

RadioActive

A European Online Radio Project

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Context: RadioActive Europe

The main aim of the RadioActive Europe¹ project is to use the production of on-line radio to empower young people and adults at risk of social exclusion, with regard to education and employment. Funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme, RadioActive uses radio as an informal educational tool for groups of different ages, though mostly young people, through partners in the United Kingdom, Germany, Malta, Romania and Portugal. This chapter describes the Portuguese experience of this project, which has been running since March 2013 at three youth centres (two in Porto and one in Coimbra²) set up under the government project *Escolhas* ("Choices") to support youth communities throughout the country.

The project is organized in accordance with European guidelines on informal education, lifelong learning and action research with a social dimension³. However, it also has strong affinities with the development agenda in Latin America, where there is a long tradition of community intervention projects and where the history of radio is connected to that of education and the struggle for citizenship rights. The philosophy underpinning RadioActive is particularly inspired by the participative methods promoted in the 1960s and 70s by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Following Freire (1977), this European project understands the need to consider the research reality from the inside out, respecting its idiosyncrasies. Consequently, the idea of active community participation underpinned the initial platform (Ravenscroft, Attwell, Stieglitz & Blagbrough, 2011) and the innovative research proposal: to promote and develop personal and social rapprochement to stimulate informal learning through online radio and the social media. One of the most important differences between formal and informal learning is pre-

cisely the increased opportunities that the latter offers for negotiation, which increases the chances of the task being appropriated by whoever carries it out (Underwood, Parker & Stone, 2013, p. 485).

Unlike many other radio projects that are designed to be close to citizens and that have emerged from their communities, RadioActive was developed in academia; though it too aims at being an idiosyncratic community process. This is one of the innovations of this research: it aims to empower the community by supplying tools, spaces and environments that enable these people to reflect upon and identify common problems and participate in their solutions, and also to develop a critical and artistic voice. The skills acquired are valuable when transposed to the various multidimensional needs of daily life; indeed, this empowerment aims to improve the community's quality of life (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995, p. 571), with regard not only to problem-solving, but also to having the self-confidence to pursue dreams and desires. There is also an individual dimension to collective empowerment in that users, by manipulating digital tools, acquire skills and critical abilities that are useful for learning and development (Erstad, 2013, p. 79-80). In contemporary society, citizen empowerment is dependent upon media literacy (Jacquinet-Delaunay, Carlsson, Taye & Tornero, 2008, p. 28). Thus, RadioActive offers a means for informal, reflexive and creative communication.

This empowerment principle is aligned with the European Parliament and Council Recommendation (2006) concerning the eight essential skills for lifelong learning: communication in one's mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; digital skills; learning to learn; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; cultural awareness and expression, and mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology.

Problematization: tools to act

Another of the main innovations of this project is problematization, along the lines stipulated by Paulo Freire. Practice is the starting point for an understanding of the reality in question, and is absolutely necessary; however, it is not enough in itself and therefore needs to be complemented by theoretical tools for interpretation (Freire, 1977, p. 26). The intervention strategy was defined collaboratively in the field (and not only through a literature review), taking into account the willingness, needs and characteristics of each community. Thus, it began with a systematization of the community's characteristics and profiles, in which the members themselves participated together with the researchers. The problematization phase, implemented in the first months of the project, involved direct participative observation of focus groups and informal conversations at different centres, as well as interaction during the technical and content workshops.

In one of the communities, we identified two levels of key participants/actors: a) coordinators in areas such as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), or Education and Communication Sciences, who work directly with the communities; and b) children and young people at the centre, who have needs on the level of essential skills for lifelong learning. At the other two centres, there was also another intermediate group consisting of young adults who showed interest in being direct interlocutors, and indeed had the skills to do so, in some cases because they had prior experience of online radio at school. Unlike the previous group of children and young people, this group of young adults clearly had digital skills (which improved even more over the course of the project) and a spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship. Thus, they took over running the radio production, coordinating programmes, organizing formal and informal meetings with the children and young people in the community, and encouraging them to participate in the production.

Thus, this initial knowledge about the communities involved proved essential to RadioActive's success in the terrain. Its ability to adapt to differences, rather than imposing fixed models of intervention, allowed it to overcome unexpected problems more effectively. The two Porto centres illustrate the importance of problematization. At one of them, the group rapprochement is made through its young leaders and community facilitators with strong recourse to technology, as for them, the programme's technical quality is essential. At the other centre, the young people use conventional tools such as pen and paper, and distribute the radio tasks on posters stuck to walls: it is only after this that the possibility arises to use the computer, participating in the technical part and in making music, where the lyrics are paramount. One of the youngsters most committed to this task explains that the radio project got her interested in writing, as it led her to play with the Portuguese language in an attempt to write song lyrics – despite the fact that she did not appreciate Portuguese much as a subject at school.

Now I try to do more [lyrics], this programme existed... before I didn't write anything at all. I didn't like it. But now this radio [project] exists and now that I know that I can do the music programme, I'm more inspired and I've begun to write more. (Inês, 15 years, interview, 2014)

Implementation: assessment and challenges

Given the levels of disaffection that some of these young people feel in relation to school and formal education, RadioActive operates mostly in an informal atmosphere. In these contexts, young people are commonly truant from school, are reluctant to explore digital tools and have little confidence in speaking in public. It is thus particularly important that they get the chance to use technology and online environments, do voice work, write texts, develop communication

skills and take responsibility for the execution of tasks. However, this does not preclude an important relationship between RadioActive and the school. All the groups participating in the project explore the possibility of using the online radio in the school. In Coimbra, one of the youngsters who had never produced radio before was invited to develop a radio project for children under 10. The second programme produced by *Metas*, in Porto, was broadcast, upon the suggestion of the young people involved, at the secondary school where they had previously had experience of online radio. For the third, the young people chose to debate the subject “Young people and education”, focusing upon both formal and informal aspects. According to Jonas, community leader and one of the participants in the radio production, *“the value of informal education is that it gets them to experiment and do it themselves – they’re not just listening but also trying it out”* (Jonas, 21 years, interview, 2014). Renato, 23 years, a monitor at the Digital Inclusion Centre (CID) and participant, also points out: *“They learn a lot with the radio [project] – how to do an interview, how to be objective. We learn that in school in the 7th grade in Portuguese in the part about communication.”* With the radio project, they learn how to ask a question in a more objective way or to structure what they say: *“In the last programme, I asked a question and he didn’t answer the way I wanted him to. Now I’m going to have to be more objective in my questions to get a better answer”* (Renato, 23 years, interview, 2014).

The school connection has also been activated by the technicians. For example, Joana, CID monitor at *Catapulta*, holds a series of workshops about RadioActive and the use of the audio recording and editing programme Audacity at a third-cycle school (7th to 9th grades) in the context of ICT lessons. She recognizes that learning takes place on a step-by-step basis: *“Even after I’ve explained [that it is necessary to get copyright] some of the children are still surprised, because they can’t just go to YouTube and download music. I give them some alternatives, explain that they’re free, the copyrights, then there are more technical aspects, such as how to download, how to record, how to organize my sound library”* (interview, 2014). This is also a way of ensuring the project’s sustainability through learning by a cascade system.

Construction: promoting self-confidence and efficiency

Internet radio plays a very important role in helping these young people develop certain skills. The researchers on the ground have noted that levels of interest amongst the young participants tend to fluctuate due to lack of self-confidence; however, it returns when a particularly arduous or difficult task is accomplished and properly acknowledged. Thus, the lifelong learning skills prescribed by the European Parliament are shown to be profoundly related to self-confidence and self-efficacy, qualities that these young people acquire in the project. When Joana

was questioned about the benefits that the radio project brought to *Catapulta*, she replied: “*For some, it functions very much on the level of self-esteem, the value they attribute to themselves and to their work. To realise that it might be appreciated, even if these are skills that aren’t valued at school, like writing music, for example. Or singing. School doesn’t usually give good grades for that, but here it’s important, it’s of value and it’s good. They also commit themselves to a long-term project and for the question of writing that’s very important indeed. It’s not just about writing well, without mistakes, it’s about expressing an idea*” (Joana, interview, 2014). Inês, who participated in *Catapulta*, claimed: “*I learned new things, I learned how to work with Audacity, I didn’t know how. I learned many things that I didn’t even know existed. Things that... well... I think working on the radio is something to be proud of [smile]!*” (Inês, 15 years, interview, 2014).

The connection between skills, efficacy and confidence is essential to encourage young people to participate and engage (Haste, 2004). An active model of education for citizenship presupposes agency, the search for knowledge, narrative and interpretation, and proactive engagement. This perspective on the role of efficacy in skills development is also decisive when we think of the way a project develops and the challenges that arise before it is concluded.

Sustainability: surviving to the end of the formal project

In many media education projects, there is a recurrent problem that affects the research and intervention on the ground: the fact that these projects only exist and yield results when there is funding. With this in mind, RadioActive has proposed the ambitious objective of creating structures in each of the participant countries that will enable the philosophy of the project to continue beyond its official end in December 2014. This continuity results from continued investment in a dialogic pedagogy which, from the outset, involves the participants in processes of reflection and analysis and in the conception and execution of activities. In Portugal, this is particularly important in the light of the economic situation, with rising unemployment and a general lack of investment, particularly when no financial returns are expected.

Notes

1. RadioActive Europe: promoting engagement, informal learning and employability of at-risk and excluded people across Europe through Internet radio and social media (531245-LLP-1-2012-1-UK-KA3-KA3MP).
2. *Metas* and *Catapulta* in Porto and *Trampolim* in Coimbra.
3. European Parliament and Council Recommendation of 18th December 2006.

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