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The Xploit Mission

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July 2011

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SUMMARY

After a decade of developing lifelong learning initiatives and projects, the European Commission launched new actions in 2008 and 2009 focusing on the exploitation of available European lifelong learning resources.

The idea was to promote cooperation projects not developing new learning approaches, but developing sustainable platforms for exploitation and valorisation of existing resources, being produced within the lifelong learning actions or elsewhere. An important element in this exploitation strategy was, and still is, to establish infrastructures of communication and collaboration in the communities capable of capturing, implementing and mainstreaming such resources.
The 3 year Xploit project is addressing this challenge at systematic level, including a meta-dimension that monitors and describes how such infrastructures are built and maintained.

The project is put into operation in four communities in different countries: Swansea UK, Iasi RO, Salt Catalonia ES and Udine IT. There are two Xploit partners in each of these communities, a political partner representing the local authority, and a lifelong learning partner offering access to a variety of educational environments. Partners from Hungary and Austria have quality assurance tasks in the project, and the project coordinator is from Denmark.

The Xploit approach follows three steps:
- step one is to analyse community learning needs and produce a strong Community Profile, establishing solid community networks in the process
- step two consists in a long double action phase, interrupted by a time-out reflection period, in which learning resources will be exploited or created to meet the community needs. During this period new infrastructures of lifelong learning and European involvement will be established
- step three is the production of useful learning communities material, models and resources in support of the establishment of learning communities across Europe.

The pre-condition for the exploitation of European learning resources is the existence of infrastructures of communication and collaboration between a number of stakeholders in a community, representing different sectors such as the local authorities, the educational world as well as the labour markets.

The development of a community into a learning community in the Xploit perspective is therefore based on the interaction between the exploitation and capturing of European learning resources and the step-by-step establishment of new infrastructures in the community.

The Xploit approach to a learning community is a bottom-up approach: people, citizens and institutions close to the community's key learning needs should be involved in the establishment of new lifelong learning infrastructures.

The initiatives must be endorsed by and offer space from the local political stakeholders, as they are in the Xploit communities, but the bottom-up approach seems to be the most efficient and sustainable way to build up a learning community.

Project Objectives

The simple but ambitious objectives of the Xploit project is to offer models and inspiration to communities across Europe interested in a more systematic approach to European lifelong learning resources, to establish sustainable and mainstreamed lifelong learning cooperation infrastructures and to develop into a learning community.

The Xploit models and inspiration is based on practical experience from four different communities in four different countries.
Instead of developing yet another theory or vision on learning cities, the Xploit models and inspiration is extracted from three years of learning community practice in these four communities.

Therefore an overarching objective in the Xploit project is to transform the community processes into models, tools and documentation useful to other European communities. Three out of eleven project partners are focusing on the descriptions of the community meta-processes.

The project implementation can therefore be described as a dialectic movement between learning community practice and learning community reflection, leading to useful outputs not simply based on theoretical models.
The project's process tools and documentation, including multimedia documentation, will along the project be transformed into products freely available from the project website.

At the same time the Xploit project is establishing network collaboration with European projects, resource centres, cities and policy-makers in and beyond Europe. The objective is to establish a network of stakeholders and forums to submit a network application on learning communities in 2012 or 2013.

Project Approach

The Xploit approach to exploitation and valorisation is based on long-standing experiences in the field of mainstreaming European learning resources: it is extremely difficult to exploit and mainstream European learning resources, unless solid and dynamic infrastructures of lifelong learning communication and collaboration can capture such resources, put them into practice and turn them into permanent community provisions.

On the other hand, such infrastructures are not likely to be established and put into operation, unless governed by practical activities analyzing and meeting the concrete learning needs of the citizens, especially disadvantaged groups of citizens. Therefore the Xploit project developed and put into practice a specific methodology capable of producing such a dynamic interaction: addressing concrete learning needs and establishing new infrastructures of lifelong learning cooperation.

In most communities across Europe such capacity does not exist. The community needs competences, European awareness and innovative approaches to be able to work with lifelong learning and European cooperation at systematic level.

It might very well, seen from the Xploit perspective, take 5-10 years for a community to establish efficient learning community infrastructures.

The Xploit methodology can be described as a step-by-step approach:

- First, political support and interest is ensured, as this justifies the development of new initiatives in the community
- Second, a group of key stakeholders are established to identify the most important short-term and long-term learning needs in the community
- Third, a community platform is produced, offering a sort of "program" for the first community initiatives
- Fourth, the identified learning needs are met by capturing available European and other learning resources, by exploiting European and other funding opportunities, and by establishing larger networks in the community (including groups of active citizens)
- Fifth, these activities are documented and turned into learning experiences, based on which further steps can be taken, using the same approach

As in a spiral, this approach and these steps can be repeated at higher level, resulting in still stronger infrastructures of communication and collaboration as well as positive experience from the many practical initiatives.

In support of the Xploit activities in the communities and of the establishment of sustainable learning community infrastructures, the Xploit project decided to offer transnational and local training of a number of community players to act as Learning Community Guides.

Project Outcomes & Results

The concrete outcomes of the project will be the final elaboration of the Xploit website into a resource centre for exploitation of European lifelong learning resources, the development of lifelong learning infrastructures in the community and the step-by-step establishment of a learning community.

The final web resource centre will offer guidance, experience, documentation and networking opportunities in text as well as multimedia formats. Documentation of the project activities are produced all along the project duration and will form the raw material for the final web based outcomes.

A number of reader-friendly short-papers will be produced in printed versions along with small hand-out appetizers referring to the short-papers and the web resources. Different learning community cases and models will be offered.

At local level, the project will result in new and sustainable exploitation and valorisation infrastructures, linked to the ongoing development of lifelong learning infrastructures.

A very important, and not quite foreseen, result of the project is linked to the many spin-off initiatives in the Xploit communities, to a large extent simply based on the existence of Xploit in the communities and the many activities linked to the project. New challenges are met, new initiatives taken and even new funding initiatives developed, and most of the spin-off initiatives are closely linked to the exploitation of European resources.

If this spin-off activity is continued throughout the project duration, and into the network to follow, the communities have taken some major steps towards becoming learning communities.

At European level the Xploit project has initiated a series of collaborations with other European projects and forums addressing the challenges of a learning community, with learning cities across and beyond Europe, as well as with learning cities resource persons.

The project is continuously working to qualify these network initiatives, and they resulting network resources are expected to play a major role in the production of the learning communities network application to follow the Xploit project.

The special Xploit contribution to this networking is linked to the promotion of bottom-up approaches, the focus on disadvantaged citizens and their learning needs, as well as on the sustainability of the new infrastructures, including the competence development of local community players.

Partnership and networks

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The four Xploit communities
Xploit is put into practice in four very different communities across Europe. The communities are different in all major respects, and this diversity offers Xploit a rich experience in the field of developing learning communities.
In each of the communities there are two Xploit partners, the local authority and a lifelong learning organisation.
The four communities are approaching the Xploit mission in very different ways, as they represent very different traditions and realities. They are typical examples of the very different communities across the European Union. The final Xploit outcomes will benefit from this diversity. Pre-defined pathways to becoming a learning community do not exist.
Though very different, all the four communities aim to take important steps towards the establishment of sustainable infrastructures for the capturing of European learning resources and for a systematic approach to lifelong learning in the community, in short: towards becoming a learning community, or to further qualify existing learning communities.
Unlike the term *Learning City*, the term *Learning Community* offers a flexible approach to very different traditions and realities: a community in Xploit might mean a small or mid-sized city, it might mean a sector in the community, or it might mean a special community within the city community at large.
The development processes of learning communities can be very different. Each community should start the process in environments with a capacity and motivation to be the learning community driver.
In all cases, it is important that the activities and initiatives are endorsed by the local authorities. In Xploit the local authorities in the four implementing communities support the project and its missions at all levels.

Brief outline of the different approaches:

The Swansea UK approach
Xploit interaction with and learning from established infrastructures
Reflections on the quality and impact of high-level lifelong learning infrastructures and the meaning of learning communities
Practical interaction with focused learning or youth partnerships
Focus on European dimension of the learning communities
Focus on the dynamics of Community Centers for lifelong learning
Innovation in education, entrepreneurship and creative technology

The Udine IT approach
Xploit interaction to help establish basic lifelong learning infrastructures at high level and with strong sustainability, directly linked to European cooperation
Focus on learning from the development of such infrastructures at city level
Focus on coordination, cooperation and sustainability
Practical interaction with well-defined lifelong learning initiatives, based on Italian values
Competence development of local staff expected to be the drivers of the learning community and new lifelong learning initiatives

The Salt Catalonia ES approach
Xploit interaction to help establish basic lifelong learning infrastructures at medium level
Focus on coordination, cooperation and sustainability
Practical interaction with existing and new lifelong learning initiatives, especially targeting disadvantaged groups of citizens including migrants
Support the integration of a European dimension in all initiatives
Competence development of local staff expected to be the drivers of the learning community and new lifelong learning initiatives
Focus on the dynamics of Community Centers for lifelong learning

A strong focus on the establishment of sustainable lifelong learning and cross-sector networks in the city

The Iasi RO approach
Xploit interaction to support the establishment and dynamics of new lifelong learning infrastructures and networking within the educational community in Iasi
Strong focus on the establishment of a learning community within a large educational network in the city
Focus on coordination, cooperation and sustainability
Support the integration of a European dimension in all initiatives
Competence development of local staff expected to be the drivers of the learning community and new lifelong learning initiatives

Evaluation and quality assurance

The important evaluation and quality assurance activities in Xploit are managed by die Berater from Austria, an organisation with long-standing experience in European cooperation and quality assurance.
The Xploit project will be evaluated on the following key topics:
Effectiveness of project coordination
Partner involvement
Role of political partners
Impact on the learning communities
Impact of media work
Sustainability perspective
Quality management and evaluation

Special mirroring and learning community partner

Besides taking active part in evaluation and quality assurance, the Hungarian partner from the City of Nagykovácsi will play the special role of a "mirroring" community in the Xploit project. As the Xploit project aims to provide models and inspiration for learning communities across Europe, it is important to evaluate during the project implementation itself the relevance and usability of the Xploit offers. This activity is called a "mirroring" activity, anticipating the post-project impact capacity of the Xploit outcomes.
During the project's first phases, the Nagykovácsi community developed interests in the project beyond the special roles, also at political level, and this means that the community is moving closer to being a fifth learning community in the project.
The Nagykovácsi community has a special focus on the role of entrepreneurship, living labs and the participation of private enterprises. This focus is considered very important in the Xploit project, as true learning communities should include the private sector. Learning communities are not merely a "public" concern.

Promoter and coordinator

Xploit is promoted and coordinated by the Aarhus Social and Health CareCollege in Denmark. The organisation has long-standing experience in developing and managing European projects and networks and is continuously contributing to the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Program by taking new initiatives within the Leonardo, Grundtvig, Comenius and Transversal actions.
The organisation is supporting the development of new European initiatives addressing the learning needs of the Xploit communities.

PROJECT NETWORKING

GENERAL
The Xploit networking approach is based on the assumption that empty networking makes little sense in the over-information society.
Therefore the Xploit project is focusing on the establishing of strong local Xploit teams and networks in the first half of the project.
In the second half, the project will be able to offer interesting and useful input, and will expand the European networking activities accordingly.
Besides practicing general networking and dissemination, the project will offer three concrete perspectives for networking partners across Europe:
- two open workshops at European level to discuss exploitation of European learning resources and challenges involved in developing learning communities
- learning community guide training for interested communities, based on a shared-cost approach
- invitation to collaborate on a network application addressing the need for a strong coordination of learning communities at European level

FOCUSED
The Xploit project is collaborating with a number of relevant European projects, forums, experts and with learning cities beyond Europe.
Examples of this focused networking are:

- Collaboration and exchange of experience and methodologies with the highly respected learning cities expert Norman Longworth.
  http://eurolocal.info/profile/professor-norman-longworth
  Norman Longworth participates and benefit from key Xploit events, as well as the Xploit project participates in key events in Longworth's learning cities networks.
- Collaboration with the Transversal LECIM project addressing migrants' inclusion in learning communities.
  http://lecim.ciofs-fp.org/default.asp?p=homeLECIM
  Xploit partners take part in LECIM events and the Xploit coordinator has received a grant from the LECIM project to a study visit in the learning city of Catania in Italy.
- Collaboration with the EUROlocal, reinforcing the EC policy on lifelong learning regions by collecting the tools, strategies, learning materials, reports and everything concerned with their development
  http://eurolocal.info
- Exchanging knowledge and experience with the Learning Regions Net
  http://www.learning-regions.net
  The Mission of the network is: Learning Regions and Cities have become a widely adopted concept in European education policies. Due to the different departures and pathways each of them has developed domain specific knowledge, in the area of social capital building, regarding good governance and institution building, stakeholder collaboration, public-private partnerships and transversal cooperation. R3L+ capitalizes on this diversity by bringing together actors from the respective countries in order to learn from each other and jointly elaborate a common quality framework for collaborative action.
- Long-term cooperation with the first official learning city in Israel, the City of Modi'in.
  http://www.xploit-eu.com/networking/modiin.html
  Xploit partners carried through a study visit to the learning city of Modi'in and the key person in establishing the city as a learning city takes part in most transnational Xploit events and activities. At national level it is decided that Modi'in will be the role model for another five learning cities in Israel, and the Xploit project is invited to dialogue with and learn from the Israeli stakeholders along this process.

Plans for the Future

At local level the Xploit partners intend to sustain and support the established infrastructures, networks and initiatives in the four Xploit communities by including the communities in the European network of learning communities following the Xploit project.
This will be done through active inclusion in the European network, through the exploitation of European lifelong learning funding opportunities (new projects with the participation of the communities and focusing on the most important learning needs in the communities) and through supporting further initiatives, such as bridging to the private sector and linking to social corporate responsibility programs.

Many spin-off initiatives have resulted from the Xploit activities in the communities. The project and the key project partners will offer resources to the further development of such initiatives, including the proper funding. Many of the spin-off initiatives are very useful to other learning communities and will be disseminated in the wide networks of the key Xploit partners. A solid cooperation between the Xploit communities after the termination of the project, and beyond the learning communities' network, is most likely to take place.

Nevertheless the overarching mission of the post-Xploit initiatives is to establish a strong and qualified European network of learning communities working on the basis of the bottom up approach. This bottom up approach can be defined as:
Within a framework of political endorsement and provision of action space, the learning community builds on the needs, resources, direct participation and interests of groups of citizens with strong learning needs and on the organisations working with these groups of citizens.

The network is expected to be funded by the Lifelong Learning Program for a 3 year period, during which a sustainability strategy will be developed, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the network independent of EU funding.
The network strategy will be carried out in the second half of the Xploit project and in close collaboration with the project's EU networking partners. A strong network application to be submitted in 2012 or 2013 will result from this activity.

The network application and project will put a strong focus on the participation of the private and social sectors in the development of learning communities.
Furthermore the network will be concerned with entrepreneurship initiatives as an alternative to formal education, as the future growth of the European labour markets will depend on creativity, innovation and risk-taking.

Contribution to EU policies

The Xploit project is contributing to a large number of European policies; both in itself and through the many spin-off initiatives established in the communities.

The Xploit project is especially contributing to two overarching European policies:
- The exploitation and valorisation of the wide range of European lifelong learning resources produced under the Lifelong Learning Program and earlier as well as parallel programs
- The establishment of sustainable mainstreaming infrastructures in the communities to capture and implement such learning resources, thus taking the communities to a learning community level

Through its many community activities and networking activities the Xploit project is at the same time contributing to a large number of key European policies, such as:
- Including a strong European dimension in the communities' lifelong learning approaches
- Approaching lifelong learning at a systematic and sustainable level
- Providing suitable learning provisions for disadvantaged citizens, such as drop-out youth and unemployed adults
- Migrants' inclusion in the communities and their access to lifelong learning
- Competence development of public authority staff as to European cooperation and lifelong learning provision
- Promoting cross-sector cooperation in lifelong learning
- Promoting the creative use of ICT and media in non-formal and formal settings
- Promoting creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet the challenges of the future European labour markets

Furthermore, the Xploit project is contributing to the new European policy of including third countries directly in the project consortia. The Xploit project as well as its spin-off initiatives are establishing solid collaboration with different third countries, such as the US, Israel and Switzerland.
There are serious plans in the Xploit networks to take steps to establish project cooperation with Russia and Sub-Saharan African countries.

Learning communities - learning cities?

In recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in the interest in "Learning Cities" across Europe and even worldwide.
There are more than a hundred cities in Germany titled "Learning City", and in China all cities are called learning cities.

Many networks have been created to discuss, define and support the development of "Learning Cities", some of them based in the European Union.
In general we have seen a tremendous increase in the use of the word "learning". If we put "learning" in front of another word, we are on the right track.

No doubt, many of the stakeholders in these fields are highly qualified and seriously contributing to the development of true learning cities and to important networks.
Nevertheless the Xploit project is concerned about the rhetoric of "learning cities" as such rhetoric seems to inflate many positive initiatives in our modern and globalized times.
For instance, often the celebration of being a learning city goes hand in hand with dramatic cuts in the budgets of non-formal education. And, in many cases the participation of citizens in need of new learning provisions are only symbolic.
The development of a city or a community into a learning city or community is a very complicated matter. It might take decades, as it challenges centuries of traditional public and industrial thinking.

What is needed, to avoid the total inflation of the name "learning city", is clear value-based criteria for a learning city, not academic criteria, but criteria linked to visible changes in the community with clear impacts.
In other words, we need to describe learning cities in the language of "learning outcomes".
Not: how many meetings were organized, but: what changes are visible in the community, meeting the cities and the citizens' learning, cultural and employment needs. What can the citizens and the city do that they could not do before?

The Xploit project wish to contribute to a bottom up approach, in which the development of a learning community is based on practice and on the direct involvement of all levels of the community, especially the citizens in need of change.
The Xploit project is designed to demonstrate models of how steps can be taken towards becoming a learning community based on the infrastructures and collaboration resulting from practical lifelong learning initiatives, involving all levels of stakeholders and "users".

Such processes are expected to be much more time-consuming and complicated than declaring a city a "learning city".
Nevertheless the outcomes of such processes are expected to far more solid and sustainable than political declarations, also because the bottom up approach includes the empowerment and politicisation of the citizens in need of change and new learning and labour market opportunities.

Therefore the Xploit project uses the term "learning communities" and allows a very flexible interpretation of this term, such as a part of a city, a sector, a suburb, a migrant community, etc. A big city might very well consist in many learning communities, and a true Learning City should build on the energies and activities in such learning communities.