Successful Blended Learning Projects in 2006: Experiences in different formal, non-formal and informal learning environments

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Summary

European partners from 11 countries working in the framework of the Blended Learning Institutions' Cooperative (blinc) have been applying web-based, mixed learning methodologies for different learning groups and contexts in three different projects.

The INTEGRATION project deals with intercultural staff training for organisations working with multiethnic clients and beneficiaries. Nine partners from six nations have been developing audiovisual learning and training materials. This was done by using video-graphic approaches in intercultural training, analysing given situations of intercultural encounters in a critical incident approach, and producing and documenting "intercultural micro-communications" as short online films.

In the framework of the Joint Environmental Management (JEM!) project funded by Socrates, Joint Actions Programme partners from five countries applied an eCoaching System for the introduction of environmental management in European schools. The content of the system consists of fully-fledged courses, training materials and accompanying guidelines for teachers, trainers or consultants. The applied system used in JEM! was developed in the framework of a project entitled "IEM in hospitals", which was recognised as one of the five best projects out of 2,500 since 1992.

In the framework of JEM!, the approach was transferred to European schools. Training and counselling is performed using blended learning approaches and the entire system can be accessed on the interactive project website.

Both projects are examples of how innovative, IT-aided learning concepts can be realised in various formal and informal learning environments with different learning groups, contents and objectives. They clearly showed that the success is, to a major extent, determined by the quality of the instructional design applied in the blended learning contexts.

That is why the Advanced Blended Learning and Didactics (A-B-C-D) project (Grundtvig 1.1, 2005-2007) is aiming at the development of a comprehensive training course for Blended Learning Designers. In May and September 2007, the courses will be held in Athens and Bordeaux, introduced by a preliminary e-learning phase. The course will also offer opportunities to develop individual blended learning projects using Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, WIKI, e-portfolios and synchronous web-communication instruments including online conferences or Skype.

Introduction

European partners from 11 countries, working in the framework of the "blended learning institutions' cooperative „blinc", have been applying web-based, mixed learning methodologies for different learning groups and contexts in 3 different projects.

Two recently finished projects promoted a demand-oriented blended learning approach in order to support the different target groups (migrants (INTEGRATION) and students in an extracurricular approach (JEM!)).

In the projects blended learning generally represents additional learning offers, i.e. eLearning is mainly applied in combination with face to face units and/or project works and other methodological approaches. Both projects created tailor-made training offers with a participatory training approach for pupils, students and migrants using additional multi-media-based, interactive and co-operative learning environments. This was supposed to be the basis for getting into modern working and learning surroundings also for not mainstreaming and disadvantaged target groups.

In both projects innovative methodological approaches for blended learning design were worked out, mainly based on the modified Goettingen Catalogue of Didactic Models (GKDM). The precise adjustment regarding the combination of presence and IT-based learning units (modules) was of vital importance. Apart from specially designed planning patterns all partners developed audiovisual learning materials and integrated them into the learning modules. The learning modules were then allocated to the respective learning groups and to individual learners.

Following various projects in the field of blended learning these 2 projects transferred blended learning methodology to new learners' target groups and also to new non-formal learning environments. This way the projects follow the approach to test and to apply modern, multimedia and internet aided learning approaches also in new contexts that has been developed in the blended learning institutions network blinc since 2004.

The blended learning institutions' cooperative was developed in the framework of the "eL3" networking-project funded by the EU's eLearning project.

blinc is the umbrella organisation of a transnational network for European project partners; namely developers, experts and users of blended learning products and services from 12 countries that joined in the course of various European informal nets and projects over the last years.
A current project called ABCD (advanced blended learning competencies and didactics) now comprises the experiences and approaches and offers special training courses for blended learning designers based on the elaborated GKDM-model.

Project 1: Blended learning in informal learning situations:
INTEGRATION - Intercultural Dialogue for a Multicultural Society in Europe

Faced with changes in the demographic and cultural composition of societies, educating people towards the acceptance and emergence of a multicultural society has become a necessity to prevent xenophobia and racism. In this framework the role of intercultural education is of crucial importance with the aim of fostering tolerance, understanding and respect among groups and individuals.

In the framework of the project INTEGRATION, we have been striving for improving the intercultural competencies of pedagogical staff and teachers in different institutional environments in Europe and their target groups by founding an information and material pool, which is available to all experts working in the third sector and which is used to sustainably affect the sensitisation of societies and politics.

An intercultural training course for staff members has been developed aiming at enabling staff members to be more proficient in interacting with people from different cultures and to be able to activate migrants to take part and to organise intercultural events themselves.

The course is based on the 20 instructional design models according to the Goettinger Catalogue of Didactic Models focussing relevant models on multiethnic learning groups and combines different learning methodologies such as eLearning and face-to-face learning.

The training course (train the trainer) consists of four major elements:
1. **Casuistic approach in intercultural documentation and intercultural training:** critical incidents, culture assimilator, culture categories, topics, keywords, description of multicultural settings for collecting reports within an institution and for preparing specific training material or a data base.
2. **Survey approaches in intercultural documentation and intercultural training:** questionnaires on needs of clients and staff, questionnaires on culture orientation for collection surveys.
3. **Simulation/gaming approaches in intercultural documentation and intercultural training:** role playing on intercultural experiences, theories and models of intercultural development, encounters in intercultural or multicultural situations.
4. **Video-graphic approaches in intercultural documentation and intercultural training:** seeing and reflecting given situations of intercultural encounters and of cultural settings, producing and documenting "intercultural micro-communications".

The partners have been testing all different elements themselves for feedback in order to eventually improve the course elements. They have become multipliers within their teams and with their newly acquired competencies have identified training needs and developed specific training material which meets the special needs of their target groups.

The video-graphic approach was considered to be the most interesting one by all partners. With both audio and visual components films have the capacity to bring experiences, ideas and emotions of people from different cultures into a training programme. We didn't want to use ready-made films to avoid copyright laws and decided to produce our own films to be able to coordinate the suitability of content and difficulty of information with our learning groups. After the collection and evaluation of critical incidents reports among the staff and clients in the partner institutions partners identified a critical incident that shows a typical problem of intercultural communication. The film production was then carefully planned and partners had to elaborate a memorandum containing a preliminary title, the subject, the content to be taught, a rough structure, a planning of the process and a definition of the aim and the target group. Then a more detailed concept including the storyboard was created. The partners wrote a critical incident episode and changed it into a role play. Those elements that couldn't be put into dialogue were performed by a narrator.

The films were produced with the learners during the training or within the INTEGRATION-group. In the case of the French partner GIP FIPAN the films were realised as video project with migrants as a form of self-expression to reflect upon their experiences of migration and to give them a voice to depict their cultural background. The Paritätische Kindergarten produced a film with the staff member who experienced the critical incident which was selected.

The films were partially integrated in eLearning units and placed on the eLearning platform or shown on DVD to the learners' groups. The general feedback of the learners' groups was very positive as the films reflect their experiences in cross-cultural situations.

Moreover, each of the 9 partners concentrated on a specific topic in intercultural training. To give some examples: The Italian partner, IL GHETTO, developed eLearning units together with a group of migrants aiming at explaining to migrants in Sardinia how to face bureaucratic problems by giving them concrete information and advice. The French partner INSUP, Bordeaux organised artistic workshops with their learners' groups aiming at establishing links between various forms of knowledge and between cultures and facilitating a multi-cultural integration by producing collective art and writing. The products were shown in a public exhibition. The Welsh partner SURE START worked on the development of culturally sensitive health care services tailored to meet the individual needs of families from the Black and Minority Ethnic Community and developed a special training programme for their staff members. A completely different approach was followed by the UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA, Riga, since in Latvia intercultural problems are due to its history of Russian occupation. The

integration of the Russian speaking minority is the aim of the actual language policy in Latvia. The partner developed specific training material for teacher training.

On December 8th, 2006, all transnational partners and German local partners were invited to celebrate the final conference of the 2-year project INTEGRATION.

Not only the presentation of the project results was in the focus of the conference but also the sharing of experiences with an international audience. Each partner presented their specific training approach and illustrated their results in an exhibition and audiovisual presentations. Among the visitors there were representatives of local associations working in the field of integration, stakeholders from the local and regional administration, the Ministry of Culture, training institutes, University and the press.

Project 2: JEM! Blended learning in formal and non-formal learning: Introduction of Environmental Management in European schools

The project JEM! (Joint Environmental Management) has been aiming at the sustainable development of the environment awareness of young people in 5 regional European school networks.

The regional government of Kassel, Germany has coordinated the project- the partners have been educational institutions from the regions Szigetszentmiklos (Budapest, Hungary), Vienna (Austria), Cagliari/Sardinia, Italy), Nice (France) and Boleslawowo (Gdansk, Poland) as well as partner schools and other locally committed institutions located in the administrative district of Kassel.
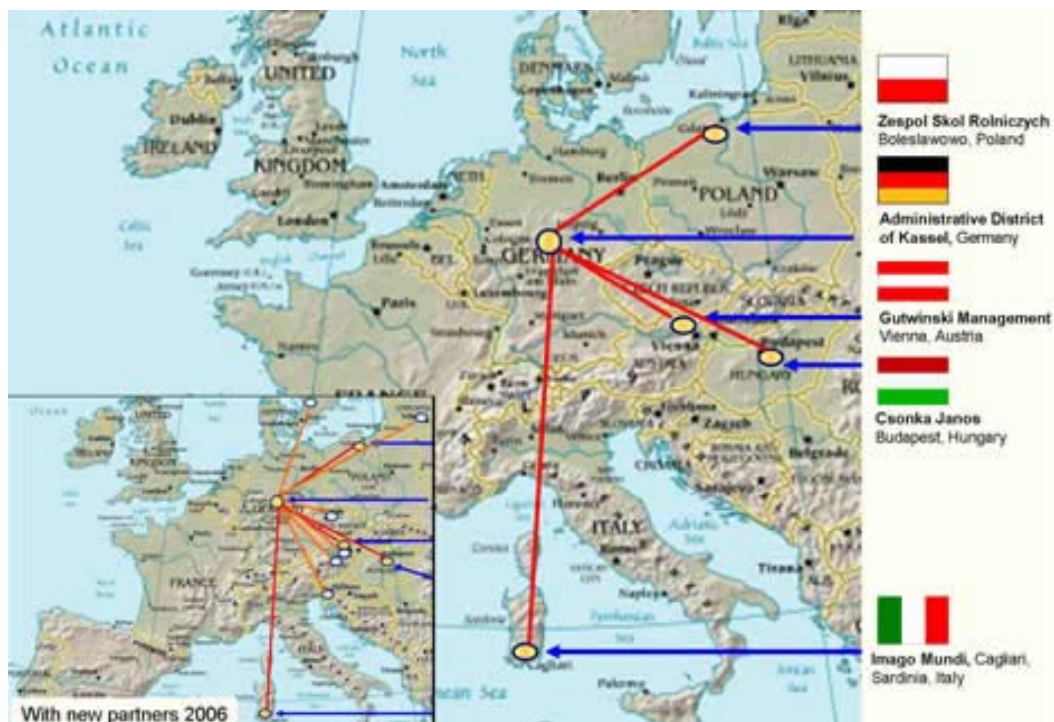

Fig. 1: The JEM! - project regions in Europe 2004 and 2006

The core of the model project has been the development of a new and more attractive presentation of schools and education by focussing on an extracurricular environmental topic (environmental protection). In this connection external stakeholders as well as up-to-date internet-based learning methods and instruments have been deliberately included for the European exchange.

In JEM! innovative learning has been concretely realised for the target groups of students, youths and young adults under the umbrella of environmental management.

Against this background the European Commission promoted the pilot project for a period of 2 years in the framework of its educational programme Joint Actions.

The Participating Parties

The participating stakeholders of each of the schools (pupils, teachers, parents, staff members of training and consulting institutions, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) as well as associations and regional corporations) act as multipliers, who positively influence their personal environment towards a better environmental awareness.
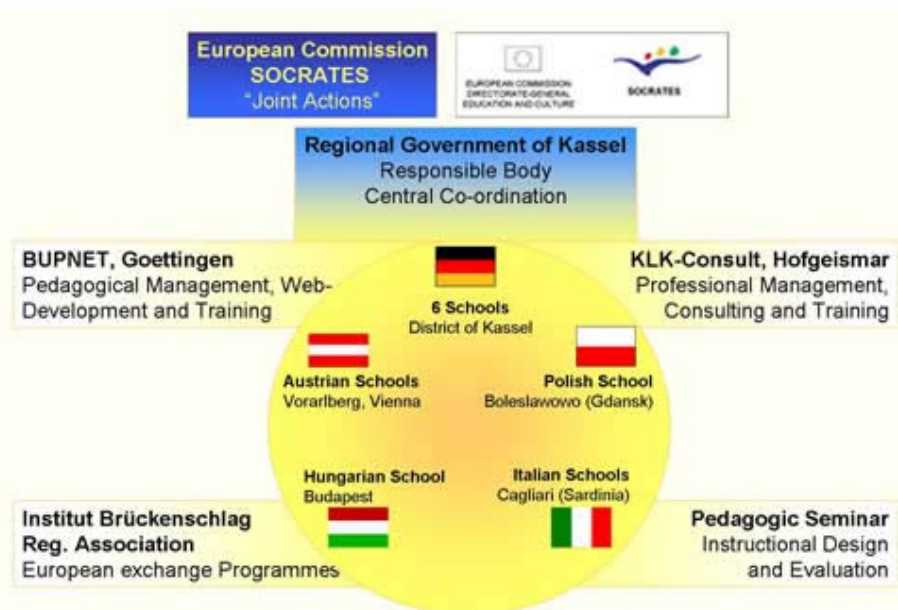

Fig. 2: JEM! - project-structure

The participating schools have introduced an environmental management system and applied the web-based coaching and learning system.

They have been supported by the co-ordinators of the regional network (environmental administration) as well as by professional environmental consultants and other participating stakeholders on a local level (e.g. the supervisory school authority). The consulting regarding the introduction of an environmental management system has been done via an internet-based learning and consulting instrument ("Learning Management System").

Introduction of an Environmental Management System

An environmental management system (EMS) is a professional management instrument which systematically aligns the organisation of the school as well as procedures and activities of the schools with an environmentally friendly behaviour. Basing on this system all environmental media and material flows become transparent and the environmental awareness is improved. Experiences with EMS so far have shown that the consumption of resources can be reduced.

The speciality of the project is the fact that it is the school boys and girls who, as environmental management members, develop the EMS together with a selected teacher (environmental management responsible) and who establish it in their schools.

During their daily routine the young persons gain knowledge regarding the eco-friendly handling of resources and – by means of extracurricular training – acquire a positive attitude towards an active civic engagement.

Fig. 3: Illustration of the steps involved in an EMS

Above all they gain know-how and competencies regarding modern management and are actively working together with their European schoolmates via internet.

Working Structure of the Project

The project was placed on 3 pillars:
- Introduction of environmental management systems in the schools of the partner regions
- Development of blended learning units for teachers and instructors as well as for students
- Technological and organisational development to achieve sustainability in a European networking process.
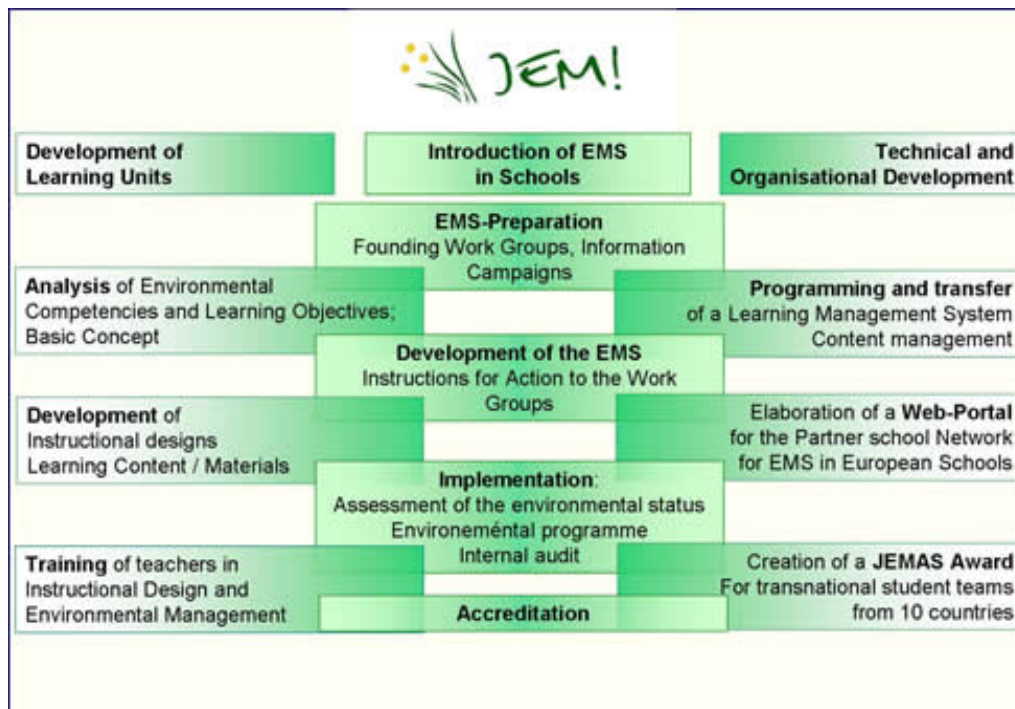

Fig. 4: JEM! Work-packages and project structure

The 3 work packages were interlinked and reached their envisaged aims and outputs.

Outputs and results

A comprehensive course with more than 30 subchapters relating to the introduction of EMS was established in German and Italian language and shall be translated in other languages by the JEM!-partners in the growing network.

The whole system consists of a complete set of 15 development steps for the introduction of an EMS in a school with various online materials and a parallel instructional online-guide for teachers and instructors.

12 teachers from 4 countries participated in training courses on environmental management.
All participating schools are on their way to a successful implementation and reached the stage of "internal audit". In the course of the project the project team set up a collaboration with the Austrian environmental label (Umweltzeichen) to transfer and adapt a good and feasible accreditation system and to avoid the re-invention of the wheel.

Apart from the environmental and IT-related aspects the development of good and feasible approaches for instructional designs was in the centre of the project. In this context training concepts and learning materials have been developed and teachers (the environmental officers) were trained in the framework of a workshop on the European level.

In order to achieve the widest European dissemination of the model project possible a multilingual internet portal was developed for the JEM! network with interactive instruments like an online self-assessment tool to inquire about the status of the school concerning environmental management. The project ended in a large transnational event in Vienna in November 2006 bringing together 30 committed students from 9 European countries and another 30 stakeholders from schools, educational institutions and other institutions and associations.

Participants of the JEMAS Award in Vienna

The first so called JEMAS award for students from 12 selected European schools was developed and organised in Vienna. Mixed transnational student teams participated in a "Games without frontiers-parcours" in the Vienna Business Academy. Preliminary to the event more than 3.000 schools all over Europe were invited to apply for participation.

Evaluation of the project: Lessons learnt

Concerning its objectives JEM! was a very ambitious project. JEM! was built on an approach developed by leading JEM!-partners in a 2001-2004 LIFE Environment project in hospitals (www.iem-life.de) and transferred it to European schools. The hospital project has recently (2006) been awarded as one of the best projects out of 2.500 from 1992 onwards especially because of the environmental impact, the participatory approach, the innovative learning methodology and the transferability.

In JEM! the environmental management, training and learning approaches were modified and applied in European schools

Transferability and Environmental Management
As far as transfer to European schools is concerned it became obvious that new environmental managerial approaches very often keep stuck in normal school life and structures. That's why the successes in the European schools were to a major extent dependent on the personal commitment of individual teachers.

Very often those teachers, who were the connectors to the JEM! co-ordinators, complained about a lack of support from the school management and from colleagues. It also became obvious that management systems cannot be transferred 1:1 to schools, mainly because of different resources available. It is simply not possible for a "normal" school to invest several thousands of Euros for the recertification of an EMS.

Therefore the JEMAS label was developed on the basis of the Austrian Environment label (Umweltzeichen) enabling European schools to conduct an online auto-evaluation of the state of their EMS and to join the JEM! network for European support.

In all schools the project was an impulse that led to a higher awareness on environmental issues. The environmental declaration, the programme and the environmental check enhanced a series of successful sub-projects with environmental impact.

Instructional design

Again it was revealed that the limiting factors to introduce new learning methodologies and instruments are missing didactic competencies for blended learning models by teachers, trainers and consultants. This is especially relevant for those teachers who, understandably enough, follow their proven didactic concepts and who are to a certain extend reluctant towards alternative instructional approaches that are especially feasible for blended learning approaches. To our mind this may also be a hurdle for the invention of mixed methodologies in some schools.

There are other, very positive examples where teachers of the same school were impressed and enthusiastic about the new opportunities offered by blended learning and teaching:
- **flexible learning** (in combination with extracurricular offers)
- **individual learning** (recognising different learning styles and learning requirements)
- **new media with a higher motivation potential** and (to higher extend self-directed learning offers)
- **more effective course and material administration**

Like in previous projects the GKDM (Göttinger Katalog Didaktischer Modelle) and its extensive toolbox was the central element for blended learning design operations, in our case for environmental management in schools.

Participatory approach

Reports from the schools and a final evaluation of the JEMAS-event reveal that the learning by doing approach turned out extremely successful on the school level as well as in the transnational contest.

www.jem-eu.org
Further information:
www.iem-life.de

For both projects audiovisual documentations will be available on DVDs by the end of January and can be ordered via www.blinc-eu.org.

Project 3: A-B-C-D Competencies for blended learning designers

The project A-B-C-D (Advanced Blended Learning Competencies and Didactics) (Grundtvig 1.1, 2005-2007) is aiming at the development of a comprehensive training course for "Blended Learning Designers".

In May and September 2007 the courses will be carried out in Athens (GR) and Bordeaux (FR), introduced by a preliminary eLearning phase. The course will also offer opportunities to develop individual blended learning projects using Web 2.0 tools like blogs, WIKI, ePortfolios and synchronous web-communication instruments like online-conferences or skype.

The course is developed for teachers, authors, tutors consultants and other educational experts who want to introduce blended learning offers in their daily routine. The course will convey the necessary instructional design and IT-competencies. There is the opportunity for an individual funding for the participants through the Grundtvig 3 programme.

Background of project and courses

Especially for large parts of adult education it becomes more and more obvious that combined teaching methodologies containing mixed systems of face-to-face learning and eLearning (blended learning) best take into account the possibilities and needs of the target groups. New media are the basis for extended ways and possibilities of learning implied in the keyword eLearning. eLearning particularly allows an adjustment to the spatial and temporal conditions of the learners and as a consequence always improves the participation of larger social groups in the educational process across different levels of qualification, subjects and phases.

The project A-B-C-D ties up to previous experiences with eLearning and works out a training concept for the development of competencies in special didactics of blended learning. The resulting course enables stakeholders of adult education to develop and realise combined training faster and more extensive and to some degree at a higher, comparable quality level.

Objectives

The course aims at developing competencies in special didactics of blended learning and enables the participants to develop and realise training courses with a blended learning approach. The course not only transmits technical know-how, but especially instructional design competencies focused on mixed learning arrangements. The course itself will be developed as a blended learning concept in order to establish the immediate experience with the methodology.

Project Team and Methodology

The providers of the ABCD course are institutes with long-term experiences in blended learning in various national and transnational projects, contents and contexts. The course concept is based on introduction, practical utilisation and implementation of easy to use planning approaches and feasible planning instruments.

ABCD refers to the well-known Göttingen Catalogue of Instructional Models (GKDM) that was developed by FLECHSIG already in the 70ies. Major parts of the catalogue and the referring instruments were modified and adapted by HALLER et al in the course of recent projects in the framework of SOCRATES and eLearning projects. There will be a high extend of European exchange of best proven practice and practical application of knowledge and planning competencies in transnational learning projects.

Course Phases

Preliminary Phase: In the preliminary phase, which starts 6 weeks prior to the face-to-face session, participants get basic information about blended learning. They have the first opportunity to get to now to their course colleagues. By doing so, they already get into contact with various technical tools suitable for blended learning courses (skyping and online rooms) as well as with new learning

environments (learning management systems). Participants get the necessary information to successfully use those tools and instruments and are supported by experienced tutors.

Face-to-Face Session: In the face-to-face session, technical and instructional knowledge are transmitted by using different didactical methodologies. Moreover, a project work is initiated which will be finalised during the follow-up phase in eLearning and eCoaching.

Follow-up Phase: The participants continue to work in a collaborative approach on their blended learning course using again communication tools and eLearning environments. The work will be supported by an online tutor. Regular online sessions give the participants the opportunity to get advice and information from other group members and the tutor and will promote an exchange of experiences and good practice.

As far as Information and Communication Technologies are concerned there will be a special emphasis on "social software" for communication and collaboration purposes like open source weblogs, WIKIs, ePortfolios, learning landscapes, skype and online conferencing tools.

All necessary information and application documents are available at the website: www.abcd-eu.org

Conclusions: Development of Blended learning network and valorisation of the Blended learning design approach

The projects INTEGRATION and JEM! followed a sequence of national and transnational projects finished in 2001 and 2005 such as "IT's Social", "OASIS" (funded by Grundtvig) and "IEM in Hospitals" (LIFE Environment) and "eL3, eLearning Clusters in the European 3rd Sector" (eLearning).

Consequently, there was an organisational development to set up a sustainable network for blended learning designers (blinc) that has been constantly growing since 2005. It is supposed to give European wide assignments and opportunities for its members. The common component, as far as methodology is concerned, is the blended learning approach. All reported and previous projects were realised in collaboration of experts from the field (VET-institutes, schools, consultants, NGOs and other learning providers) and scientific institutes.

In the previous projects transferable blended design approaches were developed on the basis of the applied GKDM-Models, pre-tested and valorised in a European collaboration that has been lasting for more than 5 years now.

Experiences / Lessons learnt

As far as different learning contents are concerned we can state that the blended learning concept has been applied in various projects with a wide range of "beneficiaries" or learners in formal, non-formal and even informal learning.

After 5 years we can state that especially the variety of methodology and media allows skilled designers to adjust content and demands to the required methodology with regard to pre-knowledge and available resources of learners. It also allows to adjust the learning offer to different learning styles and special learning requirements.

Once in contact with blended learning approaches most educationalists – from Kindergardens to University, from small NGOs to large hospitals – were impressed by and enthusiastic about the opportunities behind the applied blended learning and teaching approaches concerning to flexibility, customising potential (individualised offers), learners' motivation and also the economic impact.

Especially the GKDM (Göttinger Katalog Didaktischer Modelle) with the elaborated materials, guidelines and the extensive toolbox including all kind of planning and evaluation instruments turned out to be a very suitable kit to develop blended learning designs for curricular and extracurricular contents and contexts.

Blended learning is not expensive – technology is not the problem anymore and all reported projects successfully set up on open source software (OSS).

The success of the instructional concept (or the learning offer) is predominantly based on the didactic competence of the Blended Learning Designer.

This is the reason why, after building a pool for institutes and organisations working in the field of BL, a European course for BL-designers is offered from 2007 onwards to convey the necessary skills and competencies and to foster a European collaboration in this field.

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