Education and Culture

Leonardo da Vinci

REFLECTIVE QUALITY DEVELOPMENT FOR CVT TEACHERS AND TRAINERS THROUGH SELF-EVALUATION

SECOND COUNTRY REPORT

GREECE

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1. Introduction

In the course of the Leonardo da Vinci project "Reflective Quality Development for the CVT teachers and trainers" a computer-based tool has been developed; the tool aims at the supporting practitioners (esp. teachers, trainers, and teachers' trainers) in the process of self-evaluation and developing further the quality of their work. The tool is based on the assumption that people need the time to think of issues related to their work life; thus, the tool sets questions that intrigue the user to consider various aspects of their work situations and possible ways for improving them. The tool does not aim to act as an informative guide or test of knowledge, but clearly to stimulate people to think on issues that they consider important. It is thus, an interactive tool, which gives users the possibility to choose which questions they would like to reflect on, and most importantly, to develop their own questions –hence customize it to their own needs.

For this purpose, the tool divides into six dimensions:

1. Assessment and Recognition
2. Self-evaluation and Quality Development
3. Values and Roles
4. Teaching and Learning
5. Collaboration and Networking
6. Work Conditions

These dimensions are structured for the purpose of presentation and navigation into four levels:

- The system level, where issues that set the wider socio-economic context are dealt
- The institutions level, where issues related to the institutions where the user is being employed are questioned
- The group/team level, where the dynamics of people working together are considered
- The individual level, where issues that directly concern the user and his work are explored.

The tool has been thoroughly tested, aiming to capture feed-back from a wide range of practitioners, according to the following criteria:

- Conceptual Practicability
- Technical Usability
- Content
- Relevance to social needs and time

It is relevant to underscore here the importance that the context plays in shaping and interpreting the findings; as we have already highlighted in the first national report, the concept of self-evaluation is at an embryonic stage yet in Greece; the idea of consciously taking the time and reflect for the purpose of improving the quality of work is certainly a novel idea. This approach is novel in the Greek context, where a common practice would be people to reflect on issues at the time when those arise.

Furthermore, Greece currently has a high rate of IT illiterates. IT has not penetrated yet sufficiently in the everyday working life. Therefore, even though the general attitude towards these tools is in principle positive, since people are not yet accustomed in using them, the actual value of the tool remains to be proved.

This report is on the organisation of the test phase and its methodology and gives a detailed description of its results, as tested in Greece, and recommendations for further improvement.

2. Methodology

2.1 The context

The testing phase included a wide range of social partners in the VET area, in order to assure the reliability of the results, and especially the social relevance of the tool. The participants were coming from educational institutions, policy-making authorities, unions, etc. In total we talked with 11 individuals drawn from the following institutions:

- EKEPIS: the National Accreditation Body for Vocational Training (2 individuals)
- INE-GSEE: Employees Confederation (3 individuals)
- 2 Centres for Vocational Training (KEK), which had long experience in developing training programs for socially disadvantaged groups, and were aware of the concept of modularization (1 and 2 individuals)
- 3 professional trainers, who had long experience in teaching in VET programmes for socially disadvantaged groups

The institutions which participated in the testing phase were already involved in the project, since the first interview stage a year before, when we were mapping the VET area in Greece, and were chosen on the basis of their influence and experience in this field. Furthermore, we have added in the sample two experienced free-lancer trainers, since they are in principle identified with our user-group.

We should add here that we have also approached the Confederation of Companies and Industries (SEV), which had already participated in the initial interview stage of the project; however, they refused the time to comment on the tool.

All the participants were well educated and IT literate and at least familiar with the use of IT tools to support various aspects of VET, and generally positive towards the use of IT in supporting VET trainers. In particular, one of the participants was a qualified IT trainer, and a second was responsible for developing tools to support e-learning in a VET centre. Therefore we gathered useful feed-back in improving the functionality of the e-tool.

However, our preliminary study (First Country Report, 2006) highlighted that IT has not penetrated sufficiently the Greek economic culture yet (mainly due to the small size of firms), and furthermore, self-reflection is still an alien concept to the working life. The concern raised from the preliminary study was whether an electronic tool to support self-reflection would be adequate in the Greek context. The sample of the pilot study was considered representative to record their reactions and answer this critical question, as it will be discussed further below.

2.2 Methods

Initially, the test phase was intended to be conducted with the use of a group discussion, where the participants would exchange their views not only regarding the use of the tool, but also the concepts on which the tool was constructed. However, this turned out to be impossible due to the participants' tight time-schedule. Hence, we proceeded to separate meetings with each participant institution and trainer.

The testing phase lasted 3 weeks and was completed in three stages:

a) an invitation to participate in the pilot-study, which was arranged via phone and confirmed via e-mail, when the website of the tool and other relevant info (project leaflet, instructions to log in the tool) were sent to the participants b) an initial meeting for introducing the tool to the participants and c) a feed-back meeting.

The email intended to sensitivize the participants regarding the possibilities of the tool, and ideally question its use and potentials, however, in practice very few spent the time to play with it before the initial meeting, when the tool was presented to them by the facilitator. During the initial meeting, which lasted appx. 2 hours, the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the electronic tools were first recorded, and then the tool was demonstrated and explained.

The participants had the opportunity to play around with it, and were in position to give comments, which captured their first impressions regarding its usability, and its relevance to the groups it targets.

After 1-2 weeks, a follow-up meeting was arranged –or alternatively a phone communication- where more specific comments were explored regarding the content and the usability of the tool.

The tool has been tested against the following criteria:

- Conceptual Practicability, where the conceptual coherence and relevance have been tested
- Technical Usability, where the technical aspects of the tool, i.e. easiness of navigation, user-friendliness, lay-out, etc have been tested
- Content, where the relevance and effectiveness of the developed material have been tested
- Relevance to social needs and to time, where we test the question whether an electronic tool for self-reflection is relevant to the Greek context, as it currently is, and whether it ultimately achieve to address actual needs of the target group with an effective manner.

The idea behind this 3-step pilot study was to first intrigue and then to give the participants the time to explore the possibilities of the tool. Had the participants not given the time to test the tool on their own, then we assumed that the tool failed to capture their interest.

It is also noted that, the participants were very fluent with the English language, hence they chose to test the full English version of the tool, giving limited feed-back to the Greek translated dimension.

3. Results

3.1. Conceptual Practicability

As mentioned above, all participants in the pilot phase were in principle positively predisposed to the use of electronic tools, and had experience in using them, or some of them had participated themselves in developing tools related to VET. Therefore, participants at large did not question the intention to develop an e-tool for supporting self-reflection. However, not surprisingly, the concept of self-reflection was put into question, since, as our preliminary study suggested, it is a new concept in the Greek VET area. On this point, our group of participants was split into two:

- The policy-makers suggested that it would be a very useful tool, however it seems that it would require a degree of 'professional' experience, therefore it would better suit teacher's trainers.

- The trainers did not think that self-reflection was an issue for scrutinizing, and it can be safely said that the tool was not perceived as a tool for self-reflection –i.e. a process of refection that occurs at the individual level. Trainers widely thought that reflection is something that happens while chatting with the colleagues at the cafeteria, hence it is group-activity that needs personal interaction. Consequently, they could not perceive the tool in his current form as an instrument to support (self)-reflection. They question that they stressed was 'what happens after the user answers the question', implying that the process cannot be completed with the simple act of answering questions. They insisted that the tool is not 'interactive enough' as it is, since it does not fully support the exchange of ideas and discussions with other members. This group of people would certainly prefer a tool that would support chatting-rooms, for this is what they stated they needed.

It is important however to stress a third –political- role that the trainers saw for the tool, i.e. the role of 'glue' in their effort to develop an occupational identity. The preliminary study has indicated that in Greece we cannot talk about a 'profession' of trainers, since it is a low-paid and highly insecure job, and people widely practise it as a secondary occupation. Nevertheless, there is a core of people, who identify themselves as 'professionals' and are in the process of institutionalizing their existence and having their voices heard, by forming the Trainers Union.

Two of the participants in the pilot phase represented that group and expressed their interest the tool to be available on their website, as a stimulating instrument to exchange viewpoints and communicate with other members.
No other detailed comment was mentioned regarding the concepts used in the tool, and we interpret this as the tool was well-accepted in these terms.

3.2. Technical Usability

The tool was overall very well accepted in terms of lay-out and technical features, while IT experts who participated in the pilot phase commented that their first impression is that it looks very 'professional'. However, it was pointed out by the IT experts that the advanced features it offers may scare users, who are not accustomed in the use of e-tools, off. It needs be stressed here that the rest of the participants, even though in principle embraced the options of developing own questions and build a pathway, none took the opportunity to actually try these features out.
Regarding the registration process, it was pointed out that it is indeed easy; this may be a problem, since it allows people to register with an invalid e-mail and abuse the tool. It was suggested that a confirmation of valid email before registering may be useful. It was also noted that, people are tired off and maybe suspicious of registering in various websites. It was suggested the tool to allow potential users access into the questions and answers, and to require the creation of an account name only if they want to participate 'in the community' and actually answer questions and join discussions / comments. Hence, the tool would allow potential users to browse it, and decide to register only if they think it would be useful to them.

Furthering this point on, and in line with their view of a tool for discussion, rather than self-reflection (see points in the section above), the participants observed that the comments related to a question should be presented in an aggregated way under the title of a question, as a thread of views; ideally people would be able to comment / respond to comments without having to answer a question –hence comments would concern thoughts stimulated by the question, and from there a discussion could be initiated, rather than just commenting on the use / relevance of the question. Moreover, people should be able to see if there are new comments or which is the question which currently holds most of comments (i.e. it is a hot topic) without having to go through all the questions one-by-one to track it down.

It was also noted that the tool would never achieve to capture the attention, unless potential users see that there is currently many issues 'on air'; this practically means that the developers need to fill the database with a considerable number of answers and comments, because potential users would never stick to an 'empty' tool.
This final point implies the need for a database administrator/team, who would be responsible for feeding the tool with new questions and discussions before and during the first months of its launch, until it takes off and people start using it regularly. Also, the administrator would be responsible for filtering and cleaning the database from malicious and offensive comments.

3.3. Content

Very few comments were made concerning the content of the tool; the reason for this is that very few people actually took the time and explored the questions. From the limited feed-back we gathered, it was made clear that the tool provides a great range of questions –some more appropriate for reflection than others. It was pointed out that the language used is not always 'friendly', as it sometimes strikes out as too academic and rigid; also, some questions were considered too long and complex to understand what it is actually required.

Also, it was often mentioned that the tool is very broad and people are put off by the long list of questions, which often resembles to each other; it was explained that they prefer straight-forward questions that capture the attention of users in a couple of lines.

We consider the fact that very few people took the time to test the content of the questions as an indication of the potential of the tool to reach its target group –a point, which we will elaborate further below.

3.4. Relevance to social needs and to time

It is a very significant observation the fact that very few participants actually spent the time to play around with the questions, and no participants took the time to explore the potentials of the tool –pathways and develop own questions. The pilot study was designed to include 3 stages, in order to allow participants the time before and the presentation of the tool to explore it by themselves; however, most feed-back was gathered during the second stage of the presentation of the tool, and then short summaries of their points made were sent back by the participants. The tool failed to capture the participants interest, and give some of their time to 'reflect' upon the issues we proposed, even though, they stated that all was very interesting. This situation raises a very important question, as to the actual value of the tool, and its relevance to address specific needs of the target group (i.e. teachers and trainers).

This situation is further explained by reference to two comments participants made: some participants stated that the tool does not reflect the trainers' needs, because it is a tool developed by academics/consultants, and not by a group of trainers. In other words, they doubted in principle the adequacy of an external group to develop such a tool, having identified and precisely understood the needs of the target group. It was also stated that this fact would be enough to alienate the potential users from the tool. The fact that the tool offers the users the possibility to develop their own questions was considered a minor feature.

This point relates to the following observation all participants made; the tool does not answer the 'what next' question, i.e. what happens after a person has answered a question. Participants could not see the reflection process intrigued by the tool as self-contained and conceptually complete in itself, but as the first stage of a wider process, which would lead to the exchange of views and dialogue among the users. Clearly, participants are not familiar with the concept of self-reflection, as the preliminary study has revealed, and furthermore, they consider very important the chit-chat time with their colleagues. Also, they recommended the tool could be used as a register of views, which then could be elaborated and forwarded to the Authority of VET Accreditation. This would clearly attribute the tool a political role, which could support policy-making and planning.

The same observation, i.e. that participants did not spend own time with the tool, lead to another question, which concerns the timeliness of the tool. We have already noted that the concept of self-reflection is not popular in a working context in Greece. Furthermore, even though all participants stated that they are familiar with IT tools and sometimes use them, this did not mean that participants do use IT tools to support their work, unless they are expected to do so. All participants were IT literate and have used similar tools, but very few turned these tools a part of their daily routine. This observation means that an electronic tool for self-reflection may be an unfamiliar novelty in the Greek context at this particular point in time, which may affect the extent in which the tool will penetrate the target-group.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The electronic tool for quality development through self-reflection for teacher and trainers was thoroughly tested with a group of experts, which represented most of the important actors in the Greek VET area. The English version of the tool was tested against the following criteria:

- Conceptual Practicability
- Technical Usability
- Content
- Relevance to social needs and to time

The feed-back we gathered suggested ways for improving the tool, and most importantly it challenges the presuppositions we hold regarding the conceptual basis of this tool –and similar other tools.
Based on the comments the participants in the pilot study made regarding the tool, it appears that it is a well-constructed tool, developed on a sound conceptual framework; most of the participants praised the tool for it deals with new and important concepts (self-reflection, quality development for teachers and trainers). Few suggestions for improvement in this respect were made, mostly concerning the language used in the questions, (some questions were considered hard to follow and the language used quite complicated). This issue would be amended with a thorough review and editing of all questions, which would result to a shorter and better-suited database of questions.

The main question that concerned the participants was the 'what next' question; this means that none of the participants could see this tool be completed in itself, as a self-reflection tool. As it is already noted above, the participants would rather see a tool, which would spark discussions among the users beyond the questions. It is suggested the development of the comment-box as a discussion thread, which will present current comments / views in an aggregated way; the users will be able to browse current conversations and join the ones that they find interesting.

It is also suggested the users to have the options to browse the tool without having to log in. We should highlight here that the participants' suggestions emerge from a different conceptual frame than the one used by the experts who develop the tool; notably, the practitioners' suggestions focus on the actions taken after the reflection process, not being able to see the self-reflection as a complete process in itself. We suggest to follow the participants' comments, and to extend the use of the tool to include this political role, since this would reflect better the needs of the target group.

Some concerns were expressed as to how to support the tool taking off and commit users, as well as how to prevent the malicious use of the tool. In what concerns that first matter, it is suggested that the team of experts who currently are involved with the development of the tool, should make an initial log of answers, which would attract the first users. However, it is stressed that this would not be enough, as electronic tools tend to have a long launching period, until they get established. Therefore it is suggested the provision of a website administrator, who would be responsible for keeping the tool alive with new questions and answers, as well as controlling the malicious users by confirming email accounts, and filtering offensive messages.

At a second level of analysis, based so much on participants' comments, as well as the researchers' observations of the pilot phase, it emerges that the tool has a great difficulty indeed to capture the target-group attention. It is already explained how the participants did not commit any of their personal time to play around with the tool and try out its potentials –even though most of them agreed that it is very useful and they would be interested to test it and work with it once it is launched. This raised the questions as to whether an electronic tool for self-reflection is the appropriate way to support quality development for teachers and trainers in the current Greek context. The data suggest that even though people are in principle positively disposed towards these key-concepts, the current working situation does not support the taking-off of such a tool. By this observation is not meant to refuse all practical use of such tools, but clearly to point out that an electronic tool cannot enhance quality, as an isolated move. It rather needs to be a part of a complete policy for assuring quality for teachers and trainers, where most important elements would be policies for raising awareness for quality and self-reflection, and structures to assure quality at the individual and the institutional level.