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Some thoughts about integrating EU project results into local learning communities
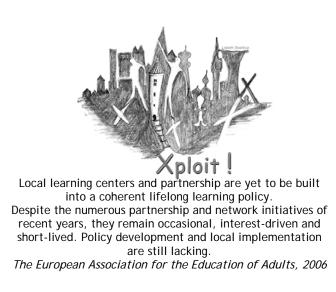
Intro

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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

Some thoughts about integrating EU project results into local learning communities

by Holger Bienzle. die Berater®, Quality Manager of the Xploit project

The key weakness of generations of EU funding programmes

For more than 15 years I have been involved in European education projects in different roles: as programme manager at a national agency, as consultant to the European Commission, as assessor of project proposals and reports, as application writer, coordinator, partner, evaluator and disseminator of transnational projects.

From the first minute on European cooperation ground (and veterans assured me it had been like this even before!) it was critically stated in numerous meetings and conferences that EU projects produce valuable and useful results, but – alas! – they somehow do not find their way to the people for whom they have been designed: educators and learners in the specific education sector addressed. At the end of each EU programme period the mantra was repeated that in the coming generation of funding programmes improvements of the dissemination and exploitation aspects would need to have top priority.

What has not worked so far

And efforts to increase the impact of EU projects have indeed been made.

At EU programme level new and sometimes strange concepts were coined, hyped and eventually abandoned again: for example "valorisation", a word coming from French financial language was imported into EU programme English with a completely new meaning, i.e. " the process of disseminating and exploiting project outcomes to meet user needs, with the ultimate aim of integrating and using them in training systems and practices at local, regional, national and European level" (http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/leonardo/new/valorisation/what_en.html). Now the magic word is "exploitation", not in the sense of "treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work" as the Oxford dictionary suggests, but consisting of "mainstreaming and multiplication", as the LLP glossary reveals (http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/glossary_en.html).

Dissemination and exploitation task forces, expert working groups, and even specific programme management units at European Commission level were created, worked and produced reports and recommendations which were then forgotten again.

Specific types of projects dedicated to dissemination, financed by specific sub-programmes on dissemination and exploitation (like the present LLP Key Activity 4, which thankfully funded the Xploit project!) produced project product databases, guidance publications, studies, internet platforms and different formats of dissemination conferences...

Useful and well-meant as these efforts undoubtedly have been, they have achieved but little in increasing the spread and uptake of results developed by EU projects. One key reason for this perpetuated shortcoming they all have in common: Their starting point is the project product, which they try to market to potential target groups: "Look what great things we have produced, don't you want to try them out?"

Xploit – a new approach

The Xploit project, while being one the afore-mentioned initiatives, took a distinctly different approach from most other dissemination improvement activities. Instead of trying to "sell" EU products to potential target groups, it had a thorough look at the local realities first: So-called "Communities profiles", compiled after intense communication with local stakeholders – learners, educators, political decision-makers – describe in detail local learning needs, actors, development plans and perspectives, irrespective whether the local context is a full-fledged learning city with a strong record of joint development efforts, or a community where education actors only reluctantly learn to start to work together for the common good instead of competing fiercely for scarce public education funds and private customers. It is on the basis of this thorough local analysis that the Xploit learning communities searched for suitable EU project products which could reinforce the local development processes.

An important part of the approach was also to identify local actors in education institutions and administration who could be trained and supported as facilitators or local "Exploitation guides". Thus, instead of simply throwing EU project products into an education market, local integration processes are carefully planned and actively supported. The process of identifying, adapting and integration EU project results itself becomes a learning experience for the communities involved. Capacity is built which enables local actors to reiterate such product exploitation processes on other occasions.

Key messages from Xploit

⟩ European project results can be effectively integrated if there is a clear picture of local needs.

⟩ European project results can be door-openers for local cooperation of education stakeholders.

⟩ European project results can be incubators of change if they serve the wider purpose of learning community development.

⟩ European project results can (only) have an impact if local decision-makers help to create fertile environments.

⟩ European project results cannot find their way into local communities by themselves - they need local community planning, capacity building of exploitation facilitators, and intensive support during the phase of integration.

Wishes for the future

Again, we are at the doorstep of a new generation of EU funding programmes in education. and again, the improvement of funded project's dissemination and exploitation of results is at stake.
To be more successful in the future, the perspective of spreading and using EU project results must be needs-driven - i.e. based on a thorough analysis of local education needs – not provision-driven - oriented at marketing EU- project products.

Consequently dissemination and exploitation of project results should not be made the sole responsibility of the funded projects, which have hitherto been haunted by the funding programme with the obligation to develop and implement individual dissemination plans, exploitation strategies and to meet artificially construed impact indicators.

Successful exploitation needs a wider context than the micro-perspective of a project. It needs strong structural support from the EU funding programme on the one hand, but also from national, regional and, above all, local policy makers and education stakeholders. It is them who need to provide the indispensable framework conditions, integration and follow-up actions which can create the real value of project results for local communities.

But unfortunately financing such „accompanying measures" is by far less popular than funding projects themselves. In public opinion, supporting exploitation actions are often misinterpreted as unnecessary bureaucracy and administration instead of giving money directly to project beneficiaries. In reality, however, these measures are crucial for making project results visible and bringing them to the people who can make use of them.

Instead of the present "projectitis", i.e. the strive for funding as many projects as the budget available allows to, exploitation strategies at European and local level are needed which include careful analysis of local needs, joint efforts of local stakeholders, thorough integration planning, training and capacity building of local stakeholders, and supported integration of EU project results into local development policies. Taxpayers' money will be well invested if a substantial part of EU programme funds and local education budgets are spent on such activities to fully Xploit the potential of EU project results.

In medias res