ILBES: An Intergenerational Learning Approach for Social Inclusion in Blended Environments and Spaces

ILBES: Un approccio di apprendimento intergenerazionale per l'inclusione sociale in spazi e ambienti misti

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries, educational, cultural or welfare centres, and other public spaces where digital services are embedded, hereby referred as *Blended Environments and Spaces* (BES), have become an important provider of free, public access to ICT, internet and learning environments for socially-disadvantaged target groups. They are a reference point for new technologies, non-formal learning, people empowerment and social integration. The clientele of BES largely includes seniors and elders who are digitally illiterate, as well as youngsters volunteering as adult trainers on the basis of their own digital competences. At the same time, the current economic downturn is pushing the job-inexperienced youngsters to look for help at these and other centres with social vocation due to the reduced employment opportunities they found.

The *Intergenerational Learning in Blended Environments and Spaces* (ILBES) methodology was developed as part of eScouts, an EC-funded project. It is inspired in two proven learning methodologies (Community-Service Learning and Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection) which are combined for the first time in the design of an intergenerational learning circle that facilitates the socio-digital inclusion of seniors and the entrance of youth to the labour market and adult life, while improving solidarity between generations and local community cohesion.

Le biblioteche pubbliche, i centri culturali o di assistenza e altri spazi pubblici dove i servizi digitali sono inclusi (qui riferiti con il termine di *Blended Environments and Spaces*, BES) sono divenuti un'importante fonte libera e pubblica di accesso alle tecnologie informatiche di comunicazione (ICT), a Internet e ad ambienti di apprendimento rivolti a gruppi socialmente svantaggiati. Sono un punto di riferimento per le nuove tecnologie, l'apprendimento informale, l'*empowerment* delle persone e l'integrazione sociale. La clientela dei BES include ampiamente adulti e anziani digitalmente analfabeti, così come giovani che volontariamente formano gli adulti a partire dalle loro competenze digitali. Contemporaneamente, l'attuale crisi economica spinge i giovani che entrano nel mondo del lavoro a cercare aiuto in questi e altri centri a vocazione sociale per sopperire alle ridotte occasioni di impiego a loro disposizione.

Formazione & Insegnamento X – 3 – 2012
ISSN 1973-4778 print – 2279-7505 on line

La metodologia dell'*Apprendimento Intergenerazionale in Ambienti e Spazi Misti* (ILBES) è stata sviluppata come parte dell'eScouts, un progetto finanziato dalla CE. Si ispira a due assodate metodologie di apprendimento (*Community Service Learning* e *Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection*) che sono combinate per la prima volta nel progetto di un circolo di apprendimento intergenerazionale che facilita l'inclusione socio-digitale degli anziani e l'ingresso della gioventù nel mondo del lavoro e nella vita adulta, migliorando allo stesso tempo la solidarietà tra generazioni e la coesione della comunità locale.

KEYWORDS
Digital competences, e-Inclusion, Intergenerational learning, Youth, Senior adults, e-Facilitators and mentoring.
Competenze digitali, E-inclusione, Apprendimento intergenerazionale, Gioventù, Anziani, e-Facilitatori e consulenza.

1. Public Internet Centres as providers of digital competence training and empowerment

Nowadays, we can see a big variety of *Blended Environments and Spaces* (BES) that address social integration mediated by ICT, like public libraries, educational, cultural or welfare centres, and other public spaces where digital services are embedded. In particular, telecentres or public internet centres (PICs) have become an important provider of free, public access to ICT, internet and learning environments for disadvantaged target groups. Those are publicly funded and provide free access and training. Besides, they play a key role in local societies, towns, small villages and deprived metropolitan areas, where they have become a reference point not only for new technologies and non-formal learning, but also for the development of social cohesion, as well as a sense of community and cultural belonging (Rissola 2007, Kluzer & Rissola 2009).

Comparative cross-country analysis carried out in a recently finalised action research project[1], characterise telecentres by service levels: 1) Level 1: On demand assistance; 2) Training provision of digital literacy[2] training, often with a social orientation; 3) User empowerment (users' digital autonomy and achievement of personal goals facilitated by technological means); 4) Active participation in community (critical use of ICT and engagement of users with their local communities/social belonging groups through their active participation of community/social projects).

The methodology presented in this paper is a resource for Blended Environments and Spaces, such as secondary schools or digital literacy providers with a social vocation, that presents the objective of developing Level 3 (empowerment of youths and elders) and 4 (closing the gap between both generations). This is

1 European Vocational Education and Training Solution for e-Facilitators of Social Inclusion (VET4e-I) project. See <http://www.efacilitator.eu/wordpress/vet4e-i-deliverables>.

2 "Digital literacy refers to the skills required to achieve digital competence, the confident and critical use of information and communication technology (ICT) for work, leisure, learning and communication." (EC definition provided by Eurostat at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Glossary:Digital_literacy>).

an outcome of a thematic strand of EU-funded projects where an international team of practitioners, researchers and consultants developed strategies and concrete solutions to increase the capacity of social actors and intermediaries in their engagement for eInclusion[3], combining implementation of concrete good practice and development of policy recommendations (see Rissola & Centeno 2011). From different angles, those projects contribute to the development of eInclusion intermediaries, by working as catalysts of social inclusion.

2. ILBES: building a methodology for technology-enhanced intergenerational learning

A new branded methodology for an intergenerational learning approach between the youth and senior people was developed and implemented in the project "eScouts – Intergenerational Learning Circle for Community Service"[4], funded by the Key Action 3 of the EC Lifelong Learning Programme during 2011 and 2012. The project was aimed to develop an innovative intergenerational learning exchange between senior adults and youth volunteers in the context of non-formal education. It was centred on the development of socio-digital competences of senior adults, as well as on the mentoring of the youngsters in order to face in a better way their upcoming adult life challenges, improving this way local community life by means of an intergenerational dialogue and mutual support. For this scope, eScouts built a learning circle in which the youth supports senior people in ICT usage and, in return, seniors mentor the youngsters in their efforts to access the labour market and to face the challenges of adult life, completing a circle of learning, exchange and conviviality. This intergenerational dialogue and mutual exchange took place in concrete "spaces" – the *Blended Environments and Spaces* (BES) – which recall to the meaning of the word "intergenerational" that comes from the latin "inter" meaning *among*, expressing *space between*, distribution, or a mutual relationship. Another connector has been the new technologies (social web applications), which mediated teaching and mentoring processes.

eScouts provided not only the space but also the time and resources for *intergenerational learning,* understood as «the reciprocal exchange of knowledge between people of all ages so they can learn together, and learn from each other and from those in a variety of sectors, such as culture, environment, sociability, education, mediation, prevention, reaction, ICT, etc.» (ENIL 2012, 26). In this way it helped to overcome any social stigmatization between generations, while promoted personal and community development, empowerment, participation, and both social and digital inclusion. This is particularly necessary in contemporary Europe where an increasing number of people is becoming 60 or older. As a research report from JRC-IPTS (European Commision) states:

3 "E-inclusion refers to the situation where everyone in society can participate in the information society.
This requires affordable access to technologies, the accessibility and usability of ICT tools and services, and the ability and skills of all individuals to use these tools." (EC definition provided by Eurostat at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Glossary:E-inclusion>).

4 See <www.eScouts.eu> for more details.

> «Learning can enrich quality of life for older people, and also for the people interacting with, and learning from, them. Older people have a lot of valuable in-depth knowledge to give to younger workers and to each other, and new technologies can provide new means for enabling this. Intergenerational learning provides a context that can improve both learning the specific learning topics and the tacit knowledge and life experiences relating to them. In this way, the learning situation also enriches the general understanding between generations» (Ala-Mutka *et Al.* 2008).

But this ambitious project needed a devoted training methodology to support its two-way learning circle between seniors and youths. As the analysis of eleven initiatives in a recent research study concluded, there is scarce evidence yet about such kind of intergenerational learning model:

> «The concept of intergenerational learning is only partially understood, both at policy and practice level. This leads to policies and activities focusing on a one-way transmission of skills, values and attitudes from one generation to another. The great majority of the analysed situations are multigenerational rather than intergenerational, in the sense that the teaching party in the learning process is of a different generation to the receiver; which in fact is typical of almost all learning situations encountered in our society» (ENIL 2012, 55).

For this reason, two methodologies were combined for the training design through a methodological harmonisation process, each one already in use with each target group. We refer to the *Community Service Learning* (CSL) methodology implemented by Fundación Esplai in its "Conecta Joven" network in Spain, and the *Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection* (PAAR) developed by Reflective Learning in the UK and used in face-to-face workshops for senior people.

Community Service Learning (CSL) is aimed to maximize the development of the individuals' potential and their active participation in society. At the roots of CSL there is the work of William James and John Dewey. CSL is an educational initiative combining learning with community service in a single well-articulated project, where the participants are trained while working on real needs in their community. CSL is, firstly, an activity that starts from the definition of a problem, its study from various angles, the development of proposed solution(s) and finally, the implementation and evaluation of the proposal(s). Secondly, an activity by association, i.e. made collectively and not as the result of the action of an isolated person. Individual efforts are summed up to carry out civic, participatory and effective projects. Finally, an activity for a social benefit, therefore intended to increase welfare community and in consequence open to solidarity (Puig et al, 2006; Tapia M. N., 2006).

Participatory and Appreciative Action and Reflection (PAAR) was firstly used by Ghaye (2005, 2008, 2010). It describes the development from more conventional forms of action research (AR) and from participatory action research (PAR) to a more explicitly 'appreciative' research style, adding a new dimension called appreciative intelligence. PAAR brings together action and reflection, with the participation of a range of stakeholders, in order to identify and amplify current achievements and to produce practical solutions in misalignments between values and actions. PAAR co-creates – with those involved – strength-enhancing interventions based upon an understanding of the root causes of success and achievement, rather than of problems and failures.

As a result of harmonising those methodologies, a new methodological framework was defined: *Intergenerational Learning in Blended Environments*

and Spaces (ILBES), developed by D-O-T with the collaboration of the two practitioner partners above, plus the University of Dortmund and L'Apis. This is a first attempt to build a common methodological framework without forcing the two source methodologies together into some kind of unhappy 'marriage', since both methodologies aim to empower individuals to improve themselves and the community where they live but each one proceeds in a different way. The commonalities and differences between both of them were the basis to define ILBES.

While appreciating, imagining and designing are central in PAAR, CSL starts by identifying and evaluating the needs of the environment (community), to further imagine solutions and then design a tailored project, which is the first action of an CSL facilitator. In PAAR, instead, solutions are expected to be collaboratively built from the strengths of the participants. This leads to a possible divergence between CSL ("starting from a problem") and PAAR ("what is going especially well?"). In order to design a learning methodology for a learning circle between seniors and youths, the CSL approach was taken as the project layer, while PAAR was taken as the means to find solutions. In this way, the logics of problem-finding and problem-solving, which sometimes can lead to a deficit-based thinking, were complemented by strengths-based thinking. This is helpful to engage in a conversation – facilitated by ICT – regarding what people can do and wish to do, by identifying, using and developing their strengths, gifts and talents.

ILBES methodology, as based on certain ethical principles/practices and learning methods, as well as on (informal, comfortable) training settings that enhanced learning exchanges between the participants, has been very effective in giving value to life and work experiences of the participants and to encourage a sharing process. It has also given proof to empower the large majority of the participants, regarding their different roles and the expected learning outcomes.

ILBES methodology is rooted on five principles. The first one consists on valuing the space or the environment where the communication is taking place. For example, the youth or elderly centre and the neighbourhood where it is placed. The second one is the appreciation of the value that the participation in eScouts can bring to society. The third and fourth refer to the extent to which youths and seniors feel themselves empowered by the participation in intergenerational activities and by the exchange with other generations. Finally, an ethical dimension guides any eScouts intervention, always looking to produce some kind of societal good. More in details, those principles are:

1. **Space and Environment:** "Space" (used by PAAR) refers to the concrete working/learning place (e.g. the telecentre), while "Environment" (used by CLS) is a broader place which includes the "space" (e.g. the neighbourhood). All didactical materials should reflect the physical, virtual or perceptual space where the communication is taking place, and provide solutions adapted to each space.
2. **Appreciation:** the question "How far are you feeling strengthened by this participation/useful for society?" is formulated for both target groups.
3. **Empowerment** makes participants feel more active and 'in control' of their own learning.
4. **Participation** is supported and encouraged by both source didactics, but a specific challenge in intergenerational learning is to achieve that each generational group appreciates the "lessons" (knowledge, values, competences) they can learn from the other generation.
5. **Ethics** address questions like "are we working ethically?", "is this training aiming at something 'good'?", "who benefits?"

The expected outcome of ILBES is a community service-oriented action, reflection and learning, i.e. a collaborative process of committed actions and reflective learning for personal and community development, where learning is the effect of experiencing reflectively (CSL does by learning and learns by doing, PAAR acts and reflects to turn negative into positive). In ILBES social innovation is supported by e-facilitation (Diaz & Rissola 2008), social media and user-generated content (Kaletka *e Al*. 2011). Group reflection (done publically, rigorously and systematically), is promoted rather than solely self-reflection, since change and improvement with regard to the starting point of each intervention should be the effect of collective (and not individual) actions and views.[5]

3. Target groups analysis and training design

For a more informed training design, eScouts team carried out an online survey in Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Poland and Bulgaria to 150 seniors and 150 youths between May and September 2011. The candidate seniors needed to be aged over 55 years old, be willing to acquire digital competences taught by young people and, in return, be interested to give advice to young people with a view to ameliorate their preparation for the labour market and adult life. The candidate youths needed to be aged between 16 and 25 years old and be willing to make social work taking advantage of their digital knowledge, with a view of receiving a mentoring.

The sample was collected with the help of local stakeholder organisations like telecentres, welfare centres, schools, etc. The sample showed an educational heterogeneity and a polarization of Internet profiles (in terms of competences and uses) in the senior target group. Regarding the youths, the project team learnt that youth respondents were a kind of socio-economic "elite": at their early age (mostly between 17 and 21) they were well educated, had a good level of languages, low drop-out rates from school, high percentage of volunteering, and 94% had private computers with internet access.

This evidence revealed a challenge and an opportunity for the design of the training. On the one side, the project faced the challenge of preparing the youths to train the seniors, taking into account the different senior profiles (well educated vs. low educated), and benefiting from it. On the other side, the project could benefit from the good preparation of the youth "elites" to teach the elders. However, they would need first to acquire a more critical, creative, constructive and community-oriented use of ICT. As Mr. Säävälä (one of the driving force behind the European Year on Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations) says:

> «I think that ICT is both the goal and the means, and it is the goal of course especially for older people because they need to cope with e-banking, e-government and all kind of technologies that are now part of our everyday life. But it is also a goal for younger people, and I really think that younger people, they learn ICT skills with their friends, they learn some of them in schools, it is very much learning in informal settings. But they must learn the e-skills, and what is often missing is actually the kind of ethical, moral

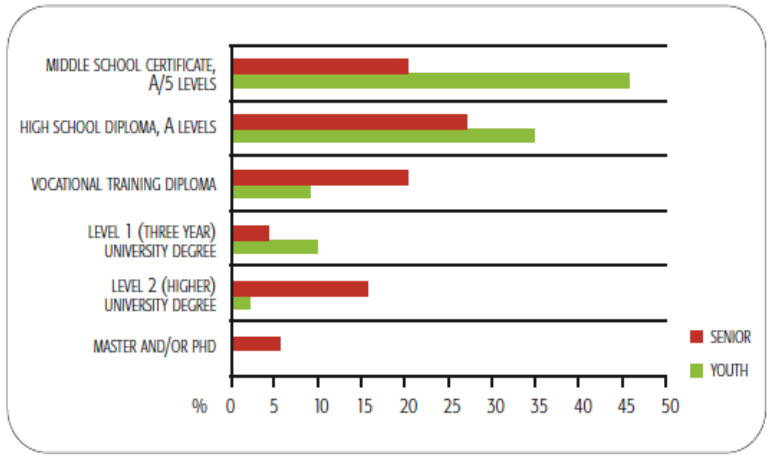
5 For more details on ILBES see <http://escouts8.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/escouts-methodological-frameworks-harmonisation.pdf>.

and legal aspects that are easily forgotten in the kind of virtual world (take cyberbulling for instance).»[6]

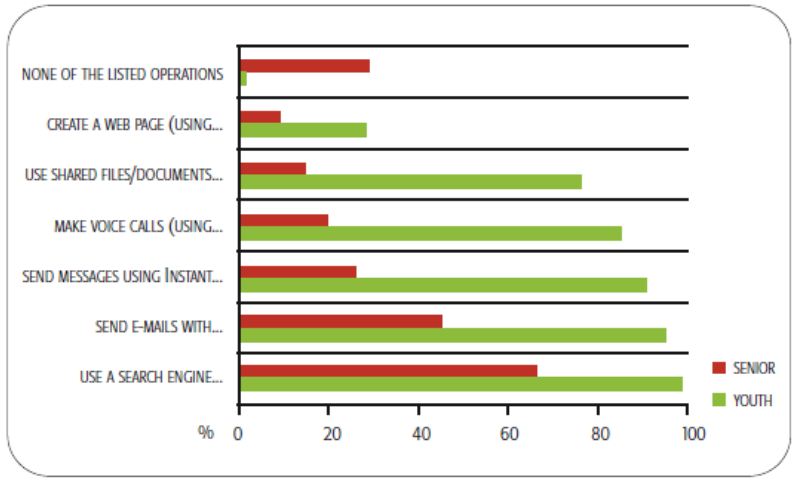
This kind of approach is exactly the one promoted in non-formal learning settings like telecentres, youth centres or libraries.

For a better understanding of what has been mentioned before, see some comparative tables between youth and senior adults' profiles.

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL

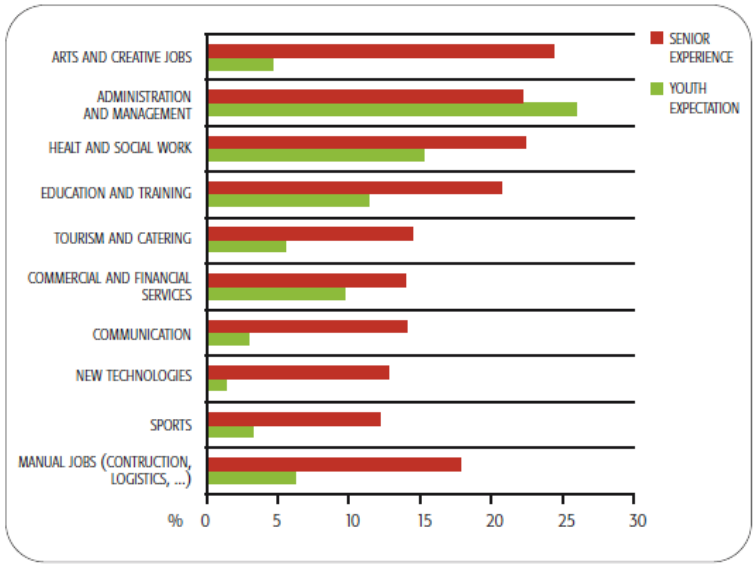


INTERNET SKILLS

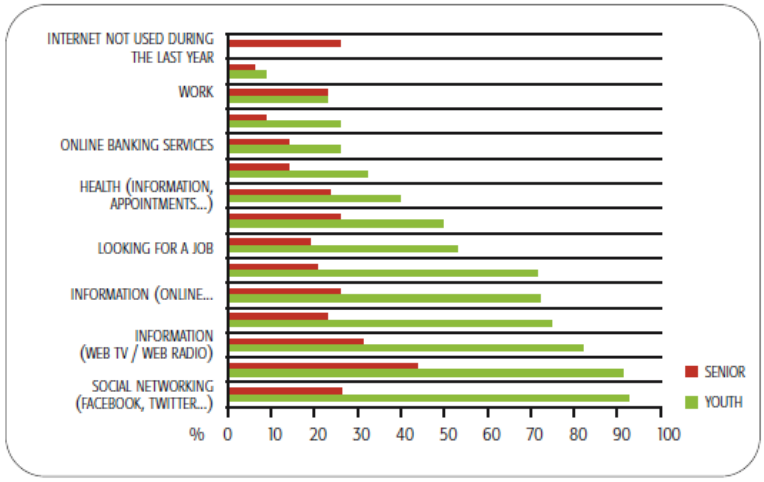


6 Interview to Mr Tapio Säävälä - Deputy Head Adult Education Unit, DG Education and Culture, European Commission by Andrea Diaz Mattei (D-O-T) during DG EAC Conference: *One Step in Later Life: learning for active ageing and intergenerational solidarity*, Brussels, 21 November 2012. Available at:<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=546392195389485&set=vb.209661039062604&type=2&theater>.

JOB SECTOR

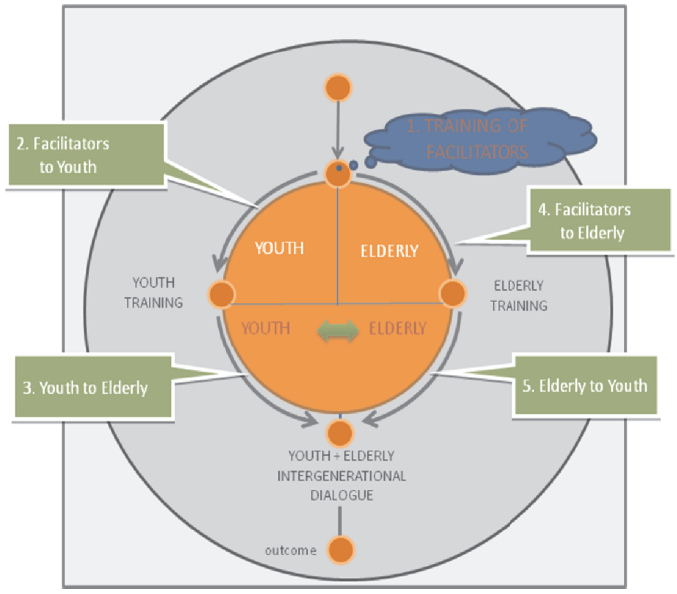


INTERNET USES



4. Training design and implementation

Once reached the survey conclusions, together with the harmonised methodological framework called ILBES, the training planning and design took place. The intergenerational learning circle was structured in 5 modules, each one corresponding to each step illustrated in the figure below:



A group of community-based social innovation and eInclusion centres carried out the ILBES modular blended learning circle in six European Member States (Bulgaria; Germany; Italy; Poland; Spain; United Kingdom) between October 2011 and April 2012.

Given the experimental character of the intergenerational blended learning circle, each consortium partner selected two core facilitators, forming a group of fourteen facilitators who had already acted as trainers/facilitators in former initiatives. Before accompanying the entire blended learning path where 84 youth and 420 seniors were going to be trained, those facilitators learnt in Module 1 the aims of eScouts project, the main characteristics of the two end-user groups, the expected role of ICT and the methodological framework. At the same time, they acquired the fundamental skills required by ILBES: 1) the project's Ethical Code (subdivided into main parts: be honest, act responsibly); 2) Facilitation and digital skills that strengthen intergenerational dialogue (the six Mobius qualities: mutual understanding; possibility; commitment; capability; responsibility; acknowledgement); 3) the eScouts Trust Wheel (achieve an outcome; raise awareness; identify concern; encourage discussion); 4) the eScouts Trust Wheel Observe Behaviours (observe behaviours; listen actively; ask open questions; end ethically).[7]

7 For more details about the training see *The eScouts Blended Training Manual Kit*, <http://escouts.eu/escouts-implementation-and-results/>.

Some 355 senior citizens and 124 young volunteers have participated in Modules 2 to 5 in the 6 piloting countries, giving proof of ILBES viability. ILBES testing showed high performance rates for all modules, with learning outcomes fully achieved in high numbers (youths: 90-100%, seniors: 60-81% in module 3, up to 98% in M5). Additionally, ILBES secured a high steadiness of participants along the learning circle, with a 90% (71 persons) of the total young trainers in M3 attending M 2 as learners, and 59 of them were monitored by the senior mentors in M5 (constituting a 73% of M5 youth learners). Moreover, 32 of the 46 seniors (70%) who followed the M4 acted as mentors in M5; 81% of them had also attended M3 as learners in the ICT training.

The youths and the seniors have been empowered to act as "young facilitator developer of intergenerational dialogue" and "senior mentor developer of intergenerational dialogue" and there have been set their basic training curriculum. And, by supporting them along the whole learning circle, the facilitators learnt to become "developers of intergenerational learning" which we envisage as a future specialization of their professional profile. On the other hand, there has been an extraordinary impact of the intergenerational learning which generated a wish to continue the facilitation-training of the older adults through the ICT in the Youth; a longing for going ahead with the learning experience on the ICT-Internet world, as well as going ahead to meet-exchange-and-share with the younger generations.

To sum up the experience, testing the methodology[8] in the field demonstrated that the act of learning has increased its importance in all ages, since it improves self- confidence, cognitive and communicative skills. Besides, it showed that ICT skills are relevant for practical and everyday use, that offering articulated opportunities to meet between generations empowers all participants, youths and senior adults, that both youth and seniors have a social capital to share and that collaboration and team-working empowers people and makes the value of collective intelligence (versus individualistic and/or homogenizing views) evident.

On the other hand, training implementation (as a pilot) was a challenging process which showed some difficulties that would require devoted attention in a future implementation. This means that at the beginning seniors were more interested in learning ICT that in the exchange with the youth; it was only after the first intergenerational module (M3) that they started to appreciate the exchange with youngsters, to learn from them and to appreciate their freshness, vitality, kindness, professionalism and new visions of society.

For example, one senior recognised that "*Young people with their spontaneity and their expectations have made me feel younger and I have re-opened the hope of a better world*". Besides, senior adults' previous knowledge of new technologies was quite diverse, so it was more effective to senior groups according to their e-skills level and concrete aspirations/purposes (e.g., communicate with grandsons living in other cities, share photos from travels, share their memories of other times, etc). Senior's initial fears towards computers and Internet were

8 The whole eScouts intergenerational learning circle was object of two complementary quality and evaluation processes which made possible collecting and analysing field data along the experimentation. The quality system aimed to provide a first description of the knowledge, skills and competences formed in a way to facilitate their recognition, this is why the ECVET main concepts and terminology (EC 2009) were extensively applied.

high, but thanks to the continuous facilitation provided by young volunteers, ILBES methodology made seniors feel more confident in the use of technology. One of them said feeling "*More confident getting around different screens. Being able to find out more about all sort of things that I did not know. Doing it yourself, independent*". In general, the senior adults needed to be motivated and supported more than the youths alongside the whole learning circle; this suggests that it could be needed a more intense initial training and backing of the seniors, although many older adults asked at the end of the learning circle how to benefit again from this kind of training in the future.

Additionally, we learnt that Module 3 and Module 5 – the two most "sensitive" modules in which the intergenerational mutual learning and exchange took place - need learning paths to be more targeted to the different concrete needs. This is particularly true for older adults, whose life stories and curriculums were more varied and diversified than youths' ones.

5. Further perspectives

eScouts has demonstrated that technology can (and could) serve as a collaborative tool and a mean for intergenerational learning, activating human and social values during the learning process taking place in BES context. ILBES methodological approach has served to promote dialogue between generations, to help senior adults learn some new skills and, finally, to promote their social inclusion (e.g. leave out of social isolation, manage health issues, general communication). Their acquired e-skills have served to make them feel useful again, to have a new topic of conversation with their families, to communicate, and ultimately to empower themselves and find a place in today's modern world. To the youth, this experience helped them engage in a better way with the other generation and envisage their future as adults. The voices of young participants to M5 support this assertion: "*It gave me the opportunity to learn to relate better with others, while making a major confrontation between the generations*". Another one said "*They helped me to see that school is not so important, but you have to be good to get a nice job*". As general reflexion, eScouts has clearly shown the human and social value that technology can play in intergenerational learning and dialogue.

To conclude, on the basis of eScouts experience, where the ILBES methodology was conceived and tested, there is proposed a twofold strategy for the further development of community and educational centres offering digital services and training as **"**eInclusion catalysts for intergenerational learning"[9]. Firstly, there is a need of preparing BES staff to become *Developers of Intergenerational Learning* by supplying them with methodologies like ILBES and embedding ILBES training offer in wider training curriculums devoted to professionalise e-Facilitators by equipping them with the necessary technical, social and pedagogical competences. Secondly, eInclusion should be embedded as a transversal field of activities into lifelong learning policies and educational curricula, and thereby promote digital literacy on the European and regional policy agenda as a mean to strengthen social cohesion. This entails:

9 eInclusion is understood in the sense the European Commission uses the term in policy documents since Riga declaration (2006), which defined eInclusion as both inclusive ICT and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives

– extending the use of intergenerational learning and digital competence training as tools for the empowerment of citizens and their active participation in society;
– promoting the intergenerational dialogue and a responsible and ethical use of ICT building over the digital capital of the youngsters on the benefit of society;
– promoting and integrating more blended and web 2.0 based learning opportunities in "traditional" adult education;
– providing adult educators with digital teaching and facilitating skills;
– promoting BES as competence centres and transversal actors for the digital advancement of lifelong learning;
– professionalising eInclusion initiatives to allow them becoming an integral part of adult education in European regions and increasing their European added value.

If we truly want individuals to shape their own education and build vital biographies over their strengths and the legacy of other generations, with an ethical and community sense, this means that we must afford not only the necessary resources and access rights, but also – and above all – the skills to shape their biographies on their own responsibility. This includes, more than ever, digital skills empowering themselves, what enables them to find better employment opportunities and participate meaningfully in society. Intergenerational learning – facilitated by community-based social innovation and eInclusion centres and supported by ICT means – seems to be a worthy approach to reach this aim.

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European Vocational Education and Training Solution for e-Facilitators of Social Inclusion

(VET4e-I) project: http://www.efacilitator.eu/wordpress/vet4e-i-deliverables
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