

"OFFICE INTERACTORS" – REINVENTING THE WHEEL THE ONLINE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES RESOURCES AND WORK INSTRUMENTS FOR TEACHER SUPPORT

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Abstract

Office InterActors is a Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation project funded by the European Commission. The project addresses the need for intercultural awareness, transferable skills and lifelong learning strategies for professional purposes, given the increased work mobility nowadays. Through open dialogue and involvement of the target groups, Office InterActors proposes a VET educational model and EU supported training opportunities for developing basic and professionals skills in Business & Administration. These are transferable from study to work and from one work setting to another: foreign language (English and French as widely spoken, plus Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Basque), ICT skills (including use of the Internet and Web 2.0), teamwork and negotiation (also in international teams through online collaboration), general and professional intercultural awareness and knowledge, entrepreneurship, other self-management skills and motivation for lifelong learning.

Key-words: blended learning, soft skills, Moodle platform, intercultural collaboration, piloting, ICT skills.

Success is pacing up with the rhythm of continuous development while envisaging plans for the future. Coherence and cohesiveness must be road companions to ensure a well defined and targeted output of any initiated process. Those set to “make the best and take it all” have to be equipped with strategic, key knowledge and skills and with constructive

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attitudes. Today's society asks for well trained individuals, flexible and easily adaptable who can maximize any given opportunity and ensure sustainability for the products of their work. Teaching cannot do all this but educating individuals can. In a constantly updating and shifting context, transferring data from one part to another does not suffice nor is it in any way supportive for professional development.

In the late years it has become clear that teaching must involve more awareness raising and coaching to help learners equip themselves not with data, which is nowadays perishable, but with the ability to research, select and use any piece of information which might be helpful for them in certain given work contexts. This of course involves focus on field specificities, basic ICT skills, use of foreign languages at at least basic conversational level, intercultural and communicational skills and an entire range of soft skills such as team work, negotiation etc.

In circumstances such as these, the roles of the two main actants in the teaching-learning process, change dramatically. Teachers are no longer considered "omniscient entities" capable of delivering correct answers nor are learners placed in the role of empty-to-be-filled bottles.

The dynamics of teacher- learner interaction have become much more complex and present different entrance levels for both teachers and learners. Thus teachers can embody any of the following: facilitator, instructor, coach, peer etc. and students can at their turn be: learners, researchers, implementers etc. Among all these roles there are numerous connections which enrich the teaching-learning process and make it a multidimensional one.

Consequently to this change determines new standards for the teaching and learning materials, contexts and tools employed in this process. All these need to be updated and match the learning needs, time and access affordances of teachers and learners. Learning, especially beyond the age of college graduation, is encapsulated in the time frame of the end beneficiaries who are no longer available for regular daily schedule classes and need to have more flexible alternatives for study. Online environments came to fill in this gap and address those willing to participate in learning activities but not available for traditional classes. In time the benefits of using such environments for teaching and learning have extended to include work on and development of built in ICT abilities, communication and language appropriateness etc. all of them complementary to online or offline activity.

"Office InterActors" has been created to directly address all the above mentioned aspects and deliver a new educational model to support teachers in their work with various categories of learners. Teacher support is closely related to student support and, therefore,

Office InterActors considers both of them and tries to bridge the gap between teachers and students to offer an inclusive experience.

“Office InterActors” educational model has been developed for three main categories of beneficiaries:

- VET institutions and practitioners across Europe interested to assimilate the “Office InterActors” model as a way to improve and diversify their VET offers.
- Employers and representatives of employers in Business & Administration interested to support the training of candidates/new recruits/apprentices/employees in need of the skills targeted by the model
- Students in their final years studying or recently graduated from Business & Administration, people employed or seeking employment in the field and who would increase their employability and/or efficiency by developing the skills targeted by the model

The main objectives of the project planned for the two years of implementation are:

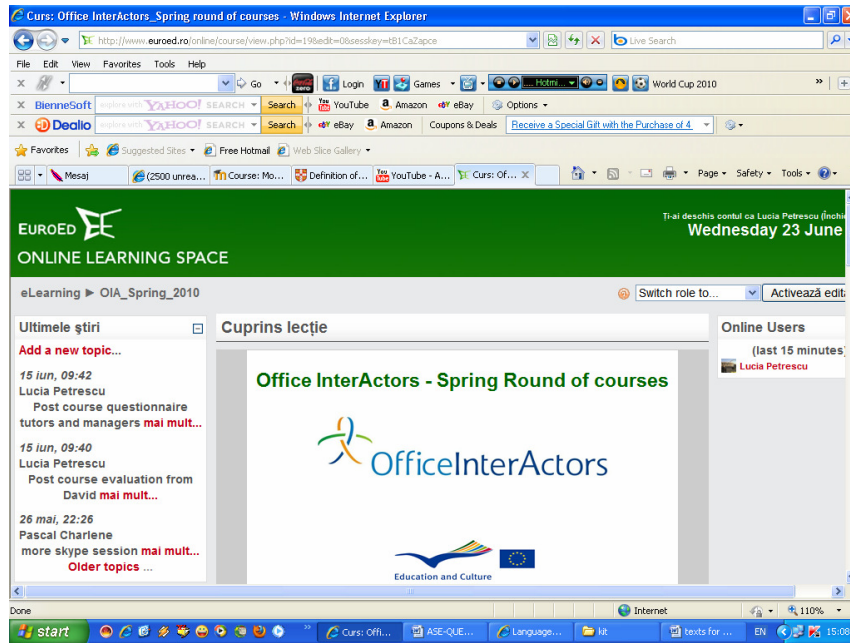
- training tutors, trainers and teachers from the partnership into the existing InterAct model
- designing the “Office InterActors” model based on the expression of needs and interests from beneficiary employers and (would-be) employees
- delivering one pilot round of Office InterAct courses structured as Basic and Advanced
- training tutors, trainers and teachers from throughout Europe to use the “Office InterActors” model (in an integrated training and international conference event)
- working together with the newly co-interested VET institutions and trained professionals to deliver a second round of “Office InterActors” courses for beneficiaries
- making the “Office InterActors” model, the Business&Administration scenarios and the delivery experience at tutor and learner level available and widely visible on the Internet

The main product of the project, the “Office InterActors” educational model, includes a complex set of learning objectives:

- increased awareness and new knowledge of the Business & Administration culture in different European countries (Spain, France, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania and possibly others in the second round of delivery),
- development of professional skills related to work in the area of Business & Administration (information management systems, financial management, human resources management, quality management and quality assurance strategies, management)
- development of transferable New Basic Skills: language skills (English, including French and less widely used languages: Lithuanian, Basque, Romanian, Bulgarian, possibly others in the second round of delivery), computer skills (including use of Internet and Web 2.0 technology), teamwork and negotiation skills, intercultural awareness
- other areas of personal development relevant to professional success: confidence, entrepreneurship, motivation for lifelong learning, time / stress /change management.

“Office InterActors” is now in its second year of implementation and the project team worked on and delivered a set of activities meant to support development and implementation of the “Office InterActors” model but also its dissemination and sustainability.

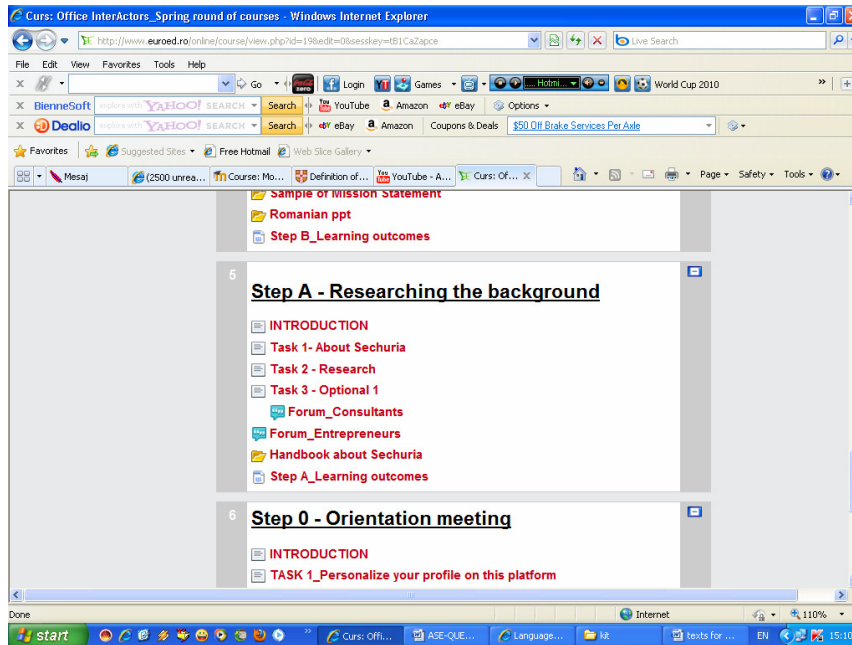
1. “Office InterActors” Internal training was addressed to the project team and a group of tutors interested to be trained in and then apply the “Office InterActors” model. This stage was the preliminary step in the development of the educational model. “Office InterActors”, as mentioned previously is a transfer of innovation project which valorizes and improves the product of another Leonardo da Vinci project called InterAct. Having the InterAct model as a basis the project team together with the tutor team selected for the Internal tutor training has worked on online moodle simulations to recreate the environment, type of content and operating tools for a course addressed to end beneficiaries. This gave the team the opportunity to directly experience the courses as learners and then reflect upon the necessary changes and improvements. Tutors were in this manner involved in course development. The project team used their teaching experience and their knowledge of the end beneficiaries’ learning needs to adapt the course content and delivery.



“Office InterActors” Moodle Area for the second round of courses, course start

2. The second stage was the pilot round of courses implemented within five countries Bulgaria, France, Lithuania, Romania and Spain. Participants in all these countries were involved in a five-week blended learning course, both face-to-face and online activities implemented with the help of a Moodle platform and a fictitious scenario used to contextualize and include all the tasks in the course. Participants in the activities were organized in two levels of competencies according to their language level, content specificities knowledge and work experience. Each national team was separated in a basic group – the Business Consultants, and an advanced group – Business Entrepreneurs. The tasks created for this course were structured along very well defined general learning goals and learning outcomes presented to students before the beginning of the course. The course itself was developed on a gradual structure including 5 main steps, Step A, B, C, D and E and one meeting for orientation, Step 0. Gradually introducing students to the tasks in the course created a suspense atmosphere which continuously motivated students and stirred up their interest. Communication was done via the “Office InterActors” Moodle platform www.euroed.ro/online with the help of the chats and forums. However, the one online synchronous communication tool students really appreciated was Skype. Unfortunately many of the computer rooms in universities do not provide access to

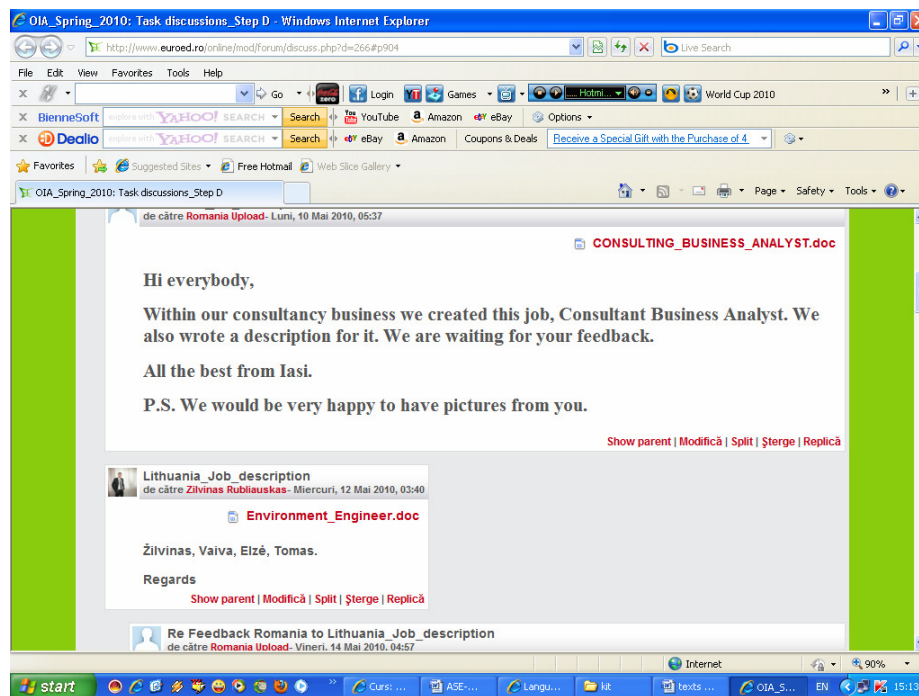
Skype and, therefore, in the first pilot round of “Office InterActors” courses, learners did not have too many opportunities for synchronous online communication. Added to this was the difficulty of establishing a common timetable for all the five teams for the implementation of the online synchronous activities. Learners’ role in this pilot round of courses was to test the platform and offer feedback for its improvement. Tutors closely collaborated with course participants who informed them on any of the aspects which needed updating.



“Office InterActors” Moodle Area for the second round of courses, course steps

3. In the second round of courses Belgium was added to the five initial countries and also specialists in the field of ICT and communication contributed to the development of the course material. Based on the first pilot round of courses improvements were made to the online communication tools, to the structure and method of archiving the forums content. Improvements were also made to the course display and strategy of connecting the various different parts of the course so as to facilitate students and tutors access. A new scenario was developed based on the scenario used in the first round of courses and informal communication, off the course tasks, was encouraged to help course participants become familiar with the international group and gain more confidence in expressing their personal opinions and offering feedback to the others in the course. Students viewed this experience as complementing their theoretical

knowledge from the university classes. Also an added value for the course was represented by those students already active in the field of work who brought in practical knowledge and shared it with the others in the course. Tutors' role in the second round of courses was first of all to guide students through the orientation meeting and familiarize them with the use of Moodle platforms and also with the course methodology and work manner. Tutors were also a guide for language accuracy and appropriateness and offered support for online communication between their national team and all the other international teams.



Office InterActors Moodle Area for the second round of courses, forum example

4. The “Office InterActors” Kit has been created to support understanding and use of the methodology developed within the “Office InterActors” project. It addresses various levels of beneficiaries starting from institutions interested to update their staff expertise, tutors involved in adult education and re-qualification, universities or other adult education institutions. Also the model can be easily transferred to domains other than that of business and administration for which the methodology has been initially developed and implemented.

This kit offers the opportunity of cascading the “Office InterActors” experience of the courses from the first year of the project. The kit has been launched at The “Office

InterActors” Integrated Training and International Conference in Iasi, February 2009 and it is also freely downloadable from the project website at www.officeinteractors.eu.

Conclusions:

Irrespective of the field and focus of activity, tutors have to update their services and products to suit beneficiaries’ needs. Lifelong learning has perhaps not been considered too often as a service or product. Growing needs and practical knowledge of life and work skills have raised learners’ awareness upon the necessity of having a qualitative product. Changing the means and manner of teaching, learning, selecting the materials and approaching learners need to become priorities in education to ensure a well trained work force after graduation but also to enhance lifelong learning and valorization of everyday experiences.

The “Office InterActors” project team is ready to offer support and assistance to those interested to implement this model of education. We consider the model developed within this project offers a wide range of affordances for any field of interest. As long as the target audience is closely analysed and their learning needs are the pattern for the course development the “Office InterActors” methodology can offer ways and means of updating staff experience and knowledge and set the level of a European standard.

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