

Udine Italy - steps towards a learning community

Intro

The key players from the Udine community in Xploit - The Municipality of Udine and Università delle LiberEtà - describe their Xploit experience.



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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



The Mayor of Udine video conferencing from Udine at the partner meeting in Aarhus Denmark

The picture we got of Udine at the beginning of the Xploit project was that of a dynamic community facing the many different challenges that inevitably arise when a city belongs to a Region at the border with other two countries. Some sort of European esprit and multicultural atmosphere has always been perceived in this community and in the entire Region Friuli Venezia Giulia. Probably that is why there has been a very rich offer of LLL activities and adult vocational education opportunities as well as cultural initiatives and events.

Special attention in Udine has been paid to raising awareness within the community about the following core themes: health literacy and promotion of healthy lifestyles, use of ICT tools and technology, knowledge on local heritage (arts, culture, history and nature), "sense of belonging" and civic awareness, "learning by playing", through the use of game as a mean for education and integration in a multicultural society. Moreover, there has been a strong political commitment and interest in promoting the community empowerment and in offering learning opportunities to make citizens more competent and actively involved in the community life.

Yet, at the time when the Xploit project was presented in our community, still there were very few and quite weak links between local projects and activities and the many projects and possibilities available at a European level. Therefore, there were no solid infrastructures which could systematically address the need to better coordinate the offer of learning opportunities within the community and the need to create a link between local and European resources.

For this reason we thought that the connection between these resources was inevitably the starting point for our commitment to bring Udine towards being a learning community. The Community Profile highlighted a massive number of local initiatives and community stakeholders engaged in many important social and cultural projects, but it was also evident that there was no projection towards European supporting actions. Few initiatives, just like twinning agreements or formal EU networks were active, but there was no dialogue with the European experiences. The need for a common vision and co-ordination was also one of the main starting points in the Xploit project.



Stefania and Mary-Ann from the Udine community at work - 2 and 3 from right

First of all the Xploit project gave rise to a consultative process with local stakeholders aimed at gathering and analyzing the needs and opportunities for learning within the community and at identifying the relevant existing resources to be exploited. This has been done both for local and European resources available. Local learning needs have been greatly investigated through targeted interviews to the local stakeholders which were individuated among politicians, people from the

public and private sector, voluntary associations, organizations operating with special population groups or/and on special population needs.

Then we tried to activate some specific drivers towards which many community players were focused and political commitment already confirmed. For example health promotion, healthy ageing, learning by playing, sustainable development, energy efficiency, social cohesion, volunteering, were all so relevant concepts that could act as catalysts for the community.

Within this framework the European co-operation and innovation could take root with the Xploit project trying to exploit, sustain and valorize the many European lifelong learning resources produced by the European projects and based on European co-funding.

This process was facilitated by the introduction of the community guides who have helped to start a process of re-organization of local resources and integration with European resources. The role of the guides has improved the ongoing development of projects and activities at a local level and has brought key stakeholders and operators in the community to work together in different projects, by exchanging information, procedures, sharing spaces and involving also decision makers. Moreover, they have strengthened a stable connection between the political and the educational partner, and have acted as collectors of ideas from the several stakeholders to create a solid network whose needs could then be reported to the decision-makers for more effective programmes.



Pina Raso, President of the LiberEtà partner, conferencing

In this way many already completed or ongoing European projects started to be shared within a wider audience and the community started to benefit from them in a more sustainable way; last but not least the European added value has facilitated the circulation and better understanding of the concept of Learning City among citizens, stakeholders and - very important - decision makers. It is worth mentioning the twinning between the multidisciplinary centre of Modi'in in Israel and Università delle LiberEtà in Udine. This event started a process of dialogues and co-operation not only among the two educational centres, but also between the Mayors of the two cities who are now working to organize a twinning between the two communities. If we consider that Modi'in has been recognized as an innovative Learning City, it becomes clear that Udine could greatly benefit from this close co-operation in its process of becoming a Learning City as well.



Mary-Ann from the Udine community (middle) and Orna Mager from Modi'in Israel (right)

The greater result achieved at the end of the Xploit project has been the activation of the community towards a change of perspective including not only the small framework of their local dimension but a wider one, which is represented by the

European panorama and values. This change of perspective has also increased the awareness about the process of Udine becoming a Learning City, which does not mean only to offer a huge quantity of lifelong learning activities but to constantly learn: learn to collaborate, learn to innovate, learn to take new ways, to change, to open up, to interact, learn to welcome, capture and exploit innovative resources. During the Xploit project the community has learned the benefits and difficulties of starting new collaborations, of involving politicians and decision-makers, of working with many different stakeholders, of developing or maintaining a mentality of mutual learning and sharing and contributing.

The many different experiences that have been put into practice by starting up local projects and linking them to European projects have been carried out with the help of many different cultural, social and educational centres and associations of the city. The learning guides have contributed to this aim, by monitoring all the processes and also being directly involved in some of the actions with a relevant impact on stakeholders, operators and managers of the different institutions and associations in the city.

When thinking of the overall impact of the Xploit project it is also worth mentioning the increase of the awareness regarding the 'places of learning'. All the stakeholders involved in the Xploit processes have understood the importance of creating opportunities for learning everywhere and on a variety of themes. Not only schools or educational institutions, but also open spaces in the city (for example city gardens, and walking paths), or public spaces located in the city territory, even the so called "non-places" just like for example supermarkets or stations, could be the ideal sites to build a network of people and make them learning together.



The Health Pyramid in a supermarket in Udine

The Xploit experience has been important in order to somehow bring local projects at a European level and EU resources within the community and to consequently demonstrate that there are many similarities and common objectives, sometimes even very similar actions that have been or could be implemented in the future. This has been useful to make the European dimension closer and more understandable for the community and, thus, raise within the community the will to have more concrete and fruitful approaches and contacts with the EU and to benefit from EU co-funding. Moreover, the wish to better organise and systematically implement and monitor the offer of cultural and educational opportunities in the city, avoiding isolated and temporary actions, has become stronger, especially from a political point of view.

A strong collaboration has been activated between the two main actors of the Xploit project, that means the Municipality of Udine and Università delle Libere, that are now working together in a systematic way with a great involvement also of the local associations and city departments and a strong attention to every new EU resource (projects, networks, learning activities or materials, events, etc.) available or to be developed in the future and to be linked on a regular basis to local projects or initiatives, thus taking them to a more sustainable and exploitable level.

Whatever the theme of interest could be in every future initiative in our city, in general the overall leitmotiv will be to create new opportunities for learning in the spirit of making Udine as a learning community. This idea of learning community will be developed through a variety of learning opportunities aimed of course at an individual enrichment and lifelong learning but above all at a collective enrichment

of the community as a whole. In this sense learning opportunities can be helpful for everyone's interactions and relationships, can be shared and can include intercultural and intergenerational exchange, as well as European new inputs and innovative values able to better answer to the community needs and challenges.



Hard working Italians and Europeans at the LiberEtà in Udine

Key elements for the exploitation have been the implementation of new opportunities for learning in public and open spaces, including also the interaction of physical spaces and digital spaces and a new way of learning as a result of bottom-up initiatives and participative training. This could be the starting point for a future participative planning and design of new learning opportunities in and for the community.

These processes have taken place with a constant connection with the European dimension through the exploitation of old and new EU projects in the community.

Some examples:

EU resource HEALTH BOX: promotion of healthy lifestyles through social marketing at: Health Pyramid - Public Schools - Department of Nursing Sciences (State University)-community as a whole

EU resource NatursAll: creation of City Gardens projects and locations

EU resource Outdoor ICT: creation of public itineraries available on the net and implementation of Walking Groups

EU resource Media Playing Communities: implementation of Ludoteca (Game Library) and dissemination in local kindergartens and primary schools

EU resource MENTA 50+: development of the project CamminaMenti - Minds in Movement involving various associations and promoting brain training for the elderly

EU resource FROG, following the routes of greenness and Covenant of Mayors: implementation of City gardens and new programs in the city regarding the environment and climatic changes.

All these initiatives will be supported by an overall political strategy, a systematic approach and a consequent planning of resources for the community.



European flags at an event at the LiberEtà linked to the Xploit project

The Municipality of Udine and Università delle LiberEtà have much appreciated the results of the Xploit project both as regards their reinforced collaboration and the participative process which has been activated within the community and has been very much appreciated by the community members and all stakeholders involved. This is important because this information network connects services and collects the community learning needs.

At the end of the Xploit project we can say that more wide-ranging and systematic collaboration structures should be pursued but some valid infrastructures of communication and exploitation have been set up and have prepared the ground for

expanding and qualifying the learning community opportunities and future initiatives. These infrastructures involve policy-makers, authorities, social service providers, voluntary associations, active citizens, cultural institutions, private organizations, etc.

Another important issue is the implementation of new spaces for learning: the reinforcement of infrastructures of communication and collaboration should take into account this important need. The city as a whole should be a place for learning and should create learning opportunities from a cultural, educational, environmental, civic and social point of view.

Still much work has to be done and more stakeholders must be connected to the network to guarantee sustainability in the future, however we can say that Udine is on the way to become a Learning city. Much interest exists in the EU programs, networks and activities which could help Udine in achieving this goal or rather in nurturing the city as a living learning organism.



One of the hectic days at the LiberEtà in Udine - there will be more...!