

1 Case study AT:

Training course “The art of networking”

Introduction

The European training course The Art of Networking is aimed at professionals in adult education and other education sectors (adult trainers, teachers, programme developers, education managers, researchers, evaluators) who are already involved in networks or may wish to be so in the future. The Art of Networking offers training on how to act effectively in educational networks, and how to plan and manage a network. Moreover, a particular type of network is highlighted: European networks in the framework of the European Union’s funding programmes for lifelong learning.

In September/October 2009 a one-week Art of Networking course took place in Alden Biesen, Belgium. Although this course was not an “informal” learning activity, but a “non-formal” course with clear and communicated aims, competence development is an important issue. It was therefore decided to use the LEVEL5 methodology to evidence the competence development of participants in the framework of an overall project evaluation.

Setting

The course took place from September 28 to October 3, 2009 in Alden Biesen, Belgium. Alden Biesen is an impressive historical castle complex set in the beautiful Flemish landscape. Due to its remote location, the participants had a very intensive learning experience enriched with active networking and informal leisure activities.

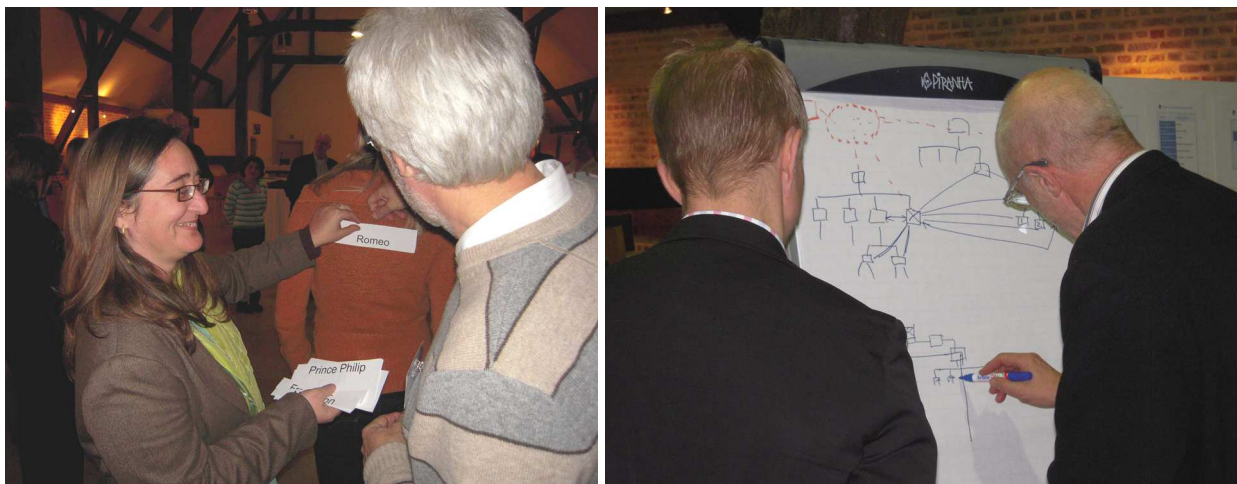
Project Activities

The course content is laid out in the graphic below.

Network theory	Network and networking: definitions and concepts - Network analysis - Driving forces of networks - Organisational forms of networks
Social networking skills	Basic interpersonal competences - Approaching people - Identifying networking potential - Creating trust - Managing relationships
Networks in EU programmes	EU policies on Lifelong Learning - The mission of networks in EU funding programmes - Applying for EU funding - Promotion, dissemination, valorisation - Reporting
Setting up a network	Mapping own networking needs - Needs analysis - Network typology and strategy - Planning the network - Selecting network members - Creating a financial basis
Network management	Challenges of network management - Diversity - Intercultural aspects - Organisation, management and decision-making - Network coordinator profile - Leadership and management
ICT tools for networks	Role of ICT in social networks - Group dynamics and ICT - Media culture - Overview of ICT tools for social networks - Analysis and application of ICT tools for networking
Learning in a network	Types of learning in a network - Methods to promote learning in a network - Reflection on learning - Large group learning methods
Network evaluation	Planning network evaluation - Evidencing and gathering information - Evaluation indicators and tools - Social context and change management
Policy and advocacy	Mapping the policy context of a network - Developing a policy action plan - Approaching key actors - Advocacy methods - Links with media
Sustainability	Network promotion and dissemination - Identifying sustainable aspects of the network - Creating a sustainability plan - Social capital

The six day face-to-face seminar was embedded within two online training phases (a preparation phase and a follow-up phase) facilitated by an internet-based platform.

The training was oriented at the participants' professional practice, consequently, they were encouraged to share their real cases, challenges and plans related to their own networking practice. The course featured a mix of working methods: Short theoretical inputs were combined with action-oriented methods such as role plays, group work, discussions and reflective rounds. Furthermore, project work and hands-on sessions were facilitated to encourage peer-to-peer learning among the participants and collaborative learning with the course facilitators.



Much emphasis was also put on feedback and course evaluation activities to make sure that participants' needs were met and the training could be optimized. Towards the end of the course, participants were encouraged to develop concrete plans on how to transfer and integrate the new knowledge into their professional practice.

Level 5 Evaluation Scheme Applied to the Project

After various discussions we finally settled for the topic "Networking in European projects" with a focus on networking and diversity in networks. Three experts (who had also been involved in the training course development and delivery) as well as an external evaluator were involved in building the LEVEL 5 system. As this was the first time that we developed a reference system for this course, describing the levels in the three dimensions was quite a time-consuming process. The reference system was applied on the learning progress of volunteer learners of the course who had agreed to participate in testing the LEVEL5 methodology.

At the very beginning we considered that observation could be our main assessment method, but soon realized that we should also carry out individual interviews with the learners. Overall, the assessment process took about 3 days. The evidencing and discussions among the co-evaluators were quite efficient once the dimensions were clarified and could be finalized in approximately 2 hours. Surprisingly, our ratings in the system of individual learners were almost similar. Using several evaluators and a mix of assessment methods proved to be a feasible way to improve the transparency of results and ratings.

The interviews were carried out in a very friendly, informal setting (e.g. while taking a walk with the learners) and proved to be a feasible approach for collecting evidence for the learner assessment. Here are some of the questions we used:

- Has your understanding of a network evolved?
- Are you planning to implement some of the issues discussed into your management structure/network/other field of activity?
- What will be the next steps for you?
- What are the obstacles or challenges to implement these steps that you see?
- How could you deal with these challenges?

Project Impact

It was very interesting to see how LEVEL5 was useful in making the learning process and progress more transparent and to a certain extent even negotiable with the learners. As this was a rather formalized course in the beginning we were a bit hesitant to whether LEVEL5 could be used. In the end, however, the methodology proved to be feasible for these kinds of courses, too.

Regarding the impact of the course on the learners, the most obvious progress was made on the cognitive dimension. This might be due to the fact that the course delivered a lot of theoretical input which initially translates into re-considering one's own networking practice. Although the learners already had hands-on experience in the area of networking prior to the course, they still received new and profound knowledge regarding network theory and also had plenty of opportunities to practice and develop their skills as well as reflecting their practice.

The development of the learners' competence during the training (not taking into account the follow-up period) was also obvious on the 2 other dimension (affective and activity).

Discussion & Perspectives

After our experiences with the COMNET course, we will continue using LEVEL5 in courses as well as in other informal learning activities. One of the main advantages we see for our work is the opportunity to use it as a visual feedback tool for learners' progress reflections. In any case, we have learned from our experience that it is important to keep the whole evaluation process transparent and participatory so as to evaluate a topic that is relevant for both the learning activity (from the organizers' point of view) and the learners.