

THE PRESENCE OF ICT IN VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE: A TRAINING PROPOSAL

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Abstract

At present, the transformations in the use and management of the technological tools in the overall society and particularly in Guidance are developed so quickly, that there is the concern of creating training systems, which offer opportunities to update the ICT competences in Counselors, as the use of such resources turns into a strategic worry of the training long life politics (European Life Long Learning).

In this context, the Project –ICT-Skills 2: ICT Tools and training for E-practitioners- is framed, with the aim of designing an e-Counselor professional profile, including the strategic competences with respect to Guidance training and teaching. These competences have to be shared in a transnational level with enough flexibility to be adapted to several contexts.

The different stages and tasks were made under the cooperation of the social organizations (which come from Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain and Romania), offering, as a result, the design of a training profile and a number of tools (self-assessment resources and an e-portfolio) logical for the Counselors professional development with and for ICT, being, likewise, a starting point for the development of future services in e-Guidance.

Key words: *e-guidance, ICT, lifelong learning, professional development, training profile, technological competences, vocational guidance.*

Introduction

The continuous changes that are being produced today in the use and management of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on society in general and in the Guidance field in particular, are produced at a such fast rate that, during the last years, multiple technological resources are found. In this way, there has been a change from Web 1.0 technologies, where, basically, computer-aided guidance resources and websites were included as information tools to Web 2.0 applications, typical at the moment, which have been developed in a massive way. This last one offers, at the same time, greater opportunities than their predecessors in terms of providing information and educational and vocational Guidance.

However, despite the remarkable technological development occurred in recent years, the use of different technological tools available, as well as their much potential offered, has not been generalized, because of the use made of them, which depends, mainly, from the objectives they seek to advance in the Guidance process, the media and resources at our disposal, as well as the different actors involved, being a crucial factor the capabilities and interests that show and have Counselors about it, and the Guidance institutions and /or services existing. Consequently, keeping in view the changes into contemporary society, it is necessary that Counselors assume and internalize new roles and functions, as well as innovative skills, which involves the establishment of training systems related to the management, use and exploitation

of technological tools, while they provide adequate resources to facilitate their full integration into the Guidance area.

Therefore, the technology skills and competences that Counselors have to meet in their professional profile must be a part of various and different training programs and activities to develop, having addressed this issue from two distinct viewpoints: initial training and continuous training (Sanz & Sobrado, 1998; Ceinos, 2008; Sobrado & Ceinos, 2011). On the one hand, with respect to the initial formation, it is necessary the existence of specific curricula for the Guidance technicians training, in which those basic character are covered, as well as a field for the Information and Communication Technology specifically, integrating these tools in theory and practical (Majó & Marquès, 2002). Moreover, referring to the continuous training that this group has to take over its career development, to acquire and internalize, as part of the competences they possess. Those skills associated with the use of technological tools must be trained in Guidance intervention processes. In other words, it is recognized the need for the Guidance Counselors group to take training actions that encourage and promote the needed training to do innovations with technological resources. Consequently, it is necessary that the training activities developed by these professionals adopt a dual perspective, as these processes must be understood as training to ICT and training with ICT, which together constitute an authentic digital literacy that will promote its renovation, as well as the knowledge, domain and integration of these tools in their daily practice. Only in this way, the development of a knowledge that exceeds the training for the technical management of these media may be encouraged, leading to a knowledge that promote an understanding of the multiple possibilities offered by these resources, their integration in terms of the real needs identified and the adoption of a critical and reflective viewpoint about it (Sobrado & Ceinos, 2011).

However, despite the trend described in previous lines, where the studies and researches made confirm that the technological training in the Guidance field has many advantages and possibilities (UNESCO, 2005), the training offer existing referred to this issue in the European Union is weak or inadequate, not seeing the preferences and concerns of various agents involved in Guidance processes reflected on them.

Consequently, the research presented is based on the suggestions made in various and different research reports conducted carried out in transnational contexts (Offer, 2000; Watts, 2001 & OECD, 2004), which place emphasis on the development of systems whose basic aim is focused on providing, to the Guidance technicians, the possibility to upgrade their technological skills, as in most European countries, has established the use of ICT and processes and recycling update regarding this issue as a strategic objective in order to modernize Guidance services and update the professional skills of Guidance Counselors (European Commission, 2006).

In short, from the context of this research, the need conceived, seen in the group of Guidance practitioners, of a greater and more specific training regarding the ICT use and management in order to achieve an optimum development of their professional work, so that, following on from the Research Project ICT Skills for Guidance Counselors (2002-2005), this research focuses on these issues with the basic purpose of promoting media and innovative technology supports, alike the training activities design for this group of professionals.

ICT Skills 2 Project Description

The research presented is based on the actions and results obtained from the Research Project ICT-Skills for Guidance Counselors (Cogoi, 2005), whose main focus was on identifying the skills considered basic to the Guidance practitioners professional development through the use of ICT. The product of this project was the design of a competences map related to technological resources and tools in order to carry out Guidance activities. This map was fixed from a matrix in which the following elements were incorporated:

1. Seven Guidance areas with their corresponding tasks, selected from those proposed by the IAEVG (2003): Assessment, Educational Guidance, Career Development, Counseling, Information Management, Research and Evaluation and Placement as well.
2. Three approaches to the use of ICT in Guidance field: as a resource, as a medium and for the development of ICT-based Guidance materials.
3. Eight technological resources: e-mail, chat, newsgroup, website, sms, telephone and video conferencing software.

Taking as reference the previous achievements, the Research Project ICT-Skills 2: Tools and Training for e-Guidance Practitioners, was launched, framed within the training program throughout the life of the European Commission –Life Long Learning Programme- Transversal Programme of Education and Cultural DG of the European Commission- with force during the period which lasted from 2007 to 2009. Its basic purpose was focused on the development of e-guidance practitioner professional profile at a transnational level, but with sufficient flexibility to be adapted to different contexts, both national and local. Specifically, the objectives formulated in this project were the following ones:

- a) Defining the core and specific ICT skills to acquire and improve in Guidance in social, educational and professional contexts.
- b) Developing designs and training standards process of Guidance practitioners in the field of Information and Communication Technologies.
- c) Integrating ICT skills with guidance competences through an interdisciplinary competences map.
- d) Designing and implementing pilot courses in educational institutions, especially universities, to develop educational training experiences to guidance Counselors in the context of ICT.

To achieve the above objectives, the project was implemented through the following phases:

- a) Context analysis in the countries of the participating institutions.
- b) Development of the e-Guidance practitioner profile and an e-portfolio.
- c) An online self-assessment tool design and implementation.
- d) Adjustment of the Guidance Counselors training model.
- e) Set the type of Counselors training.
- f) Design and implementation of open platform resources, based on Moodle.
- g) Design and development of pilot training courses in each country.
- h) Project activities dissemination.
- i) Results exploitation and utilization.
- j) Participation in transnational project meetings.
- k) Quality verification and internal evaluation processes.

The tasks carried out in each of the phases were implemented with a high degree of cooperation among the nine participating partner organizations, from four different countries and various sectors (politicians, unions, educational institutions and research teams). This association of countries and institutions, led by Aster (Italy) and coordinated by Melius (Italy), was composed as follows:

- Italy: Aster (lead/ promoter partner); Melius (coordinator) and the Center Studi Pluriversum and Cyborg (technology responsible partner of multimedia devices development).
- United Kingdom: National Institute for Careers Education and Counseling (NICEC) and University of East London (Centre for Training in Career Guidance).
- Spain: Training and Employment Foundation (FOREM) and University of Santiago de Compostela (DIOEP Research Group).
- Romania: Institute for Educational Sciences.

Each of the above institutions were responsible for setting the training model designed from the project in its context, providing each one of them different modules (from a total of 30 that make up or constitute the modular program) belonging to the following areas:

Table 1. Areas of modular training program ICT Skills Project-2.

Unit 1. Use ICT to deliver Guidance	
Unit 1.1	Use ICT media and software in the Guidance process to meet clients' information
Unit 1.2	Use ICT media and software in the Guidance process to meet clients' experiential learning needs
Unit 1.3	Use ICT media and software in the Guidance process to meet clients' constructivist learning needs
Unit 1.4	Use ICT media and software in the Guidance process to meet clients' communication needs
Unit 2. Develop and manage the use of ICT in Guidance	
Unit 2.1	Develop your use of ICT-related Guidance solutions
Unit 2.2	Manage your use of ICT-related Guidance solutions in a service context
Other Transversal Units	

The training model application was carried out by developing different pilot courses in each of the countries mentioned above, following a common methodology, but adapted to each context. Also, depending on the characteristics of each coordinating and implementing model institution, we counted with the presence of different audiences. Among them, we can distinguish the following ones:

- University students trained in different areas related to Guidance.
- Graduates candidates to develop educational and employment Guidance tasks.
- Guidance practitioners in exercise.

- Trainers (initial and continuing training) in the Guidance field.
- The pilot courses used, mainly, qualitative methods, as well as additional resources:
- Individual / group distance interaction between teachers and students through the open Moodle platform: tools such as chat, forums-web, email, e-portfolios, self-assessment resources, wikis, blogs, links to interesting websites and resources, video tutorials, Second Live, etc. were also included. It was also provided as a support for the exhibition of the contents training program through PowerPoint documents, PDF, MS Word... and for the individual and group tasks realization with the communication tools and materials available on the platform.
- Face-to-face interaction: presentation and discussion of contents through a discussion group made up of all participants and carried out at different times of the course.
- Individualized distance follow-up from tutors and teachers through e-mail, interviews (of guidance and assessment) through video conferencing via Skype, chat, telephone, etc.

Main Project Results

The project development has contributed to the following achievements:

An Overview of National Contexts about ICT in Guidance

The study has allowed to suggest useful information to those people with decision-making in the educational field, as well as the European Commission to understand better the state of this question in the European context about the use of ICT in Guidance services, the Counselors training needs, not forgetting the obstacles that still stand in the way of necessary development and deployment of technology tools in Guidance.

The Revision of ICT Skills Map for Guidance

The research provided an opportunity to review the matrix developed in the Project titled ICT-Skills for Guidance Counselors. That review led to changes based on user needs/people to train, leaving the distinction between different resources (websites, email, video conferencing, chat, forums, etc...), to give rise to a new version: the e-counsellor profile. This new map meant, also, the extension of the old face to play the real context in which an e-Counselor operates, reflecting better his training needs to complete his professional profile. Also, it was conceived as a flexible and periodically upgradable tool, according to the changing technologies, as well as the new needs of Counselors and of the last users of Guidance services.

An ICT Training Model for Guidance Design

The training path comprised 30 training modules of 25 hours of study each, equivalent to one ECTS credit, with a total duration of 750 hours for a total of 30 credits. Designed to be a flexible model, it has been presented as a useful resource to provide the necessary training in order to achieve different levels of skills accreditation in Counselors. Furthermore, it was designed taking into account their potential for transferability to other countries with organizational characteristics similar to the present Project participants.

An Open Platform of On-line Resources Design and Implementation

Moodle, the web platform (open source) activated by the partners, assumed to have an e-learning common environment for all pilot courses developed in the four participating countries. It was very functional for achieving the Project objectives, and it was expressed as a very flexible virtual environment. The partners used this platform for training courses management and, specifically, for distance activities. The users felt that it was easy to use, making a simple and intuitive navigation; and trainers also appreciated its flexibility and adaptability.

This platform has been a practical example of virtual training available for Guidance trainers, but also for Guidance practitioners in their daily practice with user services.

On-line Self-assessment Competences Tool

The on-line self-assessment competences tool helped the counselors to shape their training path according to the results obtained. An important side effect of using this tool was the awareness of the possible ICT tools use in Guidance, not used so far. Similarly with the web platform and e-portfolio, the self-assessment tool has also been established as a strategic support from Guidance trainers to identify the Counselors needs and develop better course, related to those needs.

E-portfolio

The e-portfolio has been used as a flexible and customizable tool introduced to ensure, during training, a simple procedure to obtain all the individual results of each participant (e.g. CV, test scores, results in a specific training module, etc.). It has been seen as a useful tool to support Guidance practitioners when they work with users, as a learning tool for trainers and as a resource used, directly, by Counselors for better management of their Curriculum Vitae and to submit it on line.

National Pilot Courses Design and Implementation

The pilot courses were the channel through which the different Project outcomes (a Moodle platform, an e-Counselor profile, an e-portfolio, a self-assessment tool and a training model) were tested, improved and validated in their final versions, providing, also, very useful transverse suggestions for the enhancement of the actions taken. Users granted them a high utility value and expressed a great satisfaction with the results.

Discussion

The ICT Skills 2 Project results have created in practice the provision of a training model and a consistent set of tools for the professional development of the e-counselor in the European context, completing the process begun in the previous project successfully (ICT skills for guidance Counselors), focused on the basic ICT skills identification in the European Union framework. Likewise, the achievements obtained are presented as valid they are not deviating from the issue formulated in the research, and they are reliable to deviate the actions developed in different contexts (Italy, United Kingdom, Spain and Romania), each with their respective, own and characteristic Guidance services.

The theory and practice developed from this research have succeeded in giving an early and innovative response to the educational practitioners and professional training needs in Europe with regard to ICT in Guidance, highlighted by different specialists over the past few years, who have agreed to make the following statements:

- Even having confirmed the potential of technological tools for use in the Guidance field (Repetto & Malik, 1998; Sandhu, 2001; Watts, 2001), the impact of these tools has been low, due in large part, to the lack of specific training in the ICT use in the guidance tasks development and the specific resources shortage (Pantoja, 2004).
- In many European countries, the professional development for the ICT use and e-learning has not been a priority for trainers, counselors, professional associations and the administration, although the characteristics and needs of the Guidance users have been requesting it (Sanz, 2005). This could explain the absence or lack of specificity about specific training models in that intervention area.

Both the map and the specific skills training model resulting from this research, have been useful and flexible enough to be adapted to any national, regional and local level, favoring, also, the possibility of counselors and trainers transnational exchanges from the various existing initiatives within the different programs promoted by the European Commission, included in training policies throughout life (European Lifelong Learning), without losing sight with respect to initial training of the potential of these actions within the new European Higher Education Area.

The use of resources such as the online open platform (Moddle), the self-assessment skills tool or the e-portfolio during the course of this research show the implementation of the training dual perspective for and with ICT of Guidance Counselors, assuming an innovative way to get digital skills in this term, just considered, so far, in the few existing training offers (Pantoja, 2004).

Moreover, all these resources and tools designed in theory were validated through the implementation of pilot courses, demonstrating its benefits, particularly, in the results obtained in the assessments processes made in each of the participating countries, and globally, in the Project final report (VV AA., 2009).

As recommendations for the exploitation of the results presented or further research related to this topic, special emphasis should be made on the need to go on revising the ICT skills map for Guidance with respect to new advances in technology or other innovations that can lead to new procedures and tools to consider, and in light of new roles or functions to be performed by practitioners in the future. Otherwise, the map could be obsolete, not being useful for further training models design and development.

It should also be noted that for the results exploitation of this research is to be considered, too, the Guidance services changing organization in different countries of the European Union, making an adjustment to the profile of e-counselor according to the contextual reality of the moment and depending on the characteristics and needs of the users in Guidance activities.

Conclusions

The results of this study can become a reference framework for future researches in this field and also so that the responsible individuals for counselors institutional training (initial and continuous character) can design and develop actions-founded and implemented with corresponding adjustments to the contextual requirements.

Moreover, the results imply, at the same time, a reason to conceive the Project process and products as the basis or starting point for the development of future e-counseling services, helping, from medium to long term, to issues such as the following ones:

- Cost reduction in the guidance services management.
- To improve the access and the action extension of such services beyond the physical space in which they are settled.
- The availability of new procedures and ICT-based tools so that Guidance services

users, on demand, can use the e-counselors support and guidance, not only locally but also in a transnational level.

In short, we can say that the Project ICT Skills 2 and their results have set a unique and innovative precedent in the field, which deserves to be considered at the time of making new curricula for Guidance counselors training.

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