

Network promoting e-learning for rural development e-ruralnet

**LLP Transversal Programme
Key Activity 3 ICT - Networks**

WP7 – Form national stakeholder networks & Advisory forum

National Workshop - Italy



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More information on E-ruralnet visiting the website www.e-ruralnet.eu

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Rural development: ICT as support to vocational training and communities.

Florence – Italy, December 13th 2010

1. Abstract

The Rural Development Plan 2007-2013 considers the broadband and the possibility to surf the internet with fast connection as essential services for the rural economy and its population. Although the infrastructure at national level is gradually covering the whole territory, supported by the measure of the European Commission to stimulate the European economy, the broadband is still deficient in marginal and mountainous areas and the digital divide is the main obstacle to get people involved in the use of ICT for learning objectives.

The ICT are recognized helpful tools for the economical growth and the potentiality to the diversification of competences and professions; it also can be added up to give the impulse to an innovative economy.

Moreover, the ICT have a social utility since they can be used to facilitate the connection among people, decreasing the physical and geographical isolation. The use of ICT for learning purposes still face with cultural aspects like the anchor to the formal learning with traditional teaching and the reluctance of micro companies to contribute to their employees' vocational training.

The offer of professional training specifically addressed to rural areas can count only a few examples.

The Italian workshop born with the aim to gather the members of the network and give them the possibility to present their case studies on the use of ITC with examples connected to rural contexts and the potentialities of Information and Communication technologies also to establish networks as communities of persons.

For this reason the workshop was titled "Rural development: ICT as support to vocational training and communities" because of the importance of ICT as a tool to individual's professional growth and to enforce the cooperation and the organization of a small community.

The national workshop has been also the occasion to express opinions on established thematics and to show the project E-Ruralnet and its preliminary results.

The participants: stakeholders at national and regional level such as social partners, professors at universities, e-learning providers, learners, and interested persons have assisted to the workshop and took active part to the discussions.

2. Program

The day was organized in two parts: during the morning, the case studies specifically addressed to the rural areas and connected to communities of persons were presented to the public as examples of ICT potential for rural development. After that, two sessions in the afternoon, debated on technical aspects and issues: the quality of e-courses and e-contents and the technical support and use of innovative platform to support e-learning and communication.

The aim of the first part was to welcome new members with the presentation of the project, give the project's members the possibility to present their products ("rural" case studies) and give everyone the possibility to meet, talk about their experience, compare opinions, identify problematic and real requirements of the demand.

Program:

10:00 Registration of participants and delivery of material (folders with E-ruralnet brochure, talks, program, description of the rural development activities run by CNR-IBIMET were distributed)

11:00 Welcome and opening of works (by the Scientific Responsible of E-ruralnet project, director of CNR-IBIMET Dr. Antonio Raschi)

11:15 E-ruralnet project. Presentation of the project with aims, objectives, deliveries, problems and preliminary results of the e-learning offer in Europe, by Francesca Ugolini assistant and executor of the project in Italy

Presentation of the Case studies: examples of ICT for vocational training and communities in rural contexts:

11:30 Communities of professionals and interaction using Web 2.0 (Dr. Stefano Barbieri, Veneto Agricoltura, Veneto Region)

12:00 Impr@web, access to ICT and communities of practice for the territory (Dr. Augusto Pivanti, Coldiretti Veneto)

12:30 Assisted self-learning for the development of competences: INAC-CIA (Giulio Felicetti, Italian Confederation of Farmers)

13:00 Experience and projects of e-learning in Agriregionieuropa (Antonello Lo Bianco, Association A. Bartola)

13:30 – 14:15 buffet lunch

The morning session brought out several reflection's cues.

The discussion moments had the recurrent theme of the critical current economy that should be based more on an efficient and sustainable use of resources to guarantee a high rate of employment and in addition it has been recognized the relevance of a social and territorial cohesion to be improved by a sense of community that grows up even thanks to knowledge and innovation. The community as a group of persons that lives sharing experiences, debating in order to solve problems to get benefits as a mutual learning, however needing one facilitator, animator of the group.

The most important requirement is to pay attention to the enterprises' needs, thinking about, for example, the dispersion of human and financial resources, the lack of coordination and competition that may bring to individualism.

The acknowledged needs of the rural world concern the awareness of management and market performances, but the rural economy seems to be much more reactive and innovative than other sectors; farms and enterprises, for instance, have to adopt and adapt quite quickly to innovative sustainable economical issues such as the "0 Km" or the shortening of the productive chain, with more involvement of the consumers.

The main purpose of agriculture is to produce products but it is actually even more important because it satisfies new needs of the current society (health in food, health of the environment out of the urban borders). So the rural territory acquires the importance of the connection between production and social aspects.

For this reason, farmers and entrepreneurs might be the referents for the development of the attraction of the rural territory becoming "managers of territory". The presence of a community understanding strengthens and weaknesses that it is also willing to get over barriers, plus a new generation opened to new opportunities of development, could be the strength point for the rural development of the territory as a whole.

In addition, the transformation of the productive farm in a multifunction enterprise delivering a range of services like agritourism, rural tourism, typical products, environmental conservation have to consider the necessity of new professional profiles.

The Learning Communities aim to address the learning process for the development of the territory including different typologies of professionals, against common obstacles such as individualism or physical distance. At a certain stage, the members themselves recognize the importance of complementarities and interdependence and also the importance of the connection among them to exchange experiences, good practices, get information, activating relationships.

On a community level, tools and language have to be understood and used by people with different skills, even if one of the most important factor guiding knowledge and competences is still the motivation.

Afternoon sessions:

Evaluation:

14:20 Standards of tracing and quality-quantity evaluation models for e-learning (Dr. Saverio Pescuma, Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers)

14:40 Discussion

Networking:

14:50 Moodle platform for sharing knowledge (Dr. Franco Cesari, Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers)

15:15 CRA initiatives for transferring research results and innovations (Dr. Tiziana Amoriello, Council for Research and Experimentation in Agriculture)

16:00 I-CLEEN project: a collaborative network of teachers (Dr. Maddalena Macario, Museum of Natural Science of Trento)

16:30 Discussion

The afternoon session on evaluation introduced the thematic of quality in e-learning with Dr. Saverio Pescuma (Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers) opening on the topic "Standards of tracing and quality-quantity evaluation models for e-learning".

The discussion brought up some relevant conclusions.

Particularly when an e-learning course is certified, the evaluation criteria shouldn't be based only on the acquired knowledge of the students as many factors might interact in the learning process. The quality of content is linked to the different targets and the systems of delivery should also be measured. At this stage three kinds of evaluations have to be considered: learning evaluation, evaluation of the didactic and contents evaluation of the whole system. The criteria of evaluation should take into consideration the difficulty and the different level of complexity of the contents. Finally, the speed of learning of the students should also be mentioned.

The second session on Networking started out with a session on Moodle, the widest used platform for sharing knowledge, aiming to socialization and problem solving through the possibility of sharing elements such as repositories, learning in collaboration and inter-communication.

Moodle, the open source platform aiming to the principle of constructionism and constructivism in experimenting and constructing something within a community of persons, can be considered as a virtual place where exchange of information and materials, interaction on projects and activities are possible. Moodle, is rather easy in usage and allows many different actions: deposit material (files, links, folders, e-books, webpages...), communicate by messages, chats, forum, video-conferences, work (creating a webpage, questionnaires, repository, training through lessons, information) and collaborate (using wiki, Forum, creating a database, glossary). It is a simple tool, efficient and friendly that matches with all browsers and server providers and can also be used to manage hundreds of environments (projects, activities, courses) and groups with a grade of safety.

Networking assembles several actions: collection, validation, sharing and transferring results, but also the creation of practice communities with professionals of different sectors and within a variety of subjects in order to collect specific results.

The communities offer problem solving in specific productive contexts while involving stakeholders (entrepreneurs and operators of transformation companies and workability of the products after harvesting) but also in producing and sharing manuals and protocols of good practice.

A further example of networking was presented by a high school teacher collaborating with Museo Tridentino of Natural Sciences. She talked about the use of ITC by the members to communicate, work and develop contents that will be available for users (teachers) in their everyday work. This was a contribute to the networking in a small community of persons that are strongly motivated.

Conclusions:

Many key-words eventually came up during the workshop: “community, services, resources, needs of the users, experiences, motivation and exchange”.

The workshop was a valuable moment for the speakers, representatives at national level of the major institutions dealing with rural development, professional training and strong interaction with the rural inhabitants. During their career and projects they have identified problems but also potentialities and added value of the rural world, in terms of cultural and environmental heritage. This has to be developed on the base of the sustainability and thus, vocational training, even innovating the learning process, becomes essential also for enriching the knowledge.

The success of a service is sustained by its efficacy to satisfy the need of the users though all the participants recognized the risk of damage for a micro-enterprise or family farms to be individualistic, particularly during periods of economic crisis. Some projects have shown the

efficacy of the creation of a practice community where people have the possibility to present and share problems and find solutions together: joining expertise and ideas for instance to promote their products.

Information and Communication Technologies are strategic for some rural realities where the physical and geographical isolation cuts the possibility of exchanging information, but still nowadays, the computer literacy is the main obstacle for ICT use and motivation and perseverance for e-learning.

Internet is an important and elastic tool that ease the communication and collaboration between people and institutions; it is also a quick way to get information, but e-learning, because of its flexibility still targets to a shell of users strongly motivated.

Blended learning is recognized the best solution because of the need and the pleasure to meet people and speak face to face.

Stakeholders (old and new members of the network) and general public showed their gratification to participate to the workshop that hosted high quality presentations and a balanced variety of contents.

It was meaningful to give them the possibility to relate and compare experiences, to know each other and get contacts. All people recognize the importance of sharing opinions and discuss while involving local communities, actors or institutions that are connected and could work jointly for rural development. Nevertheless the discussion remained open on questions like quality of e-learning and the use and introduction of new platforms for a better personalization of contents and tools.