Using Innovative Learning Strategies to Enhance Social Participation of Drops Outs

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Introduction

Society is changing at exponential rates, the new mass communication tools multiply the possible connections and information permeates the air like "tweets" at distance.

School cannot be resistant to these changes. In reality, the school world seems everything but averse to these themes. By now everyone talks about social software, cloud computing and online application for didactics. The tendency to consider these tools as part of the future of educational systems is now widespread. The implementation of these technologies particularly occurs in those countries which have culturally incubated and spread the net culture (United States, India and so on…).

Europe, by now, seems still in difficulty (apart from some rare cases) with the adoption of new didactic tools.

School often does not keep up with times and uses an educational system which is no more suitable to his own students interests. The result is a school carrier with failures which is stopped beforehand with the decision of dropping out of school.

The percentage of young people in Europe that do not complete compulsory education is especially high in the South where in Portugal 35,4%, Spain 31%, Italy 19,7%, and Greece 14,8% of the students drop out of school. But also countries like Holland 11,4% and Austria 10% are faced with young people leaving school without a certificate mostly because they are simply not motivated to learn [1].

It is difficult though in traditional classroom and training contexts to include the basic meta-cognitive and critical skills that would allow these learners to function autonomously in the current society and the labour market [2]. This problem is made worse because these learners not only failed to learn, but have also forgotten how to learn, and tend to show a lack of interest in anything that resembles school [3].

1. The react project

ReAct is a multilateral project within the KA3 ICT action of the EU Leonardo program. The KA3 objective is "To support the development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practice for lifelong learning". Therefore the project work is situated within lifelong learning contexts and focuses on the use of ICT to develop an innovative methodological approach that will motivate learners, and at the same time, help them to develop their lifelong learning skills. New technologies offer a potential for new approaches and the introduction of elements into training contexts that facilitate the development of changes in the intrinsic motivation of these learners [4].

To prepare for this there was an initial study to analyze the profiles of students in the institutions participating in the project, in order to adapt the activities and tools that were proposed in each environment to their abilities and needs. This study included interviews and online surveys with the various actors in each context, in order to ensure the relevance of the action. Once the study was done, a toolkit was put together, including a collection of social tools (Web 2.0) based on the concept of Personal Learning Environment (PLE).

The consortium counts seven partners from six countries with extensive experience in education and training in Europe and detailed knowledge of the issues the project seeks to address. The project partners are national and regional public administrations (SERVEF - Spain, CNO ESDICA - Portugal), institutions related to the educational system (Delft University of Technology, Netherlands) and vocational training centres (KEK KRONOS - Greece, TR2000- Italy, TIBS & BFI TIROL - Austria), focusing on the training of young and adult unemployed and especially the use of new technologies in the field of education and training.

1.1 The objectives

A prominent issue in the ReAct Project is to develop a methodology to help demotivated learners to return to learning. This is supported by a collection of ICT tools loosely linked in a virtual environment similar to social networks. It will be user-configurable, based on the concept of the Personal Learning Environment (PLE). This environment will allow learners to create their own projects working with others from different countries. The methodological approach aims to develop the intrinsic motivation in students, through personal involvement in significant creative tasks for the person and through interaction with other students [5].

The direct learning environment is an integrated mix of classroom presence, peers, coaches, teachers and the use of social media like Facebook, Google sites, Diigo and lots of other tools. As the project proposes collaboration between students from different countries knowing that they have little or no language skills, the use of an automatic translation tool will greatly facilitate communication among participants. All participants shall communicate in their own language, but will understand the messages of participants from other countries using machine translation application such as Babelfish or Google Translator Toolbar. These tools allow for quick and agile translation of the content of any web resource.

1.2 The methodology

The aim of the project is to develop and pilot a methodological new learning approach using informal learning settings in combination with new technologies in order to improve the prospects and the employability of these learners. Key elements in this approach are: autonomy, creativity and collaboration. The methodology aims at harnessing the potential of new technologies, in order to carry out: creative activities; facilitate collaboration in collaborative projects, reducing geographical distances and promoting mutual cultural understanding, and reflection; develop meta-cognitive skills and critical thinking.

The project consists of two pilot phases with in pilot one the focus on the effects on the learners and in pilot two on the teachers. Each pilot contains the following phases and activities (see table 1).

Table 1 Overview of the ReAct project phases and activities

a. Getting acquainted	In the first stage of use of the environment (PLE) there is a series of activities designed to develop familiarity with the environment, both in its technological and social aspects, and facilitate the development of community among the students of the different institutions participating in the project.
b. Collaborative creative project	In this phase, participants will form teams. They carry out a project of their own jointly with pupils from other schools, using the available tools.
c. Support and reflection	Support will be available throughout the process, both during projects and afterwards. The team of tutors will intervene whenever it seems appropriate and timely in order to promote reflection, together with the students about the process.
d. Collaborative project integration	The process of integrating the project with the main training activity becomes vital in this phase.
e. Final integration process	The aim of the ReAct project is to develop and pilot a methodological approach to the motivational use of new technologies in order to improve the prospects and the employability of these learners. The integration process is crucial for the success of the approach.

2. The react learning approach

The reAct learning approach is the result of a substantive investigation that involved all partners, interviews with schools, teachers, and project leaders that have adopted innovative learning approaches. In addition a literature research was executed including the analysis of several case studies on alternative approaches to learning. The learning approach has then been drafted collaboratively in several stages of creation and resulted in the 'reAct Methodological Approach Guidelines' [7]. A summary of this document is available at www.reactproject.eu.

The building blocks of the methodological approach therefore connect to an assembly of different resources, new developments and insights in education and the field of learning technologies. A short description is presented here to supply the reader with the appropriate background information.

A number of projects have explored this new methodology for a while. Based on their experiences and observations, and taking into account the local contexts, the reAct team drafted the following seven principles that are fundamental to the project:

- Trust: students and teachers must become confident that their ideas, contributions, and comments are treated with respect, online as well as offline.
- Challenging: students and teachers get motivated to learn when they experience or are faced with challenging, but manageable assignments.
- Self-guidance: put more trust in the hands of students to guide their own learning.
- Collaboration: Students take great interest in working with others. Teachers support collaboration through group-based work and regular feedback moments.
- Ownership: If students (as well as teachers) have the impression that they are in control of the learning they do, there is a sense of ownership.
- Creativity: in creativity one can be honest and you are able to develop an identity.
- Relevance: ownership of learning also means defining those topics that the learner finds relevant in life, even though this is not part of the official curriculum.

The role of ICT in the project is critical but not an aim in itself. Using ICT is not about using tools, but about different and better ways of learning. The reAct Project provides a dynamic list of tools that teachers and students can use and complement. It is available on Diigo and functions as a shared resource for the participants.

2.1 The research methodology

The reAct project represents a particular arrangement of an international field of different locations and institutions requiring a layered research approach that very much depends on an active involvement of all partners. An evaluation framework has been developed to allow for a collaborative research action using an range of procedures. The researching partner, the Delft University of Technology, does not have direct access to participating teachers or students, and in addition language is a significant barrier for conducting qualitative research. The involvement of the reAct partners concerns therefor specific responsibilities:

a. Interviews with teachers: The reAct partners are to carry out semi-structured interviews with the teachers involved. The researching partner provides the necessary interview formats and questions

b. Surveys amongst students: The reAct partners distribute survey instruments provided by the researching partner to the teachers and students.

c. Regular interviews with the researching partner: The reAct partners have regular online interviews in which the progress of activities will be evaluated.

Conclusion

The reAct project is an attempt to develop a learning approach using new technologies in order to improve the prospects and the employability of these learners, and to develop the skills of their teachers and trainers, in an area which is key to the success namely motivation. The outcome of the project should help to define sustainable strategies for motivating early school leavers and their teachers and trainers to connect to life long learning practices and apply these in their daily lives.

The project is on its way, but it is still too early to answer the research questions in a satisfactory manner. The aim is to state at the end of the project, which will be in the second half of 2012, if the reAct approach really changed the attitudes of learners and teachers with regard to learning or what the benefits are and drawbacks of self-organized learning with regards to drop outs. The one thing that can be said is that the experiences up till now show that the ICT tools very much support the reAct learning approach.

References

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