

ArleKin: Learning together

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Abstract

This paper presents the experience related to developing a training course on Mediation for Social Inclusion through European Mobility within a project funded by the European Union between 2013 and 2016. The course is based on the training scheme of the Tour of France Companions in which trainees learn their role by observing and working with their masters in different cities. Social mediation, as the jobs were at that time, is learnt through immersion in various contexts. This course is still being developed in France and in other countries and it has been updated by the authors of the paper, through the use of Web 2.0. The course uses action-research-training methodology in which experiential, reflective and collaborative dimensions are present. In total, five countries and 13 Associations for Mediation participated along with the team responsible for in the project.

Keywords: Social Mediation; Community of practice and learning; Collaborative learning; action-research-training; Social Mediators

INTRODUCTION

The ArleKin Project – Training in Mediation for Social Inclusion through European Mobility – financed by the European Union (ref: 539947-LLP-1-2013-1-FR- GRUNDTVIG-GMP) focused on the following objectives: i) to give visibility to a method of innovative and pertinent social intervention for responding to new challenges of social cohesion in contemporary societies; ii) to develop the professionalization of an innovative practice in a concerted way at the European level; iii) to experiment with a training plan involving European mobility inspired by the tradition of the Companions of the Tour de France.

Social mediation has constituted a socio-professional practice under expansion in recent years and, as with other occupations, it is learned through immersion in specific and varied contexts. Thus, the plan that was conceived and experimented with in terms of the training of social mediators from different European countries considered historical experience, which is recognized as the intangible heritage of humanity, where the apprentices of various occupations should learn close by the side of their masters i.e. very experienced practitioners in different cities (Moisan, Silva, Fortecœf & Buelens, 2016).

This historic training plan, which was taken up in this Project for the training in mediation for social inclusion, was updated with contemporary resources such as Web 2.0 and it constituted a first experience in the definition of an enduring training plan. The Practitioner-Mediators (PM) were welcomed by the Specialists in Mediation (SM) in institutions from various European countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain), who shared their learning through a participative site on the Internet.

The ArleKin Project had another objective; namely, the constitution of a professional and European community for Social Mediation, through the creation of a network of professional organizations and training in Mediation for Social Inclusion (MSI), as a support for its realization. For such, a European partnership was constituted with different partners, who were associated with organizations of mediation and training and research institutions, like the Institutions of Higher Education. Therefore, collaborations were developed at the European level between universities, cities and various networks of international social organizations of Mediation, so as to strengthen structured exchanges between the mediators - both at the institutional level and at university level - with the objective of sharing and challenging the practices and representations concerning the activities of social mediation. The objective was to identify what there was in common in the practices of social mediation, while respecting the diverse forms of its fulfilment in specific contexts in each country.

Communication between the members of this community of learning and practice – professors, researchers and mediators – in these European micro-systems, as well as at the macro level of the Project, were facilitated by the fact of their shared and common interests and diverse knowledge and in the professional sphere, that is to say, by their mutual involvement and by their shared repertoire and negotiation (Wenger, 2001).

WORKING, REFLECTING AND LEARNING TOGETHER: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND LEARNING

The community of practice and learning is a space for sharing experiences, knowledge and learning with space for the definition of interests and personal, professional and academic objectives. It was - in the case of the ArleKin Project – a space for sharing between the academic community, mediators and organizations that intervene in the field of Mediation for Social Inclusion. Also they are spaces with the capacity for contributing to knowledge, research and experience, to the objectives that are common to everyone, to objectives common to some groups, as well as to individual objectives. In this sense, “the community of learning is, in general, an open space for questioning and reflection about specific themes, which contain and celebrate the diversity of disciplinary perspectives and the crossing of practical and academic knowledge. It can be imagined as a space of co-operative learning from an initial identification of the experiences and knowledge and the active search for responses to the questions that anyone could formulate within the community” (Silva, Piedade, Morgado, & Ribeiro, 2016, p. 21).

The ArleKin Project constituted a community of practice, learning and professionals at the European level of Social Mediation, which we called ‘The ArleKin Community’ (ArC). Naturally the ArleKin Community, which was imbued in a process of research and self-reflection, followed up on characteristics of collaborative action-reflection-research by looking for more knowledge from the practices of MSI and its improvement from a wider and deeper, as well as a wiser and comprehensive perspective (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The community of practice and learning was associated with the notions of work-based and collaborative learning, whose potential is more and more recognized in the context of lifelong learning and professional and organizational development (Wenger, 2000, 2001). Nowadays, these communities are constituted and developed in virtual contexts, so as to make the most of distances and to strengthen availabilities. The 'ArleKin Community' (ArC) turned to these contexts systematically: i) through the Project website and that of Cayenne Virtual ; ii) by periodic meetings of the team via Skype; and also iii) by recourse to electronic mail.

The virtual and also face-to-face contexts in the various countries of the European partners were fundamental for the ArleKin Project to achieve its objectives through a collaborative methodology and the constitution of a community of practice and learning in a network (Dias, 2008).

Having as its aim the conception and implementation of an experimental training plan for Mediation for Social Inclusion by means of European mobility with the objective of validating the future modes of a durable training plan, the project progressed in various stages of work, which were previously identified and re-organized, when it was considered opportune, as the result of critically constructive debate and collaborative dialogue. So the various stages were implemented as shown in Figure 1.

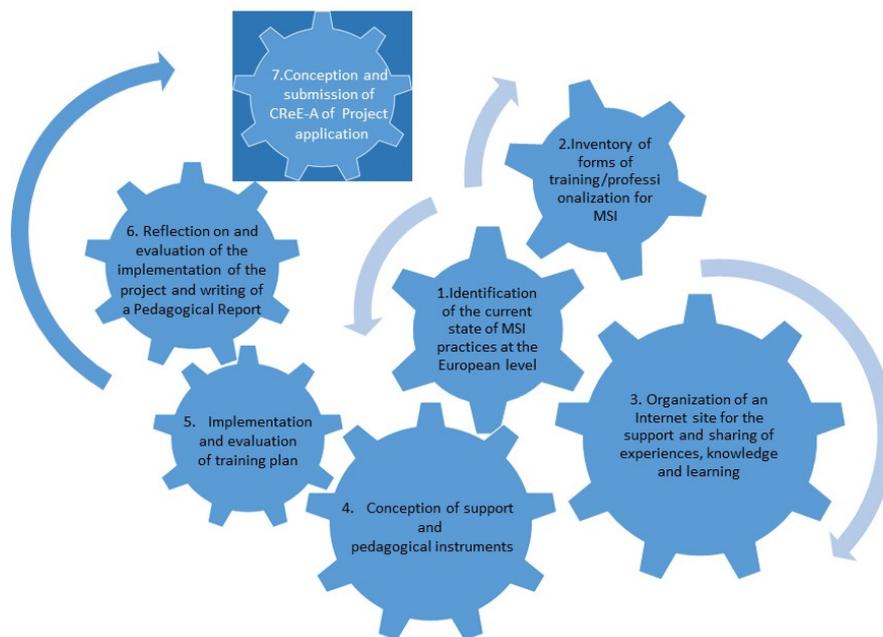


Figure 1 - The stages of the ArleKin Project

The various stages were developed in a progressive and non-linear way by being both concurrent and simultaneously interdependent from each other. Initially it started with a community of learning constituted by the members of the project team. This team was composed by academics from various scientific areas and professionals and mediators with whom were associated some participating observers; namely, political representatives in the case of Italy.

Although each one of the stages had a responsible partner, all of the team members participated actively in diverse ways, through empirical research in their respective countries, writing up of parts of reports, meetings and daily work – both face-to-face and at a distance - for debate and reflection about methodological procedures, inventories of research and collection information, sharing of doubts and experiences.

Still, for the fulfilment of the various stages the team in each partner country resorted to collaboration with their several participants in order: 1) to collect essential information about the state of the practices, training and research in Mediation for Social Inclusion in each country; 2) to participate in the Tour of Europe by the Mediators and Welcome Organizations; and 3) to share mutual experiences between academics, professionals, students, politicians and between other interested participants in the debate about MSI both in daily work and disseminations that happened in the various partner countries: Seville, Spain; Sicily, Italy; Braga, Portugal; Brussels, Belgium and Paris and Luneville, France.

Having, as its main aim, the implementation of the Tour of Europe by the Social Mediators and to conceive a training plan for the training and development of Social Mediator professionals, the ArC constituted a space and time of sharing and collaboration in the construction of knowledge and practices without frontiers, where Practitioner-Mediators (PM) were welcomed by the Specialists in Mediation (SM) in different territories and organizations – the Welcome Organizations (WO) - from various European countries. This mobility and immersion in different contexts of social mediation created opportunities for networks of interaction and work, therefore, promoting a space of sharing and dialogue – a community of practice - between the mediators from the various organizations from the partner countries with the common objective of learning together (Wenger, 2006), as a higher form of learning, through shared group activities.

Figure 2 seeks to illustrate the progressive constitution and enlargement of the assembled community of practice and learning in terms of the objectives of the Project and as moderated by the ArleKin Team. It is a community, which has been open to dialogue, while also being participative, trans-national, inter-disciplinary and pluri-institutional and which was making progress in communication, participation and collaboration in its review and consolidation of the aim and objectives of the ArleKin Project.

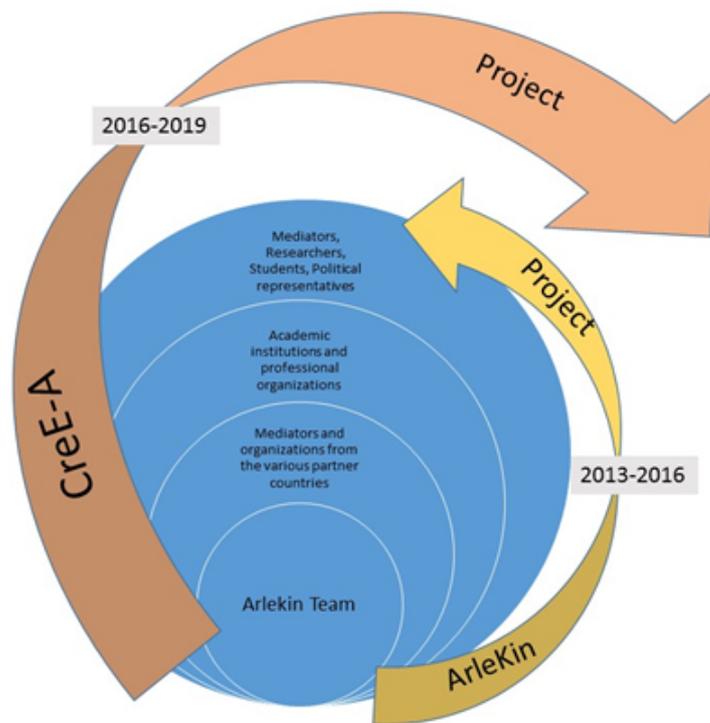


Figure 2. Constitution and consolidation of the community of practice and learning

This progressive consolidation of a community of research, training and learning permitted the expansion of its objectives in the making of a new project for the construction of a European space of mediation for social inclusion. This project, entitled Creation of a European Space for Mediation for Social Inclusion [CreE-A] was submitted to the EACEA under Action KA 3 (Call: EACEA/05/2016, Social inclusion through education, training and youth) and was approved in July 2016 for three years.

LEARNING TOGETHER: FROM SHARED KNOWLEDGE TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF CREATIVE KNOWLEDGE

The Project permitted the validation of the non-explicit action-research methodology from the start. As one of its objectives was the constitution of a professional and European community for Social Mediation, it did not depart from its previous explicit intention of attaining its objectives through a process based on an approach of collaborative research and training. However, the process and the results achieved permitted the validation of an unanticipated methodology and the construction of a community of practice and learning that is considered appropriate for the professionalization of Social Mediation. In other words:

- Social Mediation is an emerging profession;
- Its professionalization is demonstrated by its identification of the diversity of its practices, knowledge and mutual sharing;
- The knowledge of the mediators is fundamentally a knowledge of experience, an unspoken, non-formalized integrated experience and, since it is acquired through experience, it is a tacit knowledge;
- The model of training-learning of the Companions of the Tour of France offered a training plan that allows one, through immersion, to place oneself in contact with the experience of the Specialists of Mediation (SM) and with tacit knowledge, as a means of socialization. Through the Final Report (Chef d'Ouvre), the Practitioner-Mediators (PM) explained the knowledge of doing of the Mediators of the Welcome Organizations and, in this way, transformed this knowledge of doing into professional knowledge at

the disposition of all of the mediators of the professional community; in other words, an externalization of knowledge (cf. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1997).

This process of learning and professionalization was validated by the ArleKin Project. In summary,

- The Practitioner-Mediators and the Specialists in Mediation showed genuine interest in mutually discovering the practices of social mediation and its contexts in the different European countries.
- This confirmed that the homogenization of this new professional activity and its evolution, as a profession, is constructed from bottom up: through the explanation of its practices and its tacit knowledge that they developed mutually, as was possible to observe from the richness of their experiences in the sharing that was carried out among the Mediators of the Tour of Europe.
- In the same way, a European dimension also was confirmed, as the appropriate space for the revelation of the diversity of the practices, its externalization and knowledge. The interdicts or taboos or shared obvious facts in certain countries were not considered as such in others. As an example, we highlighted the case of a Mediator, who had a lot of difficulty sharing religious questions in his own country, where the laity made it harder to talk about religion, but which he could do freely with Mediators from other countries. This fact allowed for the pondering about important aspects in the intervention of social mediation, particularly when the religious question was central for the prevention of sectarian views that lead to violent extremism.

These hypotheses will continue to be considered in the new project – CreE-A – following its own spiral of action-research.

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