

# "The brain is remarkably plastic..."



"The brain is remarkably plastic, constantly learning. To be sure, the brain remains plastic throughout life, though not to the spectacular extent seen in childhood. All learning implies a change in the brain, a strengthening of synaptic connection [...]. We have two minds, the rational and the emotional ones. These two minds, the emotional and the rational, operate in harmony intertwining their very different ways of knowing to guide us through the world"

**Daniel Goleman, "Emotional intelligence", 1996**

The hominization process, the group of the evolutionary processes that brought to the *homo sapiens*, started up with the *homo habilis*, this is to say to be able to do something. Nevertheless, knowledge and skills although of strategic importance, are not enough. It is not enough to know the numerical system to be able to count! It is not enough to be able to read for reading! What makes operational knowledge and skills is the competence: knowledge, abilities and attitudes. What makes the competence transversal (applicable to various intervention areas) is the intentionality, the motivation, the feeling mind! Thus the competence is intended as a management modality of one's knowledge, to be expressed through behaviours impacting and leading to the final result.

During the learning circle "Logics and tools for learning project planning: from the Logical Framework Matrix to the Financial Plan" the key competence exercised and enquired was the "Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology", thus developing and applying logics and maths processes for solving problems also in everyday settings.

The development of such a competence has been facilitated through a learning experience based on planning an international cooperation intervention, using the logical framework matrix model and the elaboration of the financial plan of the intervention.

The participants mainly representing migrants associations working within the region of Umbria (Italy) or individuals working in the field of migration and development cooperation.

The participants and the facilitators worked jointly to the development of the "problem tree" (hierarchy of problems) towards the definition of the logical framework of a project, whose theme has been chosen by the participants: Migrants' right to health in Umbria and analysing and clarifying cause-effect relationships.

In such a way, it was possible to open a dialogue without incurring into judgments and singling out difficulties and criticalities in using competences, developed in one's country of origin that needs to be balanced to the ones of the hosting country.

Summing up, what has been tested during the learning circle on mathematical and logic competences was:

- Use of logic and operational abilities: de-codification, recognition grouping, inducing, deducing, etc. (abilities)
- Development of an open approach and a deep motivational level among the participants (attitudes)
- Acquaintance of the logical operations typical of the project planning (knowledge)

The learning circle is therefore the result and the tool of a functional union between environment and people for perceiving active participation as a self-opportunity and opportunity for the working environment.

**Tamat**

## Facilitators' training in Amsterdam

# An innovative approach toward the development of learning capabilities

Learning circles methodology relies on interaction among participants rather than top-down knowledge dissemination, which is the basis of conventional education. It highly values their experience, facilitator skills as well as study material quality. Positive group work skills, self-confidence, strong creative verbal and physical vocabulary as well as imaginative thinking, become then crucial for the success of the LC experimentation. Success of each learning circle also relies on the acquisition over time of those qualities that substantiate learning skills themselves. This is where CEL contributes to the innovation of NOPROS: by enhancing the personal development processes at the basis of any successful learning cycle.

Following up on the lively and deep interest manifested during NOPROS kick-off meeting (Perugia – Italy, February 2010), where CEL shared with the consortium a meditation exercise, at the basis of its adult learning methodology, a new Learning Circle named Learning to Learn, was added to the five NoProS curricula. As a consequence, during the meeting in Tallinn, Estonia (June 2010) CEL was assigned to develop a training programme for the LCs facilitators, which was delivered in Amsterdam on November 2010.

CEL methodology assumes that facilitators should, first of all, strive to unveil and enhance a set of inner qualities (i.e. leadership, detachment, wisdom and balance, communication and collectiveness), which are fundamental to acquiring facilitation skills. Once those essential qualities are manifested skills acquisition will be enhanced. In the tree metaphor (see



figure), skills are associated with fruits, whereas qualities are connected to trunk and roots.

For these inner qualities to blossom, CEL suggests that individuals access a meditative state that is a spontaneous physiological condition, often described as “thoughtless awareness”. This new dimension of consciousness is best achieved by first person experience. During the training programme, a wide range of qualities related to different aspects of participants’ lives were addressed, from personal

balance to health and well-being: from attention, discretion and intuition, to emotional stability, empathy and collective consciousness. These qualities ultimately enhance problem-solving skills and improve group dynamics, elevating individual and group aspirations.

Practical experiments throughout the session proved highly effective, especially when combined with participants’ openness and self-questioning ability:

- The group count to 20 exercises (with restart at every simultaneous uttering of a number). After 25 minutes of failure and consequent frustration, the group was able to count to 20 at their first attempt, after a brief meditation session.
- The theatre workshop focussed on “reinventing oneself”, i.e. getting rid of one’s conditionings in life and at work and on learning body language and body silence techniques.

**Michela Cavalletti Dhingra and Valeria Berchicci**  
(CEL- Holland)

# Cultural Heritage for Multilingual Communities in Edinburgh

The Learning Circle "Cultural Heritage in Multilingual Communities" was tested for eight three-hour sessions on participants provided by our partner organisation Shakti Woman's Aid Edinburgh, that works with women from different cultural backgrounds who have been victims of domestic abuse. The group members included Indian, Iranian, Turkish, Polish, Zambian women.

The first four weeks of the course were spent in a classroom. During this time the group covered Cultural Heritage in Society; planning and participating in a wide range of activities such as: presentations on cultural dress, special occasions/ festivals/ holidays and dance, an Indian 'henna' demonstration, a dress-up session and a Turkish dance lessons. We also had discussion on the importance of cultural heritage, keeping up with your own culture while living in a new country, how to keep up with tradition and what is important to practice.

The second four weeks of the course was spent in a kitchen. During this time, the group covered the topics of: food as intercultural exchange, food in culture/society, food and global culture and the cultural history of bread. The group learnt about these topics by cooking and teaching recipes from their different cultures.

By looking into food in culture/society we learned about different dishes used for special occasions. The group learned to make Fesenjan, an Iranian dish made for weddings and Iranian New Years Eve. For the last two topics; food and global culture and the cultural history of bread, we decided to look into different types of bread from different cultures (Indian and Turkish). We made Japati's and Turkish Corn bread. We also discussed how accessible they are in foreign countries and how similar bread is among different cultures.

Each participant of the LC2 testing was of a multicultural background and signed up to learn English through the exploration of culture. The inclusive nature of the course allowed the women to speak English often, thus developing a positive attitude towards communication. Having different levels of English speaking abilities was helpful because it allowed some of the stronger participants to aid the weaker ones when conversing with each other. The women's English improved



Facilitator Robyn Brophy with the result of Indian 'henna' demonstration

significantly over the eight-week course while exploring culture through many activities and discussions.

We received 0% negative comments on the course and 80% of participants strongly agreed that the course was relevant and improved their knowledge. In addition, 100% strongly agreed that the course was fun and they enjoyed learning in this way. This reinforces our opinion that through Learning Circles learners gain a positive attitude toward communication learnt through constant dialogue.

The Learning Circle approach proved to be a very successful learning tool and Shakti Womens' Aid have since decided to run another, this time with ASC supporting one of their workers to become a Learning Circle facilitator, so they can repeat the process again themselves without the need of our support; a great outcome for the NOPROS project.



# The experimentation phase

After a long and challenging working path, NOPROS project is now at the very final stage, which foresees the presentation of the results obtained during the experimentation phase.

One of the difficulties within the NOPROS project has been trying to create Learning Circles (LC), which could include so many different education fields.

The experimentation phase thus is a key point of the entire project, the moment in which it is possible to check and test out the actual results that come out from the curricula originally elaborated.

From this point of view, this is also the moment most properly "practical" of the project after a long theoretical work process, carried out by all the partners to give a structure to the contents and to the didactic methodology.

they were actually particularly suitable to be implemented according to the open methodology of the learning circle. Moreover, the setting up and the performing of the NOPROS experimentation sessions is indeed something substantially really close to the workshops or the stages that we usually promote.

We involved in our experimentation of the two curricula a group of seven participants rather heterogeneous in age, education, profession and motives for attending it.

Contrary to what one might imagine, when the "gap" between the participants is not as high as to prevent a natural communication, the differences brought by each participant may generate a further stimulus and enrichment of the discussion.

According to our experience, the main characteristic of learning circles is precisely this possibility of diversity of viewpoints, experienced not as conflict, but as collective cue.

Another distinctive feature is the need to come together to share experiences, stories, opinions...

A return to an interpersonal encounter, we could say.

That is why the methodology promoted by NOPROS is particularly suitable to adult education in which there is great need for discussion and exchange of ideas, recreating the atmosphere of an open and democratic society.

At any rate, we believe it is possible to see a further development of the project in relationship also to youth education in general, even within formal school education, in order to support and improve that need for personal expression and

intercommunication, typical for the younger generations. A new supporting education then, for which the traditional "frontal" lesson is now an anachronism compared to the contemporary structure and dynamics of the present "horizontality" of "knowledge".



Participants at work during LC1 experimentation session in Italy

As far as it concerns the subject matters of the key competences developed in the Learning Circles we had to enforce (for LC1 "The European Theatre in an historical perspective" to promote the acquisition of the key competence: Cultural awareness and expression; for LC 3 "Creative communication and cooperation" to promote the acquisition of the key competence: Digital competence)

# The Learning Circle in cultural exchange - why use it?



Lithuanian teachers found the learning circle as a useful tool that could be also used, as social partners also in the social partnership

For over 100 years Learning Circles have proven an effective and practical method not only of learning but also cultural exchange and social development. The traditions of Learning Circles may be found in times of King Arthur and his Round Table, they were used by United Nations and the Society of Friends. Different community organizations, trade unions, schools and other groups and institutions have used them to empower their members to make choices and take action.

However when we first proposed for our trade union chairpersons in Lithuania to use Learning Circles, they were rather sceptical – it was absolutely new experience as we never used this method for our trainings. Nevertheless everybody agreed that we have to test Learning Circles which were planned in the NOPROS project.

The first day of experimentation was dedicated to explanation of the methodology of Learning Circles which by its characteristic serves as a vehicle to discover, share, and express knowledge by looking at an issue from different points of view. The exercises helped people to realise that this instrument doesn't require learners to have the same starting point but insures and encourages the growth of everyone by chairing the knowledge.

Our Learning Circles had 15 participants. Some reading materials were distributed prior to the Learning Circle, but their use was minimized during the Circle in order to encourage the participants to share their personal views and thoughts on the topic while the facilitator kept the Circle moving in an orderly fashion. The first issue we discussed was quite an adventurous – as it was a summer and holidays time we focused on the cultural differences and similarities in EU countries. Most of us visited many countries, so we tried to present one country we were visiting – traditions, people's habits, customs, believes from our different points of view. It was not easy but the discussion was very interesting and fruitful.

Everyone found the Learning Circle as a useful tool that could be also used by us, as social partners also in the social partnership, because it could encourage all key stakeholders to speak, listen and understand others while participating in problem-solving and making decisions. It gives an unique opportunity for participants to observe, interpret and experience not only their own feelings and viewpoints about an issue, but also broaden their perspectives by considering the many viewpoints around them.

# NOPROS to acquire key competencies

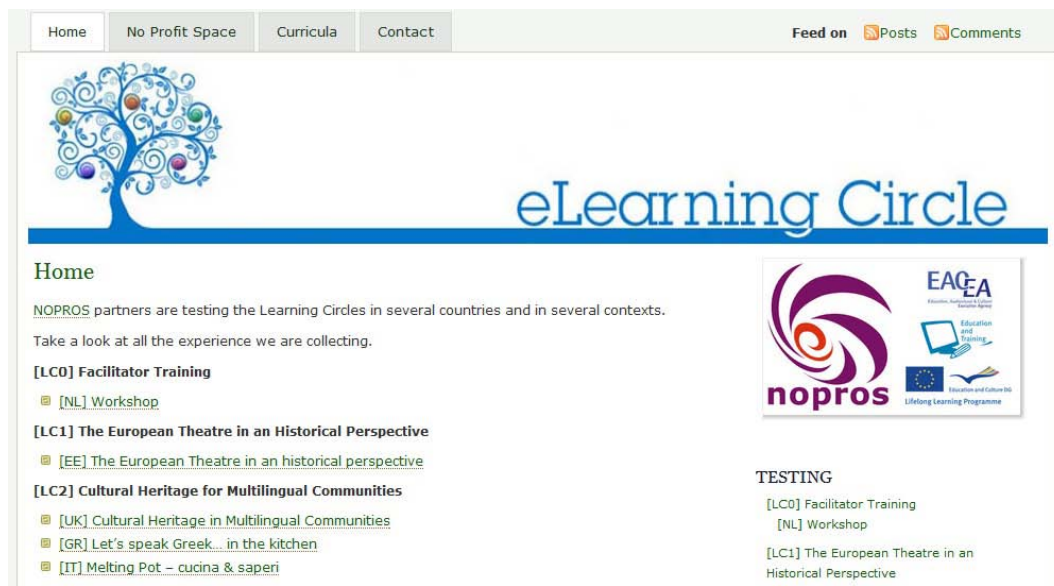
The NOPROS Learning Circles (LC) methodology is a participatory and dynamic process based on the experience of the participants, the skills of the LC facilitator and the quality of the study material. As opposed to conventional education, in which the teacher disseminates knowledge on a top-down model, Learning Circle involves interaction in which all participants contribute. This methodology will be integrated with positive group work skills, to develop self-confidence, strong creative verbal and physical vocabulary, imaginative thinking. NOPROS developed five Learning Circles curricula, each of them dealing with specific feature and areas of interventions of the non-profit sector for achieving key and transversal competencies. Also developed one Learning to Learn curriculum to identify approaches to learning skills and to be able to facilitate a group.

	Key Competence to be acquired	Learning Circle to be developed	Goals to be achieved
0	Learning to Learn	Learning and facilitating capabilities	To identify approaches to develop qualities and skills; to test the relative effectiveness of different approaches to develop skills and to be able to facilitate a group. (See the EC document and quote it)
1	Cultural awareness and expression	The European Theatre on an historical perspective	How theatre represents European history and how contributes to the building of European identity. (Quote from the LC)
2	Communication: mother tongue and foreign languages	Cultural heritage for multilingual communities	Acquire positive attitude toward communications both in the mother tongue and in a foreign language through the availability of a critical and constructive dialogue focused on themes like multiculturalism and cultural traditions sustainable tourism, cuisine and anthropology of food, culture and working environments.
3	Digital competence	Creative communication and cooperation	Identification of new tools/languages through joint actions with a social value, development of teamwork and strengthening and enhancement of skills of each one.
4	Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship	The value of social enterprises	Identifications of structures and activities useful to facilitate the flow of information and resources available in a community/business supporting the planning, organization, management, reporting and benchmarking. This process reveals hidden resources. Enhancement of the social economy to facilitate the social dialogue at European level.
5	Mathematical and basic competences on scientific and technological field	Cooperation and Sustainable resource control	Being able through international cooperation's cases-studies to apply basic scientific/technological processes. Being able to use and develop mathematical basic concepts through project planning and fund raising.



## eLearning Circle

# How can digital technologies support in disseminating outcomes?



The eLearning Circle platform of NOPROS is now online ([elc.nopros.eu](http://elc.nopros.eu)). This tool has been designed and developed to address two main goals:

- Allow NOPROS partners, who are testing the Learning Circles Curricula developed within the project, to share their experiences.
- Give the possibility to people and organizations interested in using NOPROS Curricula to be inspired by the experience gained by the Consortium.

Each eLearning Circle in the platform represents one testing performed by one of the NOPROS partner and it is structured as followed:

- **Description:** a post providing a general overview about the Learning Circle testing.
- **Experience:** a series of posts devoted to give a detailed explanation about each session of the testing: topics covered, activities performed, observations by the facilitator.
- **Suggestion:** a post dedicated to present the lesson learned by the experience; things to be improved, elements that worked out perfectly, materials which can be added to the curriculum.

The platform already proved to serve its objectives, both as a sharing tool among NOPROS partners:

“This looks great – I definitely think food encourages conversation... when we had tea, coffee and cake at the end of our session people chat a lot less formally and openly – something I think we will keep in mind for our next session at the Media Museum to help enhance this learning style.”

and as a tool to explain to people interested in the Learning Circle methodology how Learning Circles can be implemented:

“It looks really interesting! I’m an elementary teacher, always interested in integration: I will follow your blog to understand Learning Circle methodology! Franco”

The platform is being populated in these days, with partners uploading their Learning Circles experimentation, so stay tuned and check the platform regularly to know more about NOPROS testings.

By the end of the project, the platform will provide at least two examples of how to implement each of the five Learning Curricula developed by the NOPROS Consortium.

If you are using the NOPROS Learning Circle Curricula and you want to share your experience with others, creating your own eLearning circle, contact us!

**Isabella Rega**  
(SEED – Lugano)

# Positive results in Lisbon

CENJOR and the local partner Associação Moinho da Juventude (AMJ) co-organized the experimentation of the Learning Circles 2 and 3 with a group of six people, four men and two women. All of African origin, one born in S. Tome and Principe, two in Cape Verde and three in Portugal, but sons of immigrants from Cape Verde.

Aged between 27 and 33 years, all the participants had only completed basic school. All were unemployed and in process of professional integration through AMJ, which will enable them to acquire scholar qualifications and start professional training in a work environment.

The AMJ carries out its social, cultural and educational action in a suburban neighbourhood of Lisbon, called Cova da Moura, inhabited mostly by African immigrants. It was there in the offices of AMJ, that the tests took place between August 4th and September 14th of 2011.

The responses from participants were different in each of



Testing sessions in Lisbon attended by observers from the partner ASC

Progressively they showed a great curiosity about the topics under discussion and discovered the value of the individual experience of each one as a starting point for shared learning.

In LC3, "Creative communication and cooperation", for the attribution of digital competences, the low level of education present from the beginning was a difficulty to overcome, including impairing the ability of reflection and expression on the topics under discussion. Sometimes, the facilitator needed to use a formative approach to create a basic platform for the development of the debate. The facilitator changed the sequential order of modules according to the characteristics of the group in order to provide, initially, an approach to explaining the issues and then progress to more complex issues.

The experimentation in Lisbon showed that the NOPROS Learning Circles is a methodology with great potential for use in non-formal learning especially in environments related with non-profit organizations and activities.

On the other hand, the national conference of the project presentation of outcomes, organized by CENJOR on 11th October of 2011, confirmed

that potential through the analysis and statements of the representatives of invited entities...

These positive results indicate that the Learning Circles have a path to do.



The participants developed a strong dialogue on the topics under discussion

the learning circle, which were tested in parallel but in distinct sessions.

In LC2, "Cultural Heritage for Multilingual Communities", the active participation of each one developed rapidly and the interaction between the group members was intense.



## Your Life Online

# Older people developing their digital competencies

The National Media Museum (NMeM) in Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK has been working with other NOPROS partners to develop a curricula aimed at adults wanting to learn how to use the Internet as a way of developing digital competencies.

The Museum tested the first 20 hour module of this curriculum with a group of 12 older people. While many of the group had not been online before, others had facebook accounts to keep in touch with family and friends. The adults were recruited from the NMeM Reminiscence group who take part in sessions at the Museum twice a month. They were all keen learners and there was a lot of discussion in the sessions, which were very lively and informal.

It was clear from the outset that the curriculum that had been planned was too ambitious and after talking to the group about what they wanted to learn in the sessions we revised the plan. We decided to focus on

fewer topics and expand them over a number of the weekly sessions. Many people in the group found it useful to recap on the previous week's session, as they found it difficult to retain information from one week to the next.

The workshops have been a test for some of the learning activity being planned for the National Media Museum's forthcoming Life OnLine gallery, the world's first gallery to explore the social, technological and cultural impact of the internet and the web, which opens in March 2012.

We intend to keep running sessions at the Museum aimed at adults who have little experience of using the Internet, but following



The older adults were all keen learners and there was a lot of discussion in the sessions, which were very lively and informal

this test we will run the sessions slightly differently. The sessions will be grouped into shorter courses each lasting 8 hours spread over 4 weeks. Each of these shorter courses would focus on a different topic, including getting online; sending emails; iplayer and iGoogle.

The learning circle methodology worked well in the sessions, although we did find that learners had to have a basic knowledge to be able to participate in the discussions.

The evaluation and feedback we received from the participants was very positive, with Learning Circles been the most preferred method of learning over more formal methods.

# Acquiring financial fitness



The LC started with a very interesting exercise

De-Charles Resources Limited hosted its Learning Circle (LC) over a period from 31st of May to 29 of July 2011. We dedicated our sessions to LC5 - Acquiring Financial Fitness and Sustainable Energy. We were 10 participants all of whom are of different ages, come from different backgrounds and were evenly divided between men and women. A number of tools were used such as icebreakers, pair work, discussions, video screenings, IT and overall active participation.

The Learning Circle started with a very interesting exercise of joining nine dots using four straight lines without lifting our pen. Needless to say no-one managed to get it but we did get a few laughs and a lot of smoke in the air from all that thinking. Moreover, we all felt a bit more relaxed after that and ready to start our session on a very important subject to everyone now – finances.

We talked about what financial fitness means and we all came to one conclusion... being financially fit means earning enough money to pay your expenses but still be able to put some away for a rainy day. Lightening the seriousness of the conversation, we also discussed how to achieve financial fitness and came up with a long list. Prominent among them is how to balance what you spend with your income. That's why a budget is so important. You can look back at what you spent that month, see where you spent too much, and try to correct it the following month.

The next session focused more on the use of technology.

In the good old days, a budget usually implied using a pen and paper and doing it all yourself; but thanks to technology. Now we can use Microsoft Excel, for example, to make things simpler... or so we thought... in using, excel you still had the tedious job of making the table from scratch. Luckily we were introduced to a new way of thinking... Google documents. All we had to do was search for a budget template and all the hard work was done for us. After downloading the document, filed in the spaces with our income and expenditure and the spreadsheet did the rest. Not only does it calculate how much money you should have left after expenses, it also tells you the average you are spending each month.

We learnt so much in this session about how technology can make our lives simpler and that taking care of our spending actually is not difficult at all. We had a fantastic time experiencing this great new idea of cloud computing. We created and shared a collection. Monica and Samantha created and shared a report which we all contributed to by changing and adding to the document. It was a relaxing and fun way of learning something new, which can be scary if you do not know much about computers.

Overall, it was a positive experience each participant took with him/her a new skill and a new way of thinking.

# “To be or not to be”

## - the impact on Estonians

In the framework of project NOPROS, a Learning Circle (LC) curriculum “European Theatre in a Historical Perspective” was developed between the cooperation of the Italian partner and Association of Estonian Adult Educators Andras, the first module of which was tested in Italy and the second module in Estonia.

The contents of LC address theatre in a historical perspective and are structured in order to raise awareness of European cultural identity starting from the relationship between humankind and society. The participants learned to open up both at emotional and cognitive level and started to acknowledge their abilities and wishes. The LC enabled to raise the participants’ cultural awareness and competence.

The LC activities took place from November 2010 to June 2011 in two different groups. One of the groups gathered in the capital Tallinn, the other in Rapla (50 km from the capital), 31 people participated altogether, most of them women. In Tallinn there were three men too, but in Rapla the group consisted exclusively of women.

The main activity of the LC was watching a performance which served as the basis for the discussions later. Participants considered the work of the LC effective and regarded this new method of learning as beneficial. The Rapla LC worked very actively from the start engaging the participants into an exciting and gripping discussion. Some new ideas emerged giving food for thought for further activities. The meetings were looked forward to. At the same time this method of learning was familiar to most of the participants and had been subconsciously used a lot.

The process of setting up the structure of the LC proved to be of great interest. Materials compiled during the project were of great help.

The Tallinn LC consisted of people who did not know each other previously. As Estonians tend to be reserved, it takes longer to become acquainted and start a conversation. The LC demands active participation and therefore it was more



The participants in the Tallinn learning circle

complicated to initiate the group work. Compared to the Rapla group, the Tallinn one did not start as efficiently from the beginning. The facilitator responded to this by using several icebreaker exercises that were fun for everybody and helped to create a more relaxed atmosphere. The following activities went smoothly and with common understanding. The group started working intensively together and the next meetings were looked forward to with great anticipation.

Several participants have mentioned afterwards that they had never watched performances in theatre before like they did during the LC. It proved to be a new and exciting experience. It was quite surprising to discover how great an influence culture, including theatre, may have to the daily life of Estonian people. People also learned a lot about themselves. It made them look at themselves in a new way, watch the performance from a different perspective and combine these two experiences.

One of the participants, Triin, mentioned that she has shared the LC experience with some of her friends who have now shown interest in participating, too. Both LCs also proved their sustainability having decided to continue their meetings. New activities and discussions are being planned. The question set up in the title has got an answer – to be!



# Let's speak Greek... in the kitchen

The testing of LC2 module "Let's speak Greek...in the kitchen" took place in February and March 2011 at ANCE's premises in Athens.

The aim of the module was to enable participants for whom Greek is not their mother tongue, to improve their level of Greek.

The profile of the participants included short and/or long term residents in Greece, immigrants, refugees, 2nd generation immigrants and native speakers. Nationalities included Afghan, Russian, Ukrainian, Philippine, American, German, Greek-Tunisian, Greek-Russian, etc. Age varied from 16 to 60 years old and the majority were women. The level of knowledge of Greek also varied a lot (from beginners to native speakers).

During the sessions, a number of tools and activities were used, such as name games; ice-breaking games; discussion on expectations and needs; role-playing activities; working in pairs (language tutors); video screenings (listening); mobilization for active participation.

The participants enjoyed the experience (the atmosphere, the intercultural character of the group, the actual cooking & tasting). They suggested that it would be better to have less participants and of approximately the same language level and to include more role-playing. They also suggested splitting the group in two (according to language level) and organizing



Hands on learning experience: cooking and tasting promotes communication

modules for a smaller number of participants.

The most successful aspects of the LC2 testing were the mobilization of participants from different backgrounds, the participation of a chef in the sessions, the creative interaction between the participants and the opportunity to discover new interests and friends.

**ANCE**



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