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## **ILBES: AN INNOVATIVE ICT-ENABLED INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING APPROACH IMPLEMENTED ACROSS EU**

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### **Abstract**

Public libraries, educational, cultural or welfare centres, and other public spaces where digital services are embedded, hereby referred as Blended Environments and Spaces (BES), have become an important provider of free, public access to ICT, the internet and learning environments for socially-disadvantaged target groups. They are a reference point for new technologies, non-formal learning, people empowerment and social integration. The clientele of BES largely include seniors and elders who are digitally illiterate, and youngsters volunteering as adult trainers on the basis of their own digital competences. At the same time, the current economic downturn is pushing the job-inexperienced youngsters to look for help at these and other centres with social vocation due to the reduced employment opportunities they found.

The Intergenerational Learning in Blended Environments and Spaces (ILBES) methodology was developed and is being exploited through a family of *eScouts* projects. It is inspired in two proven learning methodologies (Community-Service Learning and Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection) which were combined to design an intergenerational learning circle that facilitates the socio-digital inclusion of seniors and the entrance of youth to the labour market and adult life, while improving solidarity between generations and local community cohesion.

### **Public Internet Centres as providers of digital competence training and empowerment**

Today, we see a big variety of Blended Environments and Spaces (BES) that address social integration mediated by ICT, like public libraries, educational, cultural or welfare centres, co-working spaces, living labs and other public spaces where digital services are embedded. In particular telecentres or public internet centres (PICs) have become an important provider of free, public access to ICT, the internet and learning environments for disadvantaged target groups. Government or NGO-run, they provide free access, training and empowerment. They 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; Kluzer & Rissola, 2009).

Telecentres can be categorised by its service provision in the following levels<sup>1</sup>:

1. On demand assistance;
2. Training provision of digital literacy training, often with a social orientation;
3. User empowerment (users' digital autonomy and achievement of personal goals facilitated by technological means);
4. Active participation in community (critical use of ICT and engagement of users with their local communities/social belonging groups through their active participation of community/social projects).

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). This is an outcome of a thematic strand of EU-funded projects where an international team of practitioners, researchers and consultants has been developing during a decade, strategies and concrete solutions to increase the capacity of telecentres in their engagement for eInclusion, combining implementation of concrete good practice and development of policy recommendations (see Rissola & Centeno, 2011). From different angles, those projects contribute to the development of telecentres as catalysts of social inclusion by addressing the professionalization of their personnel, training curricula for vulnerable groups, and intergenerational learning cycles promoting civic culture and social cohesion.

## **ILBES: a methodology for technology-enhanced intergenerational learning**

In the projects “eScouts – Intergenerational Learning Circle for Community Service”<sup>2</sup> and its successor “Trans eScouts – Empowering eFacilitators for Intergenerational Dialogue”<sup>3</sup>, both funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme, the methodology for an intergenerational learning approach between the youth and senior people was developed and implemented. The projects aim is threefold: to facilitate the socio-digital inclusion of senior adults and the joining of youngster to the labour market and adult life, while improving local community life by means of the intergenerational dialogue and mutual support. For this aim, those projects 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 in it, ICT (social web applications) and blended environments and spaces mediate teaching and mentoring processes.

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<sup>1</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>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eScouts.eu>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eScouts2.eu>

These ambitious eScouts projects had to provide a training methodology that supports the learning circle between seniors and youths. For this reason the training design was based on two methodologies which both contributed essential ingredients to an intergenerational and ICT supported learning: 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. CSL is aimed to maximize the development of the individuals’ potential and their active participation in society by combining learning with community service in a single well-articulated project, where the participants are trained while working on real needs in their community. CSL is, firstly, an activity that starts from the definition of a problem, its study from various angles, the development of proposed solution(s) and finally, implementation and evaluation of proposal(s). Secondly, an activity by association, i.e. made collectively and not as the result of the action of an isolated person. Individual efforts are summed up to carry out civic, participatory and effective projects. Finally, an activity for a social benefit, therefore intended to increase welfare community and in consequence open to solidarity (Puig et al., 2006).

Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) was firstly 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. PAAR 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) constitutes the 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. While appreciate, imagine and design are central in PAAR, CSL starts by identifying and evaluating the needs of the environment (community), to further imagine solutions and design a tailored project, which is the first action of an CSL facilitator. In PAAR, instead, solutions are built collaboratively over the strengths of participants. This leads to a possible divergence between CSL (“starting from a problem”) and PAAR (“what is going especially well?”).

In order to design a learning methodology for a leaning circle between seniors and youths, the CSL approach was taken as the project layer while PAAR a means to find solutions. In this way, while the logics of problem-finding and problem-solving as the only strategies to begin a change can lead to a deficit-based thinking, PAAR’s strengths-based thinking allows a balance

by helping to engage in a conversation about what people can do and wish to do, by identifying, using and developing their strengths, gifts and talents.

Imitating PAAR pillars, the following pillars for the betterment of communication between seniors and young people were defined for ILBES:

1. **Space and Environment** are crucial dimensions already considered by both didactical approaches. “Space” (PAAR) refers to the concrete working/learning place (e.g. the telecentre), while “Environment” (CLS) is a broader place which includes the “space” (e.g. the neighbourhood). All didactical materials should reflect on the physical, virtual or perceptual space where the communication is taking place in, and provide solutions adapted to each space.
2. **Appreciation:** the question “How far are you feeling strengthened by this participation/useful for society?” is formulated for both target groups.
3. **Empowerment** makes participants feel more active and ‘in control’ of their own learning.
4. **Participation** is supported and encouraged by both source didactics, but a specific challenge in intergenerational learning is to achieve that each generational group appreciates the “lessons” (knowledge, values, competences) they can learn from the other generation.
5. **Ethics** address questions like “are we working ethically?”, “is this training aiming at something ‘good’?”, “who benefits?” (for the seniors, the benefit is less clear and needs to be more developed)

ILBES aims to produce a **community service-oriented action, reflection and learning**, i.e. a collaborative process of committed actions and reflective learning for personal and community development, where **learning is an effect of experiencing reflectively** (CSL does by learning and learns by doing, PAAR acts and reflects to turn negative into positive). In it, social innovation is supported by e-facilitation (Diaz & Rissola, 2008), social media and user-generated content (Kaletka et al., 2011). Group reflection (done publically, rigorously and systematically) rather than solely self-reflection is promoted, since change and improvement with regard to the starting point of each intervention should be effect of collective rather than individual actions and views.

## **Target groups analysis and training design**

For a more informed training design, 250 candidate seniors and 250 candidate youngsters were surveyed in Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria (2011) and Croatia, Latvia and Lithuania (2014). 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 digital knowledge, with a view to ameliorate their preparation for the labour market and adult life.

Samples were collected with help of local stakeholder organisations like telecentres, welfare centres, schools, etc. In the first sample (2011) seniors 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. This scenario changed with the second sample (2014), where a more homogeneous educational level among seniors (more than half held a university degree and had some digital background) shifted the focus of digital training to how to satisfy the needs of a better-educated group.

Regarding the youths, the project team learnt in the first case (2011) 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 was 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. In the second case (2014) the general educational level of youngsters was found to be rather lower and diversified, making even more challenging the exercise of preparing them to train seniors (who were well educated) on digital skills. Despite those differences between the cases, in both the youngsters said to have learnt what they knew about new technologies mainly at educational organisations (*formal learning*) and via *informal learning* (from relatives and friends or by their own<sup>4</sup>). By the contrary, the role of *non formal learning* (telecentres, job centres or libraries) was marginal for them. However, the critical, creative, constructive and community-oriented use of ICT that eScouts project family intend 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).

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<sup>4</sup> For a distinction between formal, non formal and informal learning see (Cedefop, 2009)

## Training design and implementation

Based on projects' research, the intergenerational learning circle is structured in 5 modules, each one corresponding to each step illustrated in the figure below:

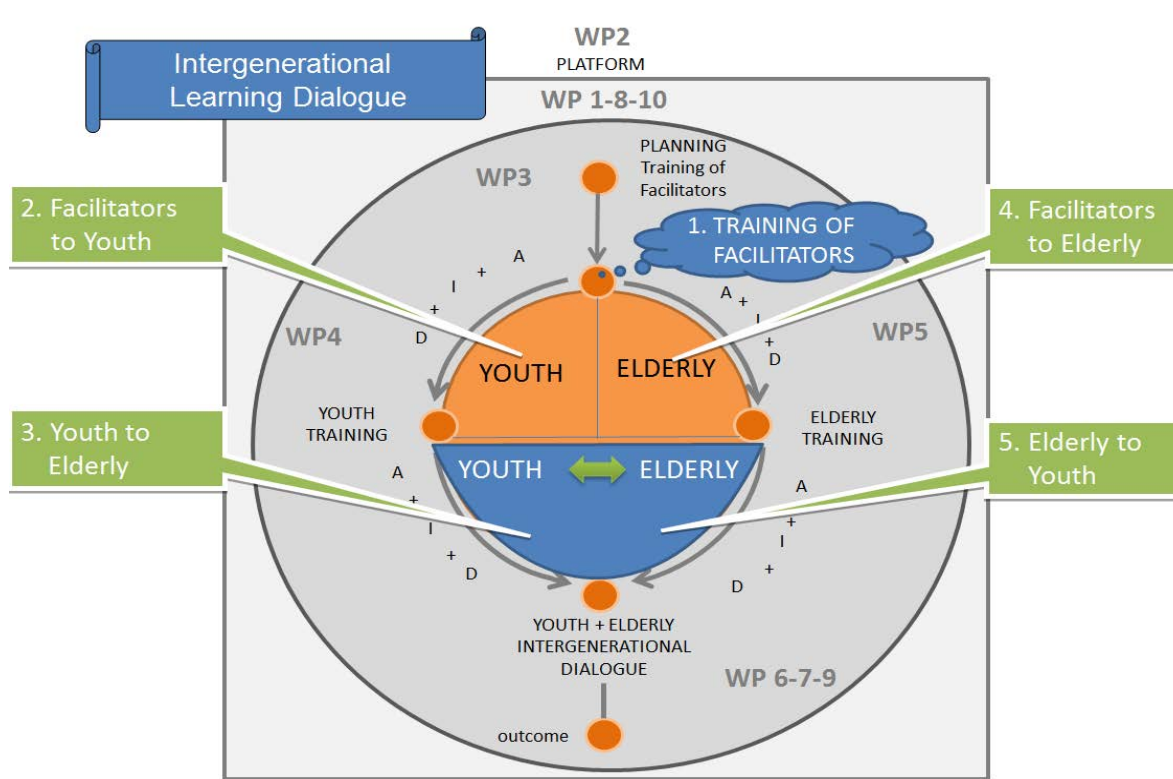


Figure 1.

While the modular design remains constant from one experience to the other, a couple of modules required adaptation to fit the needs of the second experience. In particular, Module 2 devoted to prepare youngsters to become digital trainers of the seniors was adapted to cope with a more exigent group of learners (e.g. efficient use of tablets for daily life purposes), while Module 4 devoted to prepare the seniors to become employability mentors of the youth incorporated entrepreneurship as a variant to get a job.

A group of community-based social innovation and eInclusion centres carried out the ILBES modular blended learning circle in six European Member States (Bulgaria; Germany; Italy; Poland; Spain; United Kingdom) for the first time between October 2011 and April 2012, while a second group will repeat the experience in three more (Croatia, Latvia and Lithuania) during the first semester of 2015.

In the implementation already concluded, and given the experimental character of the intergenerational blended learning circle, each partner of the consortium started by selecting two core facilitators, forming a group of facilitators who had already acted as trainers/facilitators in former initiatives. Before accompanying the entire blended learning path where 84 youth and 420 seniors were going to be trained, those facilitators learnt about the aims of eScouts project, the main characteristics of the two end user groups, the two main

methodologies and their merging into a new one (ILBES). At the same time, they 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).

The whole eScouts intergenerational learning circle was object of 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 aimed 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 (EC, 2009) were extensively applied.

## **Further perspectives**

On the basis of eScouts projects' experience, where the ILBES methodology was conceived and tested, a twofold strategy for the further development of community and educational centres offering digital services and training as “**eInclusion catalysts for intergenerational learning**” is proposed. eInclusion is understood here in the sense the European Commission uses the term in policy documents since Riga declaration (EC, 2006), which defined eInclusion as both inclusive ICT and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives.

Firstly, there is a need to professionalize BES staff by supplying them with methods and practical know-how to facilitate intergenerational learning. This includes more elaborated job profiles and recognized sets of competences, tools to identify eInclusion local needs, more and systematic good practice exchange and international models of reference (in view of an increased European added value), the promotion of funding opportunities for telecentres, libraries, etc. (especially by creating awareness for their mission and eInclusion potential), and the mobilisation of the civil society.

Secondly, eInclusion should be embedded 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 extending the use of intergenerational learning and digital competence training as tools for the empowerment of citizens and their active participation in society; building over the digital capital of the youngsters on the benefit of society; better promoting and integrating blended and web 2.0 based learning opportunities in “traditional” adult education; further developing eFacilitator profiles, as well as providing “traditional” adult educators with digital teaching and facilitating skills; professionalizing eInclusion initiatives to allow them becoming an integral part of adult education in European regions and increasing their European added value; promoting BES as competence centres and transversal actors 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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