



The Value of Creative Learning Communities and Implementation of Key Competence 7

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1. Background and Rationale

The CLC project started in January 2011 and will last until March 2013. The work is being undertaken by a European consortium of partners from Austria, Italy, Malta, Poland and the UK. The concept of CLCs builds on the notion that new teaching and learning tools are best developed through a process of engaged, enlightened and inclusive co-creation. It is of high importance the combination of know-how, attitudes and skills in the project at EU level. Sharing know-how and developing new skills in the project life-cycle is an essential factor in productivity and competitiveness. Learning to learn in the project itself and applying lessons learned in each project phase makes the partnership grow together and deliver better products in the course of time.

As recent studies and policy developments demonstrate, creativity competence development is not only highly relevant but is a strategic priority amongst the member states of the European community. In a study carried out with 1,600 children aged three to five years to examine divergent thinking, 98% showed they could think in a creative and divergent way. When the test was used with 200,000 twenty-five year olds, only 2% were able to demonstrate creative thinking [1]. Within the CLC project, it is intended to encourage both *divergent* or *lateral thinking*, that is the ability to develop new ideas, but also *convergent thinking*, that is the ability to resolve problems, plan and take risks. Creativity, furthermore, is a crucial competence for individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds as it can empower them to enter or re-enter the labour market and develop new ideas, skills and competences.

We know that low-skilled and poorly-educated people are at risk of unemployment and other forms of social exclusion, and that “continued high levels of early school leaving, low participation in lifelong learning by older workers and the low-skilled, and poor skill achievement among migrants cause concern in most countries” [5].

The CLC project also offers a dimension of European added-value, and contributes to a number of key lifelong learning objectives, as articulated by the European Commission under the Leonardo da Vinci programme, namely to “*help promote creativity, competitiveness, employability and the growth of an entrepreneurial spirit*”; to “*encourage the best use of results, innovative products and processes and to exchange good practice in the fields covered by the Lifelong Learning Programme, in order to improve the quality of education and training*”, to “*support participants in training and further training activities in the acquisition and the use*”; to “*support improvements in quality and innovation in vocational education and training systems, institutions and practices*”; to “*facilitate the development of innovative practices in the field of vocational education and training*”, and; to develop the “*quality and attractiveness of VET systems and practices*” [2].

2. Project objectives

The main CLC project objectives are:

Project objectives	Additional objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Identify the needs of VET trainers working with learners from groups at risk and the learners themselves in facilitating the acquisition of creativity as part of Key Competence 7; (ii) Provide creativity teaching tools in the form of “creative learning communities” to VET trainers; (iii) Increase the acquisition of creativity and thus the ability to think divergently and convergently in diverse situations (personally and professionally); (iv) Streamline creativity teaching throughout Europe through the creation of an EU wide applicable product. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Innovate VET teaching by offering brand new creative learning systems; (ii) Facilitate the inclusion of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds in education and the labour market; (iii) Give concrete responses to recent policy developments in VET and respond to needs highlighted in the European Years of Creativity and Innovation (2009) and Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010); (iv) Contribute to the development of the EQARF (European Quality Assurance Reference Framework) by developing new teaching material.

2.1 Key Competences for Lifelong Learning

The project is designed to contribute towards enhanced teaching and learning pathways within European Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems, particularly as these relate to Key Competence 7 (KC7) of the European Reference Framework (“sense of initiative and entrepreneurship”) [3]. KC7 is an individual’s ability to



turn ideas into action, including creativity, innovation and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects. KC7 refers to the ability to identify opportunities, including “bigger picture” issues that provide the context in which people live and work, such as economics and the opportunities and challenges facing organisations. KC7 means translating ideas into new products and processes, and taking novelty out into the world in an effort to create value or improve upon existing products, systems or practices.

KC7 seeks to identify opportunities, allocate resources, and create value and is frequently connected with organisational acumen, and with personal qualities and skills such as pro-activity, determination, leadership, creativity, risk-taking and initiative. KC7 also means to have the ability to produce something new through imaginative skill; whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or device, or a new artistic object or form. Initial education and training systems across the EU support the development of these competences. It is essential to continually build and maintain these skills.

3. Research and needs analysis

The first project year 2011 was characterised by research and needs analysis, a study carried out in the partner countries. The objective of the needs analysis was to get an insight into the perceptions held by focus groups of VET trainers and VET learners and to explore the professional training competencies required for effective KC7 practice. The CLC research and needs analysis embarks from the premise that much valuable work has been undertaken in the effort to improve capacity building and learner confidence with respect to Key Competence 7 (KC7), but recognises that further progress is required. As indicated by the research and needs analysis, documented in the transnational report at-risk learning groups are less likely to be exposed to concepts such as entrepreneurship, initiative-taking, innovation, and creativity etc., and potentially have much to gain in terms of skills development, career building, and involvement in commercial, community and social enterprise. During the research and needs analysis phase focus-group sessions and individual interviews with VET trainers and VET learners were organised and the needs of VET trainers with learners from groups at-risk and the learners themselves were identified. The research and needs analysis with 50 VET trainers, 25 engaged VET learners, 25 potential VET learners and other stakeholders was carried out and the specific needs of the target group were identified. This research and needs analysis was designed to provide a sound evidential base upon which future project activities might be based. The focal point of the study was: orientations to KC7; existing supports for KC7 training; learner perceptions of the importance of KC7 themes; blockages and problems in relation to KC7 training; and the potential role for CLCs in providing enhanced support for training and learning in connection with entrepreneurship, initiative and risk-taking, creativity, and innovation. The results of the research study showed that all VET trainers interviewed strongly favoured greater incorporation of KC7 themes in the curriculum and increased attention to promoting the aims of KC7 at disciplinary and institutional level. There is recognition of the need for a system that equips learners with a wide range of skills including practical problem solving, project management, research and decision-making. Learners are frequently looking for courses that progress KC7 strongly but are disappointed with content and lack of priority [4]. The focus on KC7 as a component in social and personal life-skills training is perceived to be central to curtailing cycles of deprivation, breaking negative perceptions and behaviours, and ameliorating the damaging implications of deviant sub-culture group membership.

4. Prototype development and creative learning tool

The results of the research and needs analysis provide evidence and a sound and solid background for the development of the prototype creative-learning tool. This will consist of teaching and learning products in a digital toolbox, made easily accessible by produced seeding materials, and a manual for VET trainers with specific contents developed for the classes and enriched with creative learning techniques and tools. Challenging targets are set in order to break the cycle of disadvantaged learning, to improve the life chances and to unlock the potential in VET training. The benefit for the target groups is of high value that is focused on the generation and exchange of tools and practices for VET trainers in VET sector that can support learners in developing a context-relevant sense of initiative and entrepreneurship. This sense is one that can empower learners to act creatively, translate ideas into action, embrace innovation and risk taking, and plan and manage projects in a way that meets their objectives, whether these objectives relate to everyday life and personal aspirations, social and community development, or commercial activities.

5. Value of Creative Learning Communities

As previously stated, the concept of CLCs builds on the notion that new teaching and learning tools are best developed through a process of engaged, enlightened and inclusive co-creation. The CLC project aims to expand CLC at EU level. EU level CLC workshops at local, regional and national level will contribute to multiplier activities. The value of the CLC concept is widely recognised by VET trainers, and acceptance of evolving ideas in CLC is strong. Content sharing channels are in existence, however, in most cases, these require further development and enhanced utilisation. In some partner countries, VET trainers operate in an increasingly competitive environment and are thus, unlikely to wish to engage in sharing resources, ideas and materials, especially where the latter are perceived to confer significant competitive advantage. Some VET trainers suggest the exploration of opportunities for multiplier effects; there is a perception that these might flow from interactions between CLCs across geographical and thematic boundaries.



Expanding the CLCs at EU level and responding to the objectives of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme is of high relevance for VET system. Creative thinking strengthens the mindsets of learners throughout Europe towards entrepreneurship. CLC concentrates on VET trainers who work with learners from groups at-risk and empowers them through the development of creativity competences. These skills are accessible to all and can build the capacity of individuals to enter or re-enter the labour market or educational sphere. In addition it is understood that entrepreneurship can contribute to social cohesion for less-developed regions and to putting unemployed or disadvantaged people into work.

6. Conclusions

The CLC project empowers the teaching of key competences European Reference Framework in VET sector with learners from groups at-risk. The main focus is KC7 sense of initiative and entrepreneurship in connection with creativity, thus directly addressing the concerns raised by previous research and by EU strategic policy. Creativity in the CLC project relates to the ability to think divergently or laterally, as well as to think convergently, to resolve problems, plan and take risks. It is essential to facilitate the acquisition of the creativity element in KC7 and improve the effectiveness in VET systems throughout Europe. The project partners are expanding CLC, bringing it to target groups as a place where VET trainers, VET learners and all other stakeholders can exchange their know-how, their knowledge and expertise and share teaching and learning materials. The geographical coverage and its collaborative sharing of lessons-learnt allows consortium members to inform important stakeholders Europe-wide, ensuring a high level of European added-value. CLC seeks to continuously improve the partnership work, always encouraging us to go the extra mile to deliver innovative products. Plans and prospects for the future include expanding the CLC within Europe.

References

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