

PILOTS

Pilots: professionalisation for learning in technology & science

Progress Report

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Executive Summary

The Pilots project works towards the professionalisation of the role of explainers in science centres and museums both through developing European training courses and through research on the role of explainers, with a focus on adult learning.

Explainers are the people working in a science centre or museum who come into face-to-face contact with the public. They often have different names depending on their exact role in the institution – animators, guides, edutainers, facilitators or pilots, among others.

So far, project outcomes include:

- ⇒ Two of four training courses
- ⇒ A set of pedagogical materials, available online, for use in training explainers
- ⇒ A project website and online community, the Pilots Hub, where project outcomes and information can be freely exchanged
- ⇒ The results of a qualitative survey based on detailed focus group interviews on the role and training needs of explainers, to be followed by a second quantitative survey of the explainers' community
- ⇒ A set of multiplying events, called Co-Pilots events, carried out by explainers having participated in the Pilots training courses

This report describes the work of the Pilots project in its first year, from November 2008 to October 2009.

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1. Project Objectives

Pilots overall aims remain to reflect on explainers as adult learning facilitators; to produce and test updated schemes of training; to disseminate a new culture of interaction between explainers and adults and to raise awareness on the role and needs of science centre and museum explainers. The focus can perhaps be more clearly divided into five main areas:

AWARENESS

Pilots disseminates its results and findings in order to invite science centres and museums to reflect on this and collectively make groundwork towards a European definition of the science explainer's profile and training needs for adult engagement in science.

RESEARCH

The Pilots project research began by collecting scientific literature, good practices, and results of other projects about the professional profile of explainers. A great part of the project is now devoted to collecting reliable, quantitative and qualitative original data on explainers and training practices in Europe, through a specific project action.

TRAINING

The Pilots training courses aim to enhance adults' engagement with science in science centres and museums, through the training of the explainers involved in the project, and in the long term, through the dissemination to the Ecsite members, as well as other stakeholders, policymakers, researchers, civil society groups and international contacts. The four training courses organised within the project lifespan are at once a way to test training methodologies and a way to disseminate best practice, at local and European level. The multiplying Co-Pilots events allow this best practice to spread throughout institutions.

MATERIALS

The training materials developed within the project are being compiled to form a resource centre, available to explainers all over Europe, which will be maintained long after the end of the Pilots project.

COMMUNITY

Lastly, a true community is being developed, of individuals interested in the role of the explainer in science centres and museums, sustained on the Pilots Hub, a web platform that operates both as a European community resource for explainers and as the project's dissemination tool.

2. Project Approach

The Pilots project works towards the professionalisation of the role of explainers in science centres and museums both through developing European training courses and through research on the role of explainers in adult learning scenarios.

Explainers are the people working in a science centre or museum who come into face-to-face contact with the public. They often have different names depending on their exact role in the institution – animators, guides, edutainers, facilitators or pilots, among others.

There is currently a lack of shared knowledge about the roles, tasks and professional status of explainers in different European science centres and museums. Little structured research exists about explainers. Training schemes for explainers are not easy to find. Explainers from different institutions across Europe have little opportunity to meet and exchange ideas and best practices. We see in our field that science centres and museums are transforming, from expository to participatory, from exhibition-centred to engaging the public, particularly adults, in a more active role. As our institutions evolve, the role of the explainer must evolve too.

Pilots runs training courses for European explainers. This is an opportunity for explainers to benefit from the latest best practice from across Europe. The Pilots project makes use of the most up-to-date European literature, methodologies, protocols and other results coming from European good practices in order to update explainers' skills and knowledge, with a particular focus on adult visitors. Courses last two or four days, and explainers in attendance take part in a range of activities designed to hone various skills relevant to their role. Participants share ideas about what it means to be an explainer, and share their own expertise as well as benefitting from the experiences of others.

The methodology behind Pilots is based on the most advanced theories for informal learning: explainers do not “explain” as such; they facilitate visitors learning, engaging them in hands-on activities, through a dialogue that makes visitors’

opinions emerge, with an awareness of the emotional dimension of the learning. This pedagogical approach, based on constructivist ideas on learning and on informal education elements, is the base for Pilots materials and training courses.

All participants in Pilots training courses must organise a training activity in their own institution, for their colleagues. This allows explainers to share their experiences from Pilots in their own language, and ensure that as many explainers as possible benefit from this best practice, in each participating institution.

Pilots is aimed at Europe's community of science explainers. These individuals are brought together in THE Group, a thematic group of members of Ecsite, the European network of science centres and museums.

The Pilots webplatform hosts a wide variety of pedagogical material, gathered and produced by the project, and supporting a European community of explainers who use, share and add to the resources available. Also available via this webplatform will be the results of research into the role of the explainer, carried out as an integral part of the project.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

Key Pilots outcomes so far include:

- ⇒ The results of a qualitative survey on the practices of explainers, based on focus groups carried out within the partner institutions;
- ⇒ An international multilingual commented bibliography on explainers' role, status and training.
- ⇒ Two of four European training courses in which European explainers engage in up-to-date methodologies and tools as facilitators in the dialogue between science and technology and society;
- ⇒ A number of multiplying "Co-Pilots" events organised by training course participants in their own institution and in their own language, in order to spread the best practice;
- ⇒ A lively online community, the Pilots Hub, with over 300 members and growing;

4. Partnerships

Network organisations are multipliers – they allow an increased impact through the activation of their members, on a national, European or international level. For Pilots, Ecsite has been focusing on European networks whose members are likely to employ science explainers.

EAZA has 300 members from 34 European countries. It publishes a quarterly magazine, sent to all EAZA members and to many zoos and aquaria in other parts of the world (USA, Australia, Japan and others) as well as to other people with a professional interest in zoos. The total number circulated currently stands at 900 copies and is increasing. EAZA have been helping to disseminate Pilots results and training courses, and have involved numerous zoos and aquaria with the project as a result.

The following national networks have been actively disseminating and collaborating with the project:

The UK Association for Science and Discovery Centres represents over fifty Science & Discovery Centres and Museums throughout the UK, with 20 other organisations as affiliated members. The network encourages excellence and innovation in informal science learning by serving and linking our member centres, and advancing their common goal of inspiring, involving and engaging people of all ages and backgrounds with science.

The **Ciência Viva** Centres are part of a Portuguese network of interactive science and technology centres that promote science on a national level. They function as regional development platforms - scientific, cultural and economic - by supporting the regional agents that are most active in these fields.

AMCSTI is the French association of science centres and museums. It represents its members on a national level and offers resources in terms of knowledge, exchange and services.

The **VSC** is the Dutch and Flemish association of science centres and museums, representing centres and museums in the Netherlands and Flanders of very different type and size. There are VSC members with a location or without its own location or even virtual organizations.

The Nordic Science Center Association (NSCF) is a cooperative organization of science centres in the Nordic countries, i.e. exhibition and activity centres whose goal are the popularization of science and whose aim are to teach through interactive objects and demonstrations. The association functions as a liaison between the members and strives towards developing cooperation between the science centers of the Nordic countries.

5. Plans for the Future

The second phase of the Pilots project will see much of the work done in the first half come to fruition. The second two training courses will take place in January 2010, at La Cité des Sciences, Paris, France, and in June 2010 at DASA, Dortmund, Germany.

Quantitative data collection on the profile, number, and role of explainers has begun in July 2009 and will go on until February 2010. The depth analysis of the quantitative data will start at the beginning of 2010 in order to publish quantitative survey report in October 2010 on the website first and then in paper publications.

Explainers participating in the training courses will develop co-pilots multiplying events and they will be encouraged to use pedagogical materials and to enrich them through translations in their own language and clustering of new materials. The second year of the project is when the most part of training events will be carried out. The new pedagogical materials developed by Partners and those created by course participants and by other members of the on-line explainers community will be published, shared and disseminated thanks to the social network acting around the Pilots Hub.

In the future the Pilots Hub will continue as a place where all science promoting professionals can find useful information and links for their job and interest. By obtaining more users the web platform will be current now and in the future. The main goal is to provide enough pedagogical material and information about science for the public.

The ongoing results of the project will continue to be disseminated throughout the Ecsite network, and THE Group meeting in June 2010 will ensure sustained dissemination work long after the end of the project.

6. Contribution to EU policies

Pilots aims to highlight the importance of lifelong learning of science in informal education; public engagement in science centres and museums. Particular attention is drawn to the role and training of the individuals who have face-to-face contact with the public within these institutions. These are key actors in lifelong learning whose role has seen until now very little reflection or acknowledgement.

