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# ESCOUTS: INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING IN BLENDED ENVIRONMENTS AND SPACES (ILBES) FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

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## 1. eInclusion as a European challenge

The last few years have seen a growing interest in eInclusion policies (i2010, Riga Declaration 2006, the EU Ministerial eInclusion Conference in Vienna 2008, the Roadmap for Digital Inclusion: a Hub For Social Innovation in Gdansk 2011) considering information and communication technologies (ICT) as a vehicle for *social inclusion, ageing well, youth employability* and *social innovation* (see Howaldt, Kopp, Schwarz 2009). The term “eInclusion” is addressed by two perspectives: Firstly, eInclusion is understood as the challenge to guide people to the digital world. Secondly, eInclusion can be understood as the approach to link disconnected people to society by digital means. In the following, we will refer to the term in both meanings: We will describe an approach to link elderly people and youth with an intergenerational learning circle to the digital and non-digital society by a combination of online and offline instruments. Especially social media – that may be characterised by their easy usage and the way they allow users to create content and participate in online activities – are seen as good means for including people with low ICT skills into the digital world (Pelka/Kaletka 2010). But as Kluzer/Rissola (2009) described, the use of digital media in eInclusion approaches has to be aided by offline support structures.

The need for eInclusion is evident on a regional as well as a national level. 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. senior people, unemployed youth, 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.

## 2. Blended Environments and Spaces as providers of ICT access and social integration

Today, we see a big variety of Blended Environments and Spaces that address social integration mediated by ICT. Examples for different Blended Environments and Spaces can be found in public libraries, educational, cultural or welfare centres, and other public spaces where digital services are embedded. In particular telecentres or public internet points (PICs) have become an important provider of free, public access to ICT, the internet and learning environments for disadvantages target groups. They are publicly funded and provide free access and training and play a key 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 non-formal learning, but also for the development of social cohesion, a sense of community belonging and cultural life (Rissola 2007). National research and comparative cross-country analysis carried out in a recently finalised action research project<sup>2</sup> illustrate how diverse the profiles of telecentres in different European countries are. Four typical telecentre profiles can be described:

Level 1: On demand assistance	Passive role; the telecentre only reacts to user's demand of help.
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<sup>1</sup> The information and views set out in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union.

<sup>2</sup> European Vocational Education and Training Solution for e-Facilitators of Social Inclusion (VET4e-I) project. See <http://www.efacilitator.eu/wordpress/vet4e-i-deliverables>

Level 2: Level 1 + Training	Provider of digital literacy training, the telecentre 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 telecentre 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 telecentre 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.

The levels 3 and 4 describe telecentres (and by extension blended centres) that build a good base for the actions described in chapters 3 and 4. Conversely, the methodology presented in this paper is a tool for Blended Environments and Spaces like secondary schools or digital literacy providers with a social vocation to develop Level 3 (empowerment of youths and elders) and 4 (closing the gap between both generations).

In a thematic strand of three EU-funded projects, an international team of practitioners, researchers and consultants has been conducting research and working on strategies and concrete solutions to increase the capacity of telecentres in their engagement for eInclusion. Our work comprises both concrete good practice implementation and policy recommendations development. From different angles, the projects contribute 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. All projects are testing and implementing constructivist learning arrangements, often on the basis of web 2.0 applications, which are set to empower the learner by introducing user generated content (Kaletka/Kopp/Pelka 2011).

### 3. Building a methodology for ICT supported intergenerational learning

In the project “eScouts - Intergenerational Learning Circle for Community Service”, funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme in 2011 and 2012, the methodology for an intergenerational learning approach between the youth and senior people was developed and is currently being implemented. The project aim is threefold: to facilitate the socio-digital inclusion of elderly and the youth joining to the labour market and adult life, while improving local community life by means of the intergenerational dialogue and mutual support. For this aim, the project built a learning circle in which the youth supports senior people in ICT usage and, in return, seniors mentor youth in their efforts to access the labour market and to face the challenges of adult life, completing in this way a circle of learning, exchange and conviviality. The teaching and mentoring was mediated by ICT means (social web applications) and Blended Environments and Spaces.

This ambitious eScouts project had to provide a training methodology that supports the learning circle between elderly and youth. For this reason the training design was based on two methodologies which both contributed essential ingredients to an intergenerational and ICT supported learning. We refer to the Community Service Learning (CSL) methodology implemented by Fundación Esplai in its “Conecta Joven” network in Spain, and the Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) developed by Reflective Learning in the UK. Community Service Learning (CSL) is aimed to maximize the development of the individuals’ potential and their active participation in society. At the roots of CSL there it is the work of William James and John Dewey. CSL is an educational initiative combining learning with community service in a single well-articulated project. The participants are trained while working on real needs in their community. CSL is, firstly, an activity that is well known as it should assume the definition of a problem, its study by various ways, the development of proposed solution and finally, implementation and evaluation of proposals. Secondly, an associated activity, what it mean is that it's made collectively and not as a result of the action of an isolated person. Individual efforts must be added to carry out participatory projects, civic and effective. Finally, an activity for a social benefit, therefore intended to increase welfare community and in consequence open to solidarity.

Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) was first used by Ghaye (2005, 2008, 2010). It describes the development from more conventional forms of action research (AR) and from participatory action research (PAR) to a more explicitly 'appreciative' research style. PAAR synthesizes the best practices of action research (AR) and participatory action research (PAR) by adding a third and new dimension called appreciative intelligence. PAAR brings together action and reflection, with the participation of a range of stakeholders, in order to identify and amplify current achievements and to produce practical solutions in misalignments between values and actions. It could be argued that PAAR may be regarded as a kind of third generation action research. PAAR is a strengths-based methodology. It co-creates, with those involved, strength-enhancing interventions based upon an understanding of the root causes of success and achievement, rather than of problems and failures.

"Intergenerational Learning in Blended Environments and Spaces" (ILBES) is a first attempt to build a common methodological framework without forcing the two methodologies together into some kind of unhappy 'marriage'. Both methodologies aim to empower individuals to improve themselves and the community where they live. However, each one proceeds in a different way. The main divergence was found in the initial questions each methodology asks:

- CSL starts from a problem previously identified by training designers (e.g. "There is a lack of engagement of the Youth: how can we solve this problem?"); its approach is rather reactive and problem-solving oriented.
- PAAR does not start from a pre-conceived problem but from the appreciation of the strengths of a situation and builds on that (e.g. "How can we increase and sustain social participation by the Youth?").

In order to design an learning methodology for a leaning circle between elderly and youth, the CSL approach can be considered the project layer while PAAR can offer means to find solutions, as it is focused on the positive elements: the strengths of participants. In other words, while starting from a problem could lead to become locked into problem-finding and problem-solving as the only strategies to begin any change, betterment or improvement process (which is deficit-based thinking), PAAR's strengths-based thinking could help to start focusing on engaging in a conversation about what people can do and wish to do, by identifying, using and developing their strengths, gifts and talents.

The harmonised methodologies will have to address and amplify both the individual and collective strengths. However, change and improvement with regard to the objectives defined at the start of the intervention will most probably be achieved and sustained if they represent collective rather than individual actions and views. For this reason, group reflection (done publically, rigorously and systematically) rather than solely self-reflection was promoted.

#### **4. Facilitating intergenerational learning**

For a more informed training design, between May and September 2011 eScouts team carried out an online survey in Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria to 150 seniors and 150 youths. The candidate seniors needed to be aged between 55 and 75 years old, were willing to acquire digital competences taught by young people and in return be interested to give advice to young people with a view to ameliorate their preparation for the labour market and adult life. The candidate youths needed to be aged between 16 and 25 years old, and were willing to make social work taking advantage of their knowledge of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), with a view to ameliorate their preparation for the labour market and adult life.

The sample was collected with help of Blended Environments and Spaces of local stakeholder organisations like telecentres, welfare centres, schools, etc. The sample showed a range of educational background "types": 26% were highly qualified while 21% had a middle school certificate; a third part was digitally illiterate while a quarter is middle-high e-skilled, etc. This educational heterogeneity of the senior target group was identified as a challenge for the design of the learning circle: how to tackle different target groups (well educated/low educated) in eScouts modules? How to deal with this diversity? How to benefit from it?

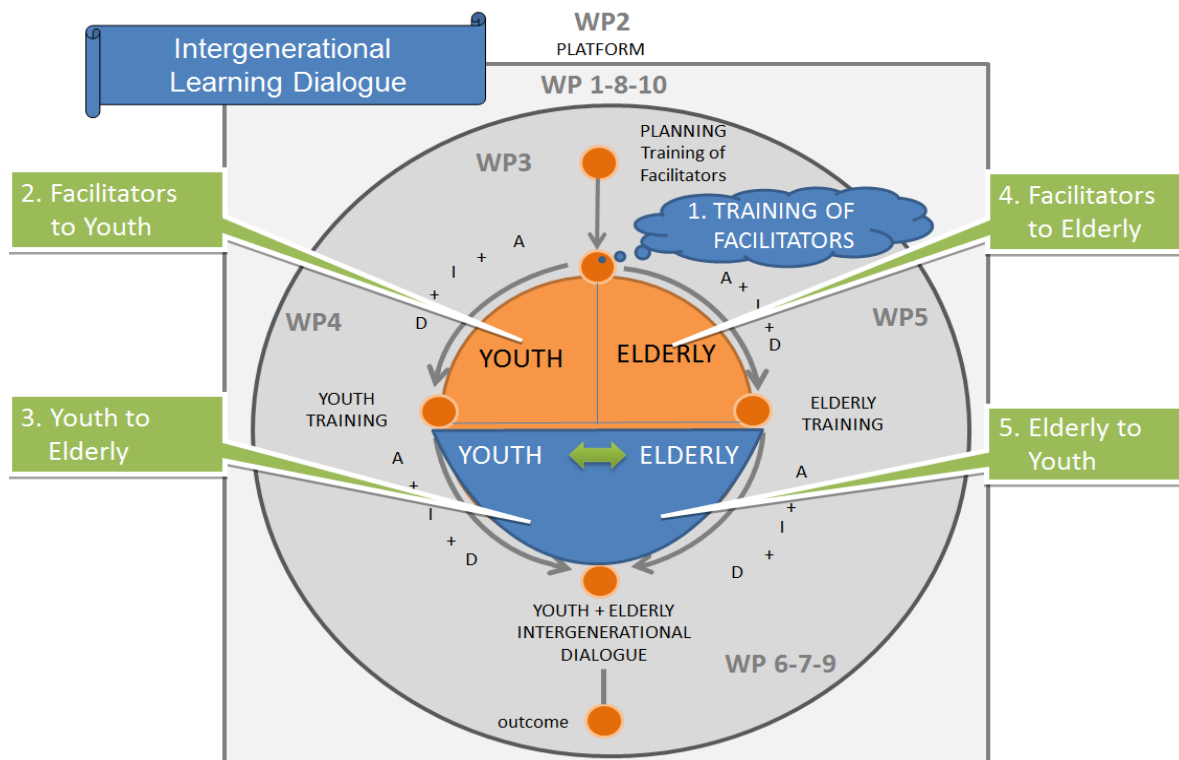
The low e-skills level of most of the senior was identified as the main factor limiting their Internet use - rather than Internet access, which was not seen as a real barrier - reconfirming the need of interventions like eScouts to equip them with digital competences and avoid their exclusion from the Information Society. However, a polarization of their Internet profiles (in terms of competences and uses) was identified as an important challenge

for the training that the youths would deliver to seniors, requiring to be carefully addressed by the training that would prepare the youngsters to become e-facilitators.

Regarding the youths, the project team learnt that youth respondents were a kind of socio-economic “elite”. At their early age (most aged between 17 and 21) they were well educated, had a good level of languages, low drop-out rates from school, high percentage of volunteering, and 94% had private computers with internet access. While this is a bias that could have been induced by the way they were recruited (i.e. via educational organisations and worked with a voluntary questionnaire) which tends to over represent “elites”, in the context of eScouts this was considered rather an opportunity than a fault, since the project could benefit from these “elites” to teach the elderly.

The youngsters learnt what they know about new technologies mainly at educational organisations (*formal learning*) and via *informal learning* (from relatives and friends or by their own). By the contrary, the role of *non formal learning* (telecentres, job centres or libraries) is marginal for them. On the other hand, the critical, creative, constructive and community-oriented use of ICT that eScouts intends to promote takes less place at schools (where the critical use is occasionally stimulated) or informal learning (where this is contingent to the capacities of the improvised trainers) and more in non formal training courses embedded in social initiatives delivered by Third Sector organizations (where this is explicitly developed).

With the survey conclusions in hand, together with the harmonised methodological framework baptised as ILBES, the training planning and design took place. The intergenerational learning circle was structured in 5 modules, each one corresponding to each step illustrated in the figure below:



The timeframe given to pilot the intergenerational learning circle in all the participating countries was seven months starting in October 2011 and ending in April 2012.

## 5. Preliminary conclusion and perspectives

The first results and outcomes from the ongoing pilot testing (modules 1 – Facilitators Training, and 2 – Facilitators to Youth) can be summarised in the following way:

1. A group of community-based social innovation and eInclusion centres is carrying out the ILBES modular blended learning circle in six EU MS (Bulgaria; Germany; Italy; Poland; Spain; UK ).

2. Given the high experimental character of the intergenerational blended learning circle, each partner of the consortium selected two core facilitators, forming a group of fourteen facilitators who have already acted as trainers and (except one) facilitators inside of former initiatives. Moreover, a number of them has taken care of youth and/or dealt with seniors. As a result, in every pair of facilitators there is constantly one who has dealt in the past with the seniors, the other not. Secondly, there is a perfect gender balance; however, the women tend to be younger, with a higher educational profile, whereas the men have a stronger field experience.
3. Transferred by the two core trainers of the two base learning methods (CSL and PAAR), the ILBES methodology has been well transmitted in the first module, where the fourteen facilitators who are accompanying the entire blended learning path have known and learnt about the aims of the project, the main features of the two groups of end users (expected to account for 84 youth and 420 seniors), the two main methodologies and their merging into a new one (ILBES). At the same time, they have acquired the fundamental skills required by the ILBES: 1) the project's Ethical Code (subdivided into main parts: be honest, act responsibly); 2) Facilitation skills that strengthen intergenerational dialogue (the six Mobius qualities: mutual understanding; possibility; commitment; capability; responsibility; acknowledgement); 3) the eScouts Trust Wheel (achieve an outcome; raise awareness; identify concern; encourage discussion); 4) the eScouts Trust Wheel Observe Behaviours (observe behaviours; listen actively; ask open questions; end ethically).
4. The whole eScouts intergenerational learning circle is subjected to two complementary quality and evaluation systems: a) self-evaluation on location; b) at-a-distance ongoing monitoring and evaluation through an articulated quality plan that encompasses a comprehensive set of indicators: Profile (educational, civic, professional); Participation (n. of hours attended; interest to take part to the following module/s; self-evaluation of the participation during the module); Satisfaction (evaluation of: list of contents/methods/tools/evaluation-assessment/facilitators; means of communication); outputs (n. of facilitators/mentors/trainees; n./type of learning materials produced; type of evaluation/assessment methods-tools applied); Learning Outcomes (Knowledge; Skills; Competences). The quality system aims to provide a first description of the knowledge/skills/competences formed in a way to facilitate their recognition, this is why the ECVET main concepts and terminology is extensively applied.

On this basis, we propose a twofold strategy for the further development of telecentres -and other kind of community and educational centres offering digital services and training- as “eInclusion catalysts for intergenerational learning”: On the one hand, it is highly important to further professionalize their staff and supply them with methods and practical know how on how to address intergenerational learning. This includes more elaborated job profiles and recognized sets of competences, local and regional competences for identifying eInclusion needs, more and systematic good practice exchange and international models of reference in the telecentre development for an increased European added value, the promotion of funding opportunities for telecentres, especially by creating awareness for their mission and eInclusion potential, and the mobilisation of the civil society.

But apart from this “internal professionalization perspective”, we think that we also have to take the next step. The next step is to integrate eInclusion as a transversal field of activities into lifelong learning policies and thereby promote digital literacy on the European and regional policy agenda as a means to strengthen social cohesion. This means:

- Extend the use of intergenerational learning and digital competence training as tools for the empowerment of citizens and their active participation in society
- Better promote and integrate blended and web 2.0 based learning opportunities in “traditional” adult education
- Further develop eFacilitator profiles, but also communicate the need to provide “traditional” adult educators with digital teaching and facilitating skills
- Increase participation in adult education in general by professionalizing eInclusion opportunities
- Become a part of all adult education initiatives in European regions by offering digital and European added value
- Promote telecentres as transversal actors and competence centres for the digital advancement of lifelong learning

If we truly want individuals to shape their own education and vital biographies building over their strengths and the legacy of other generations, with an ethical and community sense, this means that not only the necessary resources and access rights must be afforded, but also – and above all – the skills to shape their biographies on their own responsibility. This includes, more than ever, digital skills enabling them to find better employment opportunities and to participate meaningfully in society. Intergenerational learning – facilitated by community-based social innovation and eInclusion centres and supported by ICT means – seems to be a worthy approach to reach this aim.

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