XPLOIT IN EVORA PORTUGAL

[An Xploit Action Phase exploitation initiative]

The EU Xploit project aims to develop new
collaborative lifelong learning infrastructures in
communities working to develop into learning
communities – by exploiting and linking to European
resources.
The project experiments with the establishments of
such infrastructures in 5 partner countries, but also
seeks to use and exploit its concepts and
approaches in other European communities.
Therefore the project visited the community of
Evora in Portugal on the 8th and 9th of March 2012.

Xploit coordinator
March 2012

www.xploit-eu.com

Contact: Jan Gejel on jan.gejel@skolekom.dk

The Xploit project contributes at different levels to the development of learning communities
〉 By establishing new infrastructures of lifelong learning in 5 partner cities
〉 By studying learning communities in other European cities, such as Catania in Italy
〉 By collaborating with European projects with similar objectives, such as EuroLocal, and European learning communities resources, such as Norman Longworth
〉 By contributing to the development of learning cities in non-EU countries, such as the national learning cities initiative in Israel
〉 By dialoguing with global networks on learning cities, such as the Pascal Observatory and Peter Kearns from Australia

However, one of the most important activities of the Xploit project is to exploit its own resources and collaborate with European cities who have not in any way been involved in the development of learning communities. Xploit must demonstrate its value through supporting and guiding European communities with an interest in becoming a learning community, based on the community's needs and visions.
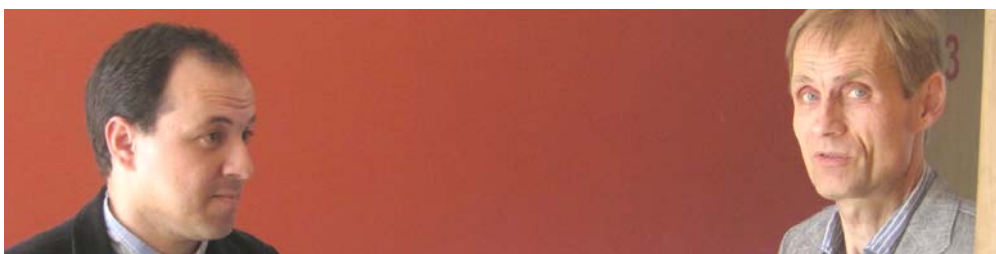
The overall aim of the Xploit visit to Evora in March 2012 was to establish dialogues with a group of institutions in Evora interested in lifelong learning, European cooperation and the taking new educational and social initiatives in the community.
Through the dedicated efforts of an "old" partner in Evora Mrs. Isabel Mira, a teacher at a secondary school in Evora, contacts were established during a 6 months period to a group of institutions in Evora interested in developing closer links to European cooperation and resources.

The following institutions participated in these dialogues:
Escola Secundária Gabriel Pereira
Agrupamento de Escolas nº 2-André de Resende de Évora
Fundação Eugénio de Almeida
Projecto "Programa Integrado de Educação e Formação"
Associação de Paralisia Cerebral de Évora
Chão de Meninos
Maio Associação pela Igualdade

More institutions expressed an interest in the initiative, but were not able to be present at the dialogues. These institutions are likely to be willing to participate when further steps are taken.
As further steps are taken, the local authorities will be involved as well.

The Xploit visit to Evora should be regarded a classic case of exploitation of European learning community resources, as no attempts were made in Evora to discuss or establish initiatives leading to a learning community.
The dialogues between the Xploit project and the Evora community are therefore extremely interesting as to approach, aims and objectives:
How can a community take the first steps to develop into a learning city in collaboration with European lifelong learning resources?

The Xploit project approached to Evora community with the following challenges:
〉 What are the needs and interests of the community today and in the near future as to lifelong learning and social innovation?
〉 How do you see your community in 5 to 10 years from now?
〉 How can you use European resources to take the steps you wish to take?
It is important to notice that the dialogues were based on the needs and the interests of the community, not on a pre-fabricated agenda from the Xploit project.

How did the Xploit project approach the Evora community?
Through a very simple bottom-up approach.
The basic idea was not to contact the local authorities and ask them to develop the city into a learning community!!
Such a formal and top-down approach does not work according to the learning community principles of the Xploit project.

Therefore a 5 step bottom-up approach was used:
1. The project established a dialogue with individuals from Evora who had been involved in different forms of European cooperation years ago, and who had strong personal networks in the community, in the educational sector in particular
2. The Evora contacts were asked to try to form a group of people and institutions with an interest in taking new and more systematic steps towards European cooperation, and to arrange a two day meeting with this group in Evora
3. The group was established and briefings carried out about the upcoming dialogues
4. The dialogues were carried out in Evora with good results and a mutual understanding
5. The first steps will be taken to expand the network, to develop a mutual platform of collaboration with European resources, and to involve Evora institutions in concrete European activities in connection with the early 2013 Call

The further steps include mobility, study visits, local workshops on European cooperation and participation in European lifelong learning projects.
When the Evora network has been consolidated, further stakeholders – including the local authorities – will be invited to participate.

The institutions participating in this first Evora network were educations and institutions working in the social and health fields.

This is not a surprise since these institutions are very close to the citizens' social and educational needs.

Several participating institutions were engaged in educational and social projects and innovation, also at transnational level. However no attempts had been made to take these experiences to a more systematic level in the community.

How can we characterize the Evora community?

The city is a World Heritage City and therefore to some degree a tourist destination.

The city attracts people interested in culture, tradition, architecture and art, but the city cannot live from its touristic activities.

The city was in the old days well-known for a flourishing art and culture life, as well as for the farming traditions in the Alentejo region, but today the city faces many severe challenges, and it is obvious to most stakeholders that new ideas and new perspectives must be created.

Of course the economic situation in the Mediterranean countries is not making the situation any better.

Let's briefly pinpoint some of the most important challenges and resources in the Evora community.

Challenges are for example:
〉 Closing and no emerging labor markets
〉 No new "markets" in sight
〉 Many old people not involved in community work
〉 Evora is a difficult place to live for disabled citizens for many reasons
〉 Young people including graduated students leave the city to find a job and a life in the bigger cities, or abroad
〉 An ongoing flow of people coming to the city and leaving the city, not representing clear patterns
〉 Quite strong educational opportunities for young people, but poor job perspectives
〉 Very few entrepreneurship initiatives
〉 Recession in many sectors
〉 The "feeling" and "belonging" to the community is slowly disappearing, few new initiatives taken
〉 Social and educational needs in many families
〉 Educational, social and community innovation not visible
〉 The community has no visible technology and media profile
〉 Traditionalism is quite strong among citizens, organizations and authorities
〉 Weak links to Europe and to European cooperation and exchange
〉 The private sector seems to be invisible in the local lifelong learning initiatives

Resources are for example:
〉 World Heritage City
〉 Strong and valuable traditions in art and culture

- ⟩ A variety of educational offers at all levels
- ⟩ Many strong and creative teachers and art workers
- ⟩ Some European experience
- ⟩ Dedicated NGO's working for social innovation, including for disabled children and adults
- ⟩ An open and interested health sector
- ⟩ Examples of lifelong learning for women, elderly and new-comers
- ⟩ Examples of solid cross-sector collaboration between health and education
- ⟩ Examples of creative and promising projects and initiatives in the educational sector, especially in kindergartens, primary and secondary school
- ⟩ A general openness towards European collaboration, including mobility of people and exchange of ideas and experience

RECOMENDATIONS

These are just examples of challenges and resources.
It is strongly recommended that the new Evora network uses the Xploit Community Profile tool to analyze needs and interests in details – and to draw a picture of the community.

What are the next steps?
During the first Evora dialogues it was agreed that the new Evora team or network will carry through a debate on the perspectives and opportunities in a more systematic approach to European cooperation, and to use European resources to inject innovation in the different community sectors.
In case the Evora team decides to take further steps in collaborating with the Xploit project and with other European initiatives, the next steps might be:

- ⟩ A consolidation of the new network in Evora, including institutions not present in the dialogues in March
- ⟩ A workshop in Evora in May or June to go into more details with the community needs and interests and how to link those to European resources, including different funding opportunities
- ⟩ A workshop in Evora in September or October planning the European involvements in connection with new applications and partnerships addressing the early 2013 Call
- ⟩ Follow-up activities early 2013

It is suggested by the Xploit resources that all the steps include a double vision:
Integrating the discussions of Evora as a learning community in the concrete European collaboration steps.
The balance between building up the community network in Evora and taking concrete European steps can be very powerful.

In support of the further debates among the stakeholders in Evora, we feel it is appropriate to put forth some elements of a vision on Evora as a learning community.
In other words: if Evora should develop into a learning community, which important long-term challenges can be foreseen in the present situation?

RECOMENDATIONS

Build strong open bottom-up networks between interested stakeholders and organizations, including the private sector to provide a platform for change and innovation

Establish solid relations to public authorities without leaving the initiatives to the public authorities

Include groups of active citizens (elderly, women, students) in the network

Develop ideas for balances between old and new in the city

Make the city attractive for young people, also graduated young people

Put a strong focus on entrepreneurship, opening up new markets and work opportunities

Develop very strong links to Europe and to other communities in a similar situation

Establish a community centre to allow the meeting of many different activities, for innovation, entrepreneurship and for European cooperation

Exploit all available local, national and especially European resources and funding opportunities (Social Fund, Regional Funds, and programs in the fields of education, active citizenship, social care and health)

Empower a few persons in the network to manage initiatives, collaboration and fundraising

Develop a strong technology and media profile of the community, perhaps in collaboration with strong technology sponsors

Create a strong sense of ownership and participation to the initiatives among all citizens!!

All this is just elements of a vision. Things take TIME, and the most important thing is to take realistic steps, one by one. However, it is often very helpful to develop visions as a guiding light when discussing the future initiatives in a community.