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EFacilitators: Functional Hybrids between ICT Teaching and Community Management

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1. Background: need for active eInclusion

This article deals with the rise of a new profession of social workers at the interjunction of ICT teaching and community management and addresses the need for eInclusion support in Europe.

The term "eInclusion" analytically comprises two distinct perspectives: Firstly, eInclusion is understood as the challenge to guide people to the digital world and the promotion of digital literacy as one key to "innovation and the sustainability of the socio-economic ecosystem of our society" (see Gdansk Roadmap for Digital Inclusion 2011). Secondly, eInclusion can be understood as the approach to integrate especially disadvantaged people and vulnerable target groups into society with the help of digital media, for example by promoting employability, key competences, social participation and quality of life. Third sector organizations play a key role in this field of work (Haché 2011). In the following, we will refer to eInclusion in both meanings: We will describe an approach to link disadvantaged people and those at risk of exclusion to the digital and non-digital society by activities of Telecentres and especially eFacilitators, a job profile for social workers, working in Telecentres.

While the last few years have seen a growing interest in eInclusion policies (i2010, Riga Declaration 2006, the EU Ministerial eInclusion Conference in Vienna 2008) considering ICT as a vehicle for personal development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability, regions and countries still face the challenge of a broadening gap between people that have access and – more important – the skills to use ICT and those who are excluded from the "digital world" – either by lack of ICT means, skills or motivation. This gap is crucial for social cohesion and economic development on a regional as well as European level, as a lack of digital participation will affect social cohesion, individual chances and the development of local labour markets and communities. Communities (e.g. regional/local communities, migrant communities) or target groups (e.g. elderly people, women in family phase) that lose touch with the development of the digital society are at risk of exclusion from the world of employment, education and participation. A competent and responsible use of the internet, of web 2.0 opportunities and corresponding learning environments have already become an important basic qualification for European learners, both in social life and in the professional context.

Recent research in the discourse of digital divide agrees that the causes for digital exclusion in Europe have shifted in the last decade: While the discussion in the 1990ies and early 2000ies was concerned about access to ICT, researchers and policy now are regarding the competence of ICT usage as the main challenge for an inclusive digital society. Policy models in the 1990ies were aiming at providing broadband access and "internet for all" (Kubicek/Welling 2000) by fostering infrastructure investments and supplying free internet access for target groups that were threatened from exclusion. Figures on actual access rates to the internet, ICT devices and broadband coverage today show a high availability throughout Europe (Eurostat 2012). But whilst the access seems to be well covered, the usage is a main concern for an inclusive Europe. On the "Digital Agenda Scoreboard" (European Commission 2011) for 2011, the two key performance targets with the lowest scoring in comparison to the target year 2015 are: "60% Internet use by disadvantaged groups" and "25% of citizens using e-government and returning Forms". ICT usage and especially usage by disadvantaged persons are still a matter of concern.

In tradition of the knowledge gap hypothesis (Tichenor et al 1970), different research strands have unfolded certain usage gaps that fracture between socio-demographic groups: The use of ICT devices is influenced by gender (gender gap), age (generation gap) and education (education gap). While these theories state that the use of ICT and its potential benefits is depending on the socio-demographic background of the users, Norris (2001) investigates on the purposes that people use ICT for political participation (democratic divide). If we suppose that the use of ICT can improve life chances in the digital societies, new inequalities may arise at the capability to use ICT (Zillien/Hargatti 2009).

Most recent research has adopted Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus-Capital theory (Bourdieu 1983) to the digital divide discourse. Dudenhöffer and Meyen (2012) show that the user's Habitus Capital (in the meaning of Bourdieu

including economic, social, symbolic and cultural prepositions) is influencing the way that individuals are using ICT. This connection challenges eInclusion policy: If persons with a high Habitus Capital are taking more advantage from ICT than those with lower prepositions, ICT will even broaden societal gaps in digital societies. Van Dijk (2005) even sees a spiral process of exclusion, because the accumulation of ICT competence seems to be faster for individuals with sufficient resources than for disadvantaged persons.

2. Approach: need for a new professional profile

Kluzer and Rissola (2009) argue that disadvantaged persons need special support structures on their way into the digital society. These support structures have to be customised for the special needs of different groups of disadvantages persons and have to consider their special life situations and challenges. In recent projects the authors have assembled diverse tools to these support structures – taking Telecentres and public internet centres (PICs) as a starting point for further development of needed eInclusion instruments. Telecentres are public institutions where people (sometime without private ICT and internet access, but mostly seeking for social embedment of their ICT use) have the possibility to access the internet as well as a variety of learning opportunities in a "low barrier environment". Easy-to-use software helps „digital illiterates" catch up with demands set by the labour market and the contemporary way of life. New learning opportunities which often reflect local and regional needs for action are created for special target groups.

Telecentres are publicly funded, the users are supported by facilitators and the Telecentre does not only support ICT-skills, but sees individual ICT-skills embedded in the development of a local community. In this context, web 2.0 applications are a promising approach to empower users with low ICT-skills to communicate, cooperate and collaborate on the internet with other people and so find a connection to the digital world. Our work comprises both concrete good practice implementation and policy recommendations development, in line with the core objective of Europe's Digital Agenda which is the "Digital Revolution for All". From different angles, our work contributes to the development of Telecentres as inclusion catalysts by addressing the professionalization of their personnel, key competences curricula for vulnerable groups, and intergenerational learning cycles promoting civic culture and social cohesion. In three projects we have tested and implemented constructivist learning arrangements, often on the basis of web 2.0 applications, which are set to empower the learner by introducing user generated content (see Kaletka & Pelka 2010).

The adoption and up scaling usage of innovations (like mediation of ICT skills) follows some patters that have been described by diffusion theories (Rogers 2003). If we follow Rogers in his analysis that the diffusion of innovations can be supported by professional change agents, we can employ his model of innovation diffusion to the support of eInclusion by creating change agents that fulfill the task of bringing acceptance and competences to target groups. Rogers points out that change agents need a high level of professionalism, as the connection between an innovation and its usage is a complex process.

In a strand of three EU-funded projects, the authors have been working on improving the profile of employees working on Telecentres. We call them "eFacilitators", as their profile comprises tasks in the fields of ICT ("e") and facilitation of individual and group learning processes. National research and comparative cross-country analysis illustrate how diverse the professional profiles of eFacilitators actually are, and how important the acknowledgement of this diversity for all professionalization efforts. As a result, four typical eFacilitator profiles were identified:

Level 1: On demand assistance

The eFacilitator has a passive role; he only reacts to user's demand of help.

Level 2: Level 1 + Training

Provider of digital literacy training, the eFacilitator can also look for/attract the users and give a social orientation to his/her intervention.

Level 3: Level 2+ User empowerment

Provider of social inclusion services, the eFacilitator promotes the digital autonomy of the users and their achievement of personal goals taking advantage of the many resources available at the Information Society

Level 4: Level 3 + Active participation in community

Provider of community service-learning, the eFacilitator promotes the critical use of ICT and the engagement of the users with their local communities/social belonging groups through their active participation of community/social projects.

3. *The eFacilitator profile*

While working as an eFacilitator at a Telecentre, a digital library, a Telehut or similar learning spaces certainly requires profound technological knowledge, other competences are not only "needed as well", but are the core of a newly emerging job profile. Similarly, we can say from a learners' perspective: Competence deficits in using information and communication technologies (ICT) are not only a problem in itself, but create negative impact on multiple areas of life, since ICT serves as a vehicle for personal development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability. Consequently, eFacilitators are no longer considered as mere ICT-trainers, but as learning, inclusion, and community managers combating digital divide and digital illiteracy. A high variety of social and pedagogical skills are needed to support especially vulnerable target groups in their desire to be included both in the modern digital world and in everyday community life. This is one of the main research results of the Leonardo da Vinci project "Vocational Education and Training Solutions for eFacilitators for Social Inclusion" (VET4e-I) in which an international team of practicioners and researchers has been working on strategies and concrete solutions to increase the capacity of Telecentres in their engagement for eInclusion by developing a multi-faceted curriculum for eFacilitators as their key personnel.

Even though a selection of occupations which are close to the image of an eFacilitator can be found in different European countries - both in vocational training and university courses - the eFacilitator profession does not formally exist yet. This is why the VET4e-I project consortium has conducted a Telecentres survey in France, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain in order to systematically find out about professionalization demands and to initiate both formal and social recognition processes for the emerging job profile in the respective countries. This research was done in an online survey with a standardized questionnaire through national surveys in each country. In total, 250 eFacilitators in four countries participated. The following part is going to summarize the results of this research. It will describe the relatively high standards the job profile demands from the members of this "not-yet-profession" and the most crucial knowledge gaps eFacilitators are experiencing.[1]

eFacilitators' typical challenges: feedback from the context analysis

The very complex role associated with the profession of an eFacilitator requires competences in many different fields. Some of the most important areas of expertise include advanced ICT skills, didactical prowess, the ability to motivate and animate people, basic job search knowledge and management competence. Survey participants in all four countries consider basic didactical knowledge absolutely mandatory since high quality teaching cannot be assured by mere competence in the field that is being taught. Taking into consideration that people who lack essential ICT skills are often part of special needs groups such as people dealing with disabilities, unemployment, illnesses or age, the pedagogical challenges eFacilitators are facing are very high. Especially people with special needs who are in danger of social exclusion often lack the chances or opportunities to (re-) enter formal education. For many of them, local blended learning spaces are a realistic option for learning and access to the local community. eFacilitators play a key role, but they face the challenge to adequately respond to all kinds of different needs.

Here are some examples the eFacilitators from France, Italy, Bulgaria and Spain see as typical: Members of vulnerable target groups have often made negative experiences both in their learning biography and their working life. In the view of eFacilitators, many have to be continuously motivated and encouraged to acquire digital literacy, for example by letting them work on and solve their real, everyday problems with the help of ICT. Depending on the reasons of the persons' ICT knowledge gaps, the eFacilitator will act as a socio-cultural animator in order to reach the students. Nevertheless, motivating the participants might not be enough since their learning progress should also be carefully supervised. The main task would be to illustrate why it is necessary to possess ICT competence nowadays and to point out the positive effects they might have on someone's social life and employability.

Given that a lot of people who are visiting Telecentres are trying to increase their employability by acquiring competences that employers take for granted, fundamental labour market knowledge and systematic relations to employers, job offices and educational providers are either an important aspect of the eFacilitator profile, or something they consider as something they will have to learn and do in the future. And even more, the eFacilitator will try to provide "services of social inclusion", as a job guide, networker or supervisor enabling the learners to better participate both in the modern information society and the community. This is also the most advanced of the four different levels of an eFacilitator's profile where he or she is provider of community service-learning, the eFacilitator promotes the critical use of ICT and the engagement of the users with their local communities/social belonging groups through their active participation of community/social

[1] For detailed information see http://www.efacilitator.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/VET4e-i_Multi-Country_Context_AnalysisDEF.pdf.

projectsHence, eFacilitators often help those who, prior to their training, had to rely on other people with digital skills, in a very personal emancipation and empowerment process. Consequently, Telecentres, Public Internet Centres and libraries play a more and more important role in local societies, in towns, small villages and deprived metropolitan areas where they have become a reference point not only for new technologies and learning, but also for the development of social cohesion, a sense of community belonging and cultural life.

While most of the Telecentres and learning spaces are open for everyone, there are also those who offer a more specialized programme, with specific areas of work and target groups, where additional in-depth knowledge is necessary. An example are those eFacilitators who specialize in helping offenders or prison inmates to obtain knowledge about penal law and challenges for felons on the labour market in order to promote their resocialization.

Knowledge gaps examples

Of course, most of the aforementioned competences can also be attributed to a skilled teacher. But a context analysis, based on a literature review and online questionnaire for Telecentre stakeholder, shows that the profile of the "ideal eFacilitator" – meaning the whole variety of competences an eFacilitator would have to have in order to adequately respond to the expectations of both the learners and the managers of the Telecentres and other blended learning spaces - is often expected to go far beyond that.

Unfortunately, the high requirements for eFacilitators are rarely fulfilled by people who are holding similar positions due to severe shortcomings in training and lack of a formally recognized profile. Several knowledge gaps have been identified with the help of the aforementioned survey conducted with four European countries. The knowledge gaps can be subdivided into seven categories: ICT, management of services, didactical methodologies, socio-cultural animation, foreign languages, job guidance and management of user services. Naturally, the relevance of the gaps in the different categories varies between the different nations depending on their aims, target groups, and professionalization efforts of the past.

All of the countries who participated in the survey still reported shortcomings when it comes to ICT competences. While these seem minor in Italy, who wish for better knowledge of video-conference systems and Open Linux, Telecentres in France have reported difficulties keeping up with advancements in ICT and are thus threatened to fall behind. Something similar can obviously be observed in Bulgaria, with reported learning gaps regarding operating systems, office applications, eGovernment, eBusiness and open source software. Given that web 2.0 applications are considered, if not a standard yet, a field with vast potential in self-organised learning, such technological and more importantly social innovations are an example of a "structural knowledge gap", because eFacilitators expect themselves to always keep an eye on new developments in technology and integrate those into their job.

Didactical methodologies and the socio-cultural animation it entails present further problems. These range from difficulties animating different target groups (e.g. elderly, children, migrants and people with disability) in France, to recognizing individual user needs in Italy and lack of basic teaching skills in Spain. Keeping in mind that a great proportion of the users have special needs which have to be identified and catered to with the help of an individually tailored teaching plan, deficiencies in these areas would severely complicate the teaching process.

Other problems are related to "service management". Telecentre personnel in France and Bulgaria have experienced trouble planning and executing projects, services and fund-raisers. Considering the importance of the engagement of users with their local communities and the interactions with other social groups, they consider it imperative that eFacilitators bring along the necessary knowledge to plan and execute such an event. Moreover, financial competences obviously gain relevance to ensure the sustainability of the Telecentre and the availability of resources to run further projects. Consequently, many eFacilitators reported knowledge gaps because they should be able to set up a proper business plan.

Finally, eFacilitators are increasingly expected to act as advisers regarding the labor market, as consultants and supporters for job search and application procedures. However, eFacilitators in France, Italy and Spain complain about lacking the required knowledge to provide such qualified assistance.

Recognition opportunities for the emerging job profile

It was one of the main assumptions that the key for a good acceptance and continuous professionalization of the job profile is the recognition by public authorities. For this reason the project has foreseen activities to support the public recognition of the profile in the partner countries. Of course, it was obvious from the start that a single project with a limited duration would not achieve full public recognition during the project lifetime. Therefore, the project planned to develop supporting instruments for partners who wanted to start the recognition process in their countries. As there is no such thing as a "European recognition", each national partner had to foster the recognition in their national or even regional context.

As mentioned before, there are a number of vocational training and higher education courses which include characteristics of the eFacilitator profile. These have been identified during the VET4e-I project. Such an interim step was necessary because it would only be possible to formally recognize the job profile of an "eFacilitator" if it relates and refers to an already existing vocation or university degree. French universities, for example, offer degrees which lead to careers much alike the profile of an eFacilitator. Those degrees comprise training in ICT as well as in animating and tutoring. This would cover some of the basic requirements an eFacilitator should fulfill as fundamental ICT, motivation and pedagogical skills can be acquired. Spanish universities have something similar in terms of a "Master in ICT dynamization" qualification. Nevertheless, this covers the tasks of an eFacilitator only partly, and there is no official career in Spain for this profession. When it comes to other formal certifications, the French have the option to undergo training as an "ICT-animator for digital public places", while Bulgarians can choose between several careers that show some similarities. "Organizer of Internet applications" and "Administrator of information support" would be examples. Nonetheless, there is no national vocational education training curriculum for these careers.

France and Italy also allow Telecentre employees to carry out their tasks without any kind of formal training. Usually they have to participate in self-developed training courses conducted by the Telecentres that are supposed to teach basic technological and pedagogical skills. Despite the fact that a comprehensive training curriculum has been developed by the Spanish "Telecentre Academy", it has not been officially recognized so far. For all four participating countries it can be concluded that Telecentres are dealing with profound difficulties regarding the qualification of their personnel, also because the individual efforts do not pay off in the form of a recognized profession.

4. Outlook

Our research in the mentioned countries has shown a strong labour market need for the competences addressed by the professional profile of the eFacilitator. Though, the promotion and recognition of this profile need further support in order to spread those competences. In two projects, the authors are actually working on supporting the processes of formal and social recognition of the eFacilitator profile in six European countries. At the moment of writing this article, the labour market need for the eFacilitator job profile is investigated on in the participating countries. The labour market need research will work as a supporting document for the formal recognition procedures in many countries. Most of the participating countries see the profile placed in the field of vocational training, indicating ECVET as a reference standard. Our UK partners, working in a country with a higher education focused education system, is considering to implement the eFacilitator profile into higher education courses, walking on the ECTS pathway of recognition. A strong support for the further development of this profile is expected to come from "Telecentre Europe", the professional association of Telecentres in Europe.

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