



Skills Project - The Cooperative Learning System From Definition To Validation

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Abstract

SKILLS - Skills Knowledge within Innovative Lifelong Learning, co-funded by the Leonardo da Vinci - LLP, is a project designed to improve the quality of cooperative member qualifications and competences by developing a new curriculum based on specific and shared cooperative characteristics present in the different European countries (mainly Italy, Sweden and Spain).

The Learning system developed within the project not only seeks to respond to specific training needs of a cooperative enterprise, but also analyses and especially validates existing non formal and informal learning opportunities, in order to create an innovative model with different methodological approaches and contents to promote the cooperative culture and entrepreneurship. The system was designed as a flexible tool to be used in different learning contexts, whether in vocational training or within schools programme.

The validation process, of fundamental importance to enhance cooperative skills and for the innovation of the project, focused mainly upon:

- 1. The learning system;*
- 2. The skills balance sheet for cooperators;*
- 3. The cooperator curriculum;*

The informal and non-formal learning occasions present in a cooperative enterprise were identified to provide innovative and relevant contents for the learning system.

A balance of skills was devised to collect the specific and transversal competences necessary within a cooperative enterprise.

A cooperative curriculum was designed to consider the three levels of cooperative members (potential, effective, board) to establish what they should know in order to be more active and aware within their cooperative enterprises.

The whole training process was put into practice through active work carried out by each partner in the form of seminars and courses, which were supported by a facilitator guide to help organize interactive meetings and to validate the necessary cooperative competences revealed. Also part of the methodology were itinerant workshops supported by a catalogue of visits based on case studies, as concrete way to enhance cooperative skills and meaning by strengthening cooperative identity, knowledge, awareness and sense of belonging.



1 kills Project

1.1 Background

In recent years there has been growing recognition of the importance of cooperators' education to guarantee that cooperatives preserve their unique democratic identity and achieve high standards of governance. The communication from the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions on the promotion of cooperative enterprises in Europe 23/02/2004 specifies that [the Commission will take the necessary steps to ensure that programmes for education, training, lifelong learning and e-learning should facilitate the participation of cooperatives, particularly those programmes that encourage transnational projects and transnational specialist networks, and that lead to the development of best practice in innovative areas].

In the rapidly changing world of today, training in cooperativism also requires more investment and improvement to accompany the development of the cooperative enterprises. Cooperative education promoted in schools and universities teaches cooperative culture from a technical and academic stance, but does not embrace specific training requisites needed within the cooperative system.

Therefore new learning and methodology has to be developed and common context of reference for cooperators' learning needs to be redefined not only to improve members' competences but also to encourage the mobility and dialogue amongst different European cooperative systems.

1.2 Objectives

The SKILLS project aimed to create an innovative learning system which validated existing non-formal and informal learning in a cooperative context, combining new methodological approaches and updated contents and procedures to make cooperative members become more aware and active and therefore to enhance the cultural cooperative identity.

1.3 Actions And Results

The Learning System developed includes:

1. an identification of cooperative skills (knowledge, attitudes, activities) in order to become more aware and active;
2. a collection and an analysis of existing non-formal and informal learning opportunities within the partners' cooperative contexts;
3. a design of learning profiles and a curriculum for cooperators;
4. a definition of the validation system to recognize and valorize the cooperative skills acquired.

The main results produced were:

- a skills balance sheet for cooperative members;
- a learning framework - a framework of reference which linked key cooperative competences identified and non-formal and informal learning occasions;
- a cooperator curriculum - a codification of the learning profile for aware and active cooperators following the three levels identified (potential members, members and board members), and referring to the European Qualification Framework (EQF) approaches and EC curriculum model (language passport, mobility);
- a validation system – consisting of tools, methods and practices to recognize and measure the skills acquired by the cooperators;
- a learning system – the final product which integrated methodological approaches, on-line and 1:1 tools and guidelines for validating, valorizing and improving cooperator skills.



Figure1.The Learning System

1.4 Final Users

The main targets of the SKILLS project were:

- cooperative managers who want to both improve their knowledge and skills and to encourage and support people in their cooperatives (members, employees, etc.) in choosing and attending training in order to become more active in their cooperatives;
- cooperative members who need to valorize and improve their cooperative skills;
- cooperative employees who are potential members and would like to get to know cooperative values and principles;
- jobseekers who would like to look into possible work opportunities offered by a cooperative enterprise;
- university students who want to understand the cooperative model (ethics, values and principles) as an alternative economic model which could also provide a future for them.

Cooperator according to ICA rule [to promote equality between men and women in all decision-making and activities within the cooperative movement] where cooperator is used for both men and women involved in cooperatives as potential members, members or board members.

1.5 Partners

Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione (Federation of Cooperation in Trentino), Italy – project coordinator;

Lanki, Instituto de estudios cooperatives (Cooperative Research Center) – Spain;

Coompanion Kooperativ Utveckling Skaraborg (Coompanion – Cooperative Development Agency) - Sweden;

Swedish TelePedagogic Knowledge Center – Sweden;

Anadolu Bil Meslek Yuksek Okulu (Anadolu Bill Vocational School) – Turkey;

Kemi-Tornion Ammattikorkeakoulu (University of Applied Science) – Finland.



2 Learning System

2.1 Skills Balance Sheet

The design of the model for a skills balance sheet was one of the first steps of the project that provided a preliminary model for expanding the skills and learning frameworks. The model is structured in 3 main parts:

- the cooperative system in the participant countries/regions – providing an overview of the different European cooperative movements in terms of a learning context reference;
- the skills for a more aware & active cooperator; providing identified fundamental skills needed in training cooperators;
- the learning structure in the cooperative context of the participant countries/region – collecting information about existing learning systems within the frame of reference.

The core of the skills balance sheet was the definition of a cooperative skills framework which could identify the main skills needed to become a more aware and active cooperator. The work began from the seven ICA (International Cooperative Alliance) principles as common denominator that unite all the cooperative movements in the world.

ICA defines six values (self help, self responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity) and seven principles (Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, Autonomy and Independence, Education, Training and Information, Co-operation among Cooperatives, Concern for Community) which all represent the guidelines to acquire the values. To put these values and principles into practice, specific skills and coherent behavior are required. The figure below summarizes this process:

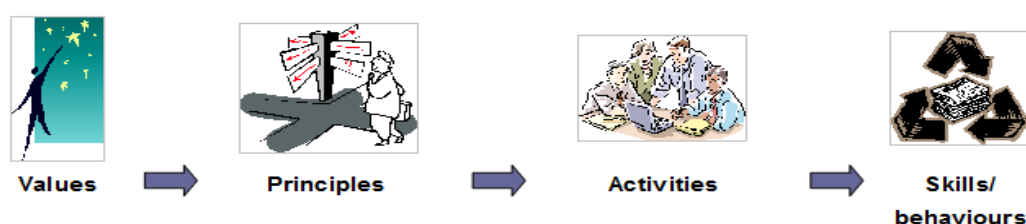


Figure 2. Areas of interest for the skills framework

The skills for a more active and aware cooperator were also observed in terms of personal, ethical, transversal and technical skills according to:

- **Attitudes** – knowing to be a more active and aware cooperator within the view and perception of the cooperative movement. It expresses the cooperators' emotional response of preference for cooperativism as result of either direct experience or observation of the cooperative system;
- **Knowledge** – knowing the cooperative movement in terms of familiarity, awareness and understanding gained through experience or studies;
- **Activity** – knowing to act in a cooperative perspective as capacity to carry out the activities in cooperatives in line with the definition, principles and structure of the cooperative movement.

The cooperative skills also evolved according to the three levels identified (potential member, member, board member).

Five main macro skills emerged as a combination of knowledge, attitudes and activities:

1. ethical management of the cooperative and interaction with other cooperatives;
2. working and acting in line with the cooperative principles;
3. supporting solidarity within the local community;
4. promotion of information and training about cooperative identity;
5. making membership active and actively participating in decision making processes.



3 The validation system

The validation process was studied and designed to accredit the results and the model of intervention developed by the SKILLS project as a way of acknowledging and improving the cooperative skills. The validation system embraced two dimensions:

- a) the definition of an awareness building process targeting cooperators in 3 steps:
 1. RECOGNITION – individual and group identification of the existing skills (competences, attitudes and knowledge) with on-line tools and 1:1 support, and a formalization of a training agreement;
 2. VALIDATION – individual and group meetings for the elaboration of a validation action plan and the effective validation of the cooperator skills identified;
 3. IMPROVEMENT- definition of a tailored training pathway (in the event the previous phase deems necessary), based on non-formal learning occasions already existing and as reflection about the informal learning occasions present in the cooperator context.
- b) the accreditation of the SKILLS project results (The learning system; The skills balance sheet for *cooperators*; *The cooperator curriculum*) by the 3 partner cooperative systems involved (FTC, LANKI, COOMPANION) in the project and by Cooperatives Europe (the European Region of the ICA).

Supporting tools for the validation process were created, including interactive demo versions available online (<http://www.skillcoop.eu/moodle/>), and three learning units which should be customized in accordance to the specific needs of each partner cooperative movement:

- knowing the cooperative and recognizing the typical characteristics in order to be able to act in line with the cooperative principles;
- harmonizing individual and cooperative interests for acting in a group perspective;
- strengthening cooperative involvement in the development of the social economy.

4 Conclusion

The importance of cooperativism was highlighted with the decision of the United Nations that 2012 would be the International Year of Cooperatives. The Resolution A/RES/64/136 passed on 18th December 2009 by consensus was proposed by 55 UN Member States recognized that the cooperative business model is a major factor in realizing economic and social development and so calls on governments, international institutions, cooperatives and other stakeholders to support the development and growth of cooperatives worldwide.

Cooperativism is a culture, rather than a simple business model, and so requires specific attention and support for the defence of its values.

The challenge of the SKILLS project was to:

- strengthen the democratic nature of cooperatives by valorizing common informal and non-formal training occasions;
- to validate professional experience in the cooperative sector;
- and to develop innovative learning programmes and materials based on partners' experience and cooperative learning methodology.

The project also offered an opportunity to further reflect about the importance of introducing mandatory training for cooperators, and especially board members, with the hope that such learning system could be adopted at a European level, along with aware raising action for decision makers to support this process.

Project information: www.skillcoop.eu

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