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Executive summary

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Good practices

First experiences

The concept of good praxis came to the attention of the scientific world during the 1940s, principally through interested American researchers who conducted a series of studies on the way innovative ideas and practices propagate inside rural communities. These studies formed the basis of a tradition of research on propagation that has since been followed by numerous other studies throughout the world.

These studies were made well known through the work of Everett Rogers (Rogers, 1962; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971), who summarized these studies and established the diffusion model, which has been applied both in industrialized countries and in developing countries; the diffusion model explains the process through which innovative ideas and practices are propagated. It also identifies the categories of adopters, i.e., those who adopt an innovative practice when it is proposed; The diffusion model also describes the mental process to be followed, labeled the adoption process, and explains how the diffusion process depends on the characteristics of the innovations. On the basis of these generalizations, Rogers explains how the facilitator of the innovative process identifies the user group, determines the appropriate content of the message and decides on the consulting methods to be used, in accordance with the users, the content, and the stage of the adoption process.

The Training and Visit System [T&V System] is a good example of the application of the diffusion model in the work of facilitators in rural contexts. It was developed with the support of the World Bank in the 1970s and is has been applied widely, especially in the developing world (Baxter and Pickering, 1988). The main elements of the T&V System are a detailed and precise working program for training facilitators, which includes on-site visits, training and updating. The focal point of this work is the involvement of local communities through formation of study groups in line with proposed innovative experiences. The members of study groups are selected, tutored and supervised by educators, whose role as facilitators is regularly monitored.

The T&V Systems model was promptly criticized for being an exclusively top-down approach, based uniquely on the vertical imposition of information embedded in the consulting and training work (Howell, 1982-1983; Oakley, 1986). Still, the model has potential as a plausible guideline for innovative training methods. It has the merit of introducing an organized system of feedback, and a procedure for supporting supervision and systematic training for educators. The most serious criticism is that it

does not attach sufficient importance to situational factors, to local knowledge, and to the ways in which local participation is fostered. Development *for* people, as underlined by Paulo Freire (1971), means development *without* people.

The practice community

The privileging of the practice community as the starting point of accessing, elaboration and launching of shared knowledge is increasingly preferred to the traditional models based on transmission of *top-down* information, particularly in the fields of education and social welfare.

Much has been written about the important characteristics of the practice community, which can be best summed up as:

a unit of individuals mutually engaged, joined by a common undertaking, in possession of a shared repertory". Furthermore, Wenger suggests that: "In fact, a teleological, theoretical and operative/methodological transnationality exists, which joins many experiences of virtual communities, whether professional (CoPs) or educational; in the latter communities, the meta-cognitive cut of the experience is more obvious, because it is rendered explicit and because it is congruent to the educational purpose of the community itself (E. Wenger 1998).

The National Institute of Pedagogical Research¹ provides the experience of a group of Portuguese researchers as a good example of a practice community. The project at issue regards the creation of a web site to support a virtual community of learning with

l'intention de flexibilizer spatio-temporellement les classes présentiellees, créant une ambiance virtuelle fondée sur de 'bonnes pratiques' qui se traduisent dans la notion de communauté, group, sens d'appartenance, partage et construction collaborative de savoir.... (Oliveira e Blanco - Université du Minho Braga).

Important aspects of learning are realized by the practice community involved in this project: learning as the development of the meaning of shared knowledge; learning as the development of identity, i.e., *getting someone* as opposed to *knowing something*; but also learning as belonging to a community; and last but not least,

¹ More information can be found at [http:// www.inrp.fr/](http://www.inrp.fr/)

learning as creating a theory of good praxis aiming to an ideal juxtaposition of theoretical competence and practical experience (Wenger 1998 , Midoro 1998).

The European Directions

The Italian Department of Welfare has published on its web site an important distinction between the concepts of *best practice* and of *promising practice* which is coherent with current EU understanding. Promising practice is understood as a way of developing the educational experience that ensures its general effectiveness in terms of positive results, intrinsic quality, and specific problem-solving power. Training agencies and trainers are required to pay particular attention to the following aspects of the content and quality of the training provided:

- Effectiveness of the actions in achieving specified objectives;
- Political relevance;
- Innovative potential;
- Sustainability, e.g., economical, organizational, environmental;
- Reproducibility of the action, including its adaptability to other situations, i.e., ability to solve problems in similar situation, conforming to the varying normative, financial and organizational conditions;
- Transferability, i.e., ability to solve problems of analogous nature, but in different situations and conditions;
- Combination ability, i.e., combining actions together and simultaneously the effectiveness of the actions, their quality, and the transferability of the practice;
- Mainstreaming potential.

Mainstreaming

The concept of mainstreaming refers to the process through which innovations developed in pilot or experimental situations are integrated into the main structure of any system (social, economic or institutional). In this way, good praxis that has been demonstrated as effective and useful in single pilot projects can be acquired on behalf of the national or local community.

Mainstreaming can be either horizontal or vertical. Horizontal mainstreaming is the transfer of findings from a project in one organization to another found within a similar environment; for example, the transfer of an innovative educational model from one training agency to another with the intention of creating and developing a local network through focus groups, new technology and permanent work groups. Vertical mainstreaming is the transfer across hierarchical levels, e.g. from the practices of local organization to the policies of higher political, regulatory or administrative bodies.

Mainstreaming is a strongly dynamic concept: it does not only indicate *what* has been accomplished, i.e. the results, but also *how*, i.e. the way certain inputs into the system achieve a certain aim and cause certain effects. The described process connects, in an osmotic way, the input coming from the bottom (bottom-up) with the effects of the elaborations carried out from the top (top-down) in a circular process of feedback, which is typical for complex systems.

The PRAISE project

Given the preceding overview, it is now possible to address the choices made within the PRAISE project as an original and innovative synthesis of such notions as *good praxis* and *practice community*, yet consistent with the standards of the international scientific community.

The local *virtuous circles* are in every respect learning communities based on the educational theory of shared praxis. Members are engaged in the exchange and circulation of praxis considered significant by the operators themselves. The activity of the virtuous circles has made it possible to foster horizontal mainstreaming of the training innovations of the project, which is leading to the definition of locally shared representations.

The international partnership group has been responsible for vertical mainstreaming, achieving this through development of communication and learning instruments, and through diffusion both within partnership meetings and at public meetings in each country.

The concepts of significance and of representation of the reality are at the centre of the proposed methodological model. These concepts do not comprise just the acquisition of quantitative data, e.g. statistical significance, but also the enrichment in connotations and sense that qualitative analysis can provide. In order to endorse fully these concepts, a narrative inquiry protocol was proposed as a key aspect of the methodology and has been refined through the process of experimentation, discussion and redefinition. Through this protocol, case studies of significant practice in each locality have been collected and shared through an online distance learning platform capable of semantic analysis. The repertory of knowledge contained in the narrations has been tested by, and joined to, a unique multilingual ontology, aimed to facilitate exchange of experiences.

Consistently with the methodology of the project, the application of the said protocol allowed for the sharing of, and the experimentation with, the practices at issue, as such practices become reproducible and transferable. This happens because the

practices now coincide with a domain of knowledge that is shared and discussed by the authors of the processes themselves.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the PRAISE methodology privileges the personal knowledge and the "small theories" of professionals working in a context that relies much more often on deductively-applied "grand theories", even when they do not fit with the actual facts that such theories intend to address and explain. In this sense, PRAISE leads the professionals themselves to getting involved in a large and ongoing laboratory formed by the whole of the actions that they come across in their daily activities.

The Narrative Transmission

A narration is the product of the capability to articulate language in a complex way; it is the intentional result of a productive activity that is widespread in the anonymous fabric of everyday life. Yet it also constitutes the well-considered reflection, pursuit and construction of an order. W. Benjamin writes “the man who travels has much to tell, says the popular saying, and conceives the narrator as someone who arrives from far away. But with as much pleasure one listens to someone who, living honestly, remained in his native land and knows its stories and traditions” (W. Benjamin, 1966). The power to narrate is a human constant both in the events of “extraordinary” life and in those obvious events that are taken for granted every day.

E. M. Forster asserts that the art of narration dates back “to the Neolithic period, maybe to the Paleolithic period. Already the Neanderthal man listened to tales judging from the form of his skull” and he adds “the primitive audience where listeners with ruffled heads gathered gaping around a bonfire, exhausted by the fight against the mammoth or the rhinoceros and kept awake only by the suspense” (E. M. Forster, 1990).

This second thought recalls to us the fact that narrating is a transitive activity in a twofold sense. Firstly, you narrate something to someone and it has a function of entertainment. Secondly, however, the higher function of the narration has to be brought back to the pragmatic aspect; it is of fundamental importance to transmit to an audience the knowledge of certain events in order to widen the possibilities of action by the audience. Therefore, the narration is an instrument connected to the necessity to adapt to one’s environment and to make actions more effective and coordinated.

In primitive societies narration had sacred functions, building near the rites which were the centre of religious life. With the development of more complex social forms narrations were developed into other areas of life. These included the tales related to the transmission of crafts, morals, rights and justice. In all these cases the retention in primitive societies has occurred by rote. In cultures without medial supports, e.g. writing, it was necessary to trust to memory these narrations, both for daily transmission and for more ritualized functions. Thus, the tales were based on repetitions, utilizing rhythm and fixed formula. Narrations were more episodic as opposed to a temporarily developing plot line. These characteristics survive into the daily oral narrative form used commonly today. Often, the narrator is not able to remember plots that are overdeveloped. In this type of narration body and voice remain part of the tale and the act has characteristics of a performance. The oral narrator must know the laws that govern audience resistance and the narrator’s own ability to seduce that audience (P. Jeddowski, 2000).

The introduction of writing changed deeply communication methods and thus also had an effect on narration. Oral narration is bound to the situation in which it occurs; it is addressed solely to the audience and is susceptible to interruptions, gaps and retractions. The written narration is released from the transmission context and from a rigidly defined transmission situation. Also, it has an indefinite audience, it is planned and it can be read again, it can count neither on the help of voice and gesture nor on the immediate feedback of the receiver. Written narrations remain for a long time beyond the moment it has been originated. Writing separates the narrator from the receiver, indeed we are inclined to understand the written narration as independent from the relationship between narrator and receiver. It can be understood as the object of a deferred narration or more precisely as the object of a mediated narration, i.e., between the narrator and the receiver the text interposes itself as medium. But the use of the narrative text also requires an active involvement of the receiver; its meaning is realized only thanks to the interpretation of the receiver. Indeed, starting from his own experience and from his previous knowledge the receiver inserts the text in a framework of expectations, attributes particular aspects to himself, and selects the salient elements. In this way a process of negotiation is activated which does not get exhausted in the act of immediate transmission, but it extends in the experience of the receiver, via reflections intersecting in life experiences.

Thus far, narrations have been analysed according their written characteristics. However, an even more important interpretation exists, namely the *symbolic* mediation. According to Crespi's definition, the symbolic mediation is formed "by the constant work of culture which transforms the natural universe into a universe of sense" (F. Crespi , 1996). Indeed, the pragmatic function and the entertainment function of narrations are more evident, but narrations' principal role is to permit the classification and the interpretation of our lives. On a social level, it is the development of a pretence of integration, in the sense of the sharing of common knowledge models, e.g. types of characters, of reasons and of actions, form of feelings, models of plots and situations, between the members of a society (J. Bruner, on M. Ammaniti, D.N. Stern, 1991). These different interpretations are important because they help the receiver by conforming to certain knowledge bases, namely the semantic and conceptual knowledge, world knowledge², i.e., knowledge about how the world is, categorical knowledge, i.e. how the world is ordered in the receiver's mind, and social knowledge, which represents understanding of people's attitudes towards things in the world of discourse.

The stories we listen to constitute an exercise of exploration and tests of commanding the world. The narrated worlds are simulations that constitute an imaginary exploration. For those who listen or read, this allows them to identify

² World knowledge most closely ties to the concept of ontology as developed durino the PRAISE project.

themselves with the characters and to experience the feelings that are associated with the event, comprehending them but not being directly involved. What is possibly considered during this exploration may prove so important as to orient again the convictions and to negotiate again the agreements or the receiver with their external world.

The narrator has many motivations, but the primary motivation is to have the receiver recognize his own existence; the difficulty to achieve this can be modelled as a gap. Indeed, through the narration it is possible to share one's world, feel one's voice, recognize one's existence and sensibility. The narrator ascribes certain actions to someone, i.e., he wants the interlocutor to accept the narration in order to obtain the version of reality that he proposes, or interprets. A narration is not a simple collection of disconnected sentences, but rather a construction that gives order to its material, choosing what is significant, establishing relationship between the single events, between the action and the character, between the character and the case. (P. Jeddowski , 2000) Every narration has a plot that is the way in which the events acquire sense thanks to the form that the narration confers to them, the receiver. In this sense we can affirm that the narration is a cognitive operation.

These narrative transmissions are of course forms of communication, and therefore they can be included in linguistic theory and discourse analysis, of which there are functional aspects which would prove more beneficial when seeking a pragmatic result. One of the earliest functional theories to be made for the communication domain was made by a German psychologist, Karl Bühler (1934). Bühler created three major functional categories into which language could be typed, namely the *emotive*, the *conative*, and the *referential*. These correspond to the first person of the addresser, the second person of the addresser, and the third person, something or someone referred to³. M. A. K. Halliday, perhaps the greatest contemporary functional linguist, later reformulated Bühler's three functions to the interactive uses of language, Bühler's expressive-conative, and the informative uses, Bühler's referential. Halliday put forward that language can be typed into two main functions, interpersonal or performative, or as a means of symbolic representation. Put within developmental terms, this means language use is first situated and performative, but later transformed into a decontextualised, representation form (Halliday, 1973; 1974; 1976). It is this aspect that is most interesting to the theory of narration as found within educational development in PRAISE. The narrations are first interpreted within their context, but then are abstracted up to be applicable to a wider class of situations not intended by the narrator.

In conclusion we can say that every story can be narrated with different types of languages, including verbal or written words, or more abstract symbols including images, gestures, mimes, etc. They can regard situations and characters meant as

³ In our narrative implementation, we may think of these as the narrator, the receiver, and the subject of the narration respectively.

real or imaginary; that which becomes a constant is the presence of time. S. Chatman writes that the elementary structure of narration is expressed in the formula xRy where x and y are the events and R is the temporary relation between them (Chatman, 1978). The presence of time is therefore the fundamental characteristic of all the narrations, both written and oral. The time at issue is that in which the events happen, i.e., the idea of the transformation of one situation into another one. However, in the story there is not only time as movement, but other forms of action, e.g. characters move, actions are made, events transpire, the situation changes.

Case studies

The case study is well known in the social sciences as a research method and as an interesting and useful way to enhance learning. Both these applications are integral to the PRAISE methodology. The description and evaluation of the activities of the virtuous circles in each partner country form research case studies within the project. Each of these case studies is an inquiry into the question of how an inclusive approach to developing social work knowledge and learning might be achieved. The virtuous circles produce case studies of social work practice that perform a crucial role both in abstracting the formative needs of the group and in supporting the learning environment. Through the linkage of these practice case studies into formative modules each partner can enrich their own knowledge and teaching.

The sections that follow define and describe in general terms both the case study research method and practice case studies.

Case study as a method of investigation and research

Case study research excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research. Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships. Researchers have used the case study research method for many years across a variety of disciplines. Social scientists, in particular, have made wide use of this qualitative research method to examine contemporary real-life situations and provide the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Researcher Robert K. Yin (1994) *defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.*

The case study has even been presented as the prime strategy for developing educational theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice (Bassey, 1999). Case studies are the preferred research strategy when *how*, *what* and *why* questions are being asked, when the researcher has little control over the event or when the research is being carried out in a real life context (Burns, 1990; Yin, 1988).

Case study research has many faces. The purpose for the study, the size of the unit under study, the range of data gathering approaches used and the overarching methodological paradigm for the study all contribute differences. Case studies may involve description, explanation, evaluation and prediction (Thomas, 1998). Bassey (1999) defines a range of purposes for educational case studies that include theory-seeking and theory-testing case study, story-telling and picture drawing case study and evaluative case study. Typically involving the observation of a bounded system or *unit*, a case study may be developed around an individual or extended to cover a community or culture (Mavis Haigh, 2000).

The use and importance of case study in educational researches and approaches

Burns lists six reasons for carrying out case studies. He suggests that they are valuable as preliminaries to major investigations as they generate rich data that may suggest themes for more intensive investigation. Also, since case studies *have the aim of probing deeply and analysing intensively* the many phenomena that make up the activities of the unit under study, then generalisations to the wider population may be possible. For similar reasons, they may serve to refute generalisations. Case studies may also generate anecdotal evidence that can illustrate general findings. The case study approach is preferred when pertinent behaviours cannot be

manipulated and finally, a case study may be the best possible description of a unique historical event (Burns, 1990).

The acceptance of case studies as a viable research tool has reemerged partly because people want a meaningful technique to capture a time-framed picture of the characteristics and performance of an individual or some aggregate that can be construed as a unit or collective. Case studies appeal to people because they have what might be termed *face-value credibility*. They can be seen to provide evidence or illustrations with which some readers can readily identify (Dan Bachor, 2000).

Case studies are complex, they generally involve multiple sources of data, may include multiple cases within a study, and produce large amounts of data for analysis. Researchers use the case study method to build upon theory, to produce new theory, to dispute or challenge theory, to explain a situation, to provide a basis to apply solutions to situations, to explore, or to describe an object or phenomenon. The advantages of the case study method are its applicability to real-life, contemporary, human situations and its public accessibility through written reports. Case study results relate directly to the common reader's everyday experience and facilitate an understanding of complex real-life situations.

Definition of case study used in teaching

A case study used in teaching or training can be described as a story which guides us about the complexities of life (Estes). The topic can be either an individual, or group of individuals, community or organisation. It can be distinguished from a 'case review' which emphasizes a critical reappraisal of a case, and from a 'case report', which usually refers to a summary of a case or to the document reporting a case.

Case studies have been used for some time to enhance learning for students in a variety of disciplines. There are multiple definitions and understandings, but it helps to distinguish between two types on a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum case studies facilitate objective analysis of real problems in order to determine the correct answer. Using this type of case study as a learning tool the teacher leads students to reason deductively from general principles to reach the solution of a particular problem. This type of case study is used in law and medicine. The cases are real stories dealing with people with problems but the cases are carefully structured to illustrate general principles and good practice. In these case studies correct answers and facts have a high priority. At the other end of the spectrum are the case studies used in, for example, business schools. These case studies are also based on real world situations. They are given to students in an incomplete state, the outcome is unknown and important information is often missing. The point is not to attempt to arrive deductively at a predetermined correct answer but to take a complicated and unresolved situation and determine how it could best be managed (Kelley and Kelley, 1998).

The other important characteristic in distinguishing different types of case study is the knowledge base of the discipline. In law and medicine for example the knowledge base is well-defined and the technical-rational approach of the disciplines make the individual or specific context of the case less important. In business much of the knowledge is less well-defined. Business education draws on different disciplines for its knowledge base and stresses that there are multiple ways of viewing and solving particular problems. The specific context of the case and subtle differences in individual subjective views are seen as important.

The social work domain is more like business than law. Social work practice is complex, both in terms of the external context and the needs of the individuals, families and community needs it seeks to serve. The knowledge base is broad and ill-defined; social workers use a variety of different approaches such as family therapy, radical social work, community work and these approaches rest on theories drawn from other disciplines such as psychology and sociology. The social work

practice situation can be understood only by a way of knowing that is engaged and participant, committed in its values and reflective and self critical in its cognitive stance (Trevillion, 2000). The case study method is a very valuable tool in helping practitioners and learners to increase their understanding of how to intervene in complex social situations.

Structure and description of the case study in approaches to learning

A case study is a story with a message which guides us through the complexities of an event or set of related events. To tell the story, the events must be organised in some way. The story teller must choose where to begin and where to end the story and choose what information and level of detail to put in the middle. The way this is done depends on the story teller, the purpose for which the case study is constructed and the discipline of the subject matter.

Leung identifies four contextual issues as important for the construction of computer based learning: topic selection, authenticity, complexity and multiple perspectives. These issues are also relevant to the construction of case studies for learning.

Topic selection is about evaluating and choosing a particular set of events or a problem as the subject of the case study. The topic must arouse interest and be of relevance to the reader. Drawing on the expert knowledge of practitioners is a good way of making sure that the case study presents real challenges from a real world situation. The topic is more likely then to be interesting, relevant and engaging for learners. It is also more likely to help the teacher to explain real world problems in the learning environment. Contextual information helps the learner to understand and become involved in the problem. Experts in a domain, describing their own experiences, naturally present the necessary details, including the physical context, the actors and the organisational and cultural climate. This contextual information plays an important role in helping the learner interact with the problem.

Authenticity concerns providing authentic contexts and activities aligned with the practice of the discipline. A realistic learning programme should be as close as possible to what learners will encounter in the real world situations. The real world case based approach fulfils these authenticity requirements well, especially in ill-structured domains such as social care. When students know the case involves situations they are likely to face they are more likely to feel the case is worth studying.

Real world case studies have complex content which makes high cognitive demands on learners because many aspects of knowledge and experience, and multiple sources of information are interconnected and embedded in the story. This integration of learning in a complex problem is important in promoting high-level thinking and problem solving.

Multiple perspectives concern the learner's problem solving ability across different problem situations and the reality that in complex domains such as social care it is unrealistic to have a single answer to a problem. A good case study encourages the learner to see that the story can be considered from different points of view, that different constructions can be drawn from the information and that different decisions could be made at various points in the story (Leung, 2003)

The structure of the case study can also be tailored to fit the learning theory underpinning the course and the teaching method (s) employed. A review of learning research generally (and the models used in computer based learning, especially online distance learning) show a shift in focus from an instructor centred behaviourist view to a more active learner's cognitivism and learner centred constructivism. Hodgson, drawing on Rumble's models of distance learning and Mason's online course models, notes that some online courses follow the 'transmission' model which is essentially behaviourist, with the content designed by educational experts in the

domain (Hodgson, 2003). Case studies can be integrated into the model but this tends to require cases which are constructed to lead to the correct answer based on the factual content of the case.

Learning in the cognitivist view builds on declarative knowledge and proceeds to a focus on problem solving. The learner is active and the emphasis is on teaching students how to think. Learner centred constructivism extends the learner further by an emphasis on experiential learning where learners learn by discovering for themselves (Leung, 2003). This corresponds to Rumble's socio-cultural model of distance learning and Mason's 'wrap-around' model of online courses. In these models learning is interactive and constructive; it involves evaluation and formation of shared values (Hodgson, 2002). Other characteristics are that multiple answers are encouraged, course material and theory are closely interwoven with practical situations, and the case studies are open-ended and realistic. This approach to learning is particularly suitable to the social care domain where the aim is to produce practitioners who are grounded in theory, but can apply the theoretical knowledge to real world situations.

SHARED KNOWLEDGE DOMAIN OF THE PRAISE PROJECT

Among the significant innovations of the Praise project are its focus on case studies in professional practice, its methodology for selection and design, and, in some instances, the drafting of guidelines for their analysis. The use of the case study methodology for learning favours learning processes aimed at consolidating professional skills, and the narrative methodology of the *virtuous circle* [VC] provides a new approach to forging a link between professional practice and training.

Obviously, any research project aiming to favour innovation in training must concentrate on a limited number of areas. It is impossible to see methodological innovation in isolation from its contents and it is therefore vital to locate the research process within a few specific domains.

Initially, the partners decided to locate the project in the domain of social work / social education. Later, they agreed to narrow the domain further in order to facilitate the process of interchange: it was decided that the cases should be located in the subdomain of childhood inside social work / social education.

Domain negotiation on the basis of compiled experiences

In its first phase the PRAISE project focused on the social work / social education domain. The partners were all interested in the training of professionals. In some cases, this interest focused both on formal areas (kindergarten, primary, secondary, university education) and on areas of work and social education. Other partners focused specifically on the training of social workers and educators, though it is also true that in most participating countries the barrier between formal and non-formal education is gradually being broken down. Besides, the socio-educational action obliges us to see reality as a complex phenomenon and to look for a global and contextual vision in which to locate problematic situations and social needs.

Therefore, it was easy to define the domain of the project within social work and social education, though at the international project meetings partners expressed

diverse conceptions of the domain and of the specific characteristics of social and socio-educational action. Likewise, the professional training models for social and socio-educational intervention also differed from country to country.

The first agreement reached was that the project should aim to constitute *virtuous circles* in which professionals and teachers could develop their professional activity in the area of social work or social education.

This was the starting point of the project, but at later meeting partners suggested that the domain should be further narrowed. After hearing and discussing the experiences of the different partners it was clear that the domain selected was excessively wide for a project that aimed to bring together the different realities of the participating countries and to introduce a new work methodology in a domain where the professional needs are very diverse (social care, adult education, job seeking, social and cultural activities, children's centres, care for the disabled, etc.).

Because of the breadth of the domain, it was impossible to guarantee a shared framework that could promote the effective exchange of experiences and the realities of the different countries. There were clear terminological and conceptual difficulties that hindered easy mutual comprehension and it was becoming difficult to reach consensus agreements on the aims and implementation of the tasks to be carried out by each of the partners.

As a result, it was decided to narrow the domain and to focus on a smaller set of parameters shared by all partners. With this aim in mind, the cases selected for analysis on-line all corresponded to the area of childhood, i.e., the first 18 years of a person's life. Agreement on this subdomain made it possible to narrow the field of activity; however, even with this restriction, the project continued to deal with a wide area with a sufficiently diverse range of situations.

Later project meetings demonstrated that limiting the field of action was indeed necessary since terminological problems and different conceptions of the social and socio-educational action persisted, even though the study now concentrated more narrowly on childhood. This area improved participants' possibilities of negotiating meanings and allowed them to centre on more specific questions, including: how far should the cases be understood to be examples of good practices or as critical

incidents subject to analysis; whether cases had to respond to a specific conflict; whether only closed cases could be analysed or open, unresolved cases as well; detailing the characteristics of the composition and of the work dynamics of the virtuous circles.

Social Work/Social Education

As noted above, although the contexts of the different participating countries in the project had specific features of their own, it was necessary to establish some shared ideas for the domain.

Social work is understood as a social intervention designed to change social situations, meeting the needs of those who require help or are in danger. This help is not necessarily provided by social workers, but may be provided by people outside the world of social work (Smale, Tuson and Statham, 2003: 19).

The concept of social work included in the Praise project had a wide sense and was not restricted to a professional specific figure. One of the main advantages of VCs was the diversity of the professionals who had taken part in the social and socio-educational interventions, exchanging views and perspectives in case study selection and design. Evidently, social work professionals brought their own special expertise to the project.

The concept of social education can and must be understood in a wide sense and, in this project, was not limited to the actions or responsibilities of a specific professional. In any case, the term “social education” is not easy to define. What is the objective of an educational process that describes itself as *social*?

To share a common framework, the domain of social education, understood in a broad sense, can be conceptualised as a domain that refers (although by no means exclusively) to processes of educational action that:

- a) contribute to the socialization process of individuals;
 - b) consider individuals’ problems and needs as an essential concern in situations of social conflict and social risk;
-

c) are located outside the strict school or formal education context, although, as stated above, it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a clear distinction between the types of learning that develop through formal and non-formal education.

The field of action in social education is very wide (Parcerisa, 1999: 33-34):

- Social and cultural activities complementing school and free time activities, including environmental education;
- Adult education (elementary, work-related and professional, etc.);
- Education in sectors with specific problems, including penal justice, juvenile justice, social marginalization and juvenile crime prevention, health education, immigration and minorities, women, old age, disabled, and primary care social services;
- Informal educational intervention, e.g., mass media, the leisure and culture industries, the city.

This diversity, both inside and outside the education field, made it difficult to reach agreement on meanings and on specific lines of action in the Praise project. However, it facilitated the compilation of a case studies database that reflected the problems and needs of many different types of individuals found within social workers' experiences.

There are two dimensions along which the variety of cases and subjects addressed within the PRAISE project proved advantageous to the participants. Firstly, there are the needs presented by the context of the case, i.e., the reality in which each of the partners operated inside the social work domain. Secondly, there are the advantages represented by the case studies owing to the additional possibility for a more diversified use and, therefore, for a greater response to the educational needs within the project domain.

Independently of each context's needs, i.e., of the reality in which each of the partners operates inside the project the domain of social work and of the project, the variety of cases and of subjects addressed represent a definite advantage because

they open up the possibility for a more diversified use and, therefore, for a greater response to the educational needs in the broad domain chosen for the project.

The childhood domain

For the reasons expressed above, it was decided to limit the scope of the project and to focus on childhood (0-18 years). The need to establish this subdomain was described above, and is reinforced by the diversity inherent in the social work / social education domain mentioned in the paragraph above. Though other subdomains such as *old age* or *justice* could have been chosen, the area of childhood was one that interested all the partners in the project.

To define the concept of childhood one is referred to the Convention on the Rights of the Child [CRC] of September 2, 1990 (United Nations 1989), approved by the UNO and ratified by the vast majority of countries, which states that children are minors under the age of eighteen with rights that must be respected.

The partners' interest in childhood reflects the fact that this is the area in which they carry out their educational action and also bears witness to a general agreement on the relevance of this subdomain and on the need, as stated in the CRC, and the obligation of party states to guarantee the rights of children so as to ensure that they develop their maximum potential. Other obligations include that children are able to take care of their health, express their points of view and receive suitable information. Likewise, children have the right to legal registration at birth, to a name and a nationality, and to enjoy the protection of the governments. All forms of abuse and exploitation are expressly prohibited.

These rights of minors have major repercussions for social and socio-educational action. It is the task of social educators to ensure that these specific, hard-earned rights are safeguarded. This situation introduces an important specific component in social and educational work with children, which is reflected in a number of the cases that the project developed in the database.

Therefore, though the cases presented great diversity, in terms of age, the concept of childhood, situations, problems and needs, and also given the specificity of the social, cultural, economic, historical context of each partner, the focus on the childhood domain enabled partners to share features and cross-sectional characteristics of the intervention that greatly facilitated joint work.

The project in relation to other domains

In these paragraphs the authors have stressed the need to locate the PRAISE project into a very limited number of domains. The process which the partners followed was described and the decisions which were taken with regard to both the domain and subdomains were explained.

In any case, the Praise project could have focused on other domains, and indeed it is likely that its findings would have been equally interesting. Its pedagogic, methodological and technological contributions could have been applied to other types of professionals and in other areas and other disciplines.

The Praise project has proposed a way for professional training – or professional futures, in their case; and even of volunteer work – based on the selection and design of cases within a narrative framework of professional practices performed by teachers (in this case) who share their experience in order to jointly construct the framework of what has been named a virtuous circle.

It is evident that the same procedure could have been suggested to professionals and trainers from other disciplines. In this sense, it would be interesting to contrast the functioning of VCs in other domains with the experience gained on the PRAISE project, and to see how far this experience could be generalized or what adaptations would be required for other domains.

In any case, in the domain of social work / social education and specifically in the subdomain of childhood the experience has allowed different EU countries to share

and establish a methodology designed to simultaneously improve training and the different realities, conceptualisations and terminologies of the domain selected for the project.

FORMATIVE NEEDS TO FORMATIVE MODULES

Formative modules are based on the adoption of case based approach and the goal of creating an e-learning environment to be used in formative courses at different levels of expertises. In this chapter, we will describe the case based approach [CBL] adopted in the PRAISE project and the design of the modules based on the formative needs.

Case based learning approach.

There are a variety of reasons for adopting a case based approach to learning. A prominent argument is that CBL involves complex, authentic situations in which the learner must learn to think like a practitioner (an expert). This reflects the view that learning is a process of moving towards greater expertise. CBL offers a means to contextualise learning in a way that connects content and action. Jonassen (1999) argues that the inclusion of cases in a constructivist learning environment provides learners with access to experiences that they have not previously encountered. Furthermore, a case based approach which combines engagement with meaningful real world tasks and expert coaching can provide deeper insights into processes and practices.

The use of cases for learning is not new. CBL has a firmly rooted tradition in some professional disciplines such a business, medicine, and law. Recent studies found applications in other disciplines obtaining similar results (Evenson-Hmelo: 2000).

Although this methodology has developed a variety of interpretations and applications, the approach is most broadly defined as requiring “students to actively participate in real or hypothetical problem situations, reflecting the kind of experiences naturally encountered in the discipline under study” (Ertmer-Rusell: 1995, 24). Different conceptions of teaching and learning will determine the nature of the cases developed and the ways in which learners interact with the materials. Most authors discuss two aspects of the case methods: the case narrative and, the implementation of the cases in the learning environment.

The essence of the case is based on the methodology of narration, i.e., the drawing of narrative documents made by each student that are later analyzed and discussed by local focus groups. These validated documents are shared through an ODL platform and enriched by elaborative contributions of additional experts.

Through the analysis of the local work group, each partner has identified the local formative needs through a shared scheme and is developing an online course using the same document basis.

The most common approach to implement cases is threefold, namely to incorporate study questions as a focus for individual reflection, small group work and whole class discussion. There are variations of this approach including participation in the cases as a simulation, inclusion of cases for decision making, student preparation of their own cases, etc.

Formative needs

The content of the cases can be used to fulfil different formative needs that can be detected with an analysis of needs developed in each specific context. As a result of this analysis we have determined different identification methods for the formative needs and different target groups for the course. These are listed in the following table for all of the PRAISE partners.

Institution	Topic	Formative need	Identification method for the formative needs	Target group of the module or course/Duration of the module or course
Berufskolleg Bethel, Germany	Language acquisition of children and their parents (mostly families with migrant backgrounds)	Preparing the students social workers who are going to work in pre-school pedagogics and who will deal with this problem	Discussion of a case study in the virtuous circle, experiences in the social field and society	Students in the last year of their course work; after this they start a year of probationary learning in the field, in kindergardens. Duration: 20-25 hours
SFEP, Italy	Changes in social service in the city of Turin	Dealing with a change in the character of social work: from reception to active participation, and with the change of the population demographics, specifically the aging city population	Discussions in the virtuous circle, analysis of case studies. Social experiences.	Social workers of the social services in the different parts of the city, participants of the virtuous circle. Duration: 80 hours subdivides in a period of 3 month
University of Pitesti, Romania	Drugs and modern society facing drug problems.	There is a lot if information necessary, especially in the field of child psychology, drug-prevention, and how to deal with drug abusers.	Social experience; information from schools, hospitals, police etc., regarding the increase in drug abuse; case- studies in the virtuous circles,	Social workers working with minors, teachers, doctors, members of public and private institutions combating drug abuse. Duration: no longer than 30 hours
University of Barcelona, Spain	Social vulnerability.	The students have to deepen their knowledge about the subjects relates to social vulnerability and the key ideas to orient the analysis of the	Analyzing case studies in the virtuous circle.	Students form the social pedagogy area careers. Duration: 9 hours online and 6 hours face-to-face.

		cases.		
INFOP Paris, France	Reflection of various concepts, including authority, stereotypes, social representations, projects and self development issues.	The trainees reflect on the various concepts they have developed previously, including determining the distance to practical social work and considering concepts in the context of background of theoretical elements.	The various ideas result from the work made on the case studies.	The module is designed for post qualifying social work training. Duration: 180 hours.

Figure 1: Formative needs and target groups

As we can see in figure 1, there are different formative needs in each country and the module target groups are also different. However, we have adopted a similar perspective using CBL approach.

The design of a CBL environment

The design of CBL environment is based on Jonassen's (1999) model, in which he provides a framework for supporting learners as they work on their own design problems. Cases present solutions to past problems that may compensate for learners' lack of experience and may help learners develop an understanding of concepts and strategies useful in similar situations.

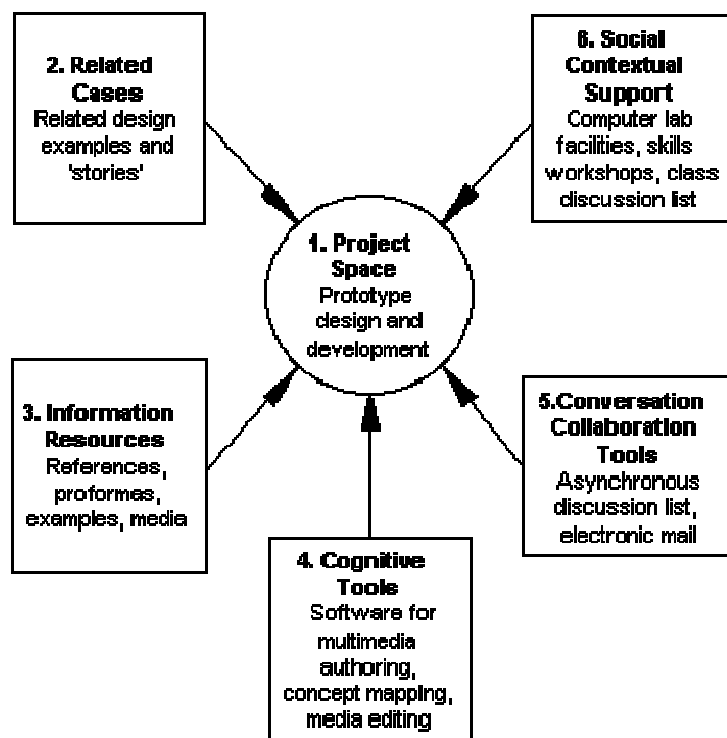


Figure 2: Jonassen's model for a constructivist learning environment

Project space

The project space is the focus of the learning environment and in this context comprises the design 'problem' for which learners develop a solution. Students work in small teams. The project design allows users to work with the case content designed by the different virtuous circles. Cases can be local or international and it provides great interest among the learners. The cases tend to be complex and engage learners in the kind of thinking required by practitioners.

Related cases

Cases provide the main instructional support while analysis activities focus on developing the learner's understanding of instructional design through individual reflection and group discussion. The activities incorporate two facets of CBL suggested in the literature: 1) learning from experts, and 2) developing ideas through personal reflection and social interaction. The two facets developed for this context provide insights into the experiences of the designers that enhance learners' understanding of the development process.

Information resources

Information resources include references to relevant sources of information including readings and web sites, proforma documents usable for guiding the development of design statements, examples and descriptions of other projects, and useful media resources.

Cognitive tools

Students can use multiple choice test or other activities in order to test their own knowledge and evolution of the learning. Other software tools can be made available to assist learners with problem representation, concept mapping, etc.

Conversation and collaboration tools

Asynchronous communication tools, such as electronic mail and discussion lists, are used to support interpersonal, small group and whole class interaction. This kind of communication is combined with face to face learning because direct contact it is also important in the social work field.

Social and contextual support

Social and contextual supports are also very important. In the PRAISE case, these are provided through a class discussion forum for general communication, and other meeting spaces, and the scheduling of face-to-face meetings and optional skills development workshops. The role of the instructor as facilitator and mentor is an essential component of this environment.

1.1.1 Conclusion

An examination of the literature advocating the use of authentic activities suggests that cases may be useful in helping learners develop an understanding of the complexities of real life situations. The real life cases developed by each partner are very substantial in supporting learners by providing a rich source of information.

Through prompting by the case analysis question, it is intended that learners will explore the multiple perspectives and issues within the cases to develop their own view of the development process, and in discussion with team and class members will explore the wider related issues. This process of analysis, experience and reflection could also be applied to other learning situations in which learners with varying backgrounds and skills could benefit from the opportunity to examine a related case before they embark on reflecting upon their own experience.

The use of technology to support the process is especially interesting since the provision of a new environment in which to interact with other people gives the opportunity to discuss the different contributions and personal approaches.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Description</i>