TOOLBOX FOR SETTING UP COMMUNITY-ORIENTED DISTANCE LEARNING

What is community-oriented learning?

The rapid changes of modern society and economy have contributed to the acceptance of the entire academic community and society in a way that competences are not supposed to be acquired only through formal education, but throughout life. The development of society and technology is so rapid that it is necessary to learn throughout life. In this process, the emphasis is increasingly placed on non-formal and informal learning after (and even during) acquiring formal education. At the beginning (in the second half of the 20th century), the reason for linking formal education with non-formal and informal learning had a very practical purpose because it represented a way to upgrade the competencies acquired through formal education with the aim of increasing competitiveness in the labour market. Today, lifelong learning is becoming a lifestyle and involves all stakeholders in the society. Although economic and technological progress has made working process in the labour market easier, the social context has resulted in an increasing alienation of individuals compared to previous periods. Families are smaller and geographically distanced, so we usually miss intergenerational connections and learning within the family. Also, life expectancy has increased and, in addition to younger generations, there is a significant need for learning at an older age. So, nowadays we are a lifelong learning society and learning is not only oriented towards formal education and institutions.

There are great learning places in the community (for example, libraries, local associations, even there are examples in promoting non-formal learning in the formal education institutions). However, given the development of technology, programs related to the community-oriented distance learning are becoming more popular and more accessible to interested members of the community. Same as in other educational programs, community distance learning has some advantages and disadvantages. Advantages are related to the availability of learning content when learners have appropriate digital skills. On the other hand, we can recognize a lot of possible disadvantages, such as staying at home instead of socialization with community members. Furthermore, participants have reduced opportunities for asking questions during the program if a lecturer is well educated in andragogy and didactics. Also, research shows a variety of results about motivation during the distance learning courses, but mostly they show

challenges with the lack of motivation in case that lecturer is not well prepared, if tasks are considered boring, too difficult, too easy, etc.

There is no unique definition of community-oriented learning. In the literature you can find many definitions, but for this purpose community-oriented learning refers to a form of learning which includes:

(1) the acquisition of new competences that are not intended only for the labour market but for the well-being of individuals through life

(2) It is intended for a wider population and contributes to the individual and the community

(3) can be intergenerational connecting different generations

(4) it contributes to the building of social relationships and togetherness

(5) it is part of lifelong learning concept

What is community-specific learning?

As we mentioned above, (lifelong) learning is not intended only for children and young people. Population 60+ can and should learn, there is a need for organizing learning activities for migrants and all possible groups regardless of their age, previously acquired qualification, gender, etc. In community-oriented learning everyone can learn. Obviously, depending on their individual characteristics, and prior knowledge, people have different educational needs. In that sense, it is not expected that everyone has identical educational needs. Every community, and even every individual has specific needs and interest. In that manner, community-specific learning is community-oriented learning which includes programs and learning activities that are relevant for every single person and community.

How to identify learning activities in community – specific learning?

Every community has its own specifics, and it is not possible to give a recipe. But we can give you some advice in accordance with relevant scientific and professional literature that will help you in implementing community-specific learning processes.

Firstly, it is important to find out if there are already implemented learning activities in the community. For example, if the local library, or associations conduct such activities. If they have experience in such activities, they can share it.

Secondly, you need to find the best media for advertising your learning activity. For example, it is not the same if your participants are older people 60+, younger working people, or migrants. It is not always expected that older people have an email or social media account. Migrants, for example, should be approached in their own language.

Third, you should know how to implement community relevant learning activities. You can find the basic steps for implementing learning activities in the lifelong learning process:

1. Needs analysis to organise learning activities in accordance with community - specific needs
2. Attendees' features
3. Planning/organization/realization of the learning process in accordance with the needs of the attendees
4. Cost and resources analysis
5. Self-evaluation of the quality of the learning activity

Based on our experience in implementing the Erasmus+60 project, which aligns with insights from relevant literature sources, below is a comprehensive outline of the steps required to develop a learning activity customized to address the specific needs of the community:

1. **Needs analysis for organizing distance learning according to the specific needs of the community**
   The first step involves gathering information about the specific educational needs of the community for which the program is intended. It is necessary to conduct research on the level of education (interview, short questionnaire about learning preferences and time managing for conducting program), access to technology and competence in using technology (for participants and lecturers), language preferences (if participants are foreigners), and cultural and social factors that may influence learning (such as prior knowledge, professional qualification, etc).
   Key methods for conducting needs analysis include surveys, interviews with community members, and consultations with local mentors or organizations. **Contextualization of content** should be reached. Namely, learning process should be adapted to the local conditions and culture of the community and participants. This includes using examples, case studies, and materials that are relevant to learners from specific communities. This makes the educational content more relatable and connected to individual life experiences.

Accessibility and availability of technology is important because communities may have different levels of access to technology. Distance learning tools must be adapted to the available infrastructure (e.g., using mobile offline apps in areas where internet connectivity is unreliable). Sometimes participants should be encouraged in using modern technology, and lecturer should check digital competency of participants.

Local support and mentors: Involvement of local mentors, lecturers, or community members as support for learning. They can provide more personalized assistance to learners, especially in communities that may not have had prior experience with distance learning.

2. Participant features

This step involves understanding the characteristics of the learners such as prior knowledge, educational biography and goals, and potential challenges they may face. It is important to assess technical skills, level of motivation, and ability to work independently to tailor the program to the needs and preferences of the learners as effectively as possible.

In that manner it is important to adjust teaching/learning methods, the language style of instructional materials to the language spoken in the community and the time needed for performing a learning task.

3. Planning/organization/implementation of the distance learning process in accordance with the needs of the participants

Program planning includes defining the curriculum, learning objectives, and lesson plans. It is necessary to determine the duration of the modules, the schedule of activities, and how competencies will be assessed. Organization involves logistical and technical aspects such as managing virtual classrooms and distributing resources. Implementation involves monitoring the program's progress, with adjustments made as necessary based on the learners' advancement. Again, lecturer should be flexible, motivated and ready to encourage participants. Also, lecturer should include examples in classes and promote an active role of participants. It is very important to implement prior knowledge of participants and their examples, questions and so on.

4. Cost and resource analysis

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For successful implementation, it is necessary to conduct a detailed cost analysis, which includes platform expenses, software licensing, creating educational materials, and teacher training. Resource analysis involves technical and human resources, as well as the availability of financial means, potential sources of funding, and assessing long-term needs for maintaining the program.

5. **Self-evaluation of the quality of the learning activity**

Self-evaluation is the final step in which the program's success is analysed. The goal of self-assessment is to provide high-quality and relevant distance education, even in communities facing unique challenges, such as geographic isolation, cultural differences, or technological limitations. Lecturers and participants need to provide feedback on the learning process, the effectiveness of teaching, technical aspects, and the usefulness of the content. Based on this feedback, the program is revised to address shortcomings and improve future learning cycles. The emphasis is not placed on the evaluation of achievements, but on the self-assessment of the participants on the quality of the acquired competencies and the quality of the program. In that manner, lecturer should (1) gather feedback during the course and at the end of a program; (2) choose assessment strategies such as quizzes, scenarios, practical exercises; (3) ensure and implement assessment tools which can be voluntary and anonymous and (4) give the participants feedback. Sometimes it is useful to include post-training assessments and follow-up surveys.

What are the features of distance learning in community-oriented learning process?

After the needs analysis, the main features of the distance learning program can be defined. In this stage, organizers of community distance learning/ lecturers /instructors select and choose the platforms that will be used. Also, in accordance with learning topic they choose the method of content delivery (video, text, interactive lessons), and the accessibility of the program (e.g., access without a constant internet connection). It is important that the tools and learning content are aligned with the technological infrastructure of the community and digital competences of the participants.

Depending on the type of program, content and individual characteristics of participants such as prior knowledge, lecturer chooses learning methods and type of distance learning which can be synchronous, asynchronous or combination of these two types of distance learning. Lecturer needs to think about flexibility in learning time and method depending on the needs and possibilities

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of the participants. For example, in communities where learners have other responsibilities (e.g., work or family care), distance learning programs need to be flexible, allowing learners to study at their own pace and at times that suit them.

Synchronous learning refers to a form of education where learning takes place in real-time, meaning that students and lecturers participate in the educational process simultaneously, whether in a classroom or through online platforms. Examples include video conferences, webinars, or virtual classrooms where all participants communicate at the same time, ask questions, and exchange ideas. The added value of synchronous learning and teaching is that it enables greater communication between learners and learners and lecturers. Also, lecturers can more easily notice learning difficulties and there is a greater possibility that they will recognize participants learning difficulties in time and be able to support them to learn and persist in completing the task. Also, in synchronous distance learning process, more activity is expected in the joint learning process than in asynchronous teaching.

Asynchronous learning allows learners to access learning materials and complete tasks at their own pace, without the need for simultaneous presence of lecturers and other learners. Examples include pre-recorded video lessons, forum discussions, or tasks that learners can complete whenever it suits them, offering greater flexibility in scheduling their learning time. Of course, cooperation is also possible through asynchronous teaching, but to a lesser extent than with synchronous teaching.

6. **Testing the pilot distance learning program**

The pilot program allows for testing the entire program on a smaller scale to identify potential difficulties and opportunities for improvement. This step involves a smaller number of learners and lecturers, and their feedback is used to adjust and enhance the program before full implementation.

An example of such testing activity was performed in the framework of Erasmus+60 project from 4-8 September 2023 in Split, Croatia. The Learning, Teaching, Training activity gathered participants and colleagues from all partner universities, as well as participants 60+ from Croatia, Portugal, France, Latvia, Czech Republic, Switzerland, and Hungary, who had the opportunity to take part in online courses testing, healthy meal preparation and physical activity

workshops, training sessions, and cultural workshops focusing on the cultural and historical heritage of the Split area and its surroundings.

Seven pilot online courses tailored for learners aged 60 and above, covering a diverse range of topics were developed and tested live, so the participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on usability in order to suggest improvements to the course organisers. Each e-learning course comprised learning videos, quizzes, and exercises. For each course, the unique testing protocol was used to ensure credibility. Video features included aspects like general first impression, set-up of the video, lecturer, audio, language, slides in the background, graphs, structure, scope or subtitles. Usability features included aspects of topic, logging in and navigating on the platform, content, materials, expectations and improvement suggestions. In a usability testing session, participants evaluated the e-learning courses and provided predominantly qualitative feedback. This feedback was reviewed by each participating university and was implemented during the ongoing development of the e-learning courses. This process was observed by a lecturer of a different course to ensure objectivity of the approach and to note the participants' behaviour and comments.

7. Tips for lecturers

Lecturers should have at least basic knowledge about distance learning processes, features of community-based learning and about educating adults.

1. Consider the participant perspective (for example, you have to know about participants' interests, prior knowledge and about their digital competencies).

2. Every adult learns in accordance with their own interests and all participants are different. They learn in a different way than children. You need to know the features of learning in adulthood. Therefore, it is important to be understanding and flexible.

3. Your role is to motivate participants and support them if they encounter difficulties.

4. Adapt the teaching content to the abilities and interests of the learners.

5. Encourage self-directed learning.

6. Use self-assessment strategies.

7. Encourage collaboration within the participants and community.

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8. Use educational methods that promote active learning.

9. if participants need help in learning process, try to help them

Literature that can help you to learn more about this topic:

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