

# Learning for life: A case study on the development of online community radio

## Aprendiendo para la vida: estudio de caso sobre una radio comunitaria online

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### ABSTRACT

In a context of social disaffection and economic crisis, acquiring the skills that promote employability and social participation is an increasing priority. RadioActive Europe is a project that addresses these issues, offering non-formal learning through Internet radio. This article analyzes the implementation of the project in Portugal amongst groups of young people in vulnerable contexts. Our findings suggest that participatory action-research and media education are valuable ways of empowering youngsters from deprived contexts, complementing the constraints of formal schooling.

**Keywords:** Online radio, media education, participatory action-research, community media, non-formal learning

### RESUMEN

*En un contexto de disgregación y crisis social, la adquisición de competencias que permitan aumentar las oportunidades de empleo y promuevan una ciudadanía más involucrada se ha ido haciendo cada vez más prioritaria. El proyecto RadioActive Europe surge en este contexto, proponiendo un aprendizaje no formal a partir de una radio ubicada en Internet. Este artículo examina la implantación del proyecto en Portugal, como una iniciativa dirigida a jóvenes en situaciones vulnerables. Se debate el potencial de proyectos de investigación-acción participativa y de la educación para los medios como forma de empoderar a jóvenes en contextos desfavorecidos, como complemento a las limitaciones de la enseñanza formal.*

**Palabras clave:** Radio online, educación para los medios, investigación-acción participativa, medios comunitarios, educación no-formal

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## INTRODUCTION: RADIOACTIVE PROMOTING MEDIA EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Media education is about power and participation. In the digital era, learning how to use the media and understanding how it works, as well as being able to develop a critical understanding of the representations produced by multiple information sources, are essential competences. Media literacy is an evolving concept that can be interpreted in very diverse ways, ranging from mere technical fluency to more complex frameworks of information processing and participation (Meyers, Erickson & Small, 2103). However, media education is usually understood as promoting an individuals' ability to look for, assess and create knowledge according to their personal contexts and social and educational interests (Khan, 2008). Although there are different approaches to media education (Khan, 2008), the most comprehensive visions have the ulterior objective of contributing to an active, critical and participative citizenship. It is believed that critical thinking empowers citizens in the consumption and use of the media.

In fact, international institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Council and UNESCO have pushed to acknowledge the connection between media education and citizenship, emphasizing the importance of educating citizens around the world about media power in society. This need is made all the more urgent by the fast pace of digital evolution, which poses new opportunities, as well as new risks, for the exercise of citizenship in today's global society.

Media education is not restricted to a teaching environment, although it was primarily designed in educational contexts (in institutional terms). RadioActive (RA) addresses precisely the need for alternatives to media education in formal contexts, especially when school is not an effective option.

RA is a European Commission project funded through the Lifelong Learning Programme<sup>1</sup> in a consortium led by the University of East London, with partners from Portugal, Germany, United Kingdom, Malta and Romania. The project promotes the development of a European Internet radio platform, supported by an innovative pedagogical approach that uses Web 2.0 tools. It was designed in a generalized context of crisis and growing unemployment, in which most of western societies' expectations about welfare, social cohesion and economic growth have been severely damaged. Therefore, the project was implemented in accordance with European priorities for the upcoming years<sup>2</sup>, while highlighting the need for investment in education and research. RA proposes a non-formal

learning mode, using community-based as well as participative methodologies to address issues such as employability, inclusion and active citizenship among groups that are excluded or face the risk of exclusion, while simultaneously being an object for reflection and analysis about digital media and small communities. The final aim is to connect these areas through an innovative approach.

In this article, the Portuguese implementation of RA is analyzed, focusing on the processes that led to the production of the first online radio show. We argue that the development of ground media education projects, especially outside of the formal educational context, must always take into account the specific conditions of their implementation. That is why the problematization phase is so decisive, as it enables the development of more efficient and flexible action (Brites, Santos, Jorge & Navio, 2014). Moreover, we reason that media education programs – especially those implemented in disenfranchised communities – should arise from a methodology combining an upper-down framework, which will enable a bottom-up implementation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM: EMPHASIZING THE RELEVANCE OF INFORMAL LEARNING SPACES

UNESCO defines the formal learning context as the key place for promoting equal opportunities, and Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is considered to be a tool for citizenship. However, in recent years, there has been a tendency to shift the focus away from school environments to informal contexts<sup>3</sup>, particularly because lifelong learning has become a priority (Meyers *et al.*, 2013). There is growing acceptance of the need for a wider learning ecology, as Sefton-Green (2004) calls it, where informal spaces have their place alongside the school.

An important distinction has to be made before continuing any further. While formal education is the structured education system, non-formal refers to "organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). Informal education "is the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences" (Id.). It is precisely the value of learning outside the traditional school, in either informal or non-formal situations, which we wish to highlight as a way of

compensating for the lack of inclusiveness of the traditional schooling process. In fact, the “millennials”<sup>4</sup>, which constitute RA’s main target in Portugal, pose a serious challenge to educators: “the danger that those less interested and less able will be neglected, and that the potential impact of socio-economic and cultural factors will be overlooked” (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008, p. 779).

Moreover, we emphasize the importance of informal contexts as a way to balance an existing institutional tendency to reduce media literacy to the acquisition of technical skills (Underwood, Parker & Stone, 2013). In fact, according to Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton and Robison (2009), “new media literacies should be considered a social skill” (p. 26). And informal contexts are a privileged place to operate this change.

The main rationale for our defense of learning processes outside the school environment has to do with overcoming individuality. One of the most significant differences between formal and informal contexts is that the classroom rewards “individual knowledge stored in the head, not distributed knowledge” (Gee, 2004, p. 80). However, networking and sharing have become core concepts of the new media society and, as Brown (2010) points out, technology is increasingly becoming more about supporting interconnection than about the individual. Therefore, digital literacy should address socially distributed knowledge: it must be not only about how to do things with tools, but also about how to do things with others (Underwood, *et al.*, 2013). It is imperative to go beyond individual acquisition because “participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement” (Jenkins *et al.*, 2009, p. 6). So, when referring to both informal and non-formal learning, we are not just pointing to a complementary activity that takes place outside educational institutions: there are also different methodologies. Non-formal education, unlike formal learning, is not rigidly structured, which is one of the reasons why it is so closely linked to community intervention and participatory methodologies. The participants can play an active role in defining the actions and the program. They feel that they have the possibility of choosing. And as each specific context ends up shaping the learning process, there is likely to be a closer relation between the participants’ expectations and the actual programme. In fact, as we will argue, one of the strengths of informal contexts is their flexibility, which allows learning objectives and methods to be tailored to individual needs. That is not a characteristic of the linear and encapsulated form

of knowledge production that occurs in traditional schooling (Engeström, 2008). Informal learning not only questions schools’ “central role in the organization, transmission, and regulation of knowledge and accepted forms of pedagogy” (Sefton-Green, 2008, p. 242), but also opens up the floor to the acquisition of other capitals, which are fundamental for the educational process.

#### EFFICACY, IDENTITY AND AGENCY

According to Sefton-Green (2008, p. 240), even before the digital age one important dimension of informal learning is its concern with what we would now call “social capital acquisition”. Sociability is not a given thing among disenfranchised young people, particularly when dealing with people from outside their community, including researchers. Hull and Kenney (2008) documented the progress made by Taj, a disenfranchised urban teenage boy who took part in a summer program and “became more accepted by, and accepting of, his peers, (...) through his growing expertise with digital multimodality” (pp. 83-84). In other words, while his technological skills were already considerable at the start, his media production work through the program allowed him to work and affirm his identity, while fitting in socially within his community. In fact, identity is a central concept in participatory projects. Together with agency and efficacy, they form a triptych that we wish to emphasize.

Self-efficacy beliefs determine the attitude and the motivation each person has for acting. According to Bandura (1995), self-efficacy is the most important dimension for stimulating agency. In social cognitive theory, the formation of efficacy beliefs is determined by four specific mechanisms: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and emotional states (Bandura, 1995). These mechanisms act on both individual and collective efficacy beliefs (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2004). It is important to consider both levels, particularly when we are dealing with participatory projects. As Bandura states (2000), “a group’s attainments are the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative and synergistic dynamics of their transactions” (pp. 74-75). Hence, self-efficacy is always “context dependent” (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 204).

Helen Haste (2004) considers agency and efficacy to be preponderant factors for the promotion of the search for knowledge, integration and interpretation of narratives, as well as proactive engagement. Therefore, “to understand efficacy and agency, and how they relate

to identity, we need to know about the preconditions for engagement and the antecedents of participation. What happens to make someone get involved? What kinds of experiences facilitate commitment?" (p. 430). In this sense, identity, actions and thoughts become central to the participant. To get truly involved, there is a need to feel a certain sense of ownership regarding the related subject (p. 433). This can occur by acting alone or in a group, or by sharing tasks and taking participation collectively (Bandura, 1999; 2000).

Agency is connected with identity and efficacy. Amnã (2010) distinguishes several of the motivations that lead to participation (pp. 196-198). In line with the aims of this article, we should point out that motivation arising from efficacy and effectiveness is a very relevant predictor, indicating that a certain participatory activity is worth the effort because "*it works*". The participant identifies himself with the action because it offers a positive route to addressing a problem. Self-efficacy is the result of a connection between a self-skill or capacity ("*I can do it*"), and the motivation brought on by demand ("*I'm needed*"), which must be confirmed by the community given that the self gets its power from the collective. "Those who are well-entrenched in a community of participants have their self-confidence confirmed" (p. 198). Therefore, identity is essential for engagement and it implicates a sense of sharing and interaction with cultural factors (Haste, 2004).

#### ONLINE RADIO TO PROMOTE PARTICIPATION AND EDUCATION

RA opted for online platforms for various reasons, both pedagogical and practical. First of all, social media constitute the core of a constructivist and dialogue-centered perspective: according to Andrew Ravenscroft (2011, p. 139), they represent "*new landscapes for dialogue*". And, following Paulo Freire's<sup>5</sup> thought (1967), dialogue is a central concept of RA's approach. Furthermore, given that the web is a part of young people's daily habits, it was a logical way of getting them involved. Apart from that, the most important factor was the possibility technology offered to replicate the proposed model, creating a pedagogical pack with a mobile studio (Ravenscroft, Attwell, Stieglitz & Blagbrough, 2011). The low distribution costs and the relatively simple administrative process<sup>6</sup> were also decisive factors. Moreover, the project benefited from prior social networking developed by all the partners. Accordingly, opting for an online platform was a way of guaranteeing a socially relevant solution, which could

be immediately feasible and financially accessible, but also sustainable after the end of the project.

The current creation of participatory radios on the web represents the convergence of two lines: on the one hand, the tradition of radio as a way of empowering citizens and, on the other, the democratization of the access to content production brought about by digitalization. It is part of a wider trend, characterized by Deuze (2006), which involves mainly media creation along collaborative and participatory principles. Radio has an enormous background as a participatory platform. In fact, there is a close connection between the work of Paulo Freire and radio, related to the influence of the latter on projects based on participatory communication and social empowerment.

Although radio has a vast presence as a medium for social and economic development, the connection of radio to education and citizenship is particularly marked in some parts of the world. In Latin America, popular radios emerged as a way for the people to fight for citizenship rights, and as a channel to promote the participation and the access to communication means and techniques (Peruzzo, 2011)<sup>7</sup>. In fact, during the 1940s community radios were born from Catholic and syndicalist groups in Bolivia and Colombia respectively (Buckley, 2011). Similarly, African community radios have attained enormous civic importance as a tool of empowerment, particularly in countries where democracy has brought promises of freedom and equality (Buckley, 2011). The basis for community radios was that they were not commercial, nor state-owned or public and that they were made by the community for the community, with the exclusive purpose of self-development. Today, radio remains the most resilient medium for education purposes, although in some parts of the globe Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have clearly gained prominence (Perkins, 2011).

Since the migration of radio to online platforms, the web has become a fertile ground for participatory projects. Internet has enormous potential, long anticipated by Brecht's radio utopia (Brecht, 1932), McLuhan's visionary metaphor of the Xerox machines (Levinson, 1999) and Toffler's (1980) "prosumer". Web 2.0 has materialized these visions in unprecedented ways, particularly by "reworking hierarchies" (Beer & Burrows, 2007). It is an ideal tool, especially when the promotion of active engagement is essential for the learning outcomes (Dohn, 2009). That is why Internet has been increasingly used as a support in informal learning contexts (Tan, 2013).

## METHODOLOGIES

### TOWARDS A METHODOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION AND DIALOGUE

RA's methodology is greatly influenced by Freire (2010, p. 22), who argued that teaching is more about creating the possibilities for the production of knowledge than about transferring it. RA has thus assumed a dialogue-based methodology, which is intended to facilitate the sustainable production of knowledge, creating collective dynamics and a cascade effect. To achieve this, the research and intervention strategies are mainly based on two concepts that sustain and shape the non-formal structure of the learning project: Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Personal Learning Environments (PLE).

The concept of PAR is in line with the PLE approach, and is central to RA's methodological and pedagogical design. The concept of "action research"<sup>8</sup> was first used in 1946 by the German psychologist Kurt Lewin when trying to address social problems and research needs in accordance with particular situations. Later on, during the 1960s, Freire developed community-based research processes in groups of socially excluded individuals. But it was not until the 1970s that PAR emerged, especially in Africa, India and Latin America, also in contexts of underdevelopment and social exclusion. Since then, it has always focused on the roots and needs of local communities (Kendon, Pain & Kesby, 2007b, p. 10). In fact, PAR is able to promote "radical changes at the grassroots level where unsolved economic, political and social problems have been accumulating a dangerous potential" (Fals-Borda, 1987, p. 325).

PAR has been used in various educational programs (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 5) and is defined as a collaborative process of research, education and action. Its main goal is to promote a form of social transformation that can be triggered precisely by the results obtained in the field (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 6). However, PAR is never imposed: researchers and participants establish comfortable levels of participation (McIntyre, 2008). All participants can work together in analyzing the situation, setting the objectives and defining the forms of intervention, as long as they are sufficiently aware of the problems. This principle constitutes a disruptive approach and defies a vertical hierarchy within the research project, promoting instead a more horizontal relation between the researcher and the subjects. Those who are usually excluded as research agents are, in fact, producing a counter-hegemonic representation of knowledge. Thus, research can also be considered as a way of empowering<sup>9</sup> the subject

(Kendon, Pain & Kesby, 2007a, p. 1). Participants are both learning and teaching at the same time (Cannella, 2008, p. 190).

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that, as a pedagogical model, PAR has its weaknesses. In fact, not everyone learns in the same way, in the same context or at the same time. Sometimes it is also difficult to quantify the learning process because the action must be persistent over time and the investment is prolonged (Cannella, 2008, p. 207).

RadioActive was not only inspired by the most recent approaches to PLEs, it also applies them. This concept promotes individuals' education by using various free access tools as an alternative learning method. It opposes some restrictions that frequently shape formal learning and instead promotes connectedness, autonomy and openness in the learning process (Sclater, 2008).

PLEs gained some prominence in 2004, mainly associated to the use of Web 2.0 tools (Johnson & Liber, 2008; Sclater, 2008). In fact, the last decade has reflected a need to rebalance the relation between an individual learner and their learning tools and contexts. The individual's role in the appropriation of technologies was emphasized and the learning process was taken to be not just individual, but also a socially constructive way of interacting with the environment surrounding the subject (Saz *et al.*, 2011).

PLEs are implemented in accordance with social necessities, and the software is not seen as a repository, but instead as a skill that can be reconfigured according to the needs of the learner. The learning process always grows from within, starting from the subject's interests and not from pre-conceived and implemented structures (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2011).

PLEs represent new ways of using technology for education. However, the rationale for their use is more pedagogical and ethical than it is technological. It is about promoting education in a holistic way, encouraging personal responsibility in the learning process (Attwell, 2007, p. 7).

### RESEARCH METHODS

The first stage of the project was *problematizing* the meaning and the possibility of change in the research field. Problematization is a design process, which is particularly adequate to the development of online platforms that have to be adapted to specific contexts (Ravenscroft, Schmidt, Cook, & Bradley, 2012). This systematization and dialogic procedure with strong Freirian influence provides the research team with a robust knowledge of the reality, which is a central requi-

site to any learning program that wishes to be effective outside formal contexts (Brites, Santos, Jorge & Navio, 2014). It is also a collaborative method that makes users a part of the definition of both the problems and the solutions, emphasizing the bottom-up approach of RA. Although we can never consider problematization as a closed phase, the first six months<sup>10</sup> were clearly the most decisive part of the process, enabling constant adjustments that led to the stabilization of the groups and to the regular production of shows. During that period, the specificities of each context were assessed through empirical and ethnographic methods. The research team conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups<sup>11</sup> with the most regular participants in the project and with key informants, the leaders of the local organization. Data was also collected from participant observation (particularly important during the workshop phase), informal conversations and later from on-air check<sup>12</sup>.

The research team prioritized successive questions. Initially, there was a firm focus on the characteristics of the participants, which was progressively redirected to collecting specific data for the technical and pedagogical scripts:

- What are the characteristics of the centers and their communities?
- What are the characteristics of the participants with respect to their civic, social, technological and informational capabilities?
- What do they expect from RadioActive101<sup>13</sup>?

The findings formed the basis for the development of the programs and for promoting mutual synergies benefiting from pre-existing structures and activities. Different intervention scripts were implemented according to the expectations and specificities of each location, in order to find the most appropriate ways to engage the groups.

Once the research team had enough data to begin the project, a series of workshops were conducted for nearly two months, forming a basis for the production of the first shows. This was a critical phase, during which the researchers persistently tried to identify and analyze which factors determined motivation and participation. Recognizing how learning is affected by the “complexity of human identity” (Cannella, 2008 p. 191) and being aware of the underlying factors was essential to implement any necessary changes that could benefit both the subjects and the groups. Later, when the first broadcasts concluded and were streamed, the researcher’s focus was directed towards a different

issue: which personal and collective achievements did the users considered important?

It is precisely from the analysis of the data collected around these questions that we propose to reflect on RA’s pedagogical model and implementation, as well as on some early results.

## RADIOACTIVE: THE PORTUGUESE CASE

### KNOWING THE DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

RA focuses on different groups of people, ranging from marginalized young people in the UK to members of church outreach organizations in Malta, as well as a multi-generational center in Germany and children from the Roma community at schools in Romania. In Portugal, RA works with disenfranchised youth in two cities, Porto and Coimbra<sup>14</sup>. This is done through three youth centers that are supported by ‘Programa Escolhas’<sup>15</sup>, a government initiative aimed at the development of equal opportunities and the reinforcement of social cohesion and inclusion of children and young people from vulnerable contexts.

In order to maximize existing conditions, it was crucial for it to exist awareness of the disparities between the various centers. Therefore, problematization was absolutely essential (Brites, Santos, Jorge & Navio, 2014). Center A is located in an urban area of Porto, with strong social and economic disparities. Three kinds of users were identified within this group: the social workers that coordinate the different activities; a group of older individuals (around 20 years of age) who are seen as leaders, have relevant digital competences and are particularly proactive; and the end users, mostly adolescents who do not have particularly strong digital or communication skills.

Center B is clearly different. It is a more recent project, located in the historical part of Porto, with only two types of participants: the social workers, who have the essential skills to develop an online radio; and the younger people, mainly between 10 and 18 years old, who have serious difficulty in learning how to use digital platforms, demonstrate fewer communication skills, and lack a sense of initiative.

The third center (C) is located in Coimbra, in a social housing area where the majority of the city’s Roma community lives. Three types of users were identified here: the monitors, who have basic digital skills (with the exception of one who has some experience); the community facilitators, who are young adults with the important role of establishing a bridge to the community; and the young people themselves, who are aged

between 11 and 16, have limited digital skills and demonstrate some learning difficulties, attention deficit and unstable behavior.

The initial characterization of the centers revealed clear problems that had to be addressed, ranging from the absence of initiative to extremely unbalanced skills within the same group, or the difficulty to engage the more unstable participants. But, despite the various differences, the overall picture showed common traces: the younger children showed little awareness of media production processes, and their digital practices in informal contexts were limited to gaming, texting and social media. Even though the older participants were more digitally savvy, the groups generally revealed familiarity with mobile technology but with little awareness about more empowering uses of the networked information.

#### CARRYING OUT RADIOACTIVE ONLINE

In this section we present some of the issues that have arisen from the fieldwork, organized by center. The workshops constituted the initial preparation for actually producing radio. Altogether, they involved around 70 people (adolescents and young adults) that met once a week for one or two hours, led by the research team. In each center, general issues on radio, journalism, writing, production, sound recording and editing, as well as Internet use were addressed by the research team, who had a solid background in both media theory and practice. This was quite useful for guaranteeing flexibility in managing the subjects and methods of the workshops. Despite the structured contents and goals of these sessions, they privileged a constant dialogue, furthering an exchange of personal expressions in an informal space. Hence, the depth of the subjects was always dependent on the participants' response. Sometimes, the researchers had to go back to a subject at a later date and try a different tactic. Usually, a more practical approach led the group to get involved and discuss the topic. The sessions were also designed to stimulate critical thinking on everyday questions related to the media, the community and society. All of these issues were registered as field notes in order to compile a Best Practices manual (Brites *et al.*, 2014) that would enable the methodology to be replicated<sup>16</sup>.

As discussed earlier, the involvement of everyone in defining the shows was a key part of the process. Center A provided a good reflection of this idea. In this center, the concept of dialogue was taken further by maintaining a constant relation between the younger individuals and their contexts. Hence, the first show was

called "Youth and Art"<sup>17</sup> and was mostly prepared by the Level 2 participants. As they were more advanced users, they were quite excited with the possibility of having quality tools to produce the show. The program included interviews about dance, street art and music, which were recorded in different locations. A video and a newsletter, both related to the show, were also produced. This phase additionally proved that the Level 2 participants had a more solid background not only in editing skills, but also regarding sonic and visual composition. The program was totally pre-recorded and was the first to be streamed online by RadioActive101 Portugal. When assessing the whole process, the group expressed satisfaction with the level of autonomy they were given in the production of the show, from brainstorming to edition. The research team's main role was ultimately to critically evaluate the process. However, the older participants recognized an involuntary tendency to take the production phase from the hands of the inexperienced younger participants, and showed determination to change that in the following shows. Overall, the collective results gave the group sufficient confidence to propose a live streaming of the second show.

Center B had an interesting albeit different dynamic, especially because the group had no experts. Their first show was called "The Sounds of Porto"<sup>18</sup> and included a sound narrative that transported the listener across various locations of the town. The production team recorded a peculiar *vox pop* about the role of youth in Oporto; they prepared a sort of speakers' corner, putting up small stages in various locations. They also talked to street musicians and elderly craftsmen. Everything was recorded in the streets near the Center. The small tasks and the progressive nature of the production was an effective way to address some difficulties associated with learned helplessness, which were already expected by the local monitors.

We have an important issue here, which is their ability to accomplish something. Because these are kids that have enormous difficulties at various levels, they assume right from the beginning that they don't want to do it, because they are not able. (...) They can gain an added resistance because they have a goal (...) they will have small targets that are doable (Center B coordinator, focus group, 2013)<sup>19</sup>.

The Level 1 participants took responsibility for a large part of the pre-production of the program. However, a subsequent overview of the process revealed that the show ended up having wider participation from the younger users, which was quite the opposite of what happened in Center A. Streaming the show was a

really important moment and most of the team gathered together to listen to it. They were quite sensitive to positive reinforcement, especially from the research team, with benefits for their self-efficacy. Afterwards, they decided they wanted to do the next show in a special situation, gathering friends and family in the youth center.

The need to establish balanced learning environments and stable groups were some of the first major issues that were addressed by the researchers. In Coimbra (Center C), the group composition was unstable from the outset and the participants' attendance was very unpredictable, aside from a few of the leaders. At Center C, the first show<sup>20</sup> came as an opportunity to cover a major annual event promoted by Escolhas. This chance to support the organization was perceived as highly desirable by the local coordinators, and despite the participants' insufficient preparation, the research team assumed the anticipation of the show as a way to address the growing apathy towards the workshops. The strategy, which consisted of rebalancing the learning process by lessening the top-down approach of the workshops in favor of a more experimental and shared learning, seemed to be the only way to captivate younger individuals that had stayed but clearly needed to develop personal motivation. Because of the group's initial instability, the researcher and ICT monitor were heavily involved in the pre-production of the show. Pre-production was both decisive and complex, since the show was prepared to be both a radio show and a live event in one of the most recognized coffee shops in the city. Being in front of a live audience would be an extra obstacle for the hosts (16 and 21-year-olds) to consider. The show involved several short interviews and live musical performances. The event was streamed later with minor editing. The main host (from the second group) continues in the project and clearly reacted well to the positive feedback from the others; he has also gained confidence from having risen to the challenge. He later emphasized the "motivation and self-confidence. We are people that had never talked on a radio and today we can speak and do an interview. That motivates us to continue to learn. And it is self-confidence, which we lacked" (male, 21, interview, 2014). He recently became the first participant of RA to monitor exterior workshops about radio and is currently working with children under 10. Apart from this methodological turn, during the training sessions it became increasingly clear that the presence of a modeling figure could be an important way of generating group stability. Consequently, the

community facilitators and older participants became central pieces in the structure, not only in Center C, but in all the centers.

But what caused this instability during and throughout the sessions? From the beginning, it was clear that the slightest glimpse of a school environment was clearly discouraging for some participants. In fact, from Day one, the researcher tried to make very clear that it this was not a formal teaching context. The workshops were held in a space provided by the Center, which was familiar to the youngsters. All the chairs were placed around the same table, reinforcing the constant invitation for everyone to reflect and participate. However, casualness ended for some of the participants as soon as radio's true nature was unveiled, as a disappointing opposition to an illusory naturalist ideal of broadcast talk. In fact, without any exception, the younger participants considered radio as a "natural" medium because of its (apparently) improvised and informal discourse: "interviewing? It's just asking questions" (no preparation or research required), said a highly distract 11-year-old boy (interview, 2013). Consequently when the research team tried to address the technical, structural and writing processes that sustain a radio broadcast, some of the youngest tended to diverge and distance themselves. For these children, radio (and the workshops) stopped being about fun and spontaneity because, unexpectedly, preparation was required. Planning required a cognitive commitment that was similar to school chores. After that, within two sessions, the same boy was asked in the street by the ICT monitor why had he stopped going to the workshop. He explained that the workshop was "empalagoso", which is a slang word with Spanish origin frequently used within the Roma community that means *boring* (2013). We realized that for a residual number of participants with a cultural background that favored school disengagement, this phase of RadioActive was not sufficiently distant from schoolwork. However, the majority of the participants had a different view and considered the learning flexibility as a distinctive factor: "on the radio, we can choose how to do the show and at school we have to do things following established processes" (girl, 13, interview, 2014).

It was precisely this flexibility that allowed for differentiated attention when addressing some cases characterized by lack of motivation or absence of sense of initiative. In fact, RA was able to apply different strategies that best fitted the participants' needs. Some were based on the development of pre-existing skills, while others focused on personal preferences or even



on sudden interests. We had two interesting examples from Centers B and C. In Coimbra, a 15-year-old girl who showed little interest in radio found her place in the project as a photographer, producing images for social networking sites and the website. Another adolescent from Center B discovered a hidden interest on writing lyrics for songs: “before I didn’t write anything at all. I didn’t like it. But now this radio exists and now that I know that I can do the music programme, I’m more inspired.” (girl, 14, interview, 2014). Hence, both the personal identification with the project and individual affirmation inside the groups developed through the promotion of diverse forms of participation. Gradually, the groups began to identify with RadioActive101 and started to call it “our radio”.

## DISCUSSION

RadioActive is the result of an innovative mix of participatory pedagogy, free access online tools and media education based on radio production. The implementation of the project in Portugal shows how a flexible dialogue-centered approach allows for differentiated applications outside formal learning, adapting the project’s methodologies to specific contexts and needs.

The flexibility of the pedagogical model has been adequate to drastic adjustments, whenever the groups’ dynamics can take advantage from that shift, as described earlier with the premature live show production. This flexibility – as opposed to the rigidity of conventional schooling – is acknowledged by the majority of the participants as one of the most distinct pedagogical aspects of RA.

Overall, the methodology showed promising signs of engaging these groups of adolescents and young adults, despite some dropouts. Referring to Oldfather’s (2002) categorization, there is a clear predominance of evolving positive motivation cases, characterized by a lack of initial motivation, followed by a positive progression and completion of the tasks. Non-motivation cases have been scarce and culturally driven. In fact, it is quite common that the Roma communities’ relation with school is characterized by high dropout rates and low school attendance (Liégeois, 2007, p.15). Therefore, some of the dropouts are consistent with the perception that RadioActive101 is associated with formal education.

The initial lack of confidence has been progressively diminished as a consequence of both personal achievements and good collective results. The participants started to feel confident about how they individually contributed to a complex bigger picture, and this

increased confidence has brought a greater identification with the project. Hence, identity, confidence and self-efficacy beliefs have to be emphasized as key dimensions for participation and involvement (Haste, 2004; Bandura, 1995). This is especially true for the younger participants, who need to feel they are sufficiently competent so as to connect further with the project and feel comfortable exposing themselves to others.

The promotion of critical analysis and airchecks within the group has been well accepted and the participants have responded particularly well to positive reinforcement. They have also begun to show signs of analytical listening, commenting on each other’s work.

The constant and interdependent relation between individual learning and collective dynamics poses numerous obstacles in a participatory project. In fact, as in other PAR projects, the unpredictable composition of the groups, the age disparity and the different levels of participant commitment pose great challenges to both the stability and the continuity of the learning process. The older participants, who show more confidence, have greater social and cultural awareness and possess better digital skills prior to the launch of the project. Hence, they are key elements for the success of the project, ensuring the required stability for the cascade learning process to take effect. Obviously, they are an example to be followed. But their importance goes further: they promote a self-regulatory mechanism that will prevail after the funding of the project is over. However, there is an absolute need for a strong ethical commitment from both the researchers and the more experienced participants, in order to effectively address the different speeds of learning in a participatory project and the capacity to direct the learning processes in a way that maximizes each individual’s results (Cannella, 2008). In fact, it would be very easy for the task to be accomplished by those that already have the skills for it, leaving the learners apart.

As a concluding remark, we argue that RA’s promising results are associated to a set of interconnected factors, namely the capacity to easily adapt (both at macro and micro levels) the intervention scripts; and the fostering of identity and self-confidence through the participatory and progressive nature of the individual tasks, which end up leading to collective successes.

While producing the subsequent shows, RA started to deal with the challenge of certifying the competences of its participants, reinforcing the quality assessment of the processes and establishing partnerships with other structures for the replication and survival of the project after the end of its formal phase in December 2014.

## FOOTNOTES

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. RA is in line with both the European Parliament and Council's Recommendation of December 18th, 2006, concerning the essential skills for lifelong learning, and the European Commission's Horizon 2020.
3. RadioActive is a non-formal learning project. In this article informal spaces and contexts are referred to in opposition to the school environment, despite the informal or non-formal nature of the processes within.
4. "Digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) or the "Net generation" (Tapscott, 1998) are other expressions that have been coined to refer to the generation that was born in a rich digital environment (roughly after the 80s) and, largely because of that, has been presented as digitally savvy. Formal education intervention was, until recent times, largely influenced by theories and beliefs based around the natural connection of these youngsters to technology (Coombes, 2009). So, given the limitations of top-down education structures in some contexts, horizontal and collective approaches are a relevant form of learning.
5. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire is one of the most important authors on participatory methodologies. Freire pointed out the importance of a dialectic of knowledge and action: practice can be considered an essential starting point, though it is insufficient on its own, as it always needs theoretical instruments (Freire, 1977/1975, p. 26).
6. Considering the absence of a specific legal framework for community broadcasting in Portugal, the Internet was considered the best choice for community media development.
7. However, we should note that in countries like Brazil, true community radios are becoming rare: "because of the private appropriation by traders and politicians of a space that should be public" (Torres, 2011).
8. We must distinguish "action-research" from the practices inherent to PAR (see Kinson et al., 2007b, p. 11).
9. Power can be defined in this context as "the capacity of the grassroots groups, which are exploited socially and economically, to articulate and systematize knowledge (...) in such a way that they can become protagonists in the advancement of their society and in defence of their own class and group interests" (Fals-Borda, 1987, p. 330).
10. This period includes the beginning of the project in the field, the workshops, the pre-production and the production of the first show.
11. All the interviews and focus groups were conducted in the youth centers.
12. Hearing and collectively analyzing the recorded shows has been a recurring practice.
13. RadioActive101 is the name given to the radio both in Portugal and the UK.
14. Porto is the second largest city in Portugal, with an urban area of over 1 million inhabitants. Coimbra is the main city in the center of the country, with around 150,000 people.
15. "Choices Program", in English.
16. RadioActive101 Practices is a handbook for replicating the model. Downloadable at <http://pt.radioactive101.eu/2014/12/22/radioactive101-practices/>
17. <http://pt.radioactive101.eu/2013/07/26/metap-programa-01/>
18. <http://pt.radioactive101.eu/2013/08/01/catapulta-programa-01/>
19. In this section, we use quotations from interviews and focus groups (cf. section 2.2) conducted by the research team during the project (2013-2014).
20. <http://pt.radioactive101.eu/2013/08/19/trampolim-programa-01/>

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