



Who needs a critical friend? -The importance of internal evaluation

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Among the growing community of European project participants there is a deep understanding of the need for evaluating project results and products. But does this understanding also include internal monitoring and project process evaluation?

In the Interact project I had the honour of being the internal evaluator – in other words to perform a formative analysis of the project process. This meant that I took part in all the project meetings – In Oslo, in London, in San Sebastian, in Härnösand and in Iasi.

There was also an external evaluator who had the task to evaluate the learning activities and the Internet-based problem-solving role-play. The division of tasks between these two different evaluators was very clear.

For many project promoters and coordinators it still isn't self-evident what to expect from an internal evaluator. Therefore it needs to be explained that the task of the internal evaluator usually is to take on a role of a critical friend and perform a formative evaluation through observations of different kinds and sum these up in short reports to be presented with remarks and maybe recommendations for the further development of the project work. This way possible delays or wrong routes can be avoided at early stages in projects and the outputs and other project results can be analysed for a second qualified opinion. Because the internal evaluator is a part of the project, has good knowledge of the project from the inside through other own responsibilities within the project and is thus a committed team member who wants the project to deliver the results proposed.

What does the internal evaluation contain?

Even if the focus is on the internal project process the typical internal evaluator observes and comments on the all the vital parts of a European project like:

- Aims & objectives of the project
- Work-plan and timetable
- Outputs
- Dissemination
- Partnership, monitoring and reporting
- Management of the project
- Observations, comments and recommendations on these points are meant to be a help to the coordinator to keep the project on track and ease the process if there are some uncertainties or deviations from the original plans.

Evaluation plan and methods

In the case of Interact there was no detailed internal evaluation plan proposed for the internal project process evaluation so there was a freedom to chose road and means.

Since the notion of the roleplay and the simulation scripts at first sight seemed rather complicated, it was important to follow up the different partners' understanding of the whole concept of Interact and their own understanding of their different roles.

In short the internal evaluation structure of Interact project was very hands-on and simple It contained:

- Three online surveys
- Three short observation reports
- Semi-structured group discussions
- Semi-structured interviews with project participants by telephone or mail
- A final internal evaluation report

The surveys were very simple and designed to only take a few minutes to complete but giving the opportunity for the partners to comment in free text as much as they wanted. A simple Swedish online survey tool called

eVal was used. As the project working language was English questions and expected comments were in this language.

The aim of the interviews of the group discussions and the interviews were to follow up impressions from observations made during the course of the project work in order to further any alternative suggestion for the project work and follow up and convey any uncertainties, disagreement or lack of confidence at earliest possible stage.

Impressions after the inception meeting in Oslo in November 2004

The first survey among the partners took place in early 2005 (mid January to early March). The partners were asked

- What did you expect from the project before it started?
- How well did you understand the aims and the objectives of the project before the Oslo meeting?
- How well did you understand your role in the project?
- How would you describe your understanding of the project now?
- Are you comfortable with your role in the project now?
- What do you expect from the work in the project in 2005?

Ten answers were submitted. The overall impression of the answers was that most of the partners seemed quite confident in their roles, even if there still were some questions-marks after the Oslo meeting. These concerns were mainly connected to the interaction between the educational partners and the workplace partners. The more meetings with the local workplace partners were held the more clear the picture had become. One partner confessed that the concept of workplace learning was completely new to him/her. The inception meeting in Oslo was obviously a very clarifying meeting. The participants were confident and looking forward to the first simulation round even if some voices about lacking English proficiency and lacking ICT skills vis à vis the Telsi platform were heard.

Observations in the autumn 2005

The first observation report was written in October 2005. It concluded that the InterAct partnership was very active and reaching its goals as intended and according to the anticipated timetable. In short it stated that:

- The Oslo meeting was very informative and instructive
- Partners became gradually confident in their roles
- There had been active communication before the London meeting
- Easy negotiations and planning in London
- The methodology of the role-play was commonly understood
- The simulations were actively and successfully implemented
- The leadership was very involving
- There was an allowing attitude within the partnership
- The commitment within the partnership was apparent
- Responsibility taken by all partners
- There was a high degree of activity

During the project meeting in San Sebastian in October 2005 there was a short presentation about the internal evaluation and a group discussion based on the questions concerning the project situation at that time and looking head. Some of the remarks were as follows below.

Has **Interact turned out** the way you expected?

"Did not expect the team to get along so well. Relationships are so much better than expected."

"Amazing teamwork! Can't do this so well at home."

"People are patient, we take our time to get a solution that everyone can agree upon. I did not expect to find so much room for my ideas, the freedom of expression is unexpected. Much better than expected!"

What are the **most obvious threats** to success for the project?

"It is easier to offer courses. In Romania, workplaces are not seen yet as a place for learning. Learning is for school – thereat to lifetime for the project/model after the project has ended. The enthusiasm is there when the money is there (generally), the workplaces are not ready (not only in Romania)"

"Time: everyone is very busy at workplaces – go generally for training at workplaces."

Norway: "all workplaces are busy, the staff feels that the leaders do not focus on training only production."

"Amount of time out of the workplace for the participants/students"

How can you use this **method in your everyday work situation**/which learning contexts?

"It opened our eyes on how new motivating and exciting it is to communicate internationally via the Internet."

"We can use it by building in an element of "international negotiations" in another course."

How **avoid InterAct as a shelf product?**

"Provide a platform and a certification to be put on the CV. Apply for EU money to set up new project. Offer courses for private companies."

"Build in elements into other courses of international negotiations and international conferences"

"Make harder and more specific learning outcomes"

The Telsi communication platform

This platform was not as developed as many others but served the purpose of an internal workspace for storing important project documents and communication very well. The project management has a clear and firm strategy of inviting all partners to discussions on topics needed for the further development of the project. After the San Sebastian meeting it is obvious that time has moved and left Telsi behind. Moodle was mentioned as the most possible future tool. In the observation report was strongly recommended to change to another platform for the rest of the project time.

Impressions before the Härnösand meeting in January 2006

In the online survey made in connection to the project meeting in late January 2006 the partners were asked:

After more than one whole year in the project – how do you feel about your role in the project?

Are you happy with how the scripts that you have used have been designed?

Did you like the way the scripts were negotiated and decided?

After taking part for more that one year now – Have you used this methodology in any other context the the InterAct project?

Compared to the methods usually used in your institution how do you regard the learning value from the InterAct methodology of scripts and international negotiations?

The overall impression from the 9 answers submitted was that partners were very happy with how they had contributed to the project and they appreciated to work in an international project. Someone says "....I am lucky to for this project which let you give ideas anytime, from your work-place....." There are, however, some trouble pointed out: "Also I would like to be more supported by my Institution in the aspect that workers (me included) had more "free" time available for simulations and project in general."

The negotiations of the scripts were liked by a majority but it was remarked "I think the first script within health and care was decided by the project leader before the first meeting. There were many good suggestions from members of the group, but none was chosen. At the same time, I don't think we had time enough to develop a script, and I really liked it".

It was evidently too early for the partners to implement the Interact methodology in other contexts.

The question about the simulations contributing to higher learning values was answered that the general notion was that it was different. But the opinion was nevertheless that "it gives new perspectives and variation to the methods used." "Simply different. Depends on the target groups and their needs and interest, it can be higher (for those in need of a general awareness of inter-culturality, team work ICT skills etc.), or lower (for those in need of focused language practice for ex.), if I am to compare with our centre's language classes" "Different and certainly generated discussion and interest"

Observations made in connection to the final conference in Iasi in September 2006

During the final conference in Iasi in late September 2006 there was as short presentation of internal evaluation aspects. The following summarizing points were commented as advice for the final valorisation stage during the last six months:

- Project objectives were met and showed that Interact offers an involving method for learning new basic skills (with its integration of ICT, language learning, cultural exchange, negotiations etc.). It adds real value to learning at work situations.
- The project is a very good example of European co-operation with a high degree of involvement and clear division of tasks for real-time online problem solving using.
- It is important to have good and accepted co-operation tools and that changing a tool in the middle of a project is not advisable.
- Time aspects need to be paid attention to – as it was clearly demonstrated in this project that some of the employers hadn't allowed sufficient time for the simulations and that there was also a time problem for the tutors.

It was also agreed that the last stage of the project was decisive for the dissemination of the project results. It is also decisive for a successful uptake and implementation of the methodology and its chances of a sustainable contribution to the diverse and rich treasure of learning methods.

Critical friend - closing summary

Unless there are severe difficulties in a project the answer to the question in the headline of this article "Who needs a critical friend?" is that all the partners and the co-ordinator especially needs the critical friend – not to criticise more than necessary, not to exaggerate difficulties and not to challenge the partnership but to reassure the co-ordinator and confirm and underline that a great job has been done and that good results have been achieved. In the case of Interact, being a critical friend was enjoyable. It was easy to conclude that the project was a success and that workplaces will develop to be more important learning arenas in the future. All as a result of an astonishing effort in a good European spirit nurtured by a strong belief in the power of education and training as an unchallenged way to develop people, organisations and countries.

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