

NEW EDUCATION FOR THE NEW GENERATION (OFFICE INTERACTORS, NCLB, EAT)

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The projects presented in this article develop a new approach to several aspects in the teaching and learning process.

Office InterActors is a transfer of Innovation project which continues to work initiated in the InterAct project referring to new methods and materials for developing awareness and skills auxiliary to the professional skills of the beneficiaries such as: negotiation skills, ICT literacy, foreign languages, international awareness and integration. www.officeinteractors.eu

Partners in the second project, **No Child Left Behind**, have created materials for civic education and have added also training packages for testing the materials created in several languages and for several countries. www.nochildleftbehind.eu

EAT is a Leonardo da Vinci project focusing on blending healthy eating, foreign languages and international awareness in activities specially designed for young learners. www.eatingabroadtogether.eu

Materials created in all of these projects and more details can be found each of the projects' websites.

Key words: auxiliary skills, material design, student centered teaching, continuous built-in evaluation and testing , international awareness and social aspects

Sooner all later it all comes back to education. Along the years, we have chosen to give this word different meanings, larger or narrower, depending on the various situations it has been used in. Education has thus come to embody quite extreme attitudes and means for implementation. Still, there is one aspect which I believe has always characterized efficient and authentic education: being updated to the ones who are supposed to benefit from it. And by this I mean more than putting to practice all the new methods and methodologies. In order for all these to make sense and really make a difference, no matter the domain, of education, they have to be grounded to the reality within which they are to function.

Education is more than an exterior stimulus. Education works from within and shapes individuals according to their very personality only. Anything else, different from that, would not last and would surely not be of any help "outside school". Education anchors individuals in their present society allowing them to see beyond it, express and develop attitudes and aptitudes for it. Education is, in

the end, much more than I could possibly gather in a few words. Samples though, could help draw an image of the type of education required by the present world around us all.

The projects presented in this article will emphasize the following aspects: awareness raising on educative attitudes for teachers and students, development of life skills and work domain specialized abilities, building on personal experience to create long lasting learning inputs and outputs. The result, as they say, is much more than the sum of its components - a lifelong learning attitude focused on improving individuals per general, not only within small sized fields. Flexibility and the ability to have both the birds and the worms' eye view is one of the most important lessons taught and learnt. Therefore, education must be „new” to fit the "new ones".

No Child Left Behind, *Office InterActors* and *EAT* projects offer a wholistic perspective upon the educative process starting with the elaboration and testing of materials, adapting elements from new ICT technologies and associating them with different curricular areas so as to offer beneficiaries a complete experience.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Novelty has always been dreamt of but very often the concrete change it brought was tried out with reluctance. Wishing for a change may turn out to be quite different from having to make the change, especially when it is initiated by elements other than the ones who have to take control in implementing the change. The reader may already be familiar with some of the aspects to be presented in this article. We do learn about many things still we practically only try some of them. Therefore discussions are not going to be about the theoretical novelties of teaching but about the novelty of implementing these ideas in the Romanian and other international contexts.

The fact that we have learnt about new methods and technologies lately, doesn't make our job as teachers easier. We still have to face the same old system and mentality that has been there for some time now. „The old” has managed to create a most „pleasant” comfort zone around it for protection against any „too laborious change” meant to make things more up to date, more efficient and more relevant to the changing contexts we all function within. We know about the „new” but have we ever done it? Student centered teaching, continuous built-in evaluation and testing, international awareness and social aspects, blended learning, cross-curricular approach – all these are surely not unfamiliar ground for Romanian education specialists. However there are few who can state that they have and still are trying these in their classes, even as an experiment. Reasons to go against it can too easily be gathered, starting with the lack of necessary materials, time, structure of the system and all sort of other lacks of affordances which demotivate practitioners and stop them from implementing any new and innovative idea. Of course there are bits and pieces that can be traced within the class activity. But can these separate, sometimes even divergent elements, make a notable difference? First steps are important and every single victory, no matter the battle, counts and brings us closer to the horizon of „all possibilities”.

They do say „aim for the stars to reach the sky” and this can indeed be a motivating element. Still, sometimes it may be wiser and more practical to look around „on the ground” at the already available material and start building from scrap our way up „towards the stars”. What I am saying is that top down approach in transferring

innovation may not always work. However bottom –up approaches such as trying to adapt methods and concepts to the specificities of the different contexts, may turn out to be more efficient at least from two points of view:

1. It proves teachers that it can be done even if the system within which it is applied is not similar to the foreign ones
2. It suits our learner and their particular needs which may differ quite a lot from one group of beneficiaries to another.

This faces us with the necessity of developing a list of gradual actions that would support building up a strategy to safely approach new methods with the certainty of having an output useful for all participants and contributors:

1. Observing the social context and human resources.
2. Identifying gaps and needs that could and should be addressed.
3. Inventoring the entire range of available materials.
4. Considering the previous points to establish the general objectives of the main action to be undertaken.
5. Structure the action into stages and establish their objectives.
6. Brainstorm the necessary materials and resources.
7. Identify the materials already available and those which need to be created.
8. Compare the method chosen to be applied and the data collected so far and decide the future course of action.
9. Decide which aspects of the new methodology would best suit the context and all the resources you have.
10. Bearing in mind the objectives and the characteristics of the new method, focus on the aspects earlier selected.
11. Develop these aspects using the material available and try to valorize all aspects included in the experience.
12. Monitor and evaluate action and the subjects involved. Also involve them as evaluators in the process – peer, self evaluation.
13. Observe the results of evaluation and build on them to make things more efficient even if that involves changes.
14. Continue implementation including the changes brought to the initial plan or material.
15. Test efficiency, relevance and any other aspects you consider important.
16. Final evaluation and ideas for future actions alike.

This is but a logical, simple path practitioners can take when planning to implement a piece of „novelty” even in contexts which at a first glance are not entirely suitable for them. The bottom-up approach described above ensures the „natural accommodation” of the newly imported ideas and real benefits for all those involved. Changes do not necessarily mean decreasing the „new” and its effects. Rightly done and anchored in the context, these changes can turn out to be of much use, especially because they help the implementor focus on the specificities of the target group and adapt the „all ” to their needs and characteristics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

All of the above mentioned steps are most carefully developed on in the three projects EuroEd Foundation has worked on along other international partners. I have chosen to use these projects to illustrate the ideas on implementing innovation in education because they round up all the stages and aspects to be considered when implementing new means and methodologies in education. These

projects present a logical development of action so as to naturally and effectively build on the teaching and learning process.

The OfficeInterActors project (www.officeinteractors.eu) focuses on developing courses that would support specialists and „to-be specialists” update their knowledge by developing skills and abilities auxiliary to their field of activity such as negotiating, ICT skills, foreign language etc.

One the very early stages of this project was to identify the target group who was to benefit from the courses. In other words the course was developed for specialists and students in the field of economics without trying to fit an already produced material onto any group available. This meant looking at their work and social contexts, analysing their needs and putting everything together to find the best way to serve the students’ interests. Experienced workers and students were teamed due the complementarity they could bring in the action of the project. This is a way of using their previous experience to build on the teaching and learning process. Through this learners are motivated and actively included in courses and, more than this, they become aware of how learning happens and what it takes to make it relevant for their own contexts.

The materials used were gradually developed and customized: the moodle platform specially structured for the two round of courses and for the administrative discussions among the partners. The site of the project is meant to provide details on the principles and methodology in the project. Beneficiaries participating in the two rounds of courses will have the possibility to experience more than an economy course. It will be a course about the way to apply economy and all the theory learnt in school, a course that will facilitate their understanding of the key points in diverse situations and the turning points which depend knowing more about the context, national or international, being better at team work and negotiations, using new technical devices to process information and transfer it to other sources. Using participants’ prior experiences saves time and enriches all activities making them more relevant and offering authentic material for students to use.

Throughout the courses tutors will have to monitor both the accomplishing of the tasks by the students and the newly created, spontaneous situations which may bring in new possibilities to approach the tasks and which may also provide other future development of the present tasks. Having enough time to watch students attitudes, reactions and all the other small but very important details will certainly contribute to the quality of the courses. Continuous evaluation within the course will come from all the directions involved: the external and internal evaluator, the tutors and the students. There will be continuous evaluation, self and peer evaluation, summative and formative evaluation forms. The evaluation plan has been developed to support the bettering of the activities developed and provide partners with more input on the necessary changes and improvements.

Designing material on the other hand, can become quite a challenge in the absence of the students for whom the material is designed for. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (www.nochildleftbehind.eu) Project has already developed a

complete set of materials and guidance for both teachers and students in the field of civic education. Work on the different parts of the final kit has involved a lot of creative work but also many sessions of testing, evaluation and improving on the basis of the feedback. Unlike the way we were used to until recently, evaluation does not come at the end of a process only and its prime purpose is not that of testing even though this aspect is included. Evaluation, just like in NCLB, can and should be used as a tool for development. The material teachers have created in the first stages of the project has been used in training courses at the end of which beneficiaries handed in feedback forms. Based on these documents partners then revisited their work and reshaped it making changes so as to best suit the target users. The partnership itself had sessions for further developing and harmonizing the material gathered before structuring it in the final form. Ongoing evaluation has supported partners in developing materials relevant and with a real utility for the future users.

The last project in this article Eating Abroad Together (EAT) (www.eatingabroadtogether.eu) has set as a priority to teach young learners about healthy eating. The products of the activities however may not entirely show that from a first glance. This is due to the cross-curricular approach that has been used in structuring all the activities in the project. Simply telling children about healthy eating and showing them that all their favourite food should in fact not be on their diets at all would have had little chances of convincing anyone to make a change especially children. Something more special and attractive was needed and so international context was first brought in for more variation of context. With the international context came the chance of adding foreign languages to the activities and offering children in the project a real communication and discussion partners from other European countries: Romania, UK, Holland, Bulgaria and Italy. Practical activities made everything seem a game for the children and at the same time provided a great number of opportunities to access new information and acquire basic vocabulary in the foreign languages. In other words the main topic was contextualized and framed so as to make sense for young learners and determine them to observe their eating habits and if necessary make changes that they and their families would benefit from. Education can never be attributed to school or to family only. It is a process that happens with input from both directions. This was the reason why family and the local community were directly involved in the activities from the project one way or another. Informing people on the principles of healthy eating was another strong reason for that.

EAT provided everyone in the project to actively get involved and be creative with basic materials. Children starting from primary school and up to high school took information back home determining changes in their eating habits.

CONCLUSIONS

The three projects presented have a logical development, contextualized to the environment they were developed for and implemented in. Even though the

project proposal was written mainly by one partner in the project, the others took the time to analyse their own contexts so as to deliver activities and products relevant to each target group. The „new education” therefore is raising awareness on the steps in the teaching and learning process, actively including all participants in order to create life skills more or less specialised, according to the needs of the beneficiaries.

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