A Practical Guide to
Learning Community Initiatives

Intro

What can you do, if you are a community player, an institution or working in the local government – and you wish to take steps towards a learning community?
Which are the different steps you can take, where can you find support and inspiration – and what should you pay special attention to?

Read more...

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Xploit !

Local learning centers and partnership are yet to be built into a coherent lifelong learning policy.
Despite the numerous partnership and network initiatives of recent years, they remain occasional, interest-driven and short-lived. Policy development and local implementation are still lacking.
The European Association for the Education of Adults, 2006

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO LEARNING COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

What can you do, if you are a community player, an institution or working in the local government – and you wish to take steps towards a learning community?
Which are the different steps you can take, where can you find support and inspiration – and what should you pay special attention to?

Perhaps you are aware that present community initiatives are not solving some of the real problems in the community?
Perhaps you know that there might be interesting resources available from local or European projects that could be useful?
Perhaps you see the need for new initiatives in the community – for youth, elderly or for the community at large?
Perhaps you would like to work for a new and more open and innovative mentality in the community?

Perhaps other things – and perhaps you would like to contribute to such steps in the community, offering more perspectives than individual projects and initiatives?

If so, what can you do?

One thing for sure, you cannot work alone.
And on the other hand, you cannot expect such changes to take place quickly and smoothly. It will be a long process, and you must start to take the right steps, not the wrong ones.
If you think you can do nothing, you are wrong. You can. And you will learn a lot and add new perspectives to your own work and life. It's worth it.

What are your ideas – why are you reacting?
Maybe you should try to describe for yourself what you see as important challenges in the community, and perhaps even start to think about what changes or innovations could be made.
Then you need support. You need to discuss your ideas with a small team of colleagues, friends or people you know would be interested. It could also be from other cities or countries, if you happen to know such people in your network or through your job.
Which are my own resources? Who do I know? Who could I talk to?

Let's say you are able to form such a small team. Take your time and discuss your ideas carefully, and try to find some more information on the issues at stake; from your community, from European networks, or whatever.

Try to establish s good consensus in the team and try to qualify your ideas and visions.

Next, you will depend on your team and their resources and networks: you should try to find out a couple of things about your community:

~ Are there any special focuses in your community? What are they about? Are these focuses useful to your plan?

~ Are there any networks in the community to address? Or organisations that would be interested in talking about your ideas and plans? Are these networks or institutions useful to you?

In this work you need the support of your team, as you might need to put some work in these "explorations".

Who are my allied? Who can I turn to? Are there useful focuses in the community?

Of course, you should use such forums, if they already exist. You would need to address them and discuss your initiatives with them.

In case such forums do not exist in your community, you need to create them!

You need to take your initiative and your team to an organisational level – you need dialogues with organisations or networks I your community.

Create a forum or address a forum.

Now, if such resources do not exist, you and your team will have to go through some reflections: if you look at your ideas or plans, or your "driver", who might be the stakeholders in your community? Who might develop an interest in your ideas and in your "driver"?

Say, for example, your driver is mobilization of retired citizens. Who are the stakeholders in this case? Who might have an interest in this? Who works with the retired citizens? Who would benefit from the mobilization?

Identify relevant stakeholders and organisations to address.

In most cases your mission is possible, but it might take some work and some time.

In some cases, your mission fails. Nobody seems to be interested. If this happens, you might need to develop a different approach: expand or qualify your "drivers" to widen the scope of stakeholders and organisations to address.

But if your mission is successful, you might – after some dialogues –be able to arrange some sessions in which these different stakeholders participate: perhaps a community centre, perhaps the social department in the local government, perhaps an NGO working with elderly, etc.

Hold on to your new network and make them work!

In fact, you have now taken the small team to an organisational level – now you have a team of stakeholders and interested people.

You need so discuss your initiative with this group of stakeholders – and to take into account their interests as well. Maybe you initiative is a wake-up call for some of the stakeholders – and now they spot an opportunity to change something…

After some debates, you might ask: should we include other resources from the community? What about the retired citizens themselves? How could they be included? What about private stakeholders, or cultural ones? You need to discuss this openly with your new network.

Quality and widen your network.

This is where many initiatives stop!

A lot of talking, no further action; and a lot of frustration…

Which are the next steps?

If the idea is to make changes in the community - by addressing one or more important challenges in the community, you need to start thinking about concrete action. Drivers, engines, incubators and catalysts only work properly through practical actions, never through endless meetings and conferences.

You need to take action.

This is a challenge. You would like to start a pioneer initiative, a project, an experiment or a similar action, and you do not have the resources. From now on you need resources to take the next steps. You need to define these practical steps. You need consensus among the people in your new network.

Then, the question: where do we find the needed resources to start our project?

Resources are the key to the next steps.

Resources often mean work power - or: money.

From this point there are many ways, and many different ways. Here are a few of them, perhaps the most typical:

~ Are there available funds in the local or regional government? Search and learn! And include the people you approach I n your network, if possible!

~ Are there private funding available in your community - social responsibility programs? Search and learn! And include the people you approach I n your network, if possible!

~ Are there useful programs from your national government? Search and learn! And include the people you approach I n your network, if possible!

~ Can you find useful resources from European initiatives and exploit them? Search and learn! And include the people you approach I n your network, if possible!

~ Are you able to make some research about available European funding? Search and learn! And include the people you approach I n your network, if possible!

Fundraising is needed and important!

All this might take some time, and you need to include your team and your new network in the efforts. In many cases you also need to contact people or institutions who have experiences in this kind of fundraising. You should use your new network and contacts to identify and approach these experienced resources.

Two things are very important in this process:

~ You must sustain the interest and motivation in your network; you can do this by including them and by demonstrating that there is a strong progression in your initiative

~ You must be willing to qualify yourself and your team: you might need to learn new things along the way and to face challenges, you never thought you would be concerned with

Learning and motivating

Let's change the scene: let's assume you are successful and that you are ready to start a solid project for retired citizens in your community.

How are you going to use this project to take further steps towards changing your community? Towards a new mentality? Towards new forms of communication and collaboration in your community? Towards a learning community?

The project as a driver

Let us take a look at what you have accomplished now:

~ You have created a project platform with different stakeholders, be that a local, national or European one, and this platform can be exploited for many important initiatives
~ You have along the way created a team and a community network, perhaps including public authorities, NGO's, educations and perhaps even labour market partners; and in case of a European project you also now have a European partnerships with networks of their own
~ Through your project you are now able to act in your community
~ You have new competences, skills and contacts
~ You are in direct contact with citizens and organisations that can be used for further initiatives

You have created new resources

Let's say your project will last for two years. How can you take steps towards a learning community in these two years – based on your project?

You can do very many things, but to take the new steps you might need to form a very qualified team of resources wishing to work in your direction, and representing different interests, sectors and stakeholders in the community.

You might also wish to exploit project contacts or European contacts to help you take these new steps. Once again, you might choose to identify learning community resources at national or European level and invite those to collaborate with you. If so, you need to make clear how they will benefit from this new collaboration.

Qualify your learning communities' steps.

How can you, then, with your new resources and in close collaboration with your qualified team take useful learning communities steps?

Here you have some open opportunities:

⇒ Make sure that your project is well-known in your community
⇒ Include other people and organisations in the implementation of your project: widen your community network
⇒ Make sure that your project is followed-up by new initiatives in the community
⇒ Link the project activities to other citizens that might benefit from the activities (what can retired citizens do for the community?)
⇒ Try to promote the establishment or wider use of a community centre through your project
⇒ Try to create cross-sector partnerships along the project
⇒ In strong projects new emerging challenges are often identified; use the project to pursue these challenges
⇒ Link your activities to similar or neighbouring initiatives in the community or in communities in your region
⇒ Reflect on the possibility of adding a European dimension to your project
⇒ If working at European level: identify further common interests among the partners and their communities

$\Rightarrow$ If possible, link your community to the partner communities
Exploit your new resources

You are now on the way: you are contributing to new partnerships and infrastructures in your community, and if you use your new resources well, you are certainly able to add new steps and dimensions to your efforts.
At this point you don't need more guidance, 'because you know what to do…!
Nevertheless there are many challenges and obstacles on the way.
In the next text we will try to identify some of the most important difficulties and warn against a number of typical dead-ends.

Of course, the small scenario above could look very differently; there are numerous such scenarios, but the basic principles are still the same: how to progress from the idea of exploitation and a learning community to put it into practice, step by step…
Often the scenarios will be linked to the above described "drivers" and accompanying measures.