



What supports learning in the course 'Training of Trainers for European Youth in Action Projects'

The final report of an integrated participatory research
undertaken in 2012/2013

Disclaimer: This *publication* has been produced with the financial support of the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre. The contents of the publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of SALTO.

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Foreword

This is the final report of the integrated participatory action-research project developed throughout the 2012/2013 edition of the Training of Trainers for European Youth in Action Projects course (ToT course), designed to research into what supports learning in the ToT.

The research project was designed and conducted by the course's team of trainers – Hazel Low, Paul Kloosterman and Peter Hofmann – with the collaboration of an educational researcher - Liliana Teixeira Lopes - as a supervising expert.

The research has been financed by the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre (SALTO T&C RC) as the coordinator of the ToT course in the name of the network of Youth in Action National Agencies.

In this report, we begin by presenting you *How it all started*, where we explain why and how this research project came to be, focusing on the main concerns at the core of this endeavor.

Next, we take you on a brief tour around the *ToT team approach to learning*, from which the ToT course's structure – that you can explore in *Appendix 1* - and the research approach – described in-depth in *Appendix 2* - were coherently defined.

You will then find the operational aspects of the research project in *Our research methodology and procedures*, followed by the *Research results* that were produced by the ToT course's participants throughout the research moments within the course.

Finally, we present you with the main *Conclusions* of the research, a contextualized understanding of what supports learning in the ToT course through the participants' perspectives and experiences.

As a closing moment of a long, reflexive and enriching process, we share some *Afterthoughts* on bringing a research dimension to the ToT course and, generally, to the non-formal learning and education practices in the context of European Youth in Action Projects.

We believe that, by sharing our process and results with other practitioners, researchers and stakeholders, we are contributing to enlighten and enrich the existent and necessary debates around broad dynamics that cross the interconnected fields of European Youth Work,

European Training Strategy of Youth in Action (ETS of YiA) and Non-Formal Education in general, namely: the place, the purpose and the approaches for research; the evaluation and quality assessment of training courses/programmes; the understanding of the complex and variable nature of learning processes and learning facilitation.

This being said, we weren't aiming at presenting the readers neither a model for the integration of research in non-formal training courses/programmes; nor a structured proposal for a full-proof approach to non-formal training or to the training of trainers; not even a step-by-step evaluation of the ToT course. We aim at sharing what we have drawn out ourselves: "food for thought"!

We hope your reading can be as enjoyable and fruitful as we feel this experience has been!

Hazel, Liliana, Paul and Peter

1. How it all started?

Just looking at numbers, the ToT course is a success story:

- 12 completed editions since 1999.
- Almost 300 trainers finished the course.
- At least two-thirds of the participants remain to be active in the YiA field for 3 years and more after.
- 90% of all National Agencies have sent participants to the course over all the years. Recently there is more and more demand and competition for the 24 places available.

What is the link between these impressive numbers and the quality of the course?

The team of trainers of the ToT course (stable composition since 2008) has always been very committed to a continuous development of the course - based on evaluation from participants, SALTO T&C RC and National Agencies as well as new insights on approaches and methodologies for training trainers. The wish was there though to understand even better what is at the core of the quality of the ToT course, what are its success factors.

These reflections and considerations were very much informed also by the developments connected to the ETS of YiA. Especially the efforts around a generic competence profile for trainers has asked and still asks for deeper understanding on how these competences can be developed. The ToT course is therefore a key-activity in the ETS of YiA – and a research on its quality aspects supporting learning of participants a relevant contribution to the discussions.

A lot of good reasons for a research on the ToT course - but which type? Research within Non-Formal Education (particularly in the context of European Youth Work) does not have a long history and tradition – and the examples present were mainly quantitative analysis type of research that we did not consider adequate for the type of insights we wanted to gain.

We were looking for a research approach that is very compatible with our educational approach as a team to the course – which is based on the principles of constructivist learning, facilitation of group and individual learning and peer learning.

In November 2011 the European network UNIQUE¹ had invited trainers and researchers to the second edition of “Non-Formal Learning Dialogue: Practice meets research” – and 30 people engaged in and passionate about bringing practice and research in Non-Formal Education closer together followed the call to the far north, to Rautavaara in Finland.

One of the 30 was *Liliana Texeira Lopes* arriving all the way from Porto, more precise from the University of Minho. Responding to the call for experts she proposed a workshop “When research means learning together: Participative research through conversational learning”. Being also among the 30 Rautavaara explorers *Peter Hofmann* from the ToT team therefore used this great opportunity and joined the workshop of Liliana. It clearly held what the title promised – the research approach² fitted perfectly into the concept behind ToT.

The result was an immediate clear YES to a research project about the ToT course as well as the cooperation with Liliana as the supervising expert. A bit more time was needed to arrive at the actual research question – after many reflective loops together with colleagues at the seminar we arrived at a simple and therefore powerful research question: **What supports learning in the ToT course?**

All involved see this research not only very relevant for the further development of the ToT-course but also as an important contribution to the endeavor to bring closer together research and practice when it comes to non-formal learning – and to provide a hopefully best-case example of how to do it: participatory, transparent, involving the actors in the training as researchers and – last but not least - low-cost.

¹ UNIQUE is an European community of free-lance trainers and researchers in non-formal learning: see <http://unique-community.ning.com>.

² For more details on the particular research approach please go to *Appendix 2: Our research approach* of this report.

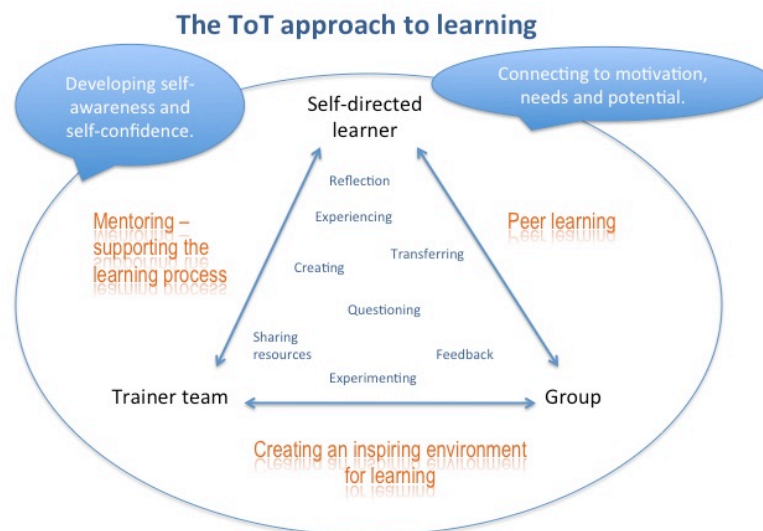
2. Training of Trainers team approach to learning

In the last six years the ToT course team of trainers has been trying to implement a self-directed learning approach inspired by constructivist perspectives putting the learners in the centre as subjects and authors of their own learning. It starts from the idea that learners know best what and how to learn.

The content framework of the training course is established by the trainers' set of competences as they are formulated under the development of the ETS of YiA programme. These competences offer the participants an insight into the different aspects of being a trainer in the European youth field and the opportunity to assess themselves on where they are in their on-going development as a trainer.

From this self-assessment, 24 participants come to 24 different outcomes. Each of them has a unique profile and has her/his own needs and wishes to start/continue the own learning path.

In the ToT course, the team wants to offer for one year a framework and environment where participants can intensively follow their own learning path.



The team sees, among others, four important elements to facilitate this learning process:

- a group climate that maximizes learning opportunities
- peer learning
- facilitation of individual learning
- offering spaces for practice opportunities – learning by doing

A learning group climate

The team aims, in partnership with participants, to promote a group culture based on the following values:

- Diversity in the group is appreciated - participants dare to show themselves in all their “being different”
- Expression in all human dimensions – intellectual, creative, emotional and spiritual – is encouraged and appreciated.
- Inclusion and partnership – acknowledging and using all our resources and competences to support each other on this journey.
- Willingness to support and motivate others in their learning
- Asking questions, critical reflection and constructive feedback are important tools to support ones’ own and others’ learning.

Peer learning

Self-directed learning is certainly not seen as a solo-job. The team believes very much in the necessity of support and feedback from - and confrontation and cooperation with - other learners to shape your own learning path. Learning together with others is stimulated in different forms during the whole duration of the course in working and reflecting together and supporting each other.

Facilitation of individual learning

The team acknowledges the challenges that self-directed learning brings. For many participants it is the first time that they are confronted with a situation where they have full responsibility for their own learning. Choosing your own learning objectives, deciding about the way you want to shape your learning, choosing the peers you want to learn with and assessing your own development are certainly challenging tasks. The team offers different

tools and methods that can help in that process and put a lot of effort into building a participant-trainer relationship that facilitates that process. Next to that every participant has one of the team-members as a mentor during the whole course. The process of becoming a self-directed learner is an important theme during the mentoring.

An overlook on the ToT course's structure can be found in Appendix 1: Training of Trainers for European Youth in Action Projects – Facts.

3. Our research methodology and procedures

Being established that the educational approach in the ToT course is based on constructivist perspectives, researching into “what supports learning in the ToT course?” had to be built coherently on a constructivist base³. This meant respecting the following **principles**:

- designing a research project that didn’t bring a significant disturbance to the activities that would otherwise occur within the ToT course;
- using research methods that were capable of respecting and sustaining the individual-group dynamics essential to the ToT course’s approach;
- developing a qualitative and participative research.

We aimed at **identifying and understanding the perspectives of learners** regarding the “whats”, “hows” and “whys” of learning in the ToT course:

- the individual, contextual and social aspects which are acknowledged by the participants as facilitators and obstacles of the learning process;
- the connections the participants establish between those aspects.

The overall research design was entirely submitted to a core criterion: **coherent integration in the ToT course’s structure and flow**.

The three research methods selected - **focus groups, interviews and questionnaires** - were developed in moments interweaved within the course’s activities throughout the months.

All focus group conversations and interviews were recorded and transcribed, to allow for posterior content analysis, along with the written answers obtained from the questionnaires.

³ For more on this project’s research methodology, please go to *Appendix 2: Our research approach of this report*.

Focus Groups

Aim: to explore the perspectives and representations of the participants regarding their experience of learning in the ToT course, with a focus on their perception of what and how supports their learning in each of the phase the focus group is being held.

Organization: the 24 participants were divided in 3 stable groups of 8 participants each. Each group convened at the end of each of the 3 residential seminars. The facilitation of each group was attributed to one of the ToT trainers, following a semi-directive technique.

Outcome: 9 focus group transcripts. The average duration of each focus group conversation is about 45 minutes.

Interviews

Aim: to explore the participants' perception of what and how supported their learning throughout the ToT course.

Interviewees: 6 participants, selected according to the perceived transformation of their experience of learning in ToT.

Organization: the interviews were conducted 3 to 4 months after the end of the ToT course, via Skype. Each ToT trainer conducted 2 interviews following a semi-directive technique.

Outcome: 6 individual interview transcripts. The duration of the interviews was variable, ranging from 40 to 60 minutes.

ToT course Final Evaluation Questionnaires

Aim: to access the participants' perception of what and how supported their learning throughout the ToT course as it ends.

Organization: the questionnaires were answered individually, in writing and submitted via e-mail. One of the ToT trainers compiled the answers in a single document for analysis.

Outcome: the section of the questionnaire focused on learning support was composed of open questions, and the answers were very variable in both size and depth. Not all participants referred to all the dimensions requested – peer learning, reflection groups and mentoring.

Content Analysis

The analysis started by informally organizing a descriptive account of every focus group, associating the transcribed direct speech to a summary of the expressed facts, thoughts, opinions and feelings, accompanied by a highlight of the divergences and convergences found across the conversation.

The second step was to associate the facts, thoughts, opinions and feelings expressed to **analytical dimensions/categories**, built to organize the information. The categories started by overlapping with the ToT course educational approach, methodology and strategies, following a very strict operative link between the ToT structure and the support to learning trajectories. But we didn't intend to promote an instrumental or functional view of how each of the ToT course's set of strategies and work proposals provided support for learning; we rather aimed at highlighting the relational dimensions of the learning processes in specific social contexts, and how each of the highly differentiated self-directed learning trajectories can be supported through the implementation of a coherent holistic educational approach.

We then experimented organizing the speeches in new categories, emerging from a perspective which privileges the relational dimension inherent to every particular process, work proposal, strategy, exercise, etc. that is part of the ToT course. This new approach was much more adequate for the analysis, since it respected and followed the non-linear and non-segmented perception the participants had shared on what supports their learning in the ToT course.

When interviewing the participants, we had a chance to perceive whether the new categories were coherent with the inter-relations they establish between their learning and the aspects of the ToT course that either support or bring obstacles to those processes. Again, we realized how much more adequate it was to not focus on the potential that

specific strategies or moments had to support the participants learning trajectories, but rather bring to light the relevance of an integrated and articulated system of relational spaces and facilitating settings.

In this other frame of thought and analysis, the information units that compose the answer to our primary research question – what supports learning in the ToT course? – organize themselves in four interconnected relational spaces, which in turn articulately organize the learning experience of each participant in the ToT course:

- **Self** – the individual relational space, the inner dimensions of learning, self-awareness, self-direction, self-assessment;
- **Peers** – the peer-to-peer(s) relational space, the peer learning dimensions;
- **Trainers-participants** – the relational and learning space with and through the trainers;
- **Educational approach** – the relation with the educational principles and the values that shape the learning environment.

4. Research results

Before we go into an interpretative analysis of the information provided through both conversational methods developed with the participants of the 2012/2013 ToT course – focus groups (FG) and interviews – we attempted a compilation of the most significant knowledge and information shared regarding learning and learning support throughout this course⁴.

All **four relational spaces** - self; peers; trainers-participants; educational approach – were **acknowledged by the ToT course’s participants as relevant to their learning experiences and overall process**, although differently perceived throughout the time, along the course’s different moments, and along the participants’ differentiated trajectories.

Here we present a **sum-up** of some of the most relevant and consistent thoughts the participants shared regarding learning support in the ToT course:

Trainers-participants

- in the first FG, there is a general perception that this relational space supports learning by providing the opportunity to observe the trainer’s in action: training, relating to each other, relating to the group of participants, establishing the conditions for the emergence of a learning environment the participants consider supportive for learning;
- further on the ToT course, the participants are growingly more explicit on how the observation of the trainers team provided a reference to their own practice during the Training Practice Project (TPP)⁵;

⁴ The data provided by the ToT course’s final evaluation questionnaires reinforces what participants expressed in the FG and interviews, and since the answers are notoriously less elaborated and don’t explore the issues in depth, we chose not to make direct references to it.

⁵ Each participant designs, prepares, runs and evaluates an international training project together with other participants from the course. The training projects are organised between Seminars 2 and 3 (cf. *Appendix 1*).

- in the first FG, the relation with the mentor is considered a support for introducing the participants to the course, to its approach and to its environment and culture, specifically through providing a safe space for clearing doubts and obtaining some answers, through providing a personal welcoming host who reduces the anxiety brought by a new experience; it's not perceived as concretely relevant by all, some expressions reveal an abstract consideration of its potential usefulness;

- in the second and third FG, there is a movement towards a specification of how this support is provided, and a broad acknowledgment of its importance and centrality by acknowledgement of its concrete usefulness:

. the mentoring relation addresses the need for emotional support – mainly through the feeling of openness and valorization of the participants interests, issues, thoughts, life, experiences, feelings – which is seen by the participants as supportive of learning trajectories by establishing a safe, stable and constant lining throughout the whole course;

. the mentoring relation is perceived as one of the core supports for the self-directed learning processes, promoting, stimulating and providing questioning and resources for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-assessment throughout the ToT course;

. the roles of the mentoring relation in supporting the participants' self-directed learning trajectories are perceived during the seminars, but also – and for some, most importantly, because it allows the maintenance of a learning mode “outside” the ToT course – between seminars;

. the mentoring relation provides a context for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-assessment in the direct interactions between mentor and mentee, allowing for a process of emergence of insights during the conversations, but also because it requires a process of preparation that promotes these individual endeavors;

- the perception of trainer-participant relational space, and its role in providing learning support, includes the role this relation plays in the establishment and maintenance of a learning environment that allows for a satisfactory peer learning experience, namely

promoting trust, respect, safety, equality, democracy, horizontality and flexibility in all the ToT course's contexts, namely the reflection groups and the support of the TPP team;

- the interviews developed 4 months after the end of the ToT course reinforced these aspects, emphasizing:

. the complementarity between this relational space and the individual learning processes, namely through promoting back-and-forth movements of (re)organization and disorganization of thoughts;

. the relevance of the mentoring process to balance out the self-directed learning approach, by being especially supportive to the development of the self-confidence needed to explore and dare, to the personal and professional empowerment of the participants;

. the paradox of relating to the trainers as peers and as experts/references/models, both aspects necessary and valued;

. the need to learn how to take advantage of the possibility to learn with a coach/mentor, especially if one is used to work alone.

Peers

- in the first FG, the participants acknowledge mainly that the learning support provided by the peer-to-peer(s) relational space is centered in the opportunity to contact with new and different approaches, perspectives, experiences, either by observation or by formal (reflection groups, inputs during specific moments during training) and informal (coffee breaks, meals, free time) conversational moments;

- accompanying this perception, is the acknowledgement that these exchanges can only happen with positive outcomes because there is an adequate atmosphere and environment for learning with/from peers, characterized by trust, respect, and a sense of safety;

- the clarification of how the relation with peers supports learning in the ToT course occurs in the second and third FG:

. the group's support for learning is played in complementarity with the individual processes: the others listen actively and openly, and provide feedback, which allows for new insights, perspectives and questions; on the other hand, each participant shares, experiments and takes on challenges;

. the adequate learning environment for such a dynamic is created through, namely, the reflection groups, where participants can develop a sense of belonging, an identification with a collective experiencing the same processes, which reduces the anxiety or fear of being judged, misunderstood or isolated, and allows a feeling of safety;

. the conversations with peers function as the conversations with the mentors – the peers support the self-directed learning processes by promoting, stimulating and providing questioning and resources for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-assessment throughout the ToT course; interaction with peers creates contexts for the emergence of insights during the conversations;

. the relation with peer(s) supports self-directed learning in a very coherent way, since each participant can design the(se) relation(s) to support her/his learning trajectory as it best suits his/her needs and characteristics: one-on-one, in small groups, in large groups, with a formalized structure and organization, through informal conversations, teaming up according to themes, tasks, goals, etc.;

. sharing tasks is perceived by some as the most powerful drive for learning with/from peers, so the Backpackers Hostel⁶ and especially the TPP are mentioned as the major contexts where the peer-to-peer(s) relational space assumes leading role in learning support.

- the TPP takes on a great importance regarding this category in the third FG, constituting also the main extra input given by the interviews:

⁶ The Backpackers Hostel is a part of seminar 2 where during two days participants are invited to design and hold training sessions together with peers for other participants. Each session is being observed by a team member and one peer.

. learning to be a trainer in international teams can only be done by experiencing integration in a team of trainers and developing a practice project, so this is a competence to which peer learning is central and irreplaceable;

. in TPP you realize that not only you learn from observing others, but you learn by taking on tasks and challenges you wouldn't take on without the support and safety your group provides;

. in TPP you also realize you constitute learning support and source for others, giving you a different perspective for your professional development;

. the TPP demanded for new roles because the participants were working with people different than the ones they usually worked with, which required developing and adjusting to new approaches to team organization, to tasks/roles distribution, etc., and this brought great learning opportunities;

- several participants interviewed emphasized that the ToT course was an opportunity to acknowledge the importance and usefulness of peer learning in any learning path, leading to deep changes in their approach to learning – they seek out for peers/groups between seminars and after ToT ended.

Self

- in the first FG, the participants state that the emphasis on self-directed learning was a very present reality since before the ToT course started, it went as far as the application form and the application procedure, two elements that prompt-started their self-reflection on their objectives and motivation to come to ToT;

- throughout all the FG and interviews, it's perceivable that the participants place this dimension in the center of learning in the ToT course: the other relational contexts (peers and trainers), and some specific tools and strategies, are frequently and strongly perceived

through the role they play in supporting the development of this individual rapport to learning;

- the participants value the possibility the ToT course gives them to take time to think, for self-reflection and introspection, processes they recognize as important to their learning process but seldom possible given their daily routines;

- in the first FG is very evident that acknowledging the inherent individual core of the learning processes is not the same as embracing a self-directed learning approach for its development: all the participants value the first, but many have an ambivalent attitude towards the second, expressed as simultaneously appreciating the freedom, power and responsibility, but needing more external structure and direction from the trainers, or experiencing an anguish arising from all the free time and freedom/responsibility to choose;

- in the second FG, but with even more emphasis in the third FG and the interviews, most of the participants growingly value the actual and consequent freedom to choose, to make decisions regarding their participation, their involvement, and the direction to take within the course's work flow, as a rare opportunity in their learning biography, especially because they acknowledge that ToT provides both emotional support and adequate tools and strategies to explore that freedom;

- this relation of oneself with her/his learning is perceived by participants as deeply dependent on the confrontation with others: observation and/or interaction triggers and supports self-awareness, self-assessment, self-reflection, leading to self-knowledge and allowing one's own definition of learning objectives and of the structure to pursue them;

- the participants perceive that this dimension in learning is supported in the ToT course in a broad and holistic way, since they feel and experience that their personal development is as much an issue as their development as trainers;

- in the second and third FG the participants express themselves more clearly about how they perceive the support the ToT course provides to their individual learning processes, and it's a very differentiated account:

- some stress out the importance of time and spaces for self-reflection;

- . some mention the role that tools like the learning achievement book (LAB)⁷, the self-perception inventory (SPI)⁸ or the online platform had in their process;
 - . for some participants there was a certain informal pressure to give back to trainers (via mentoring process) and peers (via reflection group) a feedback on their self-awareness and self-assessment which supported them in their process;
- partly in the third FG, but especially in the interviews, the participants acknowledge that the whole of the ToT course was an empowering experience by promoting:
- . learning to make decisions regarding one's own learning trajectory;
 - . self-trust and self-confidence;
 - . self-awareness, and consequently the possibility to decide with more clarity the directions for the continuous development of one's identity and professional pathway.

Educational approach

- this relational space is perceived as the broader one, and participants expressed themselves mainly in terms of how they related to the values, culture and educational principles that were diffused in the other relational spaces and work proposals within the ToT course;
- in the first FG, nearly all the participants shared their appreciation of the fact that the ToT course was set on values of freedom, flexibility, diversity and acceptance, and that these values were coherently and actively translated into practice by the trainers:
 - . they were given the opportunity to actually choose directions, pathways, objectives, partners, strategies, contexts, spaces, experiences, etc.;

⁷ Participants receive at the beginning of the course a paper notebook – for keeping notes from session, reflections, discussions, etc.

⁸ The Self-Perception Inventory is a tool for self-assessment based on the six essential competences.

- . they felt safe and supported by peers and trainers, through the creation of a group atmosphere and a learning environment based on trust and respect;
 - . they felt no external pressure to produce results, no judgments, no definition of standardized objectives, evaluation criteria and timings;
- by the second FG, the participants had a more complex view of how the educational approach supported their learning, pointing out that the possibility for support for all participants throughout the course came from diversity, perceived as balances/tensions between different aspects to which participants related differently:
- . self-reflection (alone) time and sharing moments (with peers and trainers);
 - . structured more directive work proposals by the trainers and autonomous definition of tasks and strategies;
 - . residential seminars (presence) and online environment between seminars (distance);
 - . working alone and working in a team;
- still in the second FG, but with more expression on the third and in the interviews, the TPP was strongly mentioned as the corner-stone of the educational approach in the ToT course:
- . allows for concrete practical feedback on training related activities (as does the Backpackers Hostel), which is of great value to some participants;
 - . provides a safe experimentation context of training work and youth work in Europe;
 - . in itself, the TPP is an opportunity to integrate all dimensions of the ToT course's learning, because it provides the moments in which there is an awareness and need of that learning;
- the third FG and the interviews is also where participants more clearly connect this dimension with the self-directed learning approach and the learning to learn competence: they felt growingly less scared or anguished to take charge of their learning trajectory

because they learnt to self-manage and structure their learning time and flow, and they learnt to self-assess their needs and achievements;

- both in the third FG and in the interviews, looking back on their experience in ToT, and resorting to the LAB, participants realize a positive evolution as trainers and in their relation with the educational approach, made possible by the workflow and structure of the ToT course:

- . the objectives, the approach, and the need for a specific environment to achieve them were clear from the beginning, and were coherently addressed through speech and action by a team of trainers that provided the cohesive backbone to all the dimensions of the course;
- . the diversity of experiences and moments the ToT course provides – action-reflection; collective-individual; stability-surprise – is such that, even if along the way there was cause for confusion, by the end there is a sense of accomplishment;
- . they perceive the course provided good proposals, tools and strategies, along with the valued possibility to join them or not, since there is also an acknowledgement of the importance the alone time has to harvest the products of those proposals;
- . experiencing the ToT course creates a framework that remains with the participants and marks their attitude as trainers and learners beyond ToT: ToT puts participants on track for a self-directed approach to lifelong learning, preparing them to face diversity because it was a learning experience set on diversity.

5. Conclusions

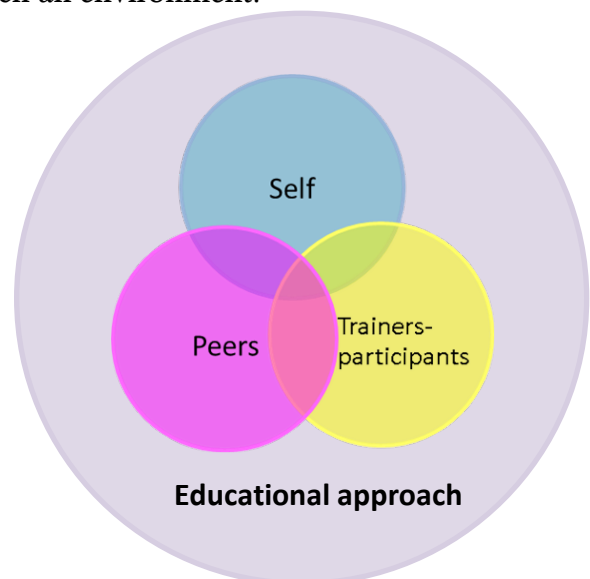
Looking into the learning processes in the course through a “relational lens” led to identifying four relational spaces, which trainers and participants acknowledge to provide structure to the learning experiences and trajectories in the ToT course. Those relational spaces were then established as content analysis categories, allowing trainers and participants to better understand the interactive and complex processes that lead to self-directed learning processes.

As **one of our central conclusions**, we must point out that the **participants perceive these relational spaces in an articulated system**, acknowledging the **interconnections** between them, and revealing the **multidimensionality and non-linearity** of the self-directed learning trajectories and the requirements for those processes to occur.

Looking into each category with a **time-span perspective**, it’s quite evident that they are differently perceived throughout the time, along the course’s different moments, and along the participants’ differentiated trajectories. This brought us to **another main conclusion**, which emerged from the content analysis process: **development-over-time of the understanding of the learning processes/elements**.

The capacity to identify, understand and appreciate the role of the various elements (of challenge and support) and the interactivity between them – needs a certain time to develop. This understanding grows through their actual participation in the 3 collective training seminars - which allow them to increasingly get used to “having permission” to build their own self-directed pathways through the course in such an environment.

Our interpretation of the results follows on the path of the participants’ interpretation of how the relational spaces are interconnected, perhaps better understood through a schematic representation:



This scheme highlights that the relational spaces “**self**”, “**peers**” and “**trainers-participants**” are **mutually influenced**, and that they are **immersed in a broader space – the educational approach** - to which each participant relates directly and, because the educational approach shapes the learning environment, influences the quality of the relational spaces between peers and between trainers and participants.

From this “relational lens” understanding of the learning processes in the course, it seemed useful for us to present our conclusions regarding what supports learning in the ToT course through 2 main perspectives: **the intra and interpersonal relational aspects**, which come from analyzing the interconnections between the “self”, “peers” and “trainers-participants” relational spaces; and **the educational approach**, as the broader relational space that frames the other 3.

The intra and interpersonal relational aspects

The learning in the ToT course is supported largely by a group culture marked by genuine respect for diversity and the value of each participant’s contributions and backgrounds.

This group culture creates a safe space, which allows for a supportive web of relationships (among participants as well as between trainers and participants) to emerge. Mutual trust, openness towards each other, readiness for new challenges and a sincere willingness to support each other are key characteristics of these relationships.

The relationship between trainers and participants provides the establishment and maintenance of a learning environment that allows for a satisfactory peer learning experience by promoting trust, respect, safety, equality, democracy, horizontality and flexibility in all the ToT course’s contexts.

The mentoring relation addresses the need for emotional support – mainly through the feeling of openness and valorization of the participants’ interests, issues, thoughts, life, experiences, feelings – which is seen by the participants as supportive for their learning.

The conversations with peers and mentors support the self-directed learning processes by promoting, stimulating and providing questioning and resources for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-awareness and self-assessment throughout the ToT course.

The educational approach

Self-directed learning flourishes in the ToT course by a balanced mixture of self-reflection, peer-learning and accompaniment by a facilitator/mentor.

As outlined before, the process of becoming a self-directed learner in ToT goes together with the development of self-awareness, self-confidence, self-management and self-assessment in different unique personal trajectories.

The feeling of freedom to choose, to participate and to give direction is both challenging and essential for self-directed learning and needs an adequate framework of individual support and tools.

The participants recognise the set of values about individual and group-learning that the course promotes and the way this is coherently put into practice in all aspects of the course.

The inclusion of “try-out” possibilities – like the Backpackers Hostel in seminar 2 and, to a greater extent, the TPP phase (cf. Appendix 1) – provide a support framework where participants learn (over time) to maximize the benefits they can take from collective reflection with their peers – and to make use of the mentoring process.

Through the chance to design and implement together training sessions and programmes where they reproduce a similar atmosphere of trust, safety and self-directedness with their own participants, they understand more and more the complexity of the facilitation and support role.

The TPP is an opportunity to integrate all dimensions of the ToT course’s learning, because it provides the moments in which there is an awareness and need of that learning.

The course supports participants to develop their own personal self-directed learning approach not only throughout the course – but also for lifelong learning.

Professional and personal development within the course are equally valued by participants in the learning process.

6. Afterthoughts (from the team of trainers)

The subject of learning - and learning to learn – has been an ongoing discussion in the ToT course team of trainers in the past 6 or 7 years. The ToT course was part of a wider research project in 2009-10 (with the focus on how to support the development of the key-competence learning to learn in adults) but, although the results confirmed some of our thinking, we were still curious to know more about what **specifically** facilitates the learning process during the year’s journey through ToT. We were especially interested to hear this from a more personal and individual perspective from the people who actually “live through” the process. What could **they** tell us that were we doing already that facilitated their learning during ToT? And what could we be doing better?

Following one group of participants over the whole year – who, at various moments, were asked to reflect on the **same question** regarding each time a **different phase** of their participation – and **systematically** collecting their comments in small focus groups already gave us quite a different insight into their experiences than the information collected from written evaluation forms. They could confirm, or react against, each other’s comments – and sometimes quite unexpected things came up that we would not have thought of “inviting” in an evaluation form.

But the real learning for us came through the process of working with the transcripts (of the focus groups and interviews) on **making sense** of the information collected. What general conclusions could we really draw from all these individual experiences and opinions? How could we categorize the information into systems for analysis?

As practitioners, we have our own “corners to defend” – our own pet assumptions about how participants experience different aspects of this year-long course. We also, inevitably, have some ideas about what we do that we do not necessarily want to change! Perhaps some things are difficult to hear – or we prefer to keep looking with our own colored glasses...

What was essential for us, therefore, in this process, was the viewpoint of an external researcher who had no interest to defend any specific element, but who could - with a trained, objective eye – draw out the similarities and contradictions within what had been

said, ask relevant questions, articulate from a **research** perspective what it might mean in terms of learning... This “disinterested” perspective – she was not a boss, had no influence on our future employment but, simply, a fascination with the process of learning – was crucial to the current report becoming a real research report and not just a promotional document about the ToT course!

The process – for us as a team – has been full of learning, insightful and has given us the means to appreciate the distance we have already travelled in the past few years in terms of understanding about facilitating the learning of others, as well, of course, as highlighting some areas where we are less coherent or that we need to develop further.

But, especially, it has validated some of our long-held beliefs about supporting the learning process which we now know were appreciated by participants. This research project has helped us to explain what we do in a more articulate, reasoned way and this ultimately means that, for the trainers we train, we can present a more clearly structured framework for the facilitation of learning of others which they, in their turn, can interpret and transmit in their own training work.

Last but not least, we realized how much this particular research approach – especially the fact that the design and implementation was a result of a true co-creation process between the researcher and ourselves – could be relevant to others within our field of non-formal education. The research element is, with this approach, smoothly integrated into the course rather than being seen as an additional “extra”. We believe that this not only increases the validity of the results but is also fully in line with the values and principles of our field.

7. Appendix

Appendix 1: Training of Trainers for European Youth in Action Projects - Facts

History of this training course

The Training of Trainers took place for the first time in 1999/2000 – then still under the *Youth for Europe* programme. It was an initiative of the Austrian association *Interkulturelles Zentrum*, then National Agency, in particular *Helmut Fennes*, its director at the time. The prime reason for creating this course was to raise the quality of training courses within the programme. Several studies, conferences and debates, at that time, showed the need to invest in quality of the programme, specifically for the users of the programme: youth workers and young people themselves.

One of the responses to that need was the establishment of a Training of Trainers course.

Since 1999, the course has been organised 12 times and has offered up to today around 300 participants the possibility to further develop their potential as trainers and facilitators and, hence, to become part of a growing group of professionals supporting the quality development of European Youth projects. Over the years the course has become more and more an important entry point into the European Non Formal Education Trainers' circuit. It has also become one of the Network Training courses offered and co-ordinated by the SALTO Training and Cooperation Resource Centre for all the National Agencies; and it will continue also into the new programme ERASMUS+.

Overall aim of the course

The major aim of this training course is to train trainers who have the competences and the motivation to contribute to the improvement of the quality of projects within the Youth in Action Programme of the European Union.

The essential ToT-competences

Within this Training of Trainers course (ToT course) participants have the chance to further develop their competences as a trainer. These 6 competence areas are being proposed in the framework of the European Training Strategy, developed within the Youth in Action programme in the course of 2012/13.

- Intercultural competence
- The competence to direct one's own learning (Learning to Learn)
- The competence to communicate meaningfully with others
- The competence to understand and facilitate individual and group learning processes.
- The competence to design educational programmes.
- The competence to co-operate successfully in teams.

The blended learning journey – the phases of the course

The methodology of the ToT course is following a blended-learning approach⁹ where the 3 residential seminars are interlinked with the online phases between. The ToT course is offering a 10-months accompanied learning process where participants can make important progress in their professional development as a trainer – based on the needs they identify for themselves.

Phase 1: Preparing the journey and taking off

This phase starts with preparing by reading the background documents, getting acquainted with the structural context of the course (the Youth in Action programme and its training dimension), and meeting with the responsible staff person in the National Agency to share expectations, talk about needs and develop some aims together. It includes also becoming familiar with the online environment of the ToT course. Phase 1 ends with the first residential seminar (8 working days).

The initial seminar focuses mainly on laying the foundation for the whole course and includes: group building, Youth in Action Programme and the political context of the course, developing an optimal learning environment, how do I learn and how do I assess my learning (Learning to Learn), essentials of training, group dynamics, roles of a trainer, identifying the personal learning commitment(s) for the next phase, setting learning objectives for the course, establishing mentor-mentee relationships and, last but not least, starting the preparation of the training project phase and forming the training project teams.

Phase 2: The learning journey is on its way

Back home after seminar 1 it is about following one's own learning journey in a self-directed way. The ToT-online environment supports this journey with providing resources (ToT-library), space for discussions and sharing's (ToT-forum), working together on resources (ToT-Wiki) and virtual

⁹ “A Learning approach that includes the use of appropriate combinations of information technologies - videoconferencing, audioconferencing, Internet, CD-ROM, and other media, combined with appropriate learning technologies, on-site facilitated activities, and strong learner support systems.” (from the World Bank Institute's Learning Design website: <http://go.worldbank.org/F228W79BS0>)

meetings (ToT-aperitivs).in the online ToT-lounge. The two mentor talks provide the opportunity to reflect the journey and become clearer on next steps. First preparations for the practical training project have to be taken care of.

Phase 2 ends with the second residential seminar (8 working days). Largely based on the training needs of the group, this seminar provides opportunities to further develop specific training competences; a special focus will be placed on teamwork, training design, intercultural learning and methodology. The design of this seminar is greatly shaped by inputs from participants – it provides several options for practising skills and sharing resources within the seminar. Project teams have the chance to actively experience themselves working as a group within several parts of the programme.

Phase 3: Exploration and arriving

After the second residential seminar the journey is heading towards the implementation of the practical training project. A preparatory meeting allows for putting all the learning from seminar 2 into the training project. Parallel there is a lot of activity happening in the ToT-online environment: Continuing discussions and reflections from seminar 2; exchanging about learning commitments and results; and 2 more exciting virtual meetings (ToT-aperitivs) in the ToT-lounge. The two mentor talks are excellent opportunities to take a step back from all these activity and see what achievements can be celebrated and what shortcomings are to be tackled.

Phase 3 and with it the ToT learning journey ends with the third residential seminar which is dedicated to evaluating, taking stock, looking forward and closing. Participants get the chance to reflect on specific aspects of their training projects together with the others in the group. Furthermore, the seminar provides the opportunity to reflect on the individual learning paths throughout the year and to re-visit some training topics. Last but not least it facilitates the exit from the course and the entry into the next steps of the development as a trainer.

Profile of Participants

Participants have to be recruited by one of the National Agencies for the Youth in Action programme covering the expenses related to the participation in the course (travel, board and lodging, fee).

Participants are expected:

- To have been already involved at least three times in a team of trainers designing, implementing and evaluating a training course in the framework of Non-Formal Education.

- To have had international experience in the youth work field with a function of responsibility (not only as a participant) – organising international youth projects, leading a youth exchange, mentoring European Voluntary Service volunteers, etc.
- To have the potential and need to develop training competences and act after the course as a trainer for European Youth in Action projects and/or for training courses organised by the National Agencies of the Youth in Action programme.
- To show initiative and willingness to self-direct their own learning process.
- To be prepared to reflect on and question their own beliefs and approaches as trainers.
- To be able to run training courses in English.

Appendix 2: Our research approach

Being established that the educational approach in the ToT course is based on constructivist perspectives, centered in the learners as subjects and authors of their own learning trajectories and processes, researching into “what supports learning in the ToT course” had to be built coherently on a constructivist base. This meant our **research design would have to assume the same paradigm that sets the base** for the course’s educational approach:

- **a relativist ontology**, which acknowledges there are multiple socially constructed realities non-governed by any natural cause-effect laws, or any other kind of pre-existing laws. The “truth” is defined as the **better informed** (relates to quantity and quality of the available information) and **more sophisticated** (relates to the impact of understanding and using the available information) social construction around which a **consensus** is established. Several social constructions may, at one given time and place, fulfill these 3 criteria, so there are multiple equally valid “truths” and realities. This makes each person empowered and responsible to, through hers/his beliefs, take part in this construction process and socially co-create her/his social reality. As a consequence, different life experiences make for different social constructions, and no “one truth” about any given reality;
- **a subjectivist epistemology**, that assumes that “researcher” and “researched” are interconnected in such a way that the findings of any given research process are literally social creations of those interactions. This perspective regarding the processes by which we can know reality through research abolishes the classical distinction between ontology – nature of social reality - and epistemology - knowledge of social reality - because it assumes that **the process of knowing and learning is in itself a process of social construction of reality**;
- **a hermeneutic methodology**, that demands a **continuous process of action, analysis, critical thinking**, new action, re-analysis, re-thinking, and so forth, leading to a **collective construction** of a knowledge production process between all the people involved, **bringing learning into the heart of research and vice-versa**.

In coherence with a constructivist research approach, our research was not developed with the intention to confirm or infirm previously designed hypothesis. The process of knowledge production was, on the contrary, descriptive and inductive: as information was being gathered and analysed, interpretations emerged and, eventually, a **highly contextualised understanding of learning in the ToT course** was formulated by trainers and participants. We didn’t set out to gather the pieces of a

puzzle of which we already knew the final shape; we were constructing an interpretative frame that took shape as the process took place.

The multiplicity and complexity of the social phenomenon we were focusing on – learning in the ToT course - called for a **participative research**, one which integrated the shared social constructions of the different people involved, so it was clear we had to access the social representations of the protagonists of the learning processes regarding their learning experience in the ToT course.

Following in the tradition of **qualitative research** in education, our main concern was to tap into the **meanings participants attributed to their experience**. Apprehending the genuine **perspectives of learners regarding the “whats”, “hows” and “whys” of learning in the ToT course** was crucial to shed light into a process that is co-produced by them. This required designing a research that allowed accessing the participants’ interpretations of the learning experience they were living, and mapping the aspects that, for them, were relevant in the social construction of that experience. This included identifying and understanding:

- the individual, contextual and social aspects which are acknowledged by the participants as facilitators and obstacles of the learning process;
- the connections the participants establish between those aspects.

But how to do it was the challenging part!

A constructivist approach to knowledge establishes that we can’t really know any phenomenon outside/besides the social context and processes by which it is created and socially acknowledged. A research design that respects this principle has to assure that the **research activities don’t disrupt the social setting** in which the phenomenon to be studied is created by those who take part in it. Because learning in the ToT course is conceived and promoted as a social process, that takes place both in an individual and a collective dimension, in where each participant is invited to build her/his own learning trajectory within a group environment, through interactions within the group and with the facilitators/trainers, researching into it called for **strategies that were equally capable of respecting and sustaining these individual-group dynamics**.

Qualitative research principles also establish that the events that compose social reality can be better understood when observed in their everyday social context, because human behavior is significantly

conditioned by the context in which the social events take place. So, our aim was also to assure that the **research activities didn't bring a significant disturbance to the activities that would otherwise occur within the ToT course** in the absence of a formal research process.

We had also other concerns regarding the research design: we acknowledge it's impossible to eliminate all the potential **effects that the presence of an external researcher can cause**, even if he/she seems perfectly integrated, so usually there is never a perfect match between what we want to research (a context without a researcher) and what we in fact end up researching (a context with a researcher,). We **minimized this by not introducing external elements to the group** – the research tasks were assumed by the ToT course's trainers. They have facilitated the research moments as any other ToT course's moment in which the participants reflect and discuss about their learning trajectories. This is also a positive contribution to the effort of **assuring continuity between the research processes and the processes by which learning can occur in ToT**, including the trainers team learning in order to integrate new roles and tasks.

So, were actually being able to bring learning to the heart of research and a research intention into the core of learning processes?

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Taking the former considerations into account, **two methods** stood out as particularly capable of providing the adequate setting for this research: **the focus group and the interview**. Since the object of this research is the process of learning in the ToT course, and that this process is conceived and promoted assuming its social and collective nature, these methods are particularly adequate to generate information about it, since they establish research contexts and processes in continuity with the ones that constitute the ToT course itself. Considering that all the moments of interaction between the facilitators and the participants in the ToT course are conceived and constructed by all as moments of learning, **resorting to the focus group and the interview as research methods maintains an internal coherence throughout the process**.

Following in the tradition of participative research, both the methods privilege some of its most treasured principles by allowing all participants to co-produce a new vision/knowledge of learning in the ToT course, in this case through conversational processes. This is the core argument that sustains an option for the focus group and the interview as the core research methods: **each participant in the focus group/interview discussion has a personal experience of social learning as the conversations take place**. Hers/his initial cognitive and emotional positions will first be

explicit to her/him, to then be transformed through the process of establishing a connection with the positions of others in order to attribute a socially accepted meaning to the group's contextualized production of information and knowledge, and through the integration of this produced knowledge in hers/his own thought, speech and action. This **potential to enhance self-awareness and to (re)construct concepts and understandings** is, by definition, a **potential for learning**.

This also configures an **opportunity for social transformation**: as new social meanings regarding learning on the ToT course are constructed and negotiated, new knowledge on that social reality is produced, and then informed new actions are made possible – either at a large scale as to transform the ToT course, or at an individual scale as to transform one's own learning trajectory, or setting the focus on the research design as to adjust it to better serve our aims. And this brings us closer to the corner of an **action-research approach**, a dynamic perspective towards both the research process and the possibilities for transformation of the process we are researching.

Because the production of new knowledge on learning in the ToT course has a transformative potential on the social phenomenon of learning in the ToT course, our **research design had to be able to capture these transformations**. To do so in large brush strokes, which is to say capturing general trends within the group of ToT participants, we introduced a **diachronic perspective**: a focus group moment was held at the end of each of the three residential seminars in order to introduce the possibility for a time-span analysis. On another note, the interviews were useful to capture in depth the most representative or outstanding transformations within the group of participants, as we tried to **explore more intensively the information produced in the focus groups conversational processes**. The interviews were also useful to **check with the participants how pertinent and valid were the content analysis categories** we had built.

Our research design included also the **ToT course's final evaluation questionnaires**, a valuable pre-existing instrument mainly composed of open questions, through which participants had the possibility to explore, in writing, the issue at stake in our research: what, and how, supported their learning throughout the course. Combining the oral and written speeches of the participants allowed for a **stronger monitoring of the reliability and validity of the research results**.