InterAct Handbook

Part 1 – The InterAct Model

- **Background**
- **A motivational instrument**
- **How does it work**

  - **InterAct in a nutshell**
  - **Description of the steps**
- **How to implement it in your own setting**

  - **Creating a script**
  - **Organisation**
  - **Pitfalls and challenges**
  - **The role of the tutor**

Part 2 – The project

- **The InterAct project**
- **Validation of the scripts**
- **Lessons learned**
- **Possibilities for future projects**
- **The partnership: contacts for guidance**

Part 3 – Validated scripts

Part 4 - Articles and presentations

Part 1 - The InterAct Model

Background

The New Basic Skills, which have been declared necessary in order to function in modern society, comprise the traditional skills like literacy and numeracy, but also new skills like ICT skills, foreign languages, entrepreneurship and social skills like communication, team-working, negotiation, etc.

There is a need for a higher level of ICT skills at the workplace in many European countries, particularly among unqualified workers, older workers and immigrants. While these groups may not need ICT skills to carry out their current work roles, they risklosing their jobs in the near future, as technical upgrading and a growing need for documentation of work procedures introduces ICT-routines in mostly any job in modern Europe.

The need for further strengthening of the New Basic Skills does not apply to ICT only. With continuing changes in most workplaces there is an increasing need for a flexible and highly entrepreneurial work force, well

equipped in soft skills like communication, social interaction and an active attitude to adapt to these changes, and indeed, to contribute to development at the workplace. The will and ability to adapt to current and future changes is also a necessary qualification to become attractive in the labour market, thus minimising the risk of marginalisation.

A motivational instrument

Many of the workers belonging to the target group for the project may not be motivated for traditional courses in, for example, the use of ICT. The reasons for this can be that they have not been in a formal learning situation for many years, that they have bad memories from their encounter with formal education or that they feel alienated from a traditional teaching and learning situation. The idea of attending a course may also seem frightening for some and even lead to fear of performing badly, which will of course contribute to reducing the learning outcome. There is also the possibility that some workers may be assigned to a course in ICT and/or other basic skills by their superiors without really being motivated for it themselves.

The InterAct project aims at developing a model for learning that is motivating also for workers who may feel alienated from traditional, formal learning situations. The model has a playful approach and shows that it is possible to learn in an informal and secure atmosphere, in the company of fellow workers, and in an enjoyable way.

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[1] The Commission adopted, in Dec 2005 a proposal for recommendation identifying eight key competences in lifelong learning: communication in the mother tongue; communication in the foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; interpersonal, intercultural and social competences and civic competence; entrepreneurship; and cultural expression. The Parliament adopted this proposal in Nov 2006.

▲ **top**

How does it work

InterAct in a nutshell

InterAct is a model for short term educational activities involving communication and negotiation between small teams of participants through the use of an Internet-based learning platform.

The teams are presented with a problem that has to be solved by the whole network. The concept allows for great flexibility in relation to the length of the activity, the theme, the target groups and the number of participants.

Because of the flexibility of the model, there are many possible ways of implementing this activity but certain basic elements are present in most InterAct simulations:

- Participants are gathered in small groups or teams in each location and are given one team role in the simulation
- Each team will interact with other teams, in different geographical locations, through the Internet
- The script evolves around a core "problem" that needs to be solved through negotiation
- The script is divided in clear steps (usually 5 or 6) with clear tasks and deadlines
- The approach is playful, scripts are realistic but fictitious, and creativity is presented as a desirable trait
- The tasks involve learning how to

    - search the Web for reliable information,
    - produce adequate written texts in a variety of styles and contexts,
    - use basic software
    - negotiate a solution
    - work in a team to achieve a goal

The central and most necessary requisite for a successful script is to include a "problem" that is presented to all the participants and that cannot be solved unless the teams collaborate in solving it.

Description of the steps

The basic steps of the model are presented below. However, the model is very flexible and can be organised in a number of ways. Steps and tasks can be added depending on the target group, the aims of the role-play and the intended duration of the activity.

Step 1

Small teams of workers (2 to 5) are formed at each simulation site. In the first phase the groups are given a "role" which will be to a certain extent relevant to the participants' work but will also include certain fictitious characteristics. The groups are asked to further develop their role, to make a more detailed description of the roles they have been given. In this phase the participants will work together in their teams, where they communicate face-to-face, and will upload the description of their role figure on the LMS (Learning Management System) they are using. Throughout the role-play there will be a team hiding behind each role figure.

Step 2
Here the teams are presented with a case-based problem or task and they are asked to present their role's answer to the particular challenge. In this phase the participants will again work face to face in their teams and then upload their common answer to the particular problem on the Internet-based platform for the other teams to read.

Step 3
An unexpected problem is now introduced, a problem that makes it impossible to simply accept the three solutions the teams presented in Step 2. They have to arrive at a common solution to the problem and this can only be done through negotiations between the teams/roles

Step 4
The simulations are normally followed up by a fourth phase, which is a debriefing and evaluation of the activities, shortly after the last problem has been solved. In this phase the participants can tell each other about problems that arose during the simulation and discuss the experience.

▲ top

How to implement it in your own setting
The aim of the InterAct project has been to develop a model for strengthening the new basic skills at the workplace and to validate it in the two selected sectors. Another aim of the project is to ensure the sustainability of the model once the lifetime of the project and the EU funding has expired, which is a challenge in international projects.

The model that has been developed and validated in the project is most of all an idea or a concept that can be adapted to different needs and situations. For those who would want to use this model, the first task will be to find a relevant topic and to develop and structure this topic into a script.

Creating a script
Once you have decided that a web-based problem solving role-play should be part of the training programme, the first thing you have to do is to find a theme that is relevant for the target group and the aim of the training as well as motivating for the participants. In order to find a good topic, it will probably be useful to discuss it with representatives of the target group. The time available for implementing the simulation is also of relevance for the choice of topic and also whether the participants should be obliged to search for a lot of information on the Internet to do the role-play. This will also depend on the participants' ICT skills and their experience in searching for information. Since it is a central requisite in a script to have a core problem that needs to be solved through negotiations, careful thought will be needed to identify a topic where it will possible to include a seed for disagreement between the groups.

When the topic has been found, the next step is to create the script. The topic has to be organised, structured and developed into a role-play or a simulation that can be carried out by the participants. Although the InterAct model has a playful approach to learning and encourages creativity, the activity requires careful planning, a tight structure and clear instructions for the participants and the tutors in order to be successful. The script has to be divided into steps or phases that build on each other so that there is development and progress in the simulation. When the script is organised on the LMS, you will have to decide if the groups should be allowed to see all the steps at any particular time, or only the one they are actually working on. If they have access to all the steps of the script, there is a risk that some groups proceed on a new step before they are supposed to. It is important to keep the script simple, as this will make the work of creating and organising the tasks easier.

To create the context for the simulation, you should include a short background history for the tasks and activities in the script, something that explains and is reflected in the roles that the groups are asked to develop further and the other tasks. This background history should be reflected throughout the different steps in the role-play. For example, one of the validated InterAct scripts starts by stating that a European Union Health Organisation has given a specific mission to groups from four countries. The roles and the following steps are created in accordance with this fictitious mission. This fictitious context can also be useful when introducing the core problem that has to be solved through negotiation.

The instructions for each step should present the tasks as clearly as possible and also how the groups are

supposed to work when accomplishing the tasks. It may be that they are going to work face to face in groups or that they are going to communicate with each other online, or both. All the tasks must have a deadline, which both participants and the tutors have to respect.

Instructions should also be clear as to how and where the groups are going to present the products of their work. The news forums that are going to be used for different purposes and the folders or documents where they are going to present the product of their group work should be created in advance and named in a way that is easily identifiable.

All the tutors involved should read the script and give their opinion as to whether the instructions are clear enough. Possible pitfalls can be a too high level of complexity in the alternatives presented for selection, lack of clarity as to which group is going to present the final decision, or too little reason for "conflict" in the negotiation phase because of a too obvious solution to the problem. If the simulation is going to be a co-operation between groups at different workplaces with several local tutors involved, these tutors should be involved in creating the script. In this way there will be more feedback on the content as well as to whether the instructions are clear enough, In addition, the tutors will more easily be able to explain the instructions to the participants when this is necessary, thus increasing the probabilities of a successful simulation. If there are groups from different countries involved, it is important to take into consideration the different time zones, different lunch hours and when the workday ends in the different countries. You may find there is very little "common time", and that means that the activities of the day may need to be organized with several "partial deadlines" to ensure the completion of the common tasks.

It is also important to consider what the possible obstacles to a successful simulation might be. The time factor is important and the workload per week should be reasonable. The latter will depend on the participants' prior competences and skills and one will also have to consider how much time they have to their disposal for each phase (a factor that may vary from one group to the other within the same simulation). If they have none to very little prior ICT skills, the participants cannot be expected to produce a lot of written material. In those cases it may prove sensible to reduce the level of complexity of the script tasks.

The most critical part of the script is the negotiation phase. The negotiation step and the tasks have to be formulated in a way that ensures there will actually be a negotiation. If for example the instructions encourage a yes or no answer, there is a risk that there will be no real negotiation and that the discussion will not last very long because of the groups giving in too quickly and letting one group "win" the negotiation. This means that the other groups accept this group's solution to the problem. The same will probably be the case if the task is formulated like an invitation to a general discussion. Experience shows that a discussion that is too general is likely to wither after a short while. It is important therefore to ensure that there really is something to negotiate about, with something at stake. The negotiations have to be organised so that all groups will win and lose something and they a solution is reached that represents a compromise.

Another issue to consider is how to terminate the negotiations. Perhaps the groups decide themselves when they have reached a compromise that everyone agrees with. An alternative may be to set a deadline for an end to negotiations and to give then one of the groups the task of summarizing the result. The latter was done in the simulations that were validated through the InterAct project, but the group that was assigned this task was always informed discreetly of this before the negotiations started, so that they were prepared when the moment came. If this solution is chosen, it should be clear in the instruction for this step that they will have to stop the negotiation at a certain deadline and that one group has been assigned or will then be assigned the task of summarising the results from the negotiation.

While a simulation must be well structured and organised, if it is to achieve its aims there is still a lot of room for creativity. In the simulations validated through the InterAct project we have wanted to emphasise the playful and humorous aspect of the role-plays and the scripts were developed with the aim of also allowing the participants to be inventive. The theatrical aspect helps in promoting creativity. Experience from simulations shows that when the participants are having fun, they forget they are in a learning situation and overcome their fear of performance. They learn a lot almost without being aware of it.

Organisation
There are some important factors to think of when organising the simulation in your workplace. First, there should be a room available for the group to work or several rooms if the simulation is carried out as cooperation between several groups at one single workplace. It is not advisable to have several groups in one room because there will be discussions and brainstorming going on and it will be tiring and hard to concentrate. The artificiality of communicating on the Internet when sitting in the same room should be avoided.

You will also need computers and an Internet connection. How many computers you need will vary with the number of participants and with the number of groups. If there is a group of 3-5 members, they can manage with one computer but two computers will make them more efficient ant the work will be more flexible. In addition, the group members will have more time each at the computer. This is especially important if the training of ICT skills is one of the aims of the training, and it will in any case prove more motivating for the

group participants. The tutor should also, if at all possible, have access to her or his own computer in order to monitor the activity, communicate with other tutors in the other simulation sites and solve problems in real-time.

Regarding the LMS, the InterAct model is platform independent, i.e. you can use any LMS in the market as long as it is adapted to the level of digital competence of your users. Make sure the LMS allows for shared editing of documents, for organization in different folders, for the differentiation between static documents and communication areas, and for differentiation of reading/writing rights.

How the pedagogical content of the collaboration within each group is organised will be up to the tutor. He or she may want to focus on soft skills like communication and teamwork. Group dynamics will then be important and a structure will have to be designed that emphasises collaboration between the group members. If the group seems to function well, it should be allowed to work on its own with the tutor in the background as motivator and assistant for the technical aspects of using the LMS. Group members should also be encouraged to give their views on the best way of organising the work. Thought should also be given to whether it might be necessary to organise a familiarisation session with the LMS.

The tasks in the script must have clear deadlines. This is important in a collaborative learning activity because the groups depend on each other to accomplish the tasks and because the activities done in one step depend on the results from the previous step. If tasks are not accomplished within deadlines, the whole activity may be blocked. If a group has problems finishing the task within the deadline, the other groups and tutors should be informed about this. If a group is not able to accomplish the task before the next step starts, the tutor will have to complete the task so that the simulation can proceed.

While implementing the role-play, it is important to read the instructions for each step thoroughly. Participants should also read the instructions one last time before embarking on the tasks, even if they have read them the evening before. A simulation script is often a dynamic entity and logic errors or unclear instructions may be identified at the last minute, and modifications introduced subsequently. Changes should be avoided once the simulation exercise has begun. Instructions can be made available in a paper version for the participants, making it is easier for them to keep to the instructions while working and to avoid deviations from the intended path. This is valid for the contents of the task in question but also for issues like where exactly on the LMS the results of the group work should be posted. If there is confusion and the groups are not able to find and read each other's answers and solutions to the presented problem or the messages in the news forum, frustration will arise, and the results will be mediocre. The same will be the case if one of the groups misunderstands or forgets the exact objective of the task and does something different from what it is supposed to do.

Pitfalls and challenges

There are several pitfalls and challenges and some of them have already been mentioned above. Unforeseen problems may arise during the simulation, so it may be necessary to improvise solutions along the way. The most common pitfalls and challenges that have been experienced in the InterAct project are summarized below:

- The groups may be too big, thus making it difficult to keep everybody active during the simulation
- Some members of the group have fallen ill and/or cannot participate for other reasons putting an overload of work on the remaining members.
- Unclear instructions in the script leading to misunderstandings and confusion
- The tutor and/or the participants not reading instructions properly and the group starting to do something other than what is being asked
- The organiser of the simulation realises that there is an error in the instructions or that they are unclear and imposes some last minute changes to the instructions. The other tutors may then not notice the short notice changes but act according to what they have already read.
- The workload is too big and one or more groups are not able to finish the task before the deadline.
- The tasks in a step are not sufficient to keep the groups working until the deadline
- The negotiation goes too slowly and does not take off
- There is no real negotiation and it seems to be finished far to early compared to the deadline
- The Internet is down and some of the groups have no access to the LMS
- Different time zones have not been taken into consideration in a simulation across borders and the groups are not on-line simultaneously

While it is difficult when problems arise during a role-play, advice as to how to solve or be prepared for challenges and problems can be shared

If it is necessary to make changes in the instructions while the simulation is going on, it is important to make sure that the local tutors are aware of this in time to adapt. This can be done by establishing a tutors' news forum that the tutors visit regularly or when they see that there is a new message or by using the phone, the

chat function on the LMS or by sending an sms

It is also a good routine that the tutors always read the instruction (together with the group participants) on the LMS one last time just before starting on the tasks of a step, even if they have read it the day before.

The organiser or supervisor of a simulation should have prepared an additional task if there is any doubt that the workload in a step may not be sufficient to keep the groups working until the deadline. This additional task can be introduced while the groups are working on the step in question.

If the negotiation is going too slow some pre planned measures will also have to be introduced to quicken the pace. It is important that the supervisor or the person responsible for the role-play pays attention to what is going on in order to intervene if something indicates that the instructions are misunderstood. The same goes for the local tutors. It is helpful if the tutor can follow the progress of the role-play on their own computer. If a group is not able to finish the task before the deadline, the tutor will have to ensure that the work is completed (she may have to do it herself if there is no other solution). Technical equipment should be checked before each session. For example by ensuring that the LMS can be accessed, this will allow activities to continue even if there is temporary loss of Internet access.

The role of the tutor
Tutors are essential in relation to developing scripts, as they have experience in identifying motivating topics, and to measure the workload and to structure and organise the script in the best possible way. Tutors are also important during the simulation because they steer the groups and can identify when there is a need for improving an on-going simulation either because instructions are unclear or that a task or the organising of one of the phases is presenting a problem. The tutor will also have to communicate with the other tutors about the progress and development of the role-play and especially if there is an urgent problem that needs an immediate and quick solution. This may be a technical problem or a problem connected to the accomplishment of the tasks. Although a high degree of structure is important in a role-play, flexibility in making modifications and real-time problem solving in an on-going simulation is equally important and the tutor is crucial to this end.

The tutor is first and foremost responsible for the group's fulfilment of its tasks within the deadlines. This includes helping the participants to read and understand the instructions and helping them to organise the work in a logical way. The groups are interdependent so if one fails to fulfil the tasks within the deadline it will affect the outcome of the whole activity. The tutor is also very important as a motivator and can help the group with ideas and suggestions if they get stuck. The simulations are usually followed up with a debriefing, and the evaluation of the activities. The tutor again, is central to these activities.

For some participants, moving from one area of the LMS to the other is a challenge if they are not digitally competent. It is advisable to provide the tutor with access via their own computer in order for them to be able to supervise activities both in their own group, but also in other groups. This involves following the communication in the news forums and helping the participants with this communication if necessary. The tutors should also teach the participants some elementary rules for communication on the Internet (netiquette), such as politeness, friendliness and being careful with irony, and should emphasise that that written communication via email can easily be misunderstood. Negotiations can get heated and the tutor may have to encourage the participants to interpret apparently rude or angry statements with latitude, rather than viewing it as someone voicing anger. Sometimes the role of the tutors may be to solve technical problems and to communicate with the other tutors and the supervisor as described above, about problems and other urgent matters, technical or otherwise, in order to make the simulations proceed as smoothly as possible.

In addition to technical problems and making the simulations proceed smoothly, there may also be challenges more closely connected to group dynamics. Participants in a group situation may adopt various roles, for example some may be too dominant, others too passive, not participating much. It is also the tutor's responsibility to try get everybody involved and to encourage those with less confidence to get more involved in activities they would naturally leave to others.

▲ top

Part 2 - **The InterAct project**

The InterAct project is aimed at developing a model to help workers increase their New Basic Skills, through learning at the workplace, using role-play as a motivator and within a thematic framework that participants would deem as relevant to their work.

The model that has been validated in the project was initially developed in projects that used Internet-based role-plays in classroom-based settings. In the previous projects the model was used by a variety of groups in formal and non-formal adult education to enhance language learning. One of the groups adapted the model for students studying Business English and through this experience it became clear that the model had great

potential for vocational training, irrespective of whether it included foreign language training.

The project has two main target groups. The primary target group being workers with low formal education or lacking ICT skills. The secondary target group are workplace instructors and trainers looking for a motivating and inspiring tool to strengthen the New Basic Skills among the workers.

The InterAct project aimed at adapting the model to the special needs of training at the workplace, customizing the scripts for two specific sectors: the health and care sector, and the tourism and accommodation sector. This meant that the model had to be developed in close cooperation with the leadership at the workplace and/or with tutors and instructors responsible for training in specific occupational settings. Scripts, structure and didactic and organisational approach were developed in close cooperation with project partners, who included both educational institutions and representatives of workplaces in the two targeted sectors.

Validation of scripts – Preparation phase
Two rounds of simulations were run in each sector and were evaluated after each round. The simulation activities lasted for five weeks, with built in debriefing after each step and an evaluation shortly after the end of the simulation. Each round was built on the experiences and the results of the evaluation of the previous round. The first round of simulations was run in the health and care sector.

As a preparation for the first round of simulations, one-day workshops were organised at the workplaces involved. The aim was to make the tutors and participants more familiar with the concept as well as with the Internet-based learning platform used in the project. A specific script was created for the workshops designed as a teambuilding activity for the participants, and the local tutors. Another objective was to increase motivation among participants. In order to achieve this, two workshops were organised on the same day (Pamplona, Spain and Iasi, Romania). A week later, a further two workshops were organised on the same day (London and Oslo, Norway). The participants in both parallel workshops were online simultaneously and they could communicate with each other in the Internet-based environment, able to read and comment on each other's work.

During subsequent rounds, the one-day workshops were not considered necessary since the tutors were now familiar with the concept, and with the Internet-based platform, and they felt more confident about motivating their participants. Shortage of time was an additional factor. During the remaining simulations, the one-day workshops were integrated in the simulations, by increasing the period was extended to five weeks instead of four. The additional week was appended to the front of the programme to allow participants to learn how to use the LMS.

The simulations in health and care
The first simulation was run in the health and care sector, with groups of participants from a nursing home in Norway, hospitals in England and Spain and an agency for social services in Romania. Since the work situations and roles of these partners varied quite substantially, it presented the partnership with a quite challenge to agree a common theme, which interested all the partners. Eventually the theme of "The Health and Nutrition of Mini-Europeans" was agreed. The topic was relevant to the health and care sector but also was a topic of concern in most European countries today, (particularly obesity among children). At the same time the topic was sufficiently general for everybody to have an opinion and to discuss it without having to search for information. Although the aim of the simulation was to see if the model could be used for strengthening the new basic skills, it was important that the participants saw the topic as relevant and motivating. By following this process, we ensured that all subsequent scripts were motivating for participants.

The fictitious element consisted of the groups agreeing to participate in a project commissioned by a European healthcare committee to propose "The Ten Commandments of Child Lifestyle and Nutrition", i.e. ten key messages that should be communicated to parents and carers on giving children the best possible start in life. Each group produced its suggestion for the "Ten Commandments" and uploaded them on the LMS, and since four groups were participating, this meant forty commandments were posted. In the next step they had to discuss and negotiate online to agree a final "Ten Commandments".

Sometimes changes in the script were introduced while the simulation was going on, either because someone had a good idea for improving the script or because it was not working as well as anticipated. In this particular simulation an additional task of creating a campaign to make the key messages known in each group's local community, was added at the end of the simulation. This was proposed by one of the partners who wanted to experience using PowerPoint to make a presentation, and the idea was integrated in the script. The final element involved all the groups voting to establish which group had made the best campaign description, the best PowerPoint presentation and the best budget, all according to a set of defined criteria that were presented in the script. The PowerPoint presentation and the voting were kept throughout subsequent simulations as it increased the element of competition, which clearly stimulated greater motivation and interest amongst the groups.

There were some interesting findings and observations during this first simulation. Intercultural and socio-

economic factors played a bigger part than anticipated, and the participants often observed and commented on them. For example the Norwegian group argued that a key message telling parents not to smoke inside their houses because of the children was superfluous because it was obvious to all. One of the other groups replied that the Norwegians should not be so quick to decide what is obvious or not. The participants in the simulations were aware of cultural and socio-economic differences between countries, but the reply made the groups more aware of differences and also made the participants discuss them further. The example seemed to stimulate curiosity amongst the groups to learn more about the other participating countries.

The second round of simulations in the health and care sector was organised a year after the first. The thematic area for the second simulation was the theories and myths surrounding longevity. A fictitious European Committee of General Well-being and Longevity was created to initiate a project to collect theories and myths in different countries in order to establish what differences between the countries existed on these issues. The groups were asked to present a certain number of theories and myths from their countries and present these on the LMS so that the other groups could read and comment on them.

In the next phase, the groups were advised that the committee could not publish all the theories and myths. There were too many, and each category had to be reduced to a certain number. The groups were therefore forced to negotiate with each other to agree which theories and myths should be left out or whether some could be combined. Again, cultural and socio-economic differences could be observed, according to tutors. Some of the groups focused very much on nutrition and exercise, other groups were more policy oriented and suggested developing a good health system that should be free for everybody. Others suggested using the media to set up campaigns for educational purposes. These are synonymous with the awareness about nutrition and lifestyle in the different countries. This simulation also concluded with voting on which group had made the best PowerPoint presentation based on a series of defined criteria.

The simulations in tourism and accommodation
The two simulations in the tourism and accommodation sector were conducted over a shorter period of time, (the first in November 2005 and the second in March 2006). The challenge was the same as for the health and care sector; i.e. to find a topic that was relevant and motivating for all participants, while at the same time general enough to suit all the different workplaces. The first step required the groups to choose and describe an area suitable for tourism, in their own country and, in the following step, to create a number of activities for a group of young Europeans going on a teambuilding trip to the participating countries. Criteria included the activities being ecologically sound, be cost effective and be suitable for teambuilding purposes. It was presented, as a project funded by the European Union and the problem that was introduced to stimulate negotiations, was that the EU could not support a project with so many activities. Consequently the groups had to negotiate to reduce the number of activities. These simulations also ended with the teams voting for the best and most creative PowerPoint presentation and the best activities for teambuilding purposes.

All the scripts validated in the InterAct project can be found in part 3 of the handbook.

▲ top

Lessons learned
Simulations at the work place
The project planned for learning activities to take place at the workplace and to be integrated in the participants' daily work. The hope was that the whole workplace would then be informed about the project and would feel inspired to take part thereby raising motivation for learning among the whole staff. However integrating learning activities within the workforce soon proved to be difficult due primarily to lack of computers, Internet connection and suitable rooms for the participants to do the project activities. Some tutors commented that participants in the simulation felt uncomfortable sitting at a computer working on role-plays while their colleagues were working. Another factor was that the participants in both sectors regularly worked shifts, which made group work and collaboration difficult. A solution, which worked, was where participants were given one day off from work to do the role-play, which was organised outside their workplace. This was at the premises of another partner and in some cases on the premises of the educational institution in the partnership. Project funding paid for staff cover while the employees participated in the simulations

Organization of the simulations
Organising simulations at the workplace required a lot of planning. The simulations in the two sectors were originally planned to be carried out simultaneously. This idea was dropped because it proved impossible to have staff participating from the tourism and accommodation sector during busy times of the year. The span of one year between the two simulation rounds in the health and care sector is not recommended because some tutors became detached from the on-line learning activities and resultantly became uncertain about the use of the LMS.

In contrast there were only a few months between the two simulations in the tourism and accommodation sector, and consequently there was little time to discuss, agree and prepare a new script. As a result, the script developed for the first simulation round was used again (with some modifications) for the second round.

The groups were asked to come up with fewer activities this time and they were also asked to make a briefer description of the physical area that the teambuilding group would visit. Feedback from the participants indicated that there had been too much work for some of the groups. This highlighted the challenge of creating appropriate scripts and tasks when there is considerable variation in the participants' ICT and English language skills.

The interaction and communication between the groups

International communication was greatly appreciated during the simulations and was regarded as an added value by the participants who highlighted it as one of the things they looked forward to. It enhanced the international dimension of the activities by allowing real communication between the participants; not only could they exchange points of view but also have more personal communication with each other in mail conferences created for this purpose.

Communication is an important element of Internet-based role-play and necessary in order to accomplish the tasks, even though communication between the different groups was not required in all the steps of the role-play. When the simulation was set up on the LMS, mail conferences were created for a variety of purposes. At the same time as the participants were role-playing on the Internet, they acted as themselves in a mail conference created for that purpose. A mail conference for social communication was set up called "Café" and a number of other mail conferences were created for specific discussions, which took place throughout the simulations. If messages were slow to be responded to, this led to disappointment and frustration and seemed to act as a de-motivator. This was particularly noticeable during the first simulation round as all the groups were not on-line on the same day. In the first simulation the Norwegian and the Romanian groups were working on Mondays, the Spanish group was operating two half days, on Mondays and Fridays, while the group from the UK was working on Tuesdays. It was difficult to obtain successful negotiation when the groups were not online simultaneously and the role-play lost some of its dynamics. Different measures were introduced to compensate for this, but the fact that the groups were online on different days was frustrating and the participants were not happy with this, as they wanted more instantaneous communication with the other groups. In the latter rounds, in both sectors, all the groups were working on the same day.

A variation in the timing and duration of lunch breaks was another challenge to be overcome. For example the Norwegians took a short lunch break early, while the Spanish took a longer one later. Since the simulation lasted for five weeks and only one day a week, it was possible to find compromises as regards the lunch break challenge to meaningful communication. The different time zones between the counties could also cause some challenges and should be taken into consideration when setting up an international simulation. The simulation worked better when the participants were made aware of the time differences, because then they could plan their work according to that and they would know when they could expect responses from their colleagues in the other countries.

For the second round of simulations changes were introduced to improve the communication. The simulations began by participants uploading a presentation of themselves (which included photographs) onto the learning platform. This was deemed as important in order to get to know each other and make future communication easier. Next the groups were told to interview each other and an interview schedule was produced. (the Norwegian group interviewing and making a presentation of the Spanish group, which in turn made an interview and a presentation of the Romanian group etc.) This modification introduced interaction between the groups in the first phase and proved successful as it resulted in greater overall communication between the groups. In order to write their presentations each group member had to send questions to a selected member of the other group, and simultaneously answer questions and send information about themselves, including photos. Finally, they had to check whether their profile (as recorded by the other group) was accurate or not.

Negotiations occurred when there was most interaction between the groups. In this phase they discussed and negotiated to arrive at an agreed solution to the problem that required collaboration and compromise. (At this stage, the groups had already worked a lot with tasks assigned to them in the previous phases). They had often had animated internal debates in their groups in order to agree on their group's answer to the tasks. The groups developed a strong sense of ownership to their solutions and answers to the presented problem and they wanted to include as much as possible of it in the joint solution they came to agree on. Many of the participants were not used to writing in English and they had a limited vocabulary. Sometimes experiencing problems expressing themselves in a nuanced way. The discussion could be quite intense, the atmosphere heated and the participants often chose words, which were too strong for what they wanted to express. This sometimes led to misunderstandings during the negotiations. Since many of the participants were not used to communicating over the Internet, they did not always realize that their words and expressions could be misunderstood, however this situation also had a good potential for learning: how to communicate on the Internet to strangers, teaching the importance of politeness, encouragement towards others and to take care when using irony and humour particularly when communicating in a foreign language.

The participants used the debriefing for writing down their impressions of the day. If the negotiations had been heated, it was necessary to tell the others that they were not angry and that there were no hard feelings and that they were only arguing in order to have their ideas and suggestions included in the final compromise. The debriefing was useful in order to clarify misunderstandings that might have arisen and to re-establish

confidence and trust in each other if there had been any difficulties. The debriefing also emphasised the vital role of the tutors, particularly during the negotiation phase.

▲ **top**

Possibilities for future projects

Lifelong Learning
The EU Memorandum of Lifelong Learning states that Europe has moved towards a knowledge-based society and economy and that access to up-to-date information and knowledge is more important than ever. One of the elements of the lifelong learning strategy for Europe is that it should aim at a universal and continuing access to learning in order to gain and renew the skills needed for sustained participation in the knowledge society. The Memorandum especially underlines the new basic skills, like ICT, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills, but it also emphasises that the list of New Basic Skills do not imply that the traditional skills are no longer important. And recent surveys testify that the traditional basic skills remain vitally important.

Reading and writing difficulties
Writing and reading difficulties among adults is widespread in most European countries. Other basic skills including numeracy and ICT are just as important in today's society and access to updating these skills is important in order to be attractive in the labour market.

Nonetheless, in spite of the rapid development of digital technology and the percentage of the population in most European countries have access to, and use computers and the Internet at work and/or at home or in cybercafés, libraries etc., it is still socially acceptable to admit having poor or no ICT skills. The same seems to be the case for numeric skills: one can admit having poor numeric skills without feeling stigmatised. The reason for this is probably that mathematics is perceived and experienced as difficult and inaccessible by sufficiently many people while having poor reading and writing skills is something that few adults would like to admit and if they have to, it very often is accompanied with a feeling of shame. Besides, it is possible to function well in modern society with poor numeric skills, modern technology makes it possible. Not having adequate reading and writing skills is a serious handicap in a modern society where a lot of information is communicated in writing, by e-mail or is available on the Internet. The necessity of changes and adaptations in working life are likely to be even stronger in the years to come and this will probably mean that all adults will have to undergo further education to a greater extent than what is the case today and subsequently the demand for adults having sufficient reading skills will increase as well (Gabrielsen). In addition to reading and writing skills being indispensable in working life, they are also indispensable in order to participate in society in the terms of active citizenship, so reading and writing skills have a democratic aspect as well.

Another aspect of writing skills is that there are jobs where the employees do not normally communicate much in written form, neither do they write reports and other documents, and they often write in a rather oral way. Their written language is very informal and resembles very much the spoken language. In this case there is also a need for training of writing skills but in a special genre, the more formal written language.

The InterAct model and reading and writing skills – a tool for motivation
Training in reading and writing may be easier to accept for employees in need of it when it is combined with training of ICT skills as it will, to a lesser extent expose participants' lack of or poor writing skills and training. The InterAct model can be used to this purpose. ICT is a key skill in this model but the training of ICT skills is content based. The tasks in an InterAct script are based on finding answers and solutions to the presented problems and situations. The groups have to write documents in answer to problems and read the other groups' solutions. In the negotiation phase participants need to read and compare texts. They also have to suggest ways to reach a compromise. They have to communicate with the other participants, read and understand their arguments and make arguments of their own. All this can be made as simple or as complicated and demanding as possible, dependant on the level of needs of the participants in question. The InterAct model can be used to train a combination of skills, foreign languages or mother tongue in conjunction with ICT skills, but also soft skills such as cooperation with others, communication and teamwork.

The InterAct model should be one of several pedagogical approaches for strengthening the New Basic Skills at the workplace. The model is primarily a tool for motivating the learners for more learning, to make them understand that the process of learning can be fun, interesting and meaningful and also adapted to their needs. This will especially be the case for workers who have bad experiences of formal education and who may not be comfortable in a formal classroom situation. As previously mentioned, the model has a playful approach to learning and clear feedback shows that that the participants had fun while they were engaged in the web-based role-play. Participants forgot their shortcomings, as well as their fear of performance, ICT and foreign languages. Evaluation clearly showed that participating in the InterAct simulation made participants want to continue learning.

Skills in co-operation and team-work

Internet-based problem simulations are based on co-operation and teamwork. If organisations wish to improve the employees' skills in teamwork with colleagues they are not so familiar with, or do not normally collaborate with, the InterAct model can be a useful tool. Participants easily get captivated and engaged and show feelings, enthusiasm, eagerness or frustration, both while working off line and online. During the simulations, the tutor can observe and work to modify the behaviours patterns within the team.

The group work in the face-to-face steps of the simulation can also be used to encourage group members who normally are more passive and shy, to become more active. This was achieved in one of the groups during the simulations in the hotel and tourism sector in the InterAct project. Here the tutor organised the discussions and brainstorming so that everybody had to contribute, including those inclined not to contribute. This was an effective way to train participants to express their opinions in public, but within a protected environment, thereby developing their skills in communication and collaboration.

The partnership: contacts for guidance

The InterAct partnership can be contacted

- for further information about the project

- for help in setting up future projects, be it international co-operation or local projects,

- for advice on how to create a script and how to organise a simulation.

- for assistance in finding partner institutions for new international projects

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