



INTERACT - THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SUCCESSFUL ADULT LEARNING MODEL AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION USING AN ONLINE LEARNING PLATFORM

Ioana Ursache, EuroEd Foundation, Romania,
 Simon Crowe, Wesminster Adult Education Service,
 United Kingdom

InterAct – Developing New Basic Skills at the Workplace through the Use of Internet-Based Problem Solving Role-Play, a Leonardo da Vinci Project

InterAct is a Leonardo da Vinci project co-ordinated by the Norwegian Institute for Adult Learning (VOX), with a partnership from Norway, Romania, Spain and United Kingdom. In each country, the project team is made of an educational institution on one side, and companies representing Tourism&Accommodation and Health&Care on the other side. The project focuses on developing, testing and releasing a didactic model for improving the New Basic Skills at the workplace: language and communication skills, teamwork skills, ICT skills and familiarity with the internet, intercultural awareness, along with entrepreneurship and motivation. The target groups from the two sectors are represented by working people who need to improve such skills in order to avoid/overcome marginalization and advance in their carriers – unqualified/less qualified workers, immigrants etc. The project started in October 2004, and its planned activities cover two and a half years. At the moment, the InterAct team have already developed the model and tested its applicability in both sectors mentioned above. The intermediate results are extremely encouraging and the conclusion half way through the project is that the team have actually developed two successful models of international collaboration through the use of an online learning platform: the collaboration model of the target groups and the collaboration model of the project team. Both models and their benefits are presented below.

InterAct – the benefits of international collaboration through online problem-solving negotiation for workers needing to improve their New Basic Skills

The InterAct model

The model of role-play simulations has already been proven effective in classroom based education. InterAct imports it and adapts it to adult learning at the workplace and at an international scale. Groups of beneficiaries from different countries, accompanied and guided by InterAct tutors, are given a role and are presented with a problem relevant to their field of activity. Together, using an internet-based online platform they must work together and reach a solution. The online platform used is a simple tool, which allows for mail conferences, creation, organization and exchange of documents, selective reading/writing rights to the various users, staged release of information etc. In principle, a “simulation” round is designed to take one working day / week for 5 weeks and is structured as follows:

- Step 0: All groups meet each other online and are presented with a role. They learn how to use the platform for communication, creation and exchange of documents, they introduce themselves and start interacting at international level, they become a team by developing their role through national-based negotiations and using information/images found searching the internet.
- Step 1: The national teams are presented with a situation and are given the task to produce a set of national-based results to be uploaded on the platform for the other teams to consult and comment on.
- Step 2: The national teams are given the task to work together as one international team and produce a common result starting from the previous productions.
- Step 3: The international team are presented with an unexpected problem and are asked to negotiate among themselves in such a way as to reduce their production by a given quantity (which is never a multiple of the number of national teams, thus stressing even more the negotiation component).
 – Another version for negotiation is to ask the international team to produce a power point presentation of the final product, but each national team must present another national team’s work and not its own.
- Step 4: Each group must evaluate and rate the work of the other groups as contestants in a competition (e.g. the best power point presentation). They also give each other feedback.
- At the end of every step, there is usually a debriefing session where the participants reflect on what they have experienced and learnt that day. The online platform represents a record of the work, the communication and the debriefing.

To exemplify from the InterAct test rounds so far, the Health&Care participants from the four countries had to develop together a European campaign to educate parents how to take better care of young children's diets. The Tourism&Accommodation participants from the same countries worked together to develop a joint team-building package for a group of imaginary tourists. In both cases, the participants got so involved in the activities that they often forgot they were solving a simulated situation. The work and communication were intense both within each national team and internationally, made possible by the use of the simple online platform allowing for basic mail conferences, creation and exchange of documents.

The benefits of the InterAct model for the participants

The InterAct "simulations" are designed in such a way as to allow for the practice of a wide range of skills. The uniqueness of each individual is a key consideration in the model - the teamwork allowed for each participant to contribute with their strong points and to work on their weaker ones. At the same time, the specificity of each team's cultural background and work situation was addressed, as the tutor in each team had the freedom to adapt the national activities to suit the relevant context, while making the international collaboration under a common denominator possible. Thus, one of the strongest points the model can be credited with is its flexibility. The following skills were practiced and improved by each participant in varying combinations specific to both their individual and their cultural profiles:

- Language skills: use of English, language appropriateness (register and style), language mistake as communication blocker vs. communication strategy;
- Communication skills: offline and online communication, negotiation strategies;
- ICT skills: how to create a word document, an html and a PowerPoint presentation, how to search the internet, save, copy-paste, upload/download, how to organise files in folders, how to check/write/reply to mail, how to use an online platform and give selective reading/writing rights to other users;
- Teamwork skills: complementarity and inclusiveness, sharing the workload, leadership control;
- Intercultural awareness: to notice and decode how different people from different countries live, think and feel through how they choose to express themselves;
- (Self-)assessment: how to evaluate, reflect on and comment on the learning that has taken place, both individually and as a group (the online platform providing a very useful record of what was said and done);
- Motivational: empowerment, involvement, entrepreneurship and motivation at the workplace, creativity and imagination (fostered by a safe degree of anonymity), having fun while learning and working.

As results from the test rounds until now, from the record of communication provided by the platform (especially the debriefing mail conferences), from the evaluation questionnaires and focus groups, the beneficiaries were greatly pleased with the whole experience, with their productions and with their learning curve. Many participants had a hard time rating what was most important to them, but generally it seems that the intercultural component was one of the main motivating factors. All the participants had a good time and were sorry when the scenarios ended. It is perhaps relevant to stress here that, although such scenarios can be easily set up at a local scale, the use of an online platform is essential at international level.

The potential of the InterAct model for further learning and international collaboration

In light of the InterAct experience so far, the model seems to have great potential in the case of institutions and companies where workers need the opportunity to develop their New Basic Skills, to improve their team work and to generally build an atmosphere of entrepreneurship and creativity at the workplace. The choice of the online platform to be used may vary depending on complexity, costs etc., and the InterAct partnership is now exploring the use of the more and more popular free platform Moodle.

Concurrently, the model and the use of an online platform can be used by institutions and companies to set up both learning and business partnerships across borders. Employees who, for various reasons, have not had the opportunity to develop these skills increasingly important nowadays could become more involved and contribute at the workplace in a more empowered and motivated way. Moreover, the same model can be applied to inter-disciplinary, cross-sectorial collaborations – as the InterAct partnership already illustrates (Education + Tourism&Accommodation, Education + Health&Care; state-governed institutions + non-governmental organizations + private companies). Finally, the actual themes and content of the communication and work may go beyond the learning scope of a fictitious scenario, but be anchored in real life and work situations as well.

InterAct – the benefits of the online ICT component for international collaboration in terms of project management

The InterAct project started as many projects do, with the writing of a proposal, its approval and then a kick-off meeting organized by the project co-ordinators. However, from the beginning of its implementation, it has

become evident that a successful model of international collaboration was being developed. At the 4th project meeting (in Sweden, January 26-29, 2006), the ingredients of the InterAct teamwork were discussed in relation to the online component of the collaboration.

Consequently, the following aspects are worth mentioning:

- The online platform greatly eased the implementation of the project, making the project stages easier to undergo, follow, quantify, document and report. The project team used the mail conferences and the document sections to negotiate and create together the didactic model and the scenarios to be tested. All the documents relevant to the project (proposal, budget, calendar etc.) were handily uploaded on the platform and referred to whenever necessary. Conventional emailing was generally used for administrative issues, leaving the core of the content-based communication to be done on the platform. Thus, it has been much easier for the team members to go to the platform rather than search through inboxes filled with emails on many differing issues;
- The constant online communication and creation of documents, combined with the face-to-face meetings twice a year helped to continue and to build the relationships started at the kick-off meeting and enhanced the friendly atmosphere, which, in turn, made the communication easy and the work pleasant. Work on the platform also helped to create a sense of collective creative buzz and a sense of identity as the "InterActors";
- The online platform facilitated a project leadership founded on inspirational role-modelling and became the framework of a decision-making process based on democratic inclusiveness and sense of responsibility;
- The existing platform and developed scenarios were first tested by the project team themselves and adjusted accordingly before applying them with the beneficiary participants. (Also, the used platform was proven very flexible in terms of organising files and folders, organising topics for communication, creating user accounts with selective reading/writing rights).

To sum up, the introduction of the online ICT component as a part of the actual project work made it possible to better focus on bringing a common vision to life while enjoying an excellent working relationship based on flexibility and creativity. The development of such a collaboration model in the InterAct project encouraged the project partners to proceed with a similar approach when embarking on future projects.

Final remarks

InterAct offers both a didactic model of adult learning for improving the New Basic Skills and a model for teamwork at an international level. The target for the didactic model is represented by those people who are not proficient in English, ICT skills, use of internet, intercultural awareness etc., but who could and, if given the chance, would contribute creatively at their place of work. The learning and collaboration aims are achieved through the use of a simple online platform connecting the players from the various countries. Concurrently, the same online platform is proven to be highly instrumental in the implementation of such an educational project. To conclude, it seems that the latest developments in technology, namely the development of ICT and online platforms, makes new, innovative approaches in adult education and international co-operation not only possible, but very efficient, bringing people together and enhancing both their motivation and their ability to work together creatively.

References:

Leonardo da Vinci Project InterAct, www.statvoks.no/interact

Authors:

Ioana, Ursache
EuroEd Foundation, Centre for European Integration
Iasi, Romania
ioana.ursache@euroed.ro

Simon, Crowe
Westminster Adult Education Service
London, United Kingdom
SCROWE@WAES.ac.uk

[back to startpage](#)
[back to articles](#)

 [top](#)