

Circles and communities, sharing practices and learning: Looking at old and new extension education approaches

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Abstract: We live today in a “knowledge society”, but “knowledge transfer” is no more the dominant extension education paradigm. The andragogical principle of “learning to learn”, and the concepts of self-directed, collaborative and action learning are more crucial today than ever, particularly when working in the rural or local development context, with groups of farmers, community leaders, development agents, adult educators or other professionals. The key principles are: to stimulate knowledge discovery and facilitate learning, through group exchanges and active participation, building on peoples’ motivations and projects.

This conceptual background was keen to the formulation and implementation of the two concrete action-oriented projects which are analysed in this paper: (1) the two “Study Circles” involving a variety of agents linked to the “Olive Oil” and “Port Wine” Routes of Northern Portugal, created to share experiences, promote initiatives and enhance the performance of these two organisations in terms of rural development; and (2) the analysis of five different “Communities of Practice” in Portugal, in different stages of development and involving educators, trainers and social development animators, functioning as lifelong collaborative learning instruments.

Do such projects and experiences show the way to relevant extension education approaches and methods? Which strengths and weaknesses show the “Study Circles” and “Communities of Practice”? How did they evolve? Are there cultural bound constraints to their functioning and outputs? If yes, which strategies to adopt in order to overcome them? What are the major lessons to be learned? In essence, the paper is about “Circles” and “Communities”, looking at practice sharing and lifelong learning in the context of development work. One of the major conclusions is that extension and development facilitators can benefit from such approaches in different ways and levels. Multiple and often complex relationships between scientists, extension agents and rural actors, so frequent and critical in our society, require new ways of obtaining and sharing diversified information and knowledge, coming from a variety of sources. More than using personal networks, the challenge these agents face is to help build and maintain social networks like the ones studied, involving different development stakeholders from the institutional, research and practice arenas, serving as learning and action systems.

Keywords: extension education, collaborative learning, communities of practice.

Introduction

We live today in a “knowledge society”. Continuous knowledge production, exchange and management became crucial activities in all spheres of social and economic activity. Besides, we live in a society in which the pace of change is almost dramatic and in which the lives of citizens, in every corner of the planet, face risk and uncertainty situations of many different sorts. Environmental problems, climate change, agricultural sustainability, food safety and security, and poverty alleviation, for example, are critical concerns, with deep implications in the field of farming and rural development, calling the attention of policy makers, researchers, extension agents, educators, and many other stakeholders.

Extension education and innovation systems and approaches have been a permanent subject of debate and research for a long period of time. Linear models of Knowledge transfer and innovation, implicit in extension approaches such as the Training & Visit Systems or other conventional ones, have been challenged, and new forms of cooperation among farmers, extension agents, scientists and other stakeholders proposed. As stressed by Hubert *et al.* (2000, 17), “The dominant linear paradigm of agricultural innovation based on delivery to, and diffusion among, farmers of technologies developed by science, has lost utility as an explanation of what happens”, and “There is a search for new models of innovation and new roles for science”.

Reinventing extension has been on researchers' and policy maker's agendas for a long time. Leeuwis (2004, 11-17) presented a set of practical changes to be implemented, including a focus on collective issues, co-designing rather than disseminating innovations, articulating the technical and social dimensions of innovation, being able to manage complexity, conflict and unpredictability, and helping organisations to learn, that is, to become "learning organisations". Such changes, he adds, must be accompanied by conceptual ones.

Several authors, based on a wide range of theoretical views on learning and change, proposed extension, training and development approaches rooted in systems thinking and social learning perspectives, and analysed concrete situations of work with learning groups in a broad variety of environments and addressing many different environmental, farming and rural problems (LEARN Group, 2000). In the previous European IFSA Symposium some 17 papers were discussed on learning processes associated with research and extension. As mentioned by Sriskandarajah *et al.* (2006, 27), "The new thrust on rural development demands learning processes in motion, some of which would involve people at the individual farm while others may encompass a whole rural area. Some will involve specific projects; others make take in farmers, citizens and many other local and non-local stakeholders. The future challenge will be about learning processes in open networks and less so in well defined and often familiar groups. Learning among heterogeneous groups of stakeholders, and among different epistemologies has become one of the most central issue today".

In today's complex and dynamic context and accepting the idea that extension needs to be re-focused, the andragogical principle of "learning to learn", and the concepts of self-directed, collaborative and action learning are more crucial than ever, namely when working with rural and local development issues, with groups of farmers, community leaders, development agents, adult educators and other professionals. The key principles are: to stimulate knowledge discovery and to facilitate learning and change, through group exchanges and active participation, and building on peoples' motivations and projects. Actor empowerment and creation of learning circles and other kinds of networks, seen as enablers of concerted action, are also an important focus of concern and specific attention.

This conceptual background was key to the formulation and implementation of the two concrete action-oriented projects which are analysed in this paper: (1) the two "Study Circles" involving an heterogeneous group of agents linked to the "Olive Oil" and "Port Wine" thematic Routes of Northern Portugal, created to share experiences, promote initiatives and enhance the performance of these two organisations in terms of rural development; and (2) the analysis of five different "Communities of Practice" in various regions of Portugal, each one in a different stage of development and involving multi-organisation educators, trainers and social development animators, functioning as lifelong collaborative learning instruments. Together, these seven groups involved more than 100 people with different backgrounds and institutional affiliations. The facilitators were all social sciences trained educators and researchers, working in Universities and ONGs.

These projects provided an interesting ground for exploratory research and reflection about new forms of developing training and extension work, and especially about practice and knowledge sharing, learning and the promotion of change. The following key questions guided the preparation of the paper: Do such projects and experiences show the way to relevant extension education approaches and methods? Which strengths and weaknesses show the "Study Circles" and "Communities of Practice" experiences? How did they evolve? Are there cultural bound constraints to their functioning and outputs? If yes, which strategies to adopt in order to overcome them? What are the major lessons to be learned?

After this introduction, the paper includes three additional chapters: a brief conceptual background, presenting adult learning related ideas and stressing the importance of collaborative learning approaches and the concept of "Communities of Practice"; the presentation of a set of collaborative learning cases ("Study Circles" and "Communities of Practice"); and the discussion of results and implications for extension work and future research. Considering the Workshop objectives, the paper attempts to provide a contribution to an understanding of extension work as a form of facilitating social learning and concerted action.

Conceptual framework

Lifelong learning

In the so-called knowledge society and in an environment characterized, using the words of Charles Handy, by uncertainty, people's competencies are permanently being challenged. Tompkin (1997) stressed that all individuals should take responsibility for their lifelong learning and permanent development of competencies (see representation of conceptual framework in Figure 1). Such concern is part of the EU agenda since the early 90's and 1996 was declared the European Year of Lifelong Learning. Universal and continuous access to learning and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities as close as possible to people, are important orientations addressing this particular concern (CCE, 2000).

Competencies versus qualifications

This challenge emerged in a period in which the concept of competency succeeds to the one of qualification, which tends to assume a static perspective on the nature of knowledge. To Zarifian (1995, 9) "competency is inseparable from production situations and cannot be reduced to "expertise" gained through experience". This means that competencies are acquired in action processes and not through traditional schooling approaches. Besides, competencies cannot be transmitted, they are produced, in the double sense that they are built by individuals to overcome challenges and require recognition in a given social setting (Jobert, 2001).

However, education, training and extension approaches very often not in line with this new paradigm and insist in the old models of schooling, attached to behavioural theories, linear transmission of knowledge and teacher/educator centred methodologies (Cabanas, 2002). With this type of training, which is close to a "qualifying training model", we have a schooling type of approach that is socially recognized through a formal certificate (Jobert, 2001).

New visions of education and training

In this sense, it is essential to conceptualize education and training processes that promote and produce competencies. To Lopes (2007), this challenge, which is simultaneously personal and collective, requires deep questioning of the pedagogical perspectives and a focus on lifelong learning as the essence of andragogy. As such, knowledge transfer should give the way to knowledge exchange and forms of communication that prepare individuals to a reflexive autonomy.

The concept of andragogy, understood by Knowles (1980, 43) as the science and art to facilitate adult learning, emerged as a form calling attention to the specificity of adult education. It was an attempt to develop a specific theory related to adult learning, assuming that adults have a capital of experiences, are capable to reflect, self-directed and responsible for making decisions (Boutinet, 2001).

Adult learners

In the modern adult education literature, adults are seen as individuals who have the capacity to reflect and direct themselves, to whom the motivational, affective and self-development factors are crucial (Pascual-Leone e Irwin, 1998), and who bring all their life experiences to the learning context and outcomes (Brookfield, 1991; Knowles, 1980).

Also Smith and Pourchot (1998) consider that adults are more capable to articulate their own learning objectives and that their motivations are better developed and tuned to satisfy their interests, skills and knowledge demands. In this sense, adults are subjects in an educational process they own, and responsible for managing their educational activities, having a sense of their educational/training needs and capacity to evaluate learning progresses.

Social learning

In such perspective, the adult-training relationship leads to a new look at the central actor of training: behind the conventional “trainee” seen as object we can see the “social learning subject”, made of irreducibly singular representations, affections and intentions (Carré and Caspar, 2001: 22).

For Brookfield (1991), the interaction with others is fundamental in the individuals’ learning process. In this sense, the educational process is a “transactional dialogue” in which all those taking part are actively involved in a continuous process of analysis of different perspectives and interpretations of reality. This analysis provides the basis for critical reflection and questioning of the learners’ mental models.

Action-based and knowledge production training makes the learner, simultaneously, producer of knowledge and consumer of such knowledge, a kind of “produconsumer” (Stahl, 1998). This view of training is in line with Schön’s (1992) model stressing the importance of the individual critical reflection on action, supporting the concept of “reflective practitioner”, that is, a professional who reflects about his/her own practice, expecting that such reflection will serve as an instrument to develop thinking and action. In such way, training implies a dialectic perspective on theory and practice (praxis).

Collaborative learning approaches

This conceptual framework provides ground to training and education approaches that give particular importance to practice, that is, to participants’ experiences (Martins, 2002), making them the central element of the system. “Communities of Practice”, action learning, clubs and study circles constitute examples of approaches that attach critical importance to social interaction and collaborative learning practices.

All of these approaches start from the individuals’ problems in their professional setting and challenge them to find solutions, to act and implement the desired changes, recognizing that they are capable of generating knowledge and not merely passive receivers of results produced by experts. They have implicit the importance of structured and organized projects, and commitment to learning, social interaction, planning and evaluation of results (Revens, 1998).

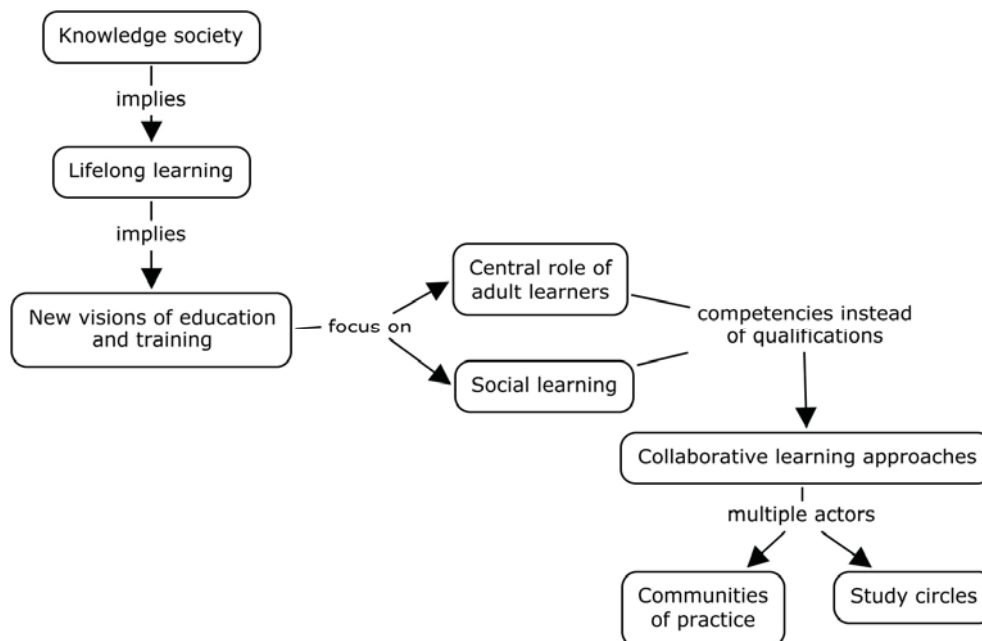


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Communities of practice

According to Wenger *et al.* (2002, 4), "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". These communities are very common, given that we are all practitioners of something, as well as social beings who frequently share our practices in many different ways, formal and informally. Even if we don't notice, such sharing is a precious source of learning and change. That is why it is relevant to consider "Communities of Practice" as learning systems from which people and organisations can benefit enormously.

Being diverse, "Communities of Practice" have in common the existence of three major structural elements: domain (a shared subject of interest), community (a sense of identity) and practice (ways of doing). They undergo a process of evolution through five main stages: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

As mentioned before, in this paper we will analyze several cases of collaborative learning experiences we can include under the umbrella of "Communities of Practice".

Collaborative Learning Cases

Study Circles

The two Study Circles analysed were created in the frame of a broader training and extension project to promote the development and sustainability of two thematic Routes, "Port Wine" and "Olive Oil", both operating in the Trás-os-Montes and Douro areas of Northern Portugal. These Routes, launched by local associations, are seen as instruments to support territorial development, particularly by promoting local quality products and rural tourism.

The project included several dimensions and a major concern was to link training with employment creation and local development. The two Study Circles were perceived as an innovation, given that most frequently training activities are "content-based" and "trainer-centred", assuming that the key role of trainers is strict "knowledge transfer". They were intended to function as spaces of encounter with training, reflection and action purposes, involving a variety of participants from different organisations, from technical staff of local institutions to farm owners and tourism business operators of different sorts, all involved in Route initiatives and activities.

The specific objectives of the Circles were: (1) to share experiences;(2) to observe situations; (3) to identify and characterize problems; (4) to present and debate cases of similar Routes in different contexts; (5) to define a "learning guide" to be used in study trips; and (6) to present ideas and proposals concerning the development and sustainability of each Route. The major aim was to consolidate the two Routes as organisations and to stimulate collective learning practices and organizational change.

Between 12 and 15 persons volunteered to participate in each Circle. Twenty (round table) meetings were organized, each with 3-4 hours duration, in a period of 15 months. The meetings were facilitated by a team of university social sciences experts, with teaching and research experience in the fields of extension, rural development, tourism and management. In general, two facilitators attended each meeting. Their function was to create an environment conducive to participation, exchange, learning and problem solving.

In the first session it was proposed and accepted that each participant should keep a "learning diary" and that, in the end, the Circle members should have a set of concrete learning points and ideas ("good practices") to consolidate the respective Route. The sessions were organized in different locations and places, including wine and/or olive oil estates, restaurants, rural tourism houses, libraries and local civic centres, as a way to observe (and analyse) a variety of Route environments, and facilitate member's participation and practice exchange. In the first meeting all participants presented themselves and exposed their expectation regarding the Circle activities and outputs. A set of general rules was defined, like the time, duration and places of meetings.

Concerning the expectations, the "Olive Oil" group stressed the articulation between projects being implemented in the region, and the contribution to plan initiatives, such as the Olive Oil Congress and the Olive Oil Museum. The "Port Wine" Route followed similar lines, also adding the importance of providing room to meet other regional actors (Douro Museum, University, Tourism School, Tourism Agencies, etc.) and to formulate specific projects. In both cases there was time to identify topics for debate in the future sessions. Issues like the following ones emerged: creation of tourism products; roles of local governments in the preservation of olive oil heritage; networking practices; importance of gastronomy and restaurants' roles; formulation of Route strategies; leadership practices. At the each meeting, the date, place and topic of the following one was set. The facilitators proposed the following topic of debate for the second session: what should be a thematic Route?

It is important to stress that the two Routes were in different phases of development and that the two groups were also different in nature. In the case of "Port Wine", the Route is linked to a worldwide known product and has considerable experience, but was facing serious sustainability problems, particularly financial ones. The Circle was constituted with people who knew each other relatively well, most being members of the Board of Directors of the Route Association and owners of wine estates also operating tourism businesses.

In the case of "Olive Oil", it was a new Route, created by another regional Association, showing a considerable dynamic and implementing a variety of activities, including gastronomy contests and demonstrations, an international congress and publications. The group was much more heterogeneous and made of people with little or no previous contact with each other. There were representatives of local municipalities, considered to be key players in the Route project, as well as olive oil producers and tourism business operators.

The level of participant attendance was good in both cases, although better in the "Port Wine" one, as the representatives of the municipalities participating in the "Olive Oil" Circle were often taken by their official duties and could not attend the meetings regularly. However, the situation evolved in the lifespan of the Circle, as these members better understood the potential importance of the Route to local development, and a spirit of commitment to the project (and the Circle) became stronger. In the case of "Port Wine", there were group members with a strong tendency to monopolise the use of time, and others were compelled to call their attention and ask for better self-control.

About six months after the first meeting, the members of the two Study Circles made study trips to similar Routes in Italy ("Olive Oil") and France ("Port Wine"), to which other elements were also invited. Each trip was previously prepared in the Circle meetings and the conclusions debated in the following ones. As a positive impact, particularly in the "Olive Oil" case, we can mention an improved group cohesion and complicity, result of the interactions during the trip. In both cases, some of the trip guests became regular members of the Circle.

Also in both Circles, it was not easy to define an agenda and to stick to it. In the beginning sessions, the debates in the "Port Wine" Circle were not focused, and there was a strong tendency to return systematically to the same problems, particularly the financial situation of the Route and the difficulty to enrol new members and to obtain support from the local administration. The facilitators made an effort to redirect the debates to the analysis of the key topics proposed by the group and to the identification of solutions and action paths. In the "Olive Oil" case it was also difficult to have the group mobilised around major topics, and many hours were spent to define concrete concerns to be addressed. The Circle finally concentrated attention in the role of gastronomy and decided to prepare a survey directed to restaurant owners participating in the Route. Close attention was also given to planning and monitoring related to several Route projects.

In three occasions, joint meetings of the two Circles were held, one to debate a project being implemented in the region with interest to both Routes, another one to share ideas about the roles of gastronomy, and a final one to present and debate the results of the overall process.

Coming to results, there were some differences between the two Circles, but both shared positive evaluations of the work done.

In the "Port Wine" Circle, six major aspects were mentioned: (1) better notion of the difficulties; (2) identification of doubts and issues; (3) better interpersonal knowledge; (4) permanent dialogue and exchange of experiences; (5) creation of a team work spirit; and (6) construction of bridges with the University: Some of the members stressed that the Circle was a good reason to meet and performed, above all, a therapeutically role, once it was possible to talk about the multiple regional problems in general and more specifically about the Route ones: "The few available persons sat around the table".

As other said, it also showed that the Route needed a clear direction: "Now I have the notion of what needs to be done". Others mentioned the limitations in practical terms, that is, the lack of concrete initiatives. In general, the Circle was positively evaluated in terms of reflection and interpersonal knowledge and connections, allowing the identification of problems and bottlenecks to Route development and sustainability. Besides, all members listed a vast set acquired of ideas in relation to future Route management and promotion.

In the case of "Olive Oil", the group feelings were that the Circle: (1) created linkages between people and a solid basis for joint action; (2) promoted the involvement of the municipalities; (3) created a better awareness about the value of olive oil as a regional products, as well as about the problems in its value chain; (4) developed the consciousness about olive oil quality promotion; (5) promoted the commitment to support the Route in all municipalities; (6) favoured the exchange of experiences and a better knowledge of the territory; (7) developed the linkages with other projects; and (8) opened up perspectives for future work. The participants considered that the Circle was a "well achieved space of reflection", which "united the municipalities around the Route", generated interpersonal knowledge and greater commitment to support the Route. As said by a member, "The Circle allowed the Route to have a face, to know the persons who can support it continuously in each place. Now I know with whom to speak in each municipality. Things are easier to implement". However, some mentioned that other people should have been involved, namely more farmer representatives. Still others stressed that "The Circle served to gain consciousness of the resources associated to olive oil. I know several municipalities, we have talked, I feel richer. It generated activity ideas". As in the case of "Port Wine", a vast set of lessons was prepared as a result of the debates, in the form of good management and promotion practices to be implemented in the future.

The members of both Circles showed a strong interest in the continuation of this experience, following the same objectives and similar rules, perhaps involving new members and less frequent sessions.

Communities of Practice

Four "Communities of Practice" were studied in a project funded by the European Union EQUAL Initiative 2005-07, with the objective of identifying methodologies to induce and animate such type of collaborative learning groups.

The literature approaching the concept of "Communities of Practice" provides a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, particularly in the North American context, very often in business environments. In Portugal, however, the literature is very still scarce. As such, the objectives of the project were: (1) to test the concept in (non-business) professional groups in the Portuguese context; and (2) to try out specific methods to apply the concept.

The studied Communities were in different stages of development: (1) relatively long existence and consolidate activity; (2) medium/long existence but not yet a true community of practice; and (3) group recently established. Looking in more detail:

- The Community "Projecto Bela Vista", with 10 years of activity, was made of a variable number of people, between 7 and 37. Members were professionals and volunteers linked to about 20 institutions which developed inter-institutional work with people living in a socially problematic neighbourhood in the area of Setúbal, southern Portugal;
- The Community "Interequipas do ICE", with 5 years of activity, was made of about 40 technicians and teachers who developed projects at the Institute of Educational Communities (ICE), an institution which promotes educational communities and social development projects, in partnership with associations and municipalities;
- The Community "Do Longe Fazer Perto", with 4 years of activity, was made of a variable number of elements who assured the coordination of multi-region school animation projects; and
- The Community "Oficinas de Formadores" was initiated in the frame of the above mentioned EQUAL project and composed of 12 trainers and animators of social development projects linked to three ONGs.

Together, this four Communities involved about 100 people. Besides these Communities, the project team itself also functioned as an experimental 5th group. The team was composed of members of the four partner organisations: three ONGs and a University. The ONGs were responsible for the support

to and study of the four "Communities of Practice". The University team provided technical expertise and know-how on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and also served as project evaluation group. The results of the work with the communities were object of analysis by the study team. A "wiki" was also produced, with information about each Community, and a set of technical-educational resources used to animate the activities, according to the established objectives (<http://colaboracomwiki.wikispaces.com>).

Several conclusions can be drawn from such experience. First of all, there is some conformity with Wenger *et al.* (1998) and Wenger (2002) conceptual vision about the elements which define a Community of Practice: domain, identity and practice. However, several problems were identified, as analysed below.

The community (identity) element was clearly present in all observed groups. Their members showed strong affective ties among themselves which, in some cases, constituted the main aggregation force or even the primary reason for group activity. In the case of the Community "Do Longe Fazer Perto", financially supported by its members, a certain discrepancy was observed between the "real" and the "official" agendas, translated into a strong value given to the opportunities of informal gathering and relatively ineffective results in terms of practice and knowledge exchanges. In the case of the more recent Community "Oficinas de Formadores", the identity element was the only one successfully developed in the life time of the EQUAL project.

The identification of a domain of practice exchange easily grows from two aspects: (1) the group develops concrete projects, particularly when there is a diversity of professional contexts (for example, people from different organisations working in the same social setting), as in the case of the "Projecto Bela Vista", "Interequipas do ICE" and the project team in itself; or (2) some professional affinity exists, as seen in the other two cases, "Do Longe Fazer Perto" and "Oficinas de Formadores". However, in the less consolidated groups, the domain, as well as the exchanges, are a weakly developed dimension. In the particular case of "Projecto Bela Vista", the relatively long existence originated of problem with the domain evolution, result of the transformation of the social reality object of work and of the changes that, as a consequence, the concerned activities faced. In addition, we observed that, in moments of domain "crisis" – translated as group purpose -, the community dimension, as well as the accumulated collective competencies, constituted sufficiently strong ties to maintain the group as a resource to look for new roles in its social context.

The practice exchange domain, according to which practical knowledge is shared among the members of the group, constitutes a major challenge for all Communities. If, in the case of consolidated Communities, with long lasting experience, such exchanges were a need and flew normally, in the other cases (including the project team) there were quite obvious and important difficulties, like a certain aversion to talk about the concrete personal or group practices and a tendency to present them in more theoretical and abstract ways. The observations, experimentation and reflection about these aspects allow us to define some explanatory hypothesis, as well as ideas for future research directed to solve the identified problems.

The study permitted to note that informal leaders perform different roles that may interfere with practice exchanges. For instance, a "protective" or "paternalistic" leader may develop a rational about the group that "filters" its exposure to outside visibility, promoting in this way a defensive culture which can limit a more spontaneous sharing of practices, as group member may fear the criticism resulting from the confrontation between practices and the proclaimed rational. Another situation results from an "expert" leader, whose intervention tends to correct practices, causing inhibition to an open discussion among peers. Still another one corresponds to a "legitimizing" leader, in the sense that he or she legitimizes the activity of individual members and, in this case, practice sharing may happen, but without any significant level of reflection.

The hypothesis about the roles of leaders, if strongly confirmed by the project, namely by the existence of successful roles in promoting practice sharing, does not explain fully all observed situations. As such, another hypothesis was defined, requiring further investigation that, in the Portuguese cultural context, as probably the one in other European countries, particularly in the South and perhaps the East, constitutes as major obstacle to the development of these Communities. In fact, we are talking about cultures permeated by repressive political regimes dominating in the recent past, with strongly dependent labour relationships, and family and school socialization processes which tend to limit the acceptance of the risk implied in practice sharing. It is worth noting that this project produced, in its more applied dimension, methodological proposals much more directed to produce

environments conducive to group identity building than to promote and organize knowledge sharing, fact that reveals the importance of the above mentioned difficulty.

Project results, besides leading to ideas for future research, stress the importance of refining the self-reflexive study methods of the different roles within the communities, namely informal leadership, as well as the development of simulation methods to permit the reflection about simulated practices.

Conclusions and implications

Most analysed cases of collaborative learning communities are relatively recent and induced by outside experts or facilitators, showing several difficulties in the transition from the conceptual model to successful practice.

Some of these difficulties had to do with: domain definition, as result of the broad area of interests, the multi-organisational character, the diversity of participants, and the lack of concrete projects uniting them; lack of effective practice sharing, consequence of cultural and contextual factors influencing the level of trust within the group, as well as of the short period allowed by the two projects for group development (and consequent observation by the researchers).

The case of the "Study Circles" is a good example of the difficulty to define the domain. In fact, the two groups started from a rather general concern - support territorial development, particularly by promoting local quality products and rural tourism -, and it was difficult to arrive to a clear work agenda. Besides, they both involved an heterogeneous group of people. In the particular case of "Olive Oil" there was a well marked multi-organizational profile, which made more difficult to articulate the participants' expectations, priorities and objectives. In fact, as well questioned by Blackmore (2004, 455), "How can a group of people who are trying to work together because they identify with a particular issue achieve concerted action when individuals actually have very different systems of interests, timeframes and purposes?"

In general, most studied Communities, at end of the projects, were at the first stage of its evolution (potential), although, in terms of community (identity), they were in the coalition one, reflecting a level of trust sufficient enough to promote problem sharing. In terms of practice sharing, all groups were able to identify knowledge needs, but it was relatively difficult to share knowledge and organise it in some coherent form. In the case of "Study Circles", the most obvious result of knowledge exchange was a list of good practices and ideas for future work aiming at Route development/consolidation and sustainability.

The desire for continuity was expressed in most situations, but in practice, in the absence of project supported external facilitators, the activities didn't continue. For example, of the five "Communities of Practice" observed in the EQUAL project, three continued their work, namely those with longer life, stronger sense of identity and commitment to on-going projects. The work of the two "Study Circles" was discontinued right after the project end.

In spite of these difficulties and limitations, this research confirms the importance of collaborative learning approaches represented by the "Study Circles" and the "Communities of Practice". First of all, the fact that they recognize and value the vast array of experiences and knowledge of the participants. Secondly, such groups create ground for the development of a sense of community and induce practices of networking, basis for mobilising peer competences and materialize lifelong learning processes. Combined, these two dimension produce actor empowerment, reinforce both the individual and collective social capital, and promote concerted action. One of the analysed "Study Circles" offers a good example. In fact, in one of the last meetings of the "Port Wine" group emerged the idea of creating a platform of civic associations working on heritage, culture and tourism in the region, initiative that is presently being developed by seven active partners, some of which were not represented in the "Study Circle".

Extension and development facilitators can benefit from such educational approaches in different ways and levels. Multiple and often complex relationships between scientists, extension agents and rural actors, so frequent and critical in our society, require new ways of obtaining and sharing diversified information and knowledge, coming from a variety of sources. More than using personal networks, the challenge these agents face is to help build and maintain social networks like the ones studied, involving different development stakeholders from the institutional, research and practice arenas, serving as learning and action systems.

Several lessons or implications can be drawn from this exploratory action research. First of all, a relatively long time is needed for “Communities of Practice” to evolve from potential to transformation, and these kinds of groups are not compatible with short time duration projects, which tend to be dominant in the fields of rural or social development. Secondly, the development of such Communities demands a good grasp of group creation and facilitation techniques. In fact, as stressed by Blackmore (2004, 449), “Communities of Practice are not without some of the issues of other structures e.g. they require resources and people in key roles such as co-ordinators, to develop and keep functioning”. Also Le Boterf (2004, 69) called attention to a vast set of conditions for network success, all of them related to the quality of cooperation. Facilitators should be conscious of such conditions and capable of promoting conviviality and solidarity, as well as of monitoring the activities and suggesting appropriate methodologies.

Creative and adequate mechanisms must be used or developed to promote the exchange of practices, which was shown to be a clear difficulty in most observed groups. Le Boterf (2006, 209-210) proposed the use of simulation methodologies, for instance applying scenarios, or problem based learning techniques, which give importance to the complementarities of knowledge and experiences in a group. Boal (1993) suggested the use of the so called “Theatre of the Oppressed”, a drama base empowering technique, inspired in Freire’s educational philosophy and methods. These methodologies may be adequate to address the problem of inhibition and reluctance to sharing practices in cultural contexts such as the one studied. The following table presents a SWOT analysis of the studied approaches.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of studied approaches

	Opportunities	Threats
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaborative learning focused on competencies development in line with concern for lifelong learning (EU agenda). - Diversity of participants with knowledge and experience can be mobilized through a variety of available methodologies and tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expectations of fast results maybe frustrated but this maybe overcome by a strong sense of community/identity. - Globalization increases competition and information asymmetries, but collaborative learning stimulates networking practices and actors empowerment.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulty of defining domain of practice sharing. - External facilitators are usually needed and can be recruited trough multiple EU and national funding sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural context limits the adoption of collaborative learning approaches. - Tension between time required for collaborative learning processes and the project funding cycle period.

Given the exploratory character of this research, ideas and hypothesis for future study were formulated. The major hypothesis has to do with the importance of the cultural context in the development of “Communities of Practice”, and its particular implications for practice sharing. Our observation permits the formulation in the following way: successful “Communities of Practice” (and other kinds of collaborative learning groups) tend to develop in democratic environments, where people participate freely, are used to assume the risk of sharing ideas, experiences and practices, and can become involved in concrete action.

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