

COUNTRY GROUP ANALYSIS: SPRING VALLEY

Overall overview

There were three trainings conducted in Latvia within an “Erasmus+” project “EFFECT” in a development process of a joint curriculum “**Practical tools for trainers to improve the effectiveness of adults learning and teaching**”. This curriculum is developed with the aim to encourage trainers and teachers to improve the efficiency of the learning process by providing them with a modern, practical and high-quality tools that allow to:

- implement an interaction with the adult students at an unprecedented level;
- support uneducated and low-skilled adults in the process of their social skills (incl. the skills which are needed for current or future work) development which is a crucial aspect for their life quality improvement.

All training courses took place in different places (three of four country regions were covered): one – at Livani Secondary School no.1, one – at Liepaja University, and one – at Valka Art School. Two of the training groups (Liepaja and Valka) were opened – there were involved trainers and teachers from the different educational institutions, who already work or plan to work with the uneducated and low educated adults in the nearest future, incl. secondary schools, universities, interest educational centres and adult training centres. The third group was, so-called “local” group where only teachers, who work at the particular school, were involved.

A total number of participants gathered in these training courses was 35. As attendance frequency was 100%, all of them finished these training courses with a certificate.

Each training was conducted by two trainers from the “Spring Valley” team who supplemented each other – mostly by Jānis Gredzens and Rūta Lūse (Žanete Drone replaced Rūta Lūse at one of the training courses). Such a model of work was chosen to provide a more individual approach to trainees because the preliminary research showed that there is a limited number of trainers and teachers who work with uneducated and low educated adults in Latvia. As most of them work for the State Employment Agency, these trainers are very well trained – they already know the most common “train the trainer” methods and use them at their daily work. Therefore, work of group where concentration of these well trained trainees was the highest turned out to be more like mentoring, not a learning process.

But understanding what kind of information (knowledge) well trained trainees would still need, wasn’t the only challenge of this project. Due to the COVID-19 situation in Latvia, there were problems to complete full groups of 12-15 people as well as to stick to the training plan. Firstly, training courses were postponed several times because of the epidemiological constraints and trainees' illness. Secondly, trainers had to realise “plan B” and make some changes in the curriculum by adapting it to the digital environment as there was a huge risk that it would not be possible to conduct the physical or face-to-face training courses, which are intended in the 1st and 3rd model. The “Zoom” platform was planned as an alternative training environment.

Feedback on the curriculum

The overall feedback on the curriculum is very positive from the all three groups – the majority or about 80% of trainees admitted that the knowledge gained during the training process was very

useful and they will use it in their daily work. Moreover, 96% of trainees would recommend this training to their colleagues. The main reasons for that are:

- Well-considered curriculum – good learning process dynamics, perfect balance between the theory and practice, meaningful exercises and, of course, an opportunity to exchange an experience which helps to broaden your horizons.
- The knowledge received in this training will be very useful not just in work with the uneducated and low educated adults – most of the learning methods (especially, the group dynamics, feedback and motivation techniques) are suitable in work with the other audiences as well, but especially in work with any other audience, incl. youth.
- Videos of the trainees' individual presentations, which they receive after the training, are very insightful because it is a good way to use the newly acquired knowledge in practice and to receive valuable feedback – detailed analysis of your presentation skills, incl. practical suggestions for improvements (the most of the trainees admitted that they have never had an opportunity to see themselves in action).

Also, there were a number of trainees who admitted that a learning tool MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), which is included in the curriculum developed by “Spring Valley”, is “must have” for all the trainers and teachers because it promotes a self-development process. Respectively, as this tool is based on a world-famous psychologist's Carl Gustav Jung finding about the aspects that determine differences in a human behaviour (different personality types, their strengths and the most effective ways to manage these strengths), it helps not just to understand your trainees better but also yourself as a trainer, which is very important knowledge, especially, if we speak about the personal development in multiple ways.

The only criticism was received about the curriculum's length. Majority of the trainees pointed out that they would prefer very intense training – one week in a row instead of approximately two months, as it is planned in the curriculum. It would help them to mobilise themselves and focus on the learning process much better.

Achievement of the learning outcomes

“Spring Valley” trainers' experience shows that some of the defined learning outcomes were too wide, therefore, they were fulfilled partly. For example, according to the approximate estimates of our trainers, each training module should be about 45 minutes longer to achieve fully these three learning outcomes that are mentioned below:

- Group dynamics phases, understands the importance of group dynamics in the training process and plans the activities of the training program (curriculum) to manage the group process.
- Learning evaluation models to analyse training and learning efficiency.
- On-line learning methods.

The most interest of the trainees during the training process was gained by activities, which were connected to these five learning outcomes:

- The basic concepts in adult learning methodology, role of the teacher and knows the contemporary approach to learning.
- Psychological barriers to learning, learners difficulties due to low learning and social skills and knows how to help learners overcome them and motivate students.
- Giving feedback to students in a non-threatening and non-critical way.
- Practising training methods and tools.
- Self-analysis of a teacher's professional development and appropriate self-analysis methods.

We can identify two aspects, which helped to achieve the defined learning outcomes. Firstly, trainees of each group were actively involved in the learning process and could easily set their personal goals within a framework of this curriculum very easily, as it was their personal interest to participate in this training. This could explain a reason why the level of their motivation as well as productivity during the class exercises and homework was very high. Either, it clearly shows that the quality of the curriculum and the professionalism of the trainee guarantee just a half of the learning processes. The other half can be provided only if you reach the right audience and choose the right wording to “sell” an idea of the curriculum.

Secondly, all trainees not just learned about the importance of the feedback’s role in the adults learning process but also received high quality feedback on their performance from the trainers as well as from other trainees. They acquired this learning method very fast and started to use it immediately by analysing the performance of their “classmates”. This ability to reflect on others becomes very useful in their self-development process.

Recommendations

The main conclusion of the “Spring Valley” trainers after these three training courses is that this curriculum should be based on an individual approach and non-standard solutions and because the target audience of this project – uneducated and low-educated adults – is too specific to use standard solutions. There is no doubt that you can teach new knowledge and new skills to anybody by using traditional learning methods. But you can’t teach to use this knowledge and these skills in practice effectively via these methods.

Taking into the consideration observations of the trainers and trainees feedback:

- Some well-through-out improvements should be made in this curriculum. The main focus should be on harmonisation of the curriculum’s length and number of covered topics. Orientation on trainees needs and priorities as well as potential adjustments of different study groups should be taken in mind.
- The target audience of this curriculum should be expanded because of the two reasons that were mentioned earlier. Firstly, there is a limited number of trainees in Latvia who work with the uneducated and low-educated adults. Secondly, the content of this curriculum is relevant for all trainers (and teachers) who work with adults (with all kinds of adult groups, not just any certain group).

Trainees also say that more detailed materials should be prepared for the trainers as well (interesting point is that people still prefer printed materials instead of digital even knowing that it’s not a nature friendly approach). And it’s necessary to provide information about the different resources where trainers can receive support for adult education management and their self-development.

But trainers emphasise four additional aspects that should be taken into the considerations to improve the curriculum and the learning process itself.

Firstly, homework which trainees have to do before the training should be very general, because they have very different experiences, fields of work, understanding of things, processes, etc. At the same time homework during the training process should be very specific, connected to the field of trainees' work and organised on a regular basis, as it mobilises people.



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Secondly, different work experience, work methodology, etc. significantly complicates the learning process, because the trainer has to work with each trainee individually, explaining through examples how a particular method can help in their daily work (because what seems obvious to one raises a number of questions for others). It is recommended to form study groups from teachers of the same or similar profile, for example, only language teachers, only computer science teachers, etc.

Thirdly, many trainers and teachers who could work with uneducated and low-educated adults in the near or distant future are not emotionally ready for this work. It is advisable to explain within a learning process what challenges, which are not connected with the content of the training, they may face and how to overcome them. For example, experience shows that uneducated and low-educated adults most often represent the lower strata of the society – they may feel unwell, come to study under the influence, fall asleep during studies, etc.

Fourthly, the training process is much more effective if it's organised at the "neutral territory" (outside their habitual environment) because then there are less distractions which can impact trainees' concentration skills, their work effectiveness and productivity.