eLEARNIG INITIATIVE

PRAISE:

Peer Review Network Applying Intelligence to Social Work Education

Grant agreement number: 2003 - 4724 / 001 - 001 EDU - ELEARN

Virtuous circles definition

Version number 2.0

30 Oct. 2005

Executive summary

Name	Monitoring report
Version	2.0
Date	30 – 10 – 2005
Status	Final
Confidentiality	-
Participant Partner(s)	All
Author(s)	University of Barcelona
Task	7
Distribution List	-
Abstract	Monitoring activities report subdivided by task
Keywords	Local experience, virtuous circles, dissemination, sustainability, analysis of the narration, reflection on experience, peer review, focus groups, formative plans, monitoring activities, semantic network, evaluation, diffusion, public events, project management.
Previous Versions	1.0
Version Notes	

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1. OVERVIEW

The PRAISE project aims to create a community of best practice comprised of ten partners across eight member states which will concentrate on innovation of training methods for social workers. The project intends to extend, complement and support the already funded Socrates Minerva CABLE project (109883-CP-1-2003-1-ITMINERVA-M). Specifically it aims to foster the establishment and the sharing of good practice in the field of personal services, with reference to the virtuous circles coordinated by each of the partners, and linked in a European communication network.

The creation of virtuous circles has been organise following the specific situation of each partner and during the project, some adjustments has been produce in order to coordinate the structure of the work and to arrive to analysis the work process of each virtuous circle.

During this first period of the project each partner has developed the following actions:

1. establish and manage its virtuous circles
2. Involved professional profiles, with relative educational needs and curricula
3. Network communication and interaction, and shared work strategies.
4. Development of criteria for the transmissibility and the reproducibility of the gained experiences.

In order to achieve the main goals of the PRAISE project, we have created a network of professionals that understand in detail the realities and associated problems of currently implemented methods, and who can intervene in arising critical situations.

This report aims to describe the methodology used during the PRAISE project addresses to continue professional development and improvement of social services.

The report aims to describe the main characteristics of the virtuous circles methodology: a general view of the concept of virtuous circles, the description of the methodology developed during the project, the process of selection and organisation of the cases, the use of the cases for formative process of the participants, and finally, we include an examples of narration of one of the circles.

2. CONCEPT OF VIRTUOUS CIRCLES.

Virtuous circles are local structures through which the actors of social work are actively involved in a complex process of actions and ideas stimulated by the project itself. Virtuous circles are composed by professionals (practioners) who aims to have a common training process and shared similar formative needs.

Each virtuous circle is based on the interaction of the members who are able to collaborate with their own experiences and knowledge in order to improve the formative process. Collaboration and cooperative learning are involved during the process, and it is a requirement for the success of the work of each circle.

Another important element that characterizes the circles is the particular emphasis ascribed to the elaboration of the experience, built during years of work or just in a short period of practical training. In both cases, virtuous circles' model aims to conciliate theoretical and practical aspects in social operators' formation.
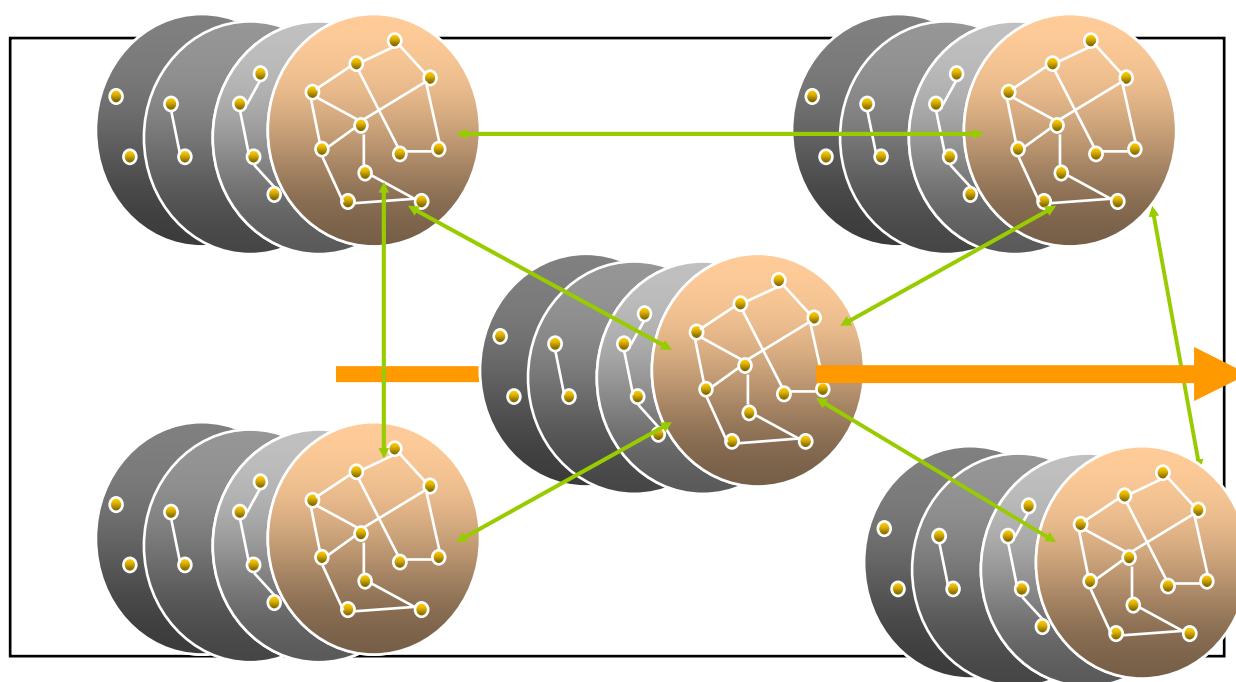

Figure 1. Virtuous circles interaction

The joint actions (at local and European levels) developed by the project, aim to increase quality and quantity of formation for social workers (with a positive return in the services). This is, in short, the reason why the circles are called "virtuous" They

aim to improve performances a "loop back circles" as it is shown in figure 1.   This network allows to act locally in each circle and to share the production and the results to the rest of the partners sharing the cases in the database.

The model is based on the methodology of narration, the drawing of narrative documents made by each student which are later analyzed and discussed into local focus groups.

These validated documents will be shared by an ODL platform and enriched by elaborative contributions of experts.

By the analysis of local work group, each partner has identified the local formative needs through a shared scheme and is developing an on line course using the same platform of the documents.

3. METHODOLOGY.

The main goal of this chapter is to analysis the main characteristic of the work using virtuous circles. One of the main discussions among the different pedagogical partners of the project during the process of organization and activation of the circles has been the methodology used during the sessions of work with each circle. The main problem to arrive to a specific model is that realities of each country are quite differences and it

was not easy to arrive to a homogenous process. For this reason, in almost all cases, there is an evolution in the way that the circles are working related to the own evolution of PRAISE project.

During the project, the pedagogical partners have used this methodology in order to compare the different ways in which the virtuous circles have elaborated their own ways of knowledge and construction of the cases. This approach has contributed to obtain a good methodology to capture the best practice of the different agents that intervene in a complex situation.

The field of social education is not heterogeneous around Europe because professionals are training from different organizations (Universities, Local administration, private institutions, etc), and there are many different professionals involved in the area: social workers, social educators, medical practitioners, psychologists, special teachers, school counsellors, social pedagogues, etc. All these different elements have produced a difference composition of the local virtuous circles (see figure 2).

	SFEP	Bethel	UdB	INFOP	UoA	THC
Composition (professionals)						
Number of members						
Frequency of the meetings						

Figure 2. Composition of local virtuous circles.

Besides these differences, the methodology used during the PRAISE project has some specific characteristics that we will describe in the following sections.

3.1. Creation and participation.

Virtuous circles were created at the beginning of PRAISE project because is one the main elements to produce case-studies. The creation of the virtuous circles was adapted to the main characteristics of each participant institution following some common ideas:

- Each institution involved in the project act as a leader of the circle organisation the meetings, proposing the calendar, topics, etc.
- Participation of different practitioners in the field of social work and social education are involved in each circle.
- Elaboration of the case studies from the experience of the practitioners involved in the virtuous circle.
- Analysis of the cases with all the participants of the virtuous circle.

Based on these common ideas, each partner organizes the virtuous circle coordinating the different participants. In some cases (SFEP), participants before starting the work in the local virtuous circle has received some specific training related the methodology used in the project in order to facilitate their participation.

Participation is voluntary, but it was not difficult to create local virtuous circle, to find people interested in the participation. Difficulties appear from more practical aspects: time of meetings, frequency, possibilities of participation in all the sessions, etc. To avoid this problems, different options has been developed. For instance, in some cases the virtuous circle is composed by a great number of people (20-30) but, not everybody participate in the same session. A calendar of the sessions and the main topics of the cases are produced by the coordinators, and each participant can select the day depending of their own interest and availability.

3.1.1. Motivation of the participants.

Participants of the virtuous circles have as a main goal to increase their own formative process as a continuous training based on the real cases of practitioners of social education. This methodology is according with the well-known idea of Schön's (1983) approach to reflective practice, which has been widely adopted in pre-service and professional development in many educational programs. It has indicated a clear pedagogical intention to move from learning as a technician to an environment inspired by the metaphor of learning as a professional. Two key concepts of Schön's approach are espoused theory and theory-in-use. The former refers to what one is expected to know and demonstrate in a given academic context, and the other to the knowledge one relies on in action. Applied to social workers and social education, it is through reflection on practice that a student or a professional makes progress in reducing the gap between theory and theory-in-use.

While reflective practice has been acknowledged for transforming the role of the educators, from that of a technician to that of a professional, knowledge building is a phenomenon recognized as most desirable in the knowledge age. Reflective practice being a critical objective in the education curriculum. Moreover, with their work in highly networked communities.

The success of the work in the virtuous circles depend on the motivation and implication of the different participants, but it is necessary the collaboration providing cases of their own practice and being able to analysis the cases presented by their colleagues with the objective of improve the study

Other important aspect to take into account is the availability of the participants for sharing case-studies not only in their local virtuous, but also in a European context with colleagues from different countries and institutions.

3.1.2. Role of participants

The main role of the participants is the production of the case-studies based on their own practice and experience. Each practitioner can select a case or cases according with the main topics of the project.

Cases are based on previous experiences of the participants, has to be authentic, real cases, and it is necessary to describe not only the case (the main problem) but also the intervention and the results achieved during the process.

Cases are described in the form of narration following the main elements elaborates in the PRAISE project:

- Narration
- Scene
- Actors
- Actions
- Reactions
- Time and space
- Aim

- Context

- Keywords

Participants of the virtuous circles received the case studies and during the sessions of work in the circle, the cases are analysed in order to achieve a better understanding of the problem and the practice involved during the intervention of the different practitioners involved in the case. In this point, it is interested to emphasis the importance of having different professionals and agents involved in the virtuous circle because it is not easy to have opportunities to analysis realities from a complex perspective and this is one of the main benefits of the virtuous circle.

Another important issue pointed by different partners is the problems related to the terminology used in the cases. The problem appears especially when different professional's area involved in the virtuous circle. Finally, another important role of participants is to establish the most appropriate keywords of each case study in order to facilitate the use of the cases for the formative sessions and the development of the ontology.

To sum up, participants have to be able to cooperate and collaborate sharing their own cases and trying to improve the analysis of the cases presented by their colleagues. At the same time, it is important to have the interest of share cases with the colleagues of other countries.

3.3. Time and space

The periodicity of meetings from each virtuous circle is different among the partners. However, in most cases the session has a monthly periodicity and the duration is around three hours.

All partners have had the problem to find appropriate dates available for all participants, and the solution in some cases-as we mentioned previously- was to create a more flexible structured based on the idea that it is not necessary that each person has to participate in all the meetings. There is a list of topics, cases and a calendar, and each participant can select the most convenient session.

The use of electronic platform such as forum, collaborative platform, etc. could improve this problem. In fact, this is the main way designed by University of Akureia due to the problem of mobility that practitioners has in Iceland. In other cases, email is used to the distribution of cases in order to provide the main information needed before the meetings.

3.4. Organisation and development of the sessions.

In the meetings of virtuous circles, each partner has the responsibility of the organisation and preparation of the material and agenda of the session. The evolution of the PRAISE project affects to theses meetings. For this reason, it is important at the beginning of each session to have some time to update the progress of the project, the evolution of the different virtuous circles, etc, and the development of the formative pilot module.

In the first part of the session both general and specific questions related to the projects area dealt with including: vocabulary, project ideas, agreements and developments that which evolve from the meeting of partners, the detection of needs in order to design a formative pilot module, proposals of subject matter for the pilot course, etc.

The second part of the session, is cantered on the study of a particular cases. The case is proposed by participants in the work session. Before the meeting, the case can be distributed among the members of the circle.

The analysis of the case is developed in the following steps:

a) Brief oral presentation of the case (as a complement to the written text previously sent to all participants).

b) Interventions of the participants, for a better comprehension of the case.

c) Work in small groups: analysis of the case. For the analysis the following script of questions was developed as a reference:

   ✓ Formal presentation of the case

   ✓ Elements and guidelines for analysis

   ✓ Hey words

d) Common ideas are gathered

e) Work in small groups: synthesis of key case ideas for formative development.

f) Common ideas are gathered and final reflections made

Some partners recorded the session in order to have the information of the process of discussion that can be helpful during the description of the case for the data base.

3.5. Evolution of virtuous circles.

The evolution of virtuous circles is parallel to the evolution and work of PRAISE project. In a mutual influence, during the meetings of the project has been necessary to clarify many aspects of the methodology. At the same time, the inputs of the different circles affect the methodology used.

A positive aspect is that the participation of circle members has always been very active, not only in the study of the case but also with respect to interest in the global aspects of projects.

The main problems and difficulties area related with the following aspects:

- Terminology, due to the different background of the professionals.
- Definition of the structure of the case
- Relation between cases and formative modules.

4. THE CASES: SELECTION, ORGANISATION, PRESENTATION, AND ANALYSIS.

Cases are the central part of the work in the virtuous circles, for this reason the process of selection and elaboration is crucial. The procedure of the elaboration of the cases is based on the contribution of one member of the circle who is able to share the case based on his/her practice in social field. The case has to be described in a narrative way, this mean that the first work of the participants is to be able to transform their experiences in a narrative description.

Narration has to include the different elements of the cases (scene, actors, time, space, etc.) describes previously, in order to provide enough information for the database. Sometimes this work is very difficult for the people who contribute with the case, for this reason, some partners are helping to the narration and the final re-elaboration.

Selections of cases are based on the formative needs detected by each virtuous circle and the main topics selected in PRAISE project (minors). Each meeting is devoted to the analysis and discussion of the cases in a collaborative way in order to improve the knowledge about the practice and the intervention describe in the case. This process is very important because allows a reflection from the practice with the participation of different points of view, and the intervention of different professionals.

The final analysis can introduce some variations to the original narration of the case. The process finishes with a revision of the original cases that can be done by the person who has introduced the narration and/or with the help of the responsible partner of the virtuous circle.

To sum up, the methodology to work the content of the cases are based on the following stages:

1. Selection and presentation of the case. One member of the virtuous circle provides a case based in a previous experience. The case is presented by a narrative description
2. Questions to clarify the content of the case. It is necessary to present the cases and to clarify possible issues related to the terminology, actions, reactions, etc.

3. Analyse of the case in small groups. We consider that the analysis of the case can be done in small groups (depending of the number of participants) to facilitate the discussion and common understanding of the participants.

4. Common discussion of the case. It is important to share the discussions of the different groups in order to arrive to a common understanding of the case. This aspect is very important because provide the contracts of the different point of view.

5. Summary of the session. It is important to finish the session with a summary and the planning for the next session.

In each meeting of the virtuous circles, it is also important to establish a period of time devote to the evolution of PRAISE project, and to the formative needs.

It is important that all participants feel part of the European project and it is important to give some feedback of the evolution of the virtuous circle and the development of the project.

New formative needs can appear during the sessions, and it is important to be obtaining this information and provide some inputs for the formative sessions.

5. EVOLUTION OF THE WORK IN THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLES

When the first work session took place, the research team had many doubts about different aspects of the Cable project (at this point the Praise project still had not begun). While both the CABLE and the PRAISE projects have continued the clarification process – during meetings of the partners – in the circles, they have put forward two more explicit objectives:

a) The formation of the participants in the circle meeting through a process of analysis and reflection on practice

b) The participation in the design and evaluation of the formative pilot module through an analysis of the cases that will be described.

The clarification of the projects has allowed the restructuring of the circle task in the formative module context, begun a process of participation that goes beyond the strict study of cases, although a lot of time was invested in this task. The circle meetings have dealt with both this subject and the general approach of the formative pilot module.

The project's more global vision has also led to some of the professional participants transferring the protagonism and responsibility of the participation to their organization, which facilitates the possibility that, in some cases, a substitution might need to be realized when faced with problems of assistance.

The development of meetings

In the circle meetings, the research team has been responsible for both the directing of and preparing of meetings. They have dedicated approximately a third of the available time to both describing the state of the Cable and Praise projects and to tasks related to the needs of these projects, for example, proposing topics for the formative pilot module. The remaining time in these meetings has been used to study a particular case.

With respect of the virtuous circles, the functions of the research team are both to call and to prepare meetings, to inform the participants about both the projects and the position the virtuous circle are to take within them, to direct the organization, and to both lead the debate and analyze contributions.

In the first part of the work session both general and specific questions relating to the projects are dealt with, including: vocabulary and project ideas, agreements and developments that which evolve from the meeting of partners, the detection of needs in order to design a formative pilot module, proposals of subject matter for the pilot course...

The second part of the session (approximately two hours) is devoted to the study of a particular case. The case that in dealt with in each session is proposed by one of the participants in the work session. Before the meeting the proposed case is distributed among the members of the circle.

The cases consist of descriptions of real situations of socio-educational intervention where a situation of conflict is faced. The idea is to analyze an example in action. The facts described provide the relevant information for analysis. One of the initial difficulties was to determine the type of narration for the case that should be presented: degree of detail, complementary information, a broad vision or specific questions, the incorporation or not of questions or doubts about analysis... The development of the circle meetings and the progressive clarification in the realization of tasks in the projects has allowed the forming of example cases that on each occasion more have become more adapted in their formal aspect.

The analysis work of the case is developed in the following steps:

g) Brief oral presentation of the case (as a complement to the written text previously sent to all participants).

h) Interventions of the participants, for a better comprehension of the case.

i) Work in small groups: analysis of the case. For the analysis the following script of questions was developed as a reference:

    ✓ Formal presentation of the case

    ✓ Elements and guidelines for analysis

    ✓ Keywords

j) Common ideas are gathered

k) Work in small groups: synthesis of key case ideas for formative development.

l) Common ideas are gathered and final reflections made

6. EXAMPLE: THE NARRATION OF ONE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE.

We have selected the virtuous circle of Comune de Torino with the purpose of provide a narration that allows to understand the development of the virtuous circles.

Case study: The virtuous circle of Turin.

The virtuous circle of Turin was initiated almost by chance when the managers of the city of Turin's Social Services Department Training Service (SFEP) met up with their colleagues who are responsible for Social Services management and programming.

The city of Turin is currently going through a very special phase, characterised by a will to change at several levels, since many of us perceive that the present organisation of the Social Services is not capable of adequately fulfilling the needs of the areas it operates in. Nevertheless, the ideas and proposals regarding this issue are often contradictory, since they are based on very different presuppositions.

On one hand, the public administration tends to create an integrated and homogeneous system, compatible with the available resources and easily manageable. On the other hand, citizens and associations put forward requests that usually mirror sectorial interests.

Then there are issues concerning the workers and their trade union representatives, who convey yet another approach to certain problems and specific situations.

However, within each of these three macro categories (Administration, Users, Service Operators) there is a certain lack of unity and each of them can be subdivided into more than one sector (for instance, the operators can be subdivided according to the trade union they are members of, to their theoretical approach, to their gender…). Each of these subgroups can find correspondences in a field that

belongs to another macro category (a certain association could happen to agree on certain common objectives with just one section of the administration or with some operators but not with others…)

The sum of it all creates a very complex and essentially unstable system, since the links that connect issues with their reference groups are partial and transitory.

In compliance with the guidelines suggested by national directives (in particular see Law 328/2000), the City of Turin has created participative tools (called "social tables") with the purpose of analysing and guiding the action of the service according to common guidelines , which have been later collected in a "social services plan".

Three priority areas have been singled out within the city: Access to the Services, Assuming Charge and Upgrading of the Centres.

When the SFEP was asked to set up a training scheme to comply with the changes taking place at different levels over the city's territory (thus supplying social operators with suitable tools to analyse the current situation and to act accordingly), it suddenly became clear that there was a need to create a set of conceptual, spatial, and temporal reference-points. These would be necessary to delineate the features of the ongoing changes in relation to the operating practices used by social services and to the analysis of the situation carried out by the operators.

Besides circular letters concerning the application of provisional acts and technical-bureaucratic reports, it was hard to recover any documentation testifying the actual operational practices and the point of view of the professionals involved in the Services, whose working time is almost completely spent in action.

Deficiencies in communication and in shared systematisation of the operators' professional thinking have been exposed. Despite the fact that these are rather important activities, it has always been impossible to find the place, resources, and time to accomplish them. The virtuous circle of Turin was created on the basis of and in partial answer to these needs. It tries to involve a number of social operators in the recovery and systematisation of concepts and operating practices by analysing

available reference materials also with the help of IT tools, in order to optimise time and resources and to enable the investigation of a very extensive database.

It was decided that it would be most profitable to start off with the operators involved in welcoming those who use the social services (due to the fact that "service access" was a priority, as had been pointed out through local schemes). These operators act as first contact between issues and requests that are put forward and possible resources and answers provided by the public administration.

This welcoming and guiding function is crucial and very difficult and it often affects future choices very deeply. From the user's point of view this is frequently the first contact with the service network.

The managers of the services from each of the 10 districts that the city of Turin is divided into, those in charge of drawing up plans of action for the city, and those responsible for training services were brought together to agree on the scheme's organisational features and subject matter.

Following that, all the operators interested in the project were contacted and a restricted number of individuals was selected in order to initiate the scheme. These people (around 30) created the first virtuous circle

The action scheme of the virtuous circle of Turin developed along three main lines:

at the beginning a short IT course was organised in order to allow everybody to use a personal computer both as a networking and as a training tool;at a later stage the collection of relevant documentation was initiated: based on accounts of operational practices, these documents are a means of putting forward the operators' ideas and representations.
The model drawn up during the first meeting of the CABLE project was adopted in order to perform such a task.

The operators were asked to describe one or more episodes (case studies) that they considered crucial to their professional activity and that favoured change and development. This was done in order to share and discuss with others main issues that would help to determine communal and sustainable means of intervention.

Such accounts will be discussed during focus groups with the purpose of systematising individual accounts, collecting shared features as well as differences, conceptual approaches and operational practices, outlining possible future scenarios, singling out necessary training requirements.

The results of the work within such focus groups will be collected and analysed and they will become the basis of training modules aimed at supporting operators who are contributing to the process of change.

Virtuous circles: Synthesis for dissemination activities and analysis of the local reports

Definitions and Methodology:

The PRAISE project aimed to create a practice based learning community comprising eight partners across eight member states concentrating on the innovation of social worker training. The project is twinned with the CABLE project. Six of the PRAISE partners are also involved in the CABLE project which has two partners in addition to those found in PRAISE. PRAISE aimed to foster the establishment and sharing of good practice in the field of personal services, where the reference to the virtuous circles was coordinated by each of the local partners and linked in a European communication network.

In order to achieve the main goals of the PRAISE project, a network was created which consisted of professional who understand the detail of the realities and associated problems of currently implemented training methods and who are capable of intervening in critical situations as they arise. The creation of virtuous circles was organized in response to each partner's specific situation. During the project, some adjustments were made in order to coordinate the structure of the work and to facilitate a work process for each virtuous circle.

This chapter will describe the PRAISE methodology which addresses continuous professional development and improvement of social services.

Virtuous circles [VC] are local structures in which social work actors are actively involved in

a complex process of actions and ideas stimulated by the project itself. Virtuous circles are

composed of professional practitioners who share both a common training process and similar

formative needs.

Each VC is based on the interaction of collaborating members using their experiences and knowledge in order to improve the educational process. Figure 1 illustrates the positive feedback loops operating at both a local level and at the level of joint European action.
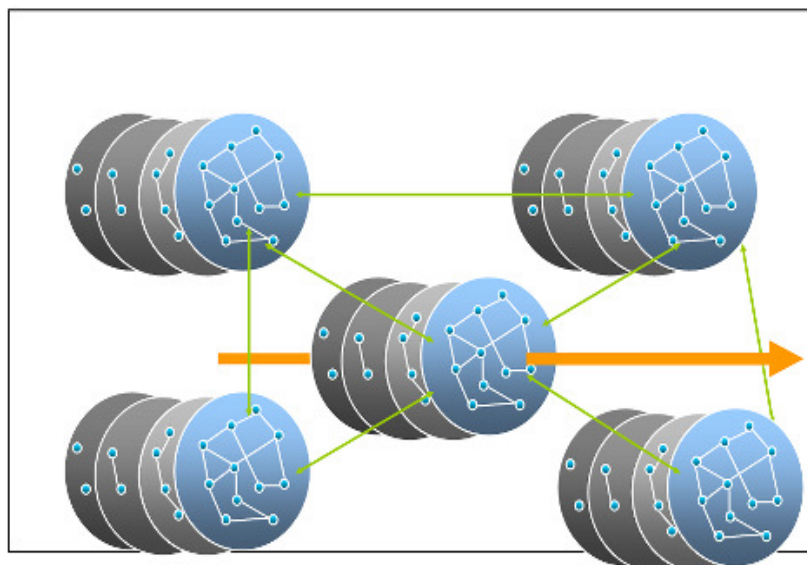
Figure 1. Virtuous circles interaction

The joint actions, both at local and European levels, were developed by the project and aimed to increase both the quality and quantity of formative education for social workers. It was anticipated that this would result in a positive impact on the overall service delivery. This impact is, in short, motivation for calling the circles *virtuous*.

VCs aimed to improve performances via feedback loops as shown in Fig 1. This network allowed participants to act locally in each circle and to share the production and the results with the rest of the partners, facilitated through the case studies stored in the database.

The VC model aimed to conciliate both the theoretical and practical aspects found in social operators' continuous professional development. Within Europe the field of social education is heterogeneous because professionals are training in different organizations, e.g. universities, local administrations, and private institutions. There are many different professionals involved in the domain, including social workers, social educators, medical practitioners, psychologists, specialist teachers, school counselors, and social pedagogues. All of these different elements have produced a compositional difference at the level of local VCs, as detailed in the following table.

	SFEP	**Bethel**	**UdB**	**INFOP**	**UoA**
Composition - professionals	1) Social workers of reception care 2) responsible of Services	1) Social workers and social educators from Bielefeld and surrounding area 2) Social workers in Bethel 3) Students	- Social workers - University lecturer and researcher - Social assistant - Social educator - Pedagogues	- Trainers - Experts	1)- Social director of joint service provision: social work, social education and psychology; Independent social work consultant; Hospital social worker; Social worker from Latvia - University lecturer and researcher 2) Social workers and University lecturer
Number of members	1) 30 members 2) 10 members	1) 5-10 members 2) about 8 members 3) 15 members	8 members	5 members	1) 4 members 2) 8 members
Frequency of the meetings	Ranging from two to four per month (starting on December '04)	1) One per month 2) Two per month (starting on November'04) 3) Two per month (starting on January'04)	One per month	One per month	One per month

Table 1.: Local VC composition.

It was not possible to impose a specific model and homogenous process for the virtuous circles in each country. Rather, each partner needed to develop a model and process that reflected the reality in their own country. In addition, the local development of virtuous circles was related directly to the overall evolution of the PRAISE project.

VCs were created at the beginning of the PRAISE project because they are one of the main elements that produce case studies. VC creational process was adapted to the main characteristics of each participant institution but followed some common themes:

- Each institution involved in the project acted as a VC leader, concentrating on meeting organization, scheduling agendas, facilitating discussion and recording activity;
- Different social work and social education practitioners are involved in each VC;

- Elaboration of case studies from the experience of the practitioners involved in the virtuous circle experience based case studies are drafted and elaborated upon by practitioners in each VC;
- All VC participants collectively analyse the case studies.

The main problems have included the need to involve all partners in this open approach and to share and discuss the different methodologies and participant institutional organizations. PRAISE has found it necessary to deal with problems such as time pressure, multilingualism and domain technical terminological issues, disparate experiences, and different legislative frameworks.. The process has been conducted as action-research (K. Lewin, 1946) and not with a predetermined definite and linear procedure.

The main goal of the VC participants was to increase their own educational process as a continuous professional development based upon real social education practitioner cases. This methodology is based upon Schön's (1983) well-known approach to reflective practice, Moscovici's (1984) theory of social representations, Knowles (1989) studies on learning by experience and nonlinear systems analysis (Botkin, 1990, Berkes, Colding and Folke, 2002). When applied to social workers and social education, it is through practice reflection that a student or a professional makes progress in reducing the gap between theory and implemented practice.

In the VCs, participation was voluntary and did not prove difficult to instantiate, i.e., to find people interested in taking part. Difficulties appear for different, practical reasons, including timing of meetings, frequency, and the impossibility of participation in all the sessions.. In some cases, solutions presented themselves, e.g., publishing a list of topics, cases to be dealt with and coordinating calendars. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to select the most convenient slots for attending sessions rather than making it mandatory to attend all sessions.

The main role of the participants was the case studies production based on their own practice and experience. Each practitioner was asked to select a case or multiple cases according to the main topics of the project.

Cases are based on previous participant experiences, and the cases had to be authentic, real episodes from their professional practice. It was also necessary to describe not only the case, i.e., the main problem, but also the intervention and the results achieved during the process. The cases were described in a narrative form following the main elements elaborated in the PRAISE project: narration, scene, actors, actions, reactions, time and space, aim, context, keywords.

Frequency of the VCs differed from locale to locale, but in most cases a session occurred at least monthly and lasted some three hours. In these VCs, each partner had a responsibility for the organization and preparation of the meeting agenda and content.

In the first part of the session both general and specific questions related to the PRAISE project areas were dealt with, including vocabulary, project concepts, agreements and developments that would derive from the transnational meetings, needs identification for the design of an educational pilot module, and proposals of subject matter for the pilot course..

It is important that all participants felt part of the European project, and that they were empowered to provide feedback into the VC evolution and the further developments of the project.

The second part of the session was centred on the study of a particular case, which was chosen by participants in the work session. Before the meeting, the case was distributed amongst the members of the circle.

The analysis of the case was developed during the meeting according to the following steps:

1. Brief oral presentation of the case, acting as a complement to the written text previously sent to all participants. It was necessary to present the case and to clarify issues related to the terminology, actions, and reactions,
2. Interventions of the participants which helped to develop a better collective understanding of the case;
3. Work in small groups focusing upon case analysis, which followed a script developed as guidelines.
    i. Formal presentation of the case;
    ii. Elements and guidelines for analysis;
    iii. Key words.
4. Common ideas were gathered and it was found to be important that the moderator participate in the discussions of the different groups in order to arrive at a common understanding of the case. This aspect was very important because it accommodated contrasts in perspective;
5. Work in small groups focusing upon synthesis of key case ideas for educational development;
6. Common ideas were gathered and final conclusions were made.

It was also found to be important to conclude the session with a session summary and immediate plans for the next session. VC evolution worked in parallel to the evolution and work of the PRAISE project.

One positive aspect is that the participation of VC members had always been very active, not only in the study of the case but also with respect to interest in the global aspects of the projects.

The main problems and difficulty areas related, involved the following aspects: the domain terminology, due to the differing professionals' background, the definition of the case structure and the relation between cases and educational modules.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Description