation about the right lifting of an older person. Even though this animation was praised by the learners it didn't initiate a particular motivation for learning. In comparison, the learners particularly liked relatively simple tests with multiple choice and open questions, as this real interactivity with quick feedback means an important element

for motivation, supposed it is used in a good didactic approach. This example showed very clearly that in Blended Learning Environments it's not the multimedia technique that shows the maximum learning success.

Conception and Development of Learning Modules and Objects

The elaboration of learning objects represents the work package with the widest range regarding effects and effort for teachers or tele-tutors. Of course at first sight it is "more interesting" to develop a fully animated simulation for a learning module than to work with texts or PowerPoint presentations (which, by the way, were the latest fashion not long ago). But it is a big mistake to think that the learning success and quality increase with the use of multimedia techniques.

We have noticed that a computer-based learning unit doesn't have to be expensive, for it is possible to develop demanding and effective learning modules with simple means. Therefore a good didactic concept and a careful planning of training modules is decisive during the conception phase. Here it is possible to save costs and ascertain the success of the learning unit. This certainly is good news for organisations working on the social sector, who are now able to create a professional knowledge management with short funds.

Evaluation

The external evaluation of the project results by the Pedagogical Seminary of the Georg-August University in Goettingen stresses the experiences made by the partner organisations: The e-learning units were well accepted by the learners. The objective to facilitate the access to lifelong learning by offering modern learning and knowledge management systems to different groups of disadvantaged people was fully achieved. As a side effect, the beneficiaries acquired basic IT-competencies which will improve their occupational outlook. Some people, who had never worked with a computer before, felt more self-confident.

It was shown that particularly in the target groups of the partner organisations, learners' guidance and monitoring was of vital importance. The phases of presence learning lasted to a large extent longer than expected and also in the computer based learning process the direct contact with a tutor or trainer was elementary. e-Learning offers a great autonomy in the learning process, which is the undisputed advantage of this methodology, but is has to be learnt. Learning Monitoring, the communication among learners and trainers and a feedback from the trainers proved very important for the success and the satisfaction of the learners.

In short, for this target groups the blended learning approach seems to be the most suitable. All partners expressed the desire to continue the development of their training units because of the positive experiences with the learners. The results so far have rather the character of pilot studies, since the learning groups were small, but show however that e-learning or blended learning represents a large development potential in the social and health care sector. There still is a lack of systematic evaluation of such measures and standards are missing which could give orientation to future projects. IT´s Social! can thus be considered a pioneer in this field, if it concerns the development of guidelines for the realisation of e-learning courses, their

dissemination and marketing.

IT's Social has shown that ICT provide efficient tools to facilitate access to lifelong learning for disadvantaged people and can be very useful for formal and informal learning processes. It is especially important for 3rd system stakeholders to state that this can be done for very reasonable prices or even with instruments free of charge (Open Sourc Software). The message is not to waste money in expensive licences but to train the trainers adequately to achieve the best results. A professional didactic blended learning approach and a good realisation of a course that also guarantees both a direct contact to a tutor or trainer and the communication among learners are evident for a successful learning process. Actually, blended learning courses (either for training or consulting purposes) have the potential to become at least a meaningful addition to traditional learning schemes in the social and health care sector.

The partners
BUPNET lt., Goettingen; Paritaetischer Wohlfahrtsverband, Göttingen (Charity); Sure Start Health Development Team, NHS, Swansea, Wales, UK; Maison de Santé Protestante de Bagatelle, Talence, Bordeaux, France; ALJ, Association pour le Logement des Jeunes, Paris, France; Gutwinski Management GmbH, Vienna, Austria; Imago Mundi, Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy; SKU, Stowarzyszenie na Rzecz Kształcenia Ustawicznego, Kattowitz, Poland.