



## eTwinning and the Project Based Learning Approach

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### Abstract

*eTwinning is the European platform created in 2005 by the European Union Commission to promote international virtual partnerships and good practices exchanges among European schools. Since 2005 onward, the platform has gone through several changes and nowadays it is considered a basic instrument of innovation in learning and teaching strategies with particular reference to cross disciplinary and disciplines integration. Working in eTwinning for years I discovered the potentialities of this instrument in teaching foreign languages in particular using a PBL approach based on digital tools. This approach is moreover powerfully inclusive as the variety of tools and strategies the whole platform can provide is helpful in coping with learning difficulties, which are a tough challenge for traditional teaching approaches. At the same time, it fosters and stimulates deepening activities in stronger students empowering basic skills. In this way the collaborative approach the PBL based on eTwinning platform allows is really adapt to involve the whole classroom not leaving anyone behind. In this article, a few examples of eTwinning projects extracts, which have been carried on in the Comprehensive Institute located in Sicily where I have been teaching so far, will provide demonstration of the theory exposed above.*

**Keywords:** *Innovative Teaching and Learning Methodologies, Education and New Technologies, Studies on Second Language Acquisition;*

### 1. eTwinning – an Introduction

eTwinning is the European online platform created in 2005 by the European Commission to promote cooperation and exchange of good practices among European schools; it fostered a sort of virtual transnational cooperation, which was the counterpart of the LLP (Long Life Learning Program, UE) actions such as Comenius and nowadays Erasmus Plus KA. Since that year, the platform has developed so far to be nowadays a powerful, wide, complex and challenging instrument, and more. Actually, "eTwinning promotes school collaboration in Europe through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) by providing support, tools and services for schools. eTwinning also offers opportunities for free and continuing online Professional Development for educators". [www.etwinning.net]. I discovered eTwinning in 2008 and from this experience it proved to be the most suitable instrument to enhance foreign language learning *in* students, to improve methodologies and professionalism *in* teachers. Moreover, the platform offered a transversal and cross-curricular approach promoting in particular the PBL (Project Based Learning) strategy that was considerably effective in implementing learning skills and acquisition of curricular competences.

### 2. What is PBL?

The definition of PBL "Project Based Learning (PBL) is stated by Thomas Markham (2011) who defines project-based learning thus: "PBL integrates knowing and doing. Students learn knowledge and elements of the core curriculum, but also apply what they know to solve authentic problems and produce results that matter. PBL students take advantage of digital tools to produce high quality, collaborative products. PBL refocuses education on the student, not the curriculum—a shift mandated by the global world, which rewards intangible assets such as drive, passion, creativity, empathy, and resiliency. These [...] must be activated through experience." In PBL, students cooperate, collaborate, assume roles, investigate, research, use creative tools to perform tasks, experience a real learning based on effective and functional activities, stimulating also their critical thinking. This skill in particular is necessary further on to promote their success in prosecuting their studies at higher levels. Therefore, it was necessary to shift teaching approaches in foreign language to more effective learning strategies. In this way PBL, together with the use of eTwinning platform, which promoted this methodology through opening collaborative projects among European schools touching different parts of the curricula, with its internet safely collaborative space, the *twinspace*, was the most reliable instrument. Moreover, it is one of the assumptions the European Commission promoting CLIL methodology is stating, that Foreign Language teaching-learning has not to be considered as a goal

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but as a tool to acquire *Other Competences*. Learning by doing and doing by learning second languages is the key. Foreign language teaching is transversal to all school curricula. This assumption is at the same time one of the main fundamentals of the Academic plan, based on Beauty and Innovation, belonging to the school where I have been teaching so far, *Istituto Comprensivo Laura Lanza Baronessa di Carini*. School spaces are revolutionized from the students' point of view, no static frontal asset with a main desk but open and flexible rooms in charge of the students themselves. In particular concerning the Foreign Language field, a multimedia laboratorial working space has been introduced where a PBL approach, based on eTwinning and on Interculturality, characterised around the 80 per cent of the whole curricula related to L2 or L3 according to the path the project was covering in each school year. As I wrote some years ago in my case-study on Open Education Europa newsletter "[...]autonomy, cooperative learning, group and pair work are strongly promoted in the process of teaching – learning foreign languages not carried on for its own sake but as a tool to learn "to do" in another language. [...] All the subjects in our curricular educational program require students to carry on an interactive dialogue, set up a topic and work on it, collect online materials, reassemble them, and discuss it in order to produce learning objects not only by teachers but also by students. [...] In this way, digital learning and foreign language learning are thoroughly involved and combined together in order to produce "something", to do "something".[...] for their future social and working life".



Figure 1: The Intercultural lab in Laura Lanza School

### 3. eTwinning projects and PBL experience in Laura Lanza school

In around 9 years, in *Laura Lanza* school, about 40 eTwinning projects were realized involving around 200-250 students working within the same class or in paired classes. Most of these projects were awarded by the European Quality Label, a recognition of the added European value of the project by the European eTwinning Board. The results were tangible with a strong implementation of second language communicative skills. What was strengthened was a successful communication strategy to learn and to improve competences suitable to all students, from the best to the weaker learners, as it implied a strong diversification of languages employed from written to visual to multimedia ones. Two projects are meaningful in this sense. The first was carried on in the school years 2013-2014 2014-2015. The partners of the project were a French and a Dutch secondary schools, the main aim was to promote citizenship and environmental awareness. A simulated real situation was stated in a PBL asset. The main topic was the imaginary rebuilding of the students' hometown after a climate disaster due to pollution and abuse of earth resources in which they were, the only survivors. Like the "Pilgrim Fathers", they had to plan and manage a new society through practical real tasks, although in a simulated scenario in which they worked in groups, organized debates, decided, assigned tasks, experimented and learnt about society, citizenship and legal rights, using foreign languages and digital tools.

**Title:** *A Brave New Nation The Rainbow Citizens.*

**Age of the Students:** 12-14

**Partners of the project:**

Italy I C Laura Lanza Baronessa di Carini, Carini(PA)

France Collège du Revermont, Bourg En Bresse

The Netherlands CSG Calvijn vestiging Groene Hart, Barendrecht



**Disciplines involved:** Citizenship, Environmental Education, Foreign Languages, Geography, Natural Sciences, and Technology  
**Language:** English

This activity was carried on through Skype web conferences in which the students interacted in foreign languages with their peers taking notes of the different points of view. They were included in mixed international teams to share information in order to create a new environment and organization for the common new hometown. They assigned themselves the following roles to manage the new society: journalists (drawing a picture of the situation after the disaster, interviewing survivors, giving news ..), scientists (debating about environment issues) mathematicians ( giving instructions for the creation of a flag ..), judges (laws, constitution..), builders and designers (planning and designing the new ideal town), athletes ( sport rules), musicians/singers (national anthem,). Moreover elections were established to elect a mayor and an election campaign was organized through digital maps and posters. Main themes were: environment, globalization and sustainable living. All the activities were all published and shared in a common virtual space, the twinspace of the project (Figure 2), published on the web. The final project outputs, the Ideal city plan and its realization on a scale model, were disseminated on the occasion of EXPO exhibition in Milan in 2015 (Figure 2).

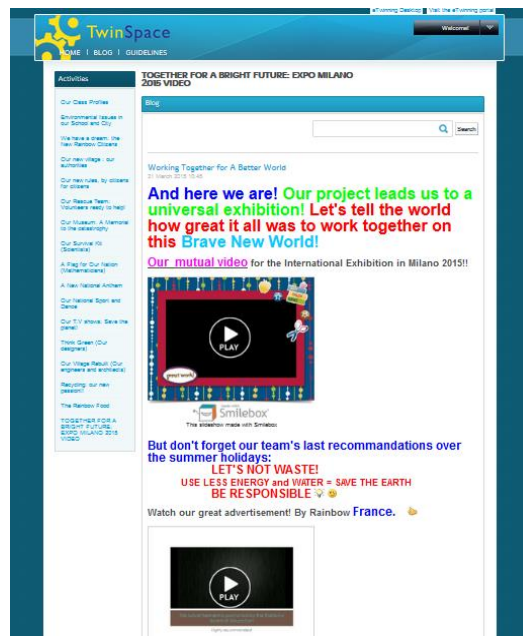


Figure 2: One of the page of the TwinSpace of the Project *The Rainbow Citizens*

The other project was supporting one of the school financed Erasmus Plus Ka2 partnerships involving students of the same age. The main aim of this project was to experience useful strategies to fight early school leaving. One of the strategies was a non-formal educational tool, the Art of Storytelling. Using it the pupils regained researching and communicating abilities, improved the use of ICT tools, developed consciousness of other European Cultures and learnt more about the living conditions of their peers in other countries. They implemented reading and writing skills as well as Arts and Drama techniques. In this case, it was easy and successful to link together cultural awareness and different languages in order to enhance both mother language and foreign language skills as an instrument to acquire further competences.

**Title:** *Values - The Essence of an Active Citizen- The Storytelling corner*

**Age of the Students:** 11-14

**Partners of the project:**

Italy, I C Laura Lanza Baronessa di Carini, Carini(PA)

Portugal, Agrupamento de Escolas Cego do Maio Póvoa de Varzim,

Poland, Zespół Szkół Szkoła Podstawowa Pobiedziskach, Pobiedziska

Estonia, Kuusalu Keskkool, Kuusalu



Turkey Esenler ENGİN CAN GÜRE ORTAOKULU, Esenler  
Norway Kvaale skule, Sogndal  
Croatia Osnovna škola Otona Ivekovića, Zagreb  
**Disciplines involved:** Foreign Languages, Language and Literature, Arts,  
**Language:** English

Students involved had to choose two legends taken from their cultural heritage, summarize and write them as a drama piece both in mother tongue and in foreign language (English in this case). Moreover they had to present them through drawings with particular regards to the setting and the characters and then to perform them in a storytelling guise. The students were helped by a professional storyteller. The materials were filmed and put on the twinspace. Multiple languages to represent and communicate were used, from reading to writing to oral interaction through storytelling and visual arts. The result was an eBook on legends created by teachers and students in both languages, mother tongue of each partner country, and second language.

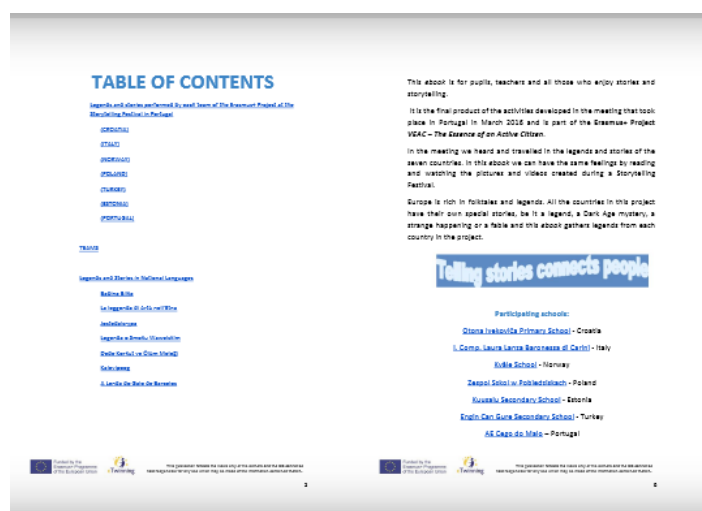


Figure 3: The eBook on Legends index

#### 4. Conclusion

The way in which eTwinning and PBL are related is one of the most effective way for students to learn and improve their foreign language competences, nonetheless mother tongue ones. The twinspace and the project strategy therefore affords to use most languages with an additional inclusive value for less advantaged students in their levels of acquisition of skills and contents. Moreover the use of a virtual platform, the detach from a traditional school curricula promotes engagement, and motivation as the students feel they are doing something concrete and effective, a way towards which a school plan have to tend. In *Laura Lanza School* these experienced teaching strategies gave birth to the "Intercultura" Academic project in which cultural awareness and exchanges among different partner countries were the basis of foreign language learning open to all disciplines: a working place, not only physical but mainly conceptual, based on communication in which language is the tool and learning by doing is a duty, a duty to raise motivation and success in students in the optic of Long Life Learning for the sake of European tomorrow citizens.

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