



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

The Swansea Learning Experience

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A paper that gives you great insight into the challenges of learning communities.

Read more...

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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

Intro



From the 3rd to the 7th of October the Xploit consortium visited our Swansea partners and dialogued with a number of stakeholders and active citizens in the field of learning communities.

As Swansea and South-West Wales has long-standing traditions for learning communities, learning centres and active citizenship the visit was aiming to provide the Xploit communities with strong inspiration in support of the implementation of the project's first action phase, running through winter 2011/12.

The visit was a great success, mostly due to the people we met. They were open, qualified, collaborating, experienced, dedicated and shared a number of basic values. The aim of this small report is not to list activities or organisations, but to try to capture the essence of what we learned in Wales and Swansea in small *texts* and *statements*.

These texts and statements should be included in the action phase debates in the Xploit communities.

Strong lifelong learning infrastructures



In Xploit, in the EU Lifelong Learning Program and across Europe the challenge of establishing sustainable lifelong learning infrastructures in support of the development of learning communities has been put on the agenda.

In Swansea and South-West Wales such learning community infrastructures have been developed through the last 10 years, and are still being taken further.

The initiatives from national, regional and local policy-makers and educational stakeholders have resulted in the establishment of strong cross-sector learning partnerships (such as the *Communities First* and *Swansea Learning Partnership* initiatives) operating at a strategic level to support and facilitate the provision of learning opportunities for all citizens, based on the ongoing identification of learning needs.

Originally the idea was to make learning provision more efficient by establishing collaboration between the different stakeholders, and avoid duplication and inefficient competition.

The very strong principle behind this approach is that strong cross-sector collaboration at local and regional level will produce more growth and more value to all, instead of blocking growth through in-efficient competition.

Instead of fighting for a small piece of the cake, why not make the cake larger?

One of the most significant results of these infrastructures is the support and facilitation of local community centres and groups of active citizens. An important value in the partnerships is not to own or control the local activities, but to provide networking and support structures. We strongly recommend going deeper into the history and principles of the Welsh learning community infrastructures.

Learn more:

Communities First

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/regeneration/communitiesfirst/?lang=en>
<http://www.communities-first.org/eng/home/>

Swansea Learning Partnership

<http://www.swansea.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=24112>
http://www.swansea-arrivals.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=75&Itemid=110
<https://swansea-edunet.gov.uk/en/adultlearning/Pages/SwanseaLearningPartnership.aspx>
<http://www.swan.ac.uk/dace/wideningparticipation/partnerships/>

South-West Wales Learning Observatory

<http://www.learningobservatory.com/south-west-wales/>
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Regional-Learning-Partnership-South-West-Wales/203700662988867>

http://www.xploit-eu.com/learning_communities/swansey.html
<http://www.xploit-eu.com/resources/inspiration.html>

Shortly the Xploit Swansea learning experience, including video interviews, will be available from the Xploit website.

History, culture, mentality



One of the most important things to reflect on concerning the strong learning community infrastructures in South-West Wales is that it is based on 25 years of local active citizenship.

The first groups of active citizens, addressing the social and learning situation in their local communities, emerged from the miner strikes and labour market conflicts in the 80's. The communities' economy was based on mining industry for decades and even centuries, and when the mining industry started to close it left a big vacuum in the communities.

Groups of working class women started to take action and formed small groups of active citizens in the communities addressing the social, economic and educational needs of the communities at large.

The result was a number of community centres, mostly run by groups of active women. These groups of women were forced to learn everything from scratch; fundraising, organisation of activities, networking, etc., etc. This very long process can be described as a long process of self-empowerment.

The Welsh learning community tradition cannot be separated from its history. Other communities across Europe have other histories, and this should be taken into account when working to establish learning communities.

What was extremely evident during the visits was that the long self-empowerment tradition in the communities has produced a special mentality among the active citizens, a mentality of hard work, pride, self-management and will.

The oldest of the community centres is now starting to look forward to the next 25 years of activities - and many of the people (mostly women!) from the "old times" are still there.

Without this strong basis of active citizens, the learning partnerships and the learning community infrastructures might not have been successful.

Women taking action, self-empowerment



The first elements of "learning communities" were not established by policy-makers, project managers or educators, but by groups of women taking action in support of communities damaged by unemployment and labour market conflicts.

The long-standing and strong British working class traditions, including the big trade unions, play a significant role in this history.

The pioneer women started to form community groups without a clear idea of what might be the outcomes of such initiatives. They started talking about a community centre, about learning needs, about the social situation in the communities, etc.

They had to learn everything from raising funds to plan activities.

Today they have become "experts" in what learning communities mean.

They were not included, they included themselves.

Many lessons can be learned from these women's long self-empowerment history, and these lessons learned should be used as a great inspiration to learning communities across Europe.

This history offers crucial challenges to learning communities across Europe and in the Xploit project: What does inclusion mean? What does participation mean? What does empowerment mean? What does autonomy mean? What are the roles of support structures?

Welsh role-models in Europe?



In learning communities and in the Xploit project we are very much focused on the competences, skills and experience needed to drive forward a learning community, or a community centre. The groups of active citizens in South-West Wales should be role-models to these learning communities, not in the sense that the communities should "duplicate" the role-models and their communities, but in the form of great and valuable experience, guidance and support.

The Xploit project is therefore contributing to new exchange initiatives between groups of active women in South-West Wales, Catania in Sicily and the Xploit communities of Udine and Salt.

We plan to provide European funding for these activities, if possible, as well as to follow the activities closely and support further collaboration between the groups of active citizens.

Such networks between groups of active citizens working with learning communities and community centres might be of great value to the European learning community networks.

Autonomy, independency



One of the most important experiences from the Swansea dialogues was about the crucial learning community questions: Who initiates such groups of active citizens? Who “owns” the community centre? Who decides about activities and initiatives in the community centre? Whose needs are in focus in the community work?

It was quite obvious during the visit that there is a rather clear mutual understanding between the learning partnerships and the national, regional and local strategic structures on one side, and the local community activities and community centres on the other.

The support structures provide support, some funding, frameworks and platforms for the local activities, but do not in general interfere with the local activities. Then support structures offer guidance, networking and coordination, but do not make specific plans for the local centres.

This means that principles such as autonomy and independency are very important to the local communities. These principles form the basis for self-management, self-learning and self-empowerment.

This discussion is of tremendous importance to the discussions on the basic criteria for learning communities: to what degree are the different community groups and community activities independent of local or regional authorities? And: what kind of cooperation should be in place between political/organisational support structures and local communities?

Political frameworking and community empowerment



A number of partnerships and stakeholders are providing support measures for the local communities in South-West Wales.

The support structures consist in cross-sector collaborations, including public authorities, labour market organisations, educations, NGO's and private enterprises. Some of the support structures are governmental, such as *Communities First*, others are networks created by the involved stakeholders, such as the *Swansea Learning Partnership*.

What is important is that the support structures do not attempt to “replace” the learning and self-empowerment of the communities. The support structures work at strategic level, networking level, and offers a variety of support for the local work, including learning provision, facilitators and contributions to the funding of the activities.

In many countries and regions it will be a challenge for public authorities and support partnerships to define their roles in relation to the local communities and centres. In fact, this challenge calls for a learning process among the supporting stakeholders: they must learn to support and to offer frameworks, but at the same time respect and encourage local autonomy and self-empowerment.

The support organisations, including local and regional authorities, must learn to promote the *politicisation* of active citizens. This is also why it might be a sound principle for support organisations, including public authorities, not to provide full funding of the community activities, as this will remove the need for self-empowerment and the feeling of ownership among the active citizens.

Addressing the needs of the community at large



The groups of active women started their journey many years ago addressing the challenges of social crisis and unemployment and closing labour markets. They soon identified many learning needs in the communities and worked hard to meet those needs. But, along the way, they also started to address a variety of other important community challenges, such as child care, single mothers, young people and young drop-outs, and elderly.

Today the communities and the centres are working with many social and learning challenges, including using technology and trying out new ways to learn, and are very open towards new initiatives.

In fact, some of the people we met stated that the community centre was to a large degree replacing the old family structures.

This statement is extremely important: the old family structures are disappearing all over Europe, but local communities and centres might be taking over many of the roles of the old families.

Things like child care, social support structures for young people and care for elderly might be important tasks for the future learning communities.

One of the most important missions of the community centres is to offer a learning bridge to further education, perhaps even to higher education.

Therefore all kinds of adult learning are taking place in the communities in support of citizens with poor educational backgrounds or with low educational self-esteem.

The idea is to use the local community activities to re-motivate young and adult learners and offer them the needed qualifications for further education outside the community.

This leads us to the next text...

The Bridge to further education



The learning communities and the community centres, including adult education provisions, offer citizens a wide range of non-formal as well as assessed learning opportunities to enrich the lives of the citizens and empower them to better manage their lives and hopes.

However, it is a strong wish in the communities to be able to offer more organized learning to people who might be interested in attending further education outside the community.

When it comes about higher education, this seems to be quite a challenge.

The communities might be able to re-motivate and re-train groups of citizens, and do this well. But higher education is very often not ready to offer these adults relevant and suitable learning activities. Most higher education remains very academic and the very smell of academia prevents many less educated adults from attending courses or educations.

This is why we need to establish a stronger interaction between adult education and higher education.

Higher education must create new learning pathways for “non-academic” youth and adults, not based on the old academic theoretical approaches.

And, in fact, such attempts are strongly supported by the European Commission’s “shift to learning outcomes”: what is assessed and important is not how many books the learner read throughout the education, but what the learner is able to do after the education. This announces a shift from abstract theory and knowledge to competences in action.

25 years of self-empowerment



Some of the women we met had been working 25 years to establish and further develop their community centre. These women represent, we can say without hesitation, 25 years of learning community experience.

They started out from nothing, including no housing or physical facilities, and learned it all on the flight.

They produced hundreds of applications to rise the needed funding, and they are still doing that. They sought collaboration with educations and other stakeholders, and they are still doing that. They work with local authorities and policy-makers, and they are still doing that. They mobilized many different groups of citizens, and they are still doing that. And they learned and learned, and they are still doing that. Some of the women celebrated they learning with academic studies.

Fundraising, networking, organizing, identifying and meeting needs in the community - all this have been on the community agenda for many years. Therefore these women *know*, and this knowledge is extremely valuable to other communities across Europe, trying to find their way to support their community.

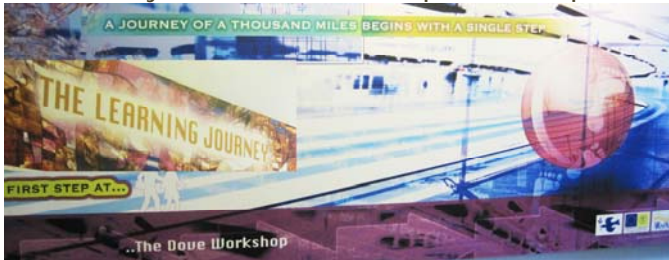
What became evident during the visit were the gender patterns: most of the people representing the support structures and strategic partnerships were men. Almost all the people working in the communities were... women.

It seems like a clear pattern: we saw the same thing in Catania in Sicily during the study visit.

This might very well be linked to the statement from some of the women: the community centre is taking over many of the old family traditions and responsibilities.

What can we learn from this? Do groups of active women represent a special resource for learning communities? How can this be used, how can it be understood, and how can, eventually, the men in the community be involved in the community work - on the terms and conditions of the women?

Community Centres and entrepreneurship



The community centres and adult education providers have always had to fight for their lives.

Every financial contribution had to be applied for, negotiated, fought for and combined with other funding sources. This was and is the weakness of such centres and provisions, but also their strength. A lot of learning, self-empowerment and pride resulted from these struggles, and today it is still like that.

These conditions called for an interest in entrepreneurship: the more the centres and the communities were able to establish small economies, the better for the budget. This has led to centres producing different kinds of local products and services. Sometimes small economies like that might account for half of the centre's budget.

Some of the communities have expanded these entrepreneurial activities to include training and guidance for citizens to establish a business. But it was clear, as in most European countries and regions, that *the entrepreneurial opportunities have not yet been sufficiently exploited*. With closing labour markets, and few emerging sectors in sight, entrepreneurship becomes still more important to the local communities. When few opening markets are in sight, the communities must create new markets, both locally and in larger scale.

This is a challenge to the communities: what are we good at, what can be become good at? The community centres are perfect "incubators" for such activities...

Inclusion and participation is not enough!



When everybody in the educational sector was taking about the ICT revolution, our shrewd MIT Media Lab colleague Mitch Resnick stated: *Access is not enough!* We could re-write this statement today, after a decade of inclusion and participation rhetoric: *Inclusion is not enough!*

Inclusion and participation rhetoric has become justification measures for many organisations building their economies on local, national and European projects. Organisations create projects and activities for disadvantaged learners in deprived areas, and from time to time they *include* the citizens in *their* projects - they allow them to *participate* in *their* projects and well-designed activities. All this might be very useful, but somehow this approach also misses the crucial point: *allowing the self-empowerment, self-management and self-learning of the citizens*. On few occasions the "organizers" step back and allow the citizens space and opportunities to develop themselves.

Often the mechanisms in play in such projects are based on the representative logic: organisations, trainers, policies *represent* the interests of the citizens. On few occasions the organizers are able or willing to support and step back at the same time.

During the visit we got the impression that inclusion and participation was more than rhetoric in South-West Wales. Whether this is perfectly true, we do not know, but the positive impression was quite strong:

- The support organisations and partnership demonstrated a strong understanding of their own roles towards the autonomy and self-management of local community activities
- The people we met in the communities demonstrated a strong independency and at the same time a strong will to collaborate with the support organisations

Once again, the Swansea experience poses a great challenge to learning communities: *what do inclusion, participation and empowerment mean in learning communities?* *This leads us to the next text...*

Communities should be built on groups of active citizens



One of the most demanding challenges to Xploit and to the networks of learning communities is: *on what criteria should learning communities build?*

We believe that a number of criteria could be set up to define the most important principles in learning communities, meaning: criteria that should be met no matter the specific context of the different learning communities.

This debate includes, of course, the dilemma of top-down and bottom up approaches. To what extent can learning communities be established by policy-makers or stakeholder networks at strategic level? To what extent must the learning community build on groups of active citizens?

What are the roles of authorities and support networks in the development of a learning community? To what extent should the learning community be built on values such as: direct participation, self-management, closeness, clarity, transparency, etc. - and what should be the nature of the relations between the individual learning community and super-structures such as learning cities, learning regions or large support organisations?

These questions are crucial to all learning communities.

The funding challenges



Learning communities, learning partnerships and all support networks are deeply depending on solid funding. In South-West Wales the many strategic and regional activities would have been impossible without regional, national and European funding.

The most valuable funding in South-West Wales has been and still is the funding from the *European Social Fund*.

As stated by our experienced Swansea colleagues: *the European Lifelong Learning Program is used for experiments, pilot projects and finding new ways, while the Social Fund is used to meet large-scale employment and training needs.*

It was clear from the visits to the communities that they all worked with a mosaic of funding sources: European, national, regional and local, as well as funding from private funds and national lotto funds; and they were all partly based on volunteering.

Any learning community and community centre will have to work with a mosaic of funding sources, as no single fund is likely to finance a wide range of activities for a longer time.

This calls for strong fundraising skills and resources in learning communities and in community centres.

Being the single major source of community funding, the Social Fund is extremely important and interesting. However, the Social Fund is administered quite differently across Europe and in different regions. Some communities have easy access to the funding, some not at all.

Therefore the Xploit project will establish an Xploit Extra initiative aiming to investigate the access to the Social Fund in different parts of Europe, and invite policy-makers to discuss this at a mini-conference in Vienna early June 2012.

The aims of the mini-conference are to enable the Xploit communities to exploit the Social Fund resources to build up their learning communities, and to equip the Xploit

community policy-makers to establish dialogues about the administration of the Social Fund in the different European regions.

The relations between the Social Fund, the Lifelong Learning Program and the development of learning communities will be addressed at the mini-conference in Vienna.

Key challenges from Swansea



- ✚ How can your community learn from the strategic partnerships' development, principles and values? In what ways is this experience useful to you?
- ✚ How did you see the interaction between the strategic partnerships and other support measures and the local community work?
- ✚ What are the values of the active citizens' self-empowerment? How is this relevant to your community?
- ✚ How can we learn from the funding experiences of the local Welsh communities? Are these experiences relevant to your community?
- ✚ What did you learn about such principles as inclusion, participation and empowerment during the visit? How might such principles work in your community?
- ✚ Is a cross-sector partnership possible in your community or region? How could it be made possible?
- ✚ How do you see the relations between the traditional families and the learning communities? How might that look in your community?
- ✚ What did you learn about community autonomy and independence?
- ✚ In what ways is the historical background of your community different from the history of South-West Wales? What does this mean to the development of a learning community?
- ✚ How will you exploit and use the Swansea Learning Experience in your community?
- ✚ Did the visit influence your Xploit work in your community? In what ways?
- ✚ Will you take initiatives involving the Swansea Learning Experience or involve people from South-West Wales in your future Xploit or community plans

Of course, people reacted differently to the learning experience...



Some were thrilled...



Some were exhausted...



Some tried to escape...



*...while others didn't care
at all !!*