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Innovative Digital and Experiential Blended Learning Non-Formal Programme for Community Animators: Lessons learned

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Abstract

An innovative blended learning non-formal programme was launched in 2018-2019 for professionals and volunteers, who were encouraged to develop their own social competences in order to work directly as community animators with vulnerable groups and promote social inclusion in Greece. The intervention, which lay within an ongoing experimental European project, COMANITY, was built upon the challenges emerged from harsh economic restraints, rising demand, restricted supply and diminishing resources in our society. Within this context, youth services are urged to increase their efficiency and effectiveness, encourage civil society to fill the gaps in service provision left by 'mainstream' supply and try to support young people to 'help their peers' by getting more of them to volunteer. Community Animator's non-formal blended learning training programme was carried out online programme delivered to 109 participants out of 947 who applied and through an experiential face to face workshop that was delivered to 14 unemployed women aiming to raise awareness and critical understanding of the concepts of democracy, equality, advocacy, human rights and social cohesion. Peer learning methods and an action research methodology were employed in order to enhance young participants to act as agents for change and develop a holding environment for those youth at risk to be marginalized. By working on their own capacities and motives, personal attitudes and possible dysfunctional assumptions, young participants actively shared and confronted critically their views and concerns, realized the impact of space and time on their civic engagement and organized themselves in social action. The present study discusses the profile and satisfaction level of participants in the online digital programme and the profile and satisfaction level of participants on the blended learning experiential programme. The data suggests that blended programmes are necessary for developing action research skills and enhancing the role of community animators, even though online programmes on their own can also assist in raising awareness about the role of community animators.

Key words: volunteers, youth, blended learning, social inclusion, action research, digital education

1. Introduction

Educational institutions, social care and mental health services throughout Europe are lately experiencing demand to provide support for an increasing number of people when seeking for new pathways to adapt into the current priorities. These people are presented with increasingly more complex issues, shaped by rising youth unemployment, increased educational drop-out rates, the demise of 'community' and its replacement by precarious on-line relationships; loss of faith in mainstream institutions and a large increase in the influx of young migrants into EU countries. In 2015, there were 8.7 million young Europeans who could not find work; 13.7 million classified as NEETs and 27 million who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2015). In 2015, more than a third of the population was at risk of

poverty or social exclusion in three EU Member States: Bulgaria (41.3 %), Romania (37.3 %) and Greece (35.7 %). Poverty rates are higher for young people than for the overall population and involuntary part-time work or protracted temporary positions expose this generation to a risk of long-term poverty. Most services have been cut across the board as governments have reduced expenditure on education, health, welfare and social services in response to the economic crisis, the financial 'crash' and the subsequent imposition of 'austerity policies'. For example, in the UK, recent research found that overall spending on youth services in England has fallen by £737m (62%) between 2010 and 2018 (YMCA, 2018). Austerity measures have led to an exodus of trained staff, because both wages and jobs have been cut, leading to a significant loss in capacity, skills and know-how (Bradford and Cullen, 2014). The third sector organisations struggle to attract volunteers in those areas where service demand is highest – in 'disadvantaged' communities.

The current youth systems fail disadvantaged and marginalized young people. They stand quite far from addressing increasingly complex, multi-dimensional issues and problems of youth. The trouble is, as demand rises, supply of quality of youth services shrinks because of 'austerity' or remaining post-austerity measures and cuts to social services. Traditional interventions with people 'on the margins' tend to be designed 'top-down', with especially young people centralised as 'the problem' (Williamson, 2007). Interventions are often constructed from the narratives of researchers, policy-makers and experts, not from the narratives of the people who participate in them (Parr, 2009). In contrast, the present programmes use participatory action research (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2014; Kemmis, 2015; Reason and Bradbury, 2001) to support trainees as 'co-producers of knowledge', actively working in collaboration with the research team in creating 'developmental' interventions, rather than applying traditional 'transmissive' behaviour change models. The approach draws on practices from radical pedagogy to support marginalised people to become architects of their own future (Freire, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978).

Therefore, the need for training a new group of professionals and volunteers and re-training the one that is already available in order to be able to respond to the new emerging needs, lead to the design, implementation and evaluation of two training non-formal programmes that were based on the notion of 'co-production' of knowledge, skills and knowhow. A digital and a blended learning experiential non-formal training programmes were planned and delivered to youth workers and volunteers, interested in becoming community animators. Volunteers, psychology or other related discipline students, novice youth workers and anyone who might have been interested in engaging European youth and creating a better future for their communities were targeted to participate. The programme, as part of an EU-funded project was planned and delivered by nine partners from four EU countries and the UK during the period 2017-2019. The idea lay on the development of an 'inclusive learning ecosystem' for marginalised and vulnerable young people through the creation of a "Community Animateur" role and programme in which 'hard to reach' youth can apply their skills, talents and creativity in participation activities that improve their communities. Hence, the programmes aimed to engage and empower trainers to act as 'community animateurs' with people on the margins and bridge the existing gap between them and mainstream institutions in order to achieve social inclusion.

1.1 The COMMUNITY project

The 'Community Animateur' was thought of as a 'Social Mediator' who makes a bridge between people on the margins and other community actors and institutions. The Animateur concept was developed to work where situations of social conflict, including intense conflict, emerge between young people, residents and other groups for the use of public areas. The Animateur is typically a young 'volunteer' who comes from the community, and is trusted by his or her marginalized peer group. Animateurs act as a point of mediation between hard to

reach young people and 'the system'. They catalyse relationships between disconnected learning and inclusion entities – for example by organizing cross-sectoral, cross-agency workshops involving schools, youth organisations, local businesses and civil society actors. They organize radical – and often disruptive – inclusive learning initiatives. They valorize and build on the resources of the community to develop, in collaboration with young people, social innovations aimed at solving problems in the community.

The objectives of the project were basically to create a new youth work and volunteering role as an innovative point of mediation and integration and provide a competence framework and training programme to support that role. At the same time, the focus was on getting youth services to become more engaged with marginalised youth and getting marginalised young people to become more engaged in youth work while also making volunteering work more accessible for hard-to-reach youth. All these objectives would be reached using a digital form of training aspiring to adapt to current technology enhanced learning processes.

COMANITY had a really ambitious aim to reach. Through the four key actions, it was expected to primarily identify relevant competences and develop a competence framework for the new role of community animateur, train and provide all necessary methods for those volunteers to learn about their new role and finally disseminate the results in and out of our region. COMANITY managed to build a framework of Competences which were clustered in three broad categories. In specific, these clusters of competences were identified as a) Enabling Emotional Intelligence Competences related to intra-personal competences (such as emotional self-awareness, self-confidence, good-enoughness), inter-personal competences (such as empathy, social responsibility, relationship handling), adaptability (competences such as resilience, belief and assertiveness, initiative) and affective competences (such as anxiety management and optimism and happiness), b) community Animateur-specific Competences related to organizing and managing information and resources, mapping, networking and mediation, advice, guidance and support, delivering participation programs and empowering young people and, c) enabling Digital Competences related to networking and mediation, organizing and managing resources, program and content creation.

The programme comprised three basic components:

- The Community Animateur (Foundation) Online Training Programme, to gain the necessary skills, knowledge and attitude to become a Community Animateur; The open online course provided participants with a theoretical background and helped them to fully understand relevant concepts and develop the necessary skills and attitude to become a Community Animateur;
- The COMANITY Hub, to enable knowledge and practice sharing and creation among learners and within the wider community of stakeholders and practitioners interested in youth and social inclusion themes; This Hub allows them to create and share knowledge with other European youth workers, volunteers and stakeholders interested in the youth social inclusion themes and challenges; The COMANITY Hub is the online space where “knowledge” is shared. The interactive functionalities of the Hub will give ones the opportunity to get informed about and benefit from online resources related to empowerment of marginalised youth, social work, social exclusion and other related topics. Posts and videos uploaded by trainees in 4 different languages allowed them to fully benefit from the collaborative learning experience while using the knowledge provided in the training modules to create new content.
- The Blended Learning Experiential Training Programme for developing an Action Research Experiment, to deploy the acquired skills and promote critical thinking within a specific methodological approach in the day-to-day work of the Community

Animateur. The action research allowed them to work collaboratively on a community project using the knowledge and skills they recently acquired. The Action Research Experiment has been a very important and interesting aspect of this training programme. It intended to invite participants to apply the knowledge, competences and methodological approach acquired through the training course to the day-to-day work of a Community Animateur. The Action Research Experiment namely has been viewed as a collaborative project where trainees chose a sensitive topic that affects youth on the margins of your community/neighbourhood and work with their peers to achieve a desired goal. This goal was set by them and their peers as they were the only ones knowing the particularities and difficulties of their community.

In order to complete the Online Community Animateur training programme participants needed to take the foundation training course whilst for completing the Blended Learning Experiential Programme, participation in a non-formal training programme including online and face-to-face learning and knowledge sharing was necessary. Additionally, participants at the blended learning programme were urged to work and interact with their peers and mentor, who played a crucial role in the success of the training. Finally, they were encouraged to create their own learning materials and participate in an action research experiment (project).

2. Method

An open call across four sites (UK, Greece, Italy, Spain) was held and 14 participants were registered to attend across each site the Blended Learning Experiential Training Programme. In Greece alone, 494 applications were received for 14 places in the course. In response to the outstanding demand by the community, a decision was taken to open up an online training programme only for an extra 100 participants, to deliver with minimum requirements, as a blended learning experiential programme needed more time and commitment by trainers and participants that might affect any issues monitored during this piloting phase of the project. The number of applications received at the online training programme reached 947. The number was excessively high and the decision was taken to remain with the initial number of 100 participants at the online programme. Eventually 109 were registered for the online course on a random selection basis. All participants at both programmes, were first invited to take a self-assessment test as the initial step of their engagement to the project. Then, the first 14 of them were selected on the basis of their profile (women unemployed) to register to the blended learning training programme part of which comprised face-to-face (f2f) interaction training.

The Blended Learning Experiential training Programme Content

The content focused on critical theory and practice and aimed to assist participants develop their own action plan for social inclusion. It also drew attention to the need to promote democratic values and principles, social justice, human rights and participatory democracy. Critical theory was analysed as a method that serves the purpose of supporting groups and individuals in acknowledging, understanding and supporting their own rights for health, education and employment. In a turbulent environment, solidarity and collective actions can flourish from small groups and communities on the basis of mutual trust, social interaction and active citizenship. These actions operate as a paradigm of good practice for bottom-up development and social change.

Experiential learning as a unique source of new learning was deployed whilst active participation and self-directed learning was encouraged. The f2f programme included a series of actions and techniques, such as role mapping exercises, networking, group dynamics and action research while the focus was on resistance to change elements and aspects of enhancement of the new role to deliver through introducing trainees to the transformative

learning theory by putting personal dilemmas for their process of change in relation to the community animator goals.

Overall, the f2f group meetings comprised a) a kick-off meeting, held in May 2019, where all participants joined the training programme, introduced themselves and became aware of the programme objectives and working methodology, b) a follow-up f2f meeting held in July 2019, based on guided open discussion, exchange of practice, sharing of opinions and experience. The action research experience conducted in their community was introduced, discussed, carried out and presented through sharing of know-how, ideas and experiences, and c) a final meeting at the end of the training programme (September 2019), where three action research initiatives conducted in their community were presented by young participants, one with refugees on Leros island (refugee intake camp site), one with drug using adolescents during a therapeutic community camp period in Western Peloponnese (Skafidia beach) and one awareness- raising initiative on youth concerns in Patras.

The Online Training Programme Content

The Community Animator Foundation Course consisted of twelve on-line modules including theoretical background, foreseen activities and a final quiz. Participants were expected to complete at least seven out of the twelve available modules. Within each training module, participants found detailed instructions and recommendations (e.g. watching recommended videos, following links to read material related to the topics they are studying etc.): follow them step by step to maximize their returns and complete all proposed activities. Each module contained 2 to 4 activities (depending on the subject and competences) and some of them required peer work. In order for each module to be considered successfully completed trainees had to complete all activities and the final quiz. While taking the foundation course they were free to explore any topic that may interest them, such as the empowerment of young people on the margins, social inclusion, youth work etc.; to start exploring, head over to the COMANITY Hub.

Since online training, relies heavily on one's own motivation and commitment, participants literally started working on a systematic way after the end of the first month of the training lifespan. The vast majority of platform visits, and engagement indices, according to platform analytics, both for blended and online trainees were surprisingly high in July and August 2019, where traditionally any activities during summer holiday break weakens in Greece.

3. Results

3.1 Online training programme

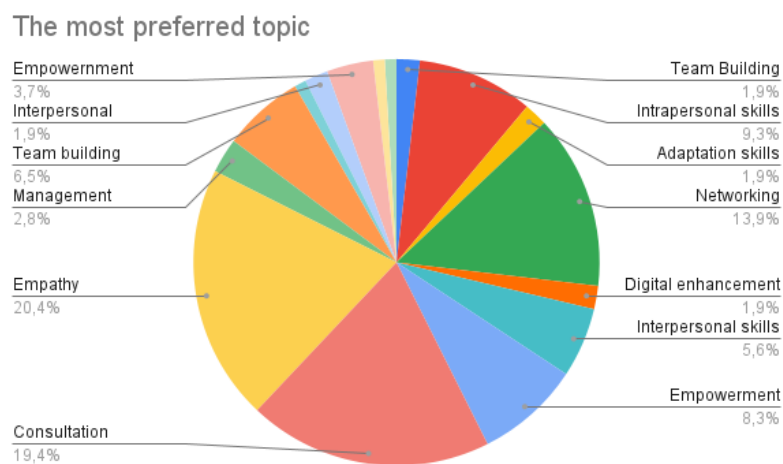
In relation to the online training programme, out of the 947 applicants, 272 (28,7%) worked in education, 235 (24,8%) in treatment, 69 (7,3%) in prevention programmes, 37 (3,9%) in research and the remaining 334 (35,3%) were either unemployed or engaged in activities they did not wish to report. The majority (N=647, 68,3%) had less than five years of working experience, 109 (11,5%) had between 6-10 years of working experience, 143 (15,1%) had between 11-20 years of working experience and 48 (5,1%) had more than 20 years of working experience. When asked to respond on open-ended questions about the reasons for which they applied in the programme, most participants talked about the need for increasing their knowledge and social skills, for personal and professional development and for being better equipped to work with socially vulnerable groups.

Despite the outstanding demand and interest, the programme had to randomly select from the above, 109 participants for registration. From those 36% were employed and 64% were unemployed. 54% were Bachelor's graduates and 46% were Master's holders. These were followed in relation to their preferred programme content and their overall satisfaction from the online course.

When asked about their satisfaction level, 68,8% reported being very satisfied or highly satisfied about the programme., followed by 30,3% reporting moderate or even low satisfaction from the online course while only 0.9% reported that it was not at all satisfactory.

70,3% found the programme useful or extremely useful for their professional development. Interestingly enough 66% of the participants found very (33,9%) or even highly significant (32,1%) the programme for their personal development. When asked to respond whether they would recommend their programme to others, 71, 6% responded that it was very or even highly likely to do so, while 13,8% said that they were not likely to recommend the programme to others.

Participants were asked to respond which topic from the programme content found as more relative to their own needs. The content that focused on Empathy and counseling and consultation were according to their responses the most preferred, followed by networking, empowerment and intrapersonal skills.



Graph 1. The most preferred topics

Competences from all 3 clusters were the four mostly visited ones (CA Module 1: Advice, guidance and support to promote social inclusion of young (49), EI Module 1: Intra-personal competences (45), DI Module 1: Organizing and managing resources for online self-regulated development (35), CA Module 2: Mapping, networking and mediation (35). Program aid instructions.

When asked to respond how they would rate their overall experience of the online programme, most participants (69,7%) agreed that it was very positive. However, when they were asked what would improve their experience, 43,1% of them suggested that face-to-face meetings would be very important to maintain.

3.2 Blended learning experiential training programme

All participants selected for the blended Greek training were women, aged between 19-25 years old. All but two were unemployed. Ten had a Bachelor’s degree in psychology, social work, social anthropology and sociology, one was a biology student, two were high school graduates and one had a Master’s degree. All were volunteers in various organizations including drug treatment organizations, refugee camps, organizations for children and adolescents with autism and organizations for former prisoners. Six of them had a proficient level of English. Interestingly enough by the end of the programme, three of them gained employment. They all reported that programme participation was very important for their

empowerment and further improvement of their social skills. Satisfaction about the blended training workshop was high (>93%). The most satisfactory elements from this training were: team spirit creation, building a shared vision, the value of experiential learning, the opportunities for dialogue and sharing ideas in the group, and networking.

In relation to topics engagement, it was clear that mapping, networking and mediation and advice, guidance and support to promote social inclusion of young people were their preferred ones.

A focus group was carried out by an independent, external researcher to figure out what were the key positive elements by participating in the programme.

In their own words, the programme was successful due to its experiential character and the emphasis placed on team building. As they characteristically said in their own words:

"I enriched my prospects regarding my professional future... I had a different experience of how this kind of team operates."

"...the way the team acted under the guidance of the moderators. Also, the freedom in expressing ourselves and discover thoughts/ideas that never expected to find in an educational programme."

"The experiential character of training and the approach of bottom-up."

As for the challenges identified in the blended programme, these referred namely to the group dynamics and opportunities generated within the process, such as interaction with others, collaboration and openness.

"To be open with the other team members."

"To cooperate and connect with the team. Maybe I just couldn't get involved and adapt."

"To express my feelings and ideas in front of the team"

"The first ice breaking exercises"

Group members collaborated very well and managed to have a substantive relationship whilst fostering a safe environment that allowed free expression and a 'home' to return to when unsure or puzzled. Mentors were all around superb both as guides and as time went by as a catalyst for collaboration and constructive meetings and setting boundaries. Consensus that boundaries were well set, but direction was not forced on the participants resulted in a free environment that might at times have felt directionless but according to the trainees encouraged and reinforced personal involvement, initiative and interest. The whole experience felt much more personal, gratifying and as though it originated from the members rather than being some external product that was then internalized by each individual.

In terms of the key positives of participation, group engagement, mentoring and, action research both as a process of learning as well as an activity, were highly appreciated. Participants considered that to be a networking experience where they had the opportunity to find peers with similar interests, tendencies and goals.

4. Discussion

The present paper suggests that the blended learning experiential training programme outweighs online-only formats, even though in relation to learner's engagement, there have been rather no significant differences with blended learning participants (in % of time while online). The face-to-face interaction with peers and mentor remain of key value in establishing productive collaboration and outcomes. Thus, emphasis on action research methodology is critical for developing initiatives for community change and therefore face to face training on action research is more than required as experiential training is key learning methodology for

the learners to engage. However, it is important to note that even online training on sensitive areas that concern most adult educators and other trainers and volunteers in non-formal settings and informal settings, has its own value for the development of social and other skills, such as empathy and networking. To this extent, transformative learning strategies appear suitable for challenging one's assumptions prior to bringing change into the community. Furthermore, evidence suggests that trainers in the youth and social inclusion fields are not sufficiently aware of the dynamics that drive youth marginalisation and social exclusion. 'Lifeworld analysis' (Cullen & Tsiboukli, 2019) and its work in action research experiments in highly marginalised communities, is significant for understanding the complex and challenging situations that socially vulnerable groups live in and experience on a daily basis.

Training programme designers and trainers themselves often tend to be preoccupied with easy to categorise 'target groups' – like NEETs, young immigrants and educational drop-outs. The reality is that these target groups are blurred – and excluded and marginalised people are faced with multiple, and mutually-reinforcing issues (like poverty, limited opportunities, ethnicity, health issues). There is, therefore, a need for trainers to become more aware of these dynamics, more reflective and more evidence-based. However, there is always a tension between the imposition of education, training and professional development standards 'from above' and creating a flexible environment in which trainers, youth workers, volunteers and young people who have no 'formal' status but are active in the community can 'learn by doing' and acquire non-formal competences which nevertheless could be subsequently recognised and accredited.

Experiential learning should be recognized if not be given equal status with traditional formal learning and training. Furthermore, there is a pressing need in general to bring down the barriers between 'society' and the formalised world of educational systems and practices; to open up formal education and take students out of the school and into civil society. Most students have little idea of what active citizenship means in practice and about what are the key issues and problems that need to be addressed through active citizenship. Such a proactive educational approach to active citizenship could have a positive effect on people's perceptions of the need for, and the value of, volunteering – not least because they could see practical outcomes – through action research - of volunteering in the real world.

Lately, the recent COVID 19 crisis suggests that a potential way to boost well-being in a time of crisis may be to increase people's sense of 'mattering', through volunteering. And although what constitutes volunteering might be wide-ranging, covering a plethora of heterogeneous activities, a sense of social cohesion can also be grounded bringing particular benefits to all members of the community, enabling them to establish a strong social role and ties (Wilson, 2000). Being connected with a cause can be a key driver, alongside regarding it as emotionally cathartic when affected personally, and finding solace from collaborating with others towards the same goal (Tierney & Mahtani, 2020). Community animators envisioned a social role in response to 'giving back' to community, in doing something at a time of crisis, affirming one's social identity, and thus establishing a sense of solidarity through joining others in working towards a common purpose.

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