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Vita adulta e cittadinanza attiva: teorie, ricerche, esperienze per la formazione personale e la partecipazione democratica

a cura di Vanna Boffo e Glenda Galeotti

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Value-based learning for sustainable agriculture: the Crescendo experience

Angelo Fanelli¹

Keywords

Sustainability, Value-based learning, Agriculture, Soft skills, Theatre

Abstract

Within the context of a KA210-ADU project called Crescendo, currently implemented in Italy with Spanish and Turkish partners, we strove to adopt Value-based Education (VBL: Knoch et al, 2022), extending it in two directions: adult education and sustainability within the context of EU agriculture. The paper summarizes the lessons learnt so far and systematizes a series of reflections aimed at fellow trainers in the European learning field.

1. The challenges of Value-Based Learning for adults in agriculture and sustainability

In their T-Kit 14, Snežana Bačlija Knoch, Sérgio Gonçalves and Susie Nicodemi (2022) give an in-depth illustration of the Value-Based Learning approach (VBL), in effect calling on us – trainers involved in the EU learning environment – to finally shed all illusions of neutrality and explicitly embrace an epistemology of training interventions centered on values. The overall aim of VBL is to understand “...what values are and what they mean in order to empower learners to embrace and embody them in their actions and behaviours” (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 31).

Within VBL, “values are evident and explicit, they are clearly communicated and elaborated and are accompanied by dialogue and reflection (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 29)”. For Knoch et al. this approach entails the “paradigm shift” of a competence-based approach – that is, going from learning factual knowledge towards “learner-centered environments where the process is designed to meet learners where and how they are or, in other words, to start from their needs and experience” (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 31). This shift brings to the forefront of training the facilitation of self-reflection, self-assessment, and a focus on the process of learning as a way to open up avenues for participants to explore the “hidden part of the iceberg”: attitudes, values², ingrained beliefs, etc. – as a consequence, training methods and tools must adapt, particularly when dealing with topics (such as Human Rights Education, Intercultural Education, Democratic Citizenship Education, and Global education) and training contexts (mobility projects in youth work) that are crucial for today’s Europe.

As an international group of *Erasmus+* trainers, we took up the challenge and strove to apply VBL in two directions: extending it to the domain of adult education and deepening it with respect to the specific field of values related to sustainable agriculture. The opportunity has been a KA210-ADU project with the title of *Crescendo (Creative communication and Soft skills for agriCultural Entrepreneurs for the sustainable Development Of Europe)*, submitted in Italy in the Spring of 2023 and currently in the implementation phase³.

*Crescendo*⁴ targets participants working in sustainable agriculture from Italy, Spain and Turkey, training them for soft skills with methodologies of Theatre (Boal, 1995; Boal, 2022; Campbell, 2019), Communication (Bateson, 1972) Linguistic Coaching⁵, and Arts (Propp, 1968). Underlying the project, a postulation specifically related to values: in order for EU agriculture to become sustainable and carbon-neutral by 2050, farmers must believe in what

they do for the environment and be able to *communicate* such beliefs (to peers, consumers, local communities and in general to all stakeholders) – the unstated assumption being that, in order to believe in something, one must first *be aware* of what one believes in, so we devised a set of tools geared towards such pedagogic goal.

The promise of VBL was immediately evident to us: what is ‘greenwashing’, we reflected, if not communication that contradicts the underlying *values* of the communicating actor? How can we support sustainable agriculture in the EU, we reasoned, if not by helping farmers *discover their values* in the first place (and subsequently helping them to convey them to their audiences)? What skills are crucial to support the diffusion of sustainable agriculture, we asked, if not soft ones i.e., those related to interacting with others (and with oneself)? Doesn’t this entail a cultural and psychological shift?, we reasoned: changing the traditional image of a passive, silent (male) farmer bent towards the ground into an active one, that of (female and male) stewards of our European foods and landscapes, endowed with a voice with which to be heard?

We discovered that – just like agronomic innovations – assessing VBL is possible only through the concrete design and the (still ongoing) implementation; through practice more than theory, that is. Throughout the implementation of *Crescendo*, we are progressively identifying areas of direct and uncontested application of the underlying epistemology of VBL to the concrete domain of adult education for sustainable agriculture; we are also finding ourselves confronting areas where the paradigm requires some tweaking and problematic areas challenging our pre-conceptions, and putting us in front of dilemmas. I believe that sharing those can be of help to other trainers working along the same lines.

Table 1 gives an overview of the organization of the first step of implementing *Crescendo*, what we called the *Conception Workshop* (the data provided in this article come from this project phase).

Day	Session	Time	Title	Content	Coordinator
1	1.1	09:00 - 11:00	INTRODUCTION TO THE CW	<i>Ice-breaking activities, presentations, introduction to the Conception workshop, Action-Learning group exercise</i>	LIBEROPENSATORE
		11:00 - 11:30			
	1.2	11:30 - 13:00	DISCUSSION & PROGRAM ELABORATION	<i>Detailed illustration of ice-breaking exercises and discussion of potential role in pilot course, feedback from farmers</i>	LIBEROPENSATORE
		13:00 - 14:30			
1.3	14:30 - 17:00				
	17:00 - 19:30				
1.4	19:30 - 23:00		Human beings Theatre Workshop	<i>Experiencing Human Being Intercultural Theatre Workshop</i>	SMASCHERATI
2	2.1	10:00 - 12:00	FROM ICE-BREAKING TO IMPROVISING	<i>Discussion on previous night's experience & adaptation of techniques to CRESCENDO: Lesson and demonstration of Proxemics</i>	SMASCHERATI
		13:00 - 14:30			
	2.2	14:30 - 16:30	TURKIE'S PROPOSALS	<i>Training modules proposed by KOCAELI BEUFA: "Dealing with conflictual situations" "Moving and dancing guided meditation"</i>	KOCAELI
		16:30-17:00			
2.3	17:00 - 19:00	DISCUSSION & PROGRAM ELABORATION	<i>Detailed illustration of Turkiye's exercises and discussion of potential role in pilot course, feedback from farmers</i>	KOCAELI	
	20:00 - 21:30				
3	3.1	09:00 - 11:00	SPAIN'S PROPOSALS	<i>Training modules proposed by BRUTAL: "You Are My Eyes", "If I was...I would be", "Awakening the Body"</i>	BRUTAL
		11:00 - 11:30			
	3.2	11:30 - 13:00	DISCUSSION & PROGRAM ELABORATION	<i>Detailed illustration of Spain's exercises and discussion of potential role in pilot course, feedback from farmers</i>	BRUTAL
		13:00 - 14:30			
3.3	14:30 - 16:30	LIBEROPENSATORE'S PROPOSALS	<i>Training modules proposed by Liberopensore: "Totemic in fabula: exploring our vision of sustainability through clay and the language of the fairy tale"</i>	LIBEROPENSATORE	
	16:30-17:00				COFFEE BREAK
3.4	17:00 - 18:30	DISCUSSION & PROGRAM ELABORATION	<i>Detailed illustration of Liberopensore exercises and discussion of potential role in pilot course, feedback from farmers</i>	LIBEROPENSATORE	
	20:30				
4	4.1	09:00 - 11:00	WRAPPING UP	<i>First draft of the program + definition of next steps</i>	LIBEROPENSATORE
		11:00 - 11:30			
	4.2	11:30 - 13:00	WRAPPING UP	<i>First draft of the program + definition of next steps</i>	LIBEROPENSATORE
		13:00 - 14:30			
4.3	14:30 - 19:00		AFTERNOON IN PERUGIA + Short video-Interviews of trainers in the Centre of Perugia		
	19:30 - 22:30				

Table 1 – Overview of the Crescendo Conception Workshop (Perugia, Feb. 27th – March 1st, 2024)

2. Bringing participants into the (training) kitchen

In February 2024, we implemented the first step of the *Crescendo* project⁶: an international *Conception Workshop* bringing together a team of trainers from Italy, Spain, and Turkiye with a group of Italian participants working in sustainable agriculture. Following the VBL approach, our explicit goal was to co-develop the Course Program for the subsequent Pilot Courses to be held in the three countries the following winter. In other words, we

opened up the “training kitchen” to our participants, allowing them to experience firsthand the training modules proposed by each national team, to comment on them, to discuss the utility of each module to their concrete professional needs⁷, and possibly to propose changes to the program itself (as Table 1 shows, among other things this was allowed by alternating experiential sessions and debriefing/design sessions).

The experience showed us that when participants enter the “training kitchen”, something amazing happens: trainers have the opportunity to test their “training recipes” directly against the “taste” of participants – their real-world, practical, professional needs (and values: more on this below). On the other hand, participants have the opportunity to express their opinions and give feedback on the various “tastings” proposed by the trainers, and to understand what goes on “behind the scenes” of the training sessions themselves. This decision - bringing together participants and trainers to co-design the training program, rather than separating design from implementation – had important consequences. The first: the *Crescendo* trainings which will be held in Italy, Spain, and Turkey in the winter of 2024-5 will be grounded on participants’ needs and will already have been tested *in corpore vili*, so to speak. Moreover, four days of co-designing the program allowed trainers and participants to explore their *respective* values, rather than simply being an opportunity, for us trainers, to observe participants’ values at a (safe) distance. As a consequence, participants had the opportunity to reflect on their own, on their peers’, and on our (trainers’ that is) values, asking themselves what their true needs might be. In the words of one participant:

[The workshop] allowed me [the] specific time to think about my larger goals, beyond to giving my contribution to changing the aesthetics of consumerist and colonialist gardens; it allowed me to know that other people also value a pioneering vision of evolution of the sustainable practices that I already carry out in my gardens, and that this interest could evolve into a line of courses or in any case the development of community knowledge that could be advantageous for all those who want to collaborate with me and with the group that is being formed.

Incidentally, us, trainers, were put in the same (generally uncomfortable) position.

3. From feeding to growing food

From a pedagogical viewpoint, VBL goes “...beyond the cognitive, beyond knowledge [...] and towards holistic learning” (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 29), incorporating the body and emotions within the training intervention and overcoming an exclusive focus on transmitting knowledge. This triggers a change in the practice of training, away from what we could label a “feeding perspective” - whereby trainers “feed” participants with pre-determined content – towards a “growing food” perspective⁸, whereby trainers equip learners with the tools to “cultivate their own training food” through an experiential learning cycle: “when taking part in learning mobility projects, young people will inevitably be faced with their own values, the values of others and most likely wider community and societal values. Therefore, values should be put at the forefront, as a fireplace gathering young people around them” (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 36).

Given *Crescendo*’s focus on sustainable agriculture, the *feeding vs. growing* metaphor is helpful not just at the face value of the project title – sustainable agriculture in and of itself being a call onto consumers and citizens to “bring to the surface” their own values about food, healthy lifestyles, and the natural environment (which, let’s not forget, includes us human animals). For us trainers, this translated quite seamlessly into designing and implementing experiential training modules – from theatre methods to communication, from “guided meditations” to work with clay and the symbolic language of the fairy tale – to create opportunities for participants to discover, explore, reflect upon and, if needed, update their “values” – that is to grow their own “training food” (it also put us under a certain amount of strain, as discussed below). In the words of one participant:

I learned that to understand how to proceed with my sustainability projects, it’s important to take time. I learned that there are specific techniques for calmly making one’s intentions arise. I understood the importance of taking a certain distance from one’s own idea, so as to understand how to deal with the requests I might have to

make to organizations and users who could help me.

Our project choice had been from the start to rely on the methodologies of Theatre, Communication, Linguistic Coaching, and Artistic Creativity, so as to give the entire project an experiential and action-learning direction: exploring the body and emotions beyond cognition; entering into a reflexive cycle of action-reflection-experimentation-conceptualization; connecting the different modules to an underlying “sustainability project” each participant brought to the workshop; linking each experience with the overall goal of “co-designing the program we’ll live together the next winter”. The further evolution of *Crescendo* will present us with more data – but for now, this aspect falls firmly in the positive bucket.

4. Sustainability as a value, or the values of Sustainability?

For Knoch et al., Sustainability forms a cluster of values, “[it] is much more than caring about nature and the environment. It is understanding the cause – effect and action – reaction of all the small things that each person does. It is being aware of the impact at social, economic, cultural and environmental levels in a medium- and long-term perspective” (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 70). From the T-Kit perspective, this leads to defining sustainability mainly as a feature of the learning mobility initiative: the reduction of its carbon footprint, the promotion of recycling, the reduction of unnecessary travel, etc. Quite obviously, we planned and implemented *Crescendo* with such priority in mind – from program structure (an international mobility for 4 trainers from Spain and Turkey while the rest of the group was formed by 4 Italian trainers + 6 Italian participants followed by three national Pilot Courses so as to minimize travel, used online meetings, etc.) to the provision of local sustainable food, recycling, etc. – one cannot have a training on sustainable agriculture that is not in itself sustainable!

Yet, within *Crescendo*, the issue of “sustainability values” brought us much deeper since it required us from the start to explore what it means to be sustainable, for both participants and trainers. For most if not all of us, working in sustainable agriculture stems from “big life-choices”, rather than the pursuit of job opportunities – it is a statement of who we are or who we want to be, which in and of itself suggests that Sustainability has (should have?) equal representation within VBL just as Human Rights or Intercultural Education: not just a feature of training, but a topic domain – a field of values expressing our relationship towards the natural, social, and inner environments. Once we focused on this “submerged part of the iceberg” through several (experiential) methodologies, it became evident that Sustainability Education is meaningless outside the framework of VBL; exploring (and externalizing!) what sustainability means for us necessarily calls for (delicate and) in-depth work: this is what the experience of the *Crescendo* Conception Workshop taught us so far. It involves not just conveying a neat TED speech in front of an audience, but expressing what we believe in through our emotions and the entirety of our bodies; giving a physical shape to our life-choices with clay; or threading our stories with the language of the fairy tale. It asks us to listen to (and interact with) others’ stories. Showing (to ourselves) who we are, as summarized by a participant:

...this is about growth: the exchange with people, the increase in the tools you receive and then immediately put into practice, and experiment immediately: it is a cultural, emotional growth, because the connection with other people involves all the senses. This is why I would summarize the Crescendo project with the word: Growth.

While for *Crescendo* sustainability is a feature of our participants’ life and work, from the trainers’ viewpoint, sustainability involves the social and interpersonal features of the course, the course dynamics generated, and the evolving relationships between trainers.

5. What are values, anyway?

Implementing the Conception Workshop brought us trainers to grasp the deep truth behind the assertion that “values take time and personal effort to be reached, discovered, reflected on, understood, and maybe, just may-

be, changed and acted on” (Knoch et al., 2022, p. 80). Once we put aside the definitional games of theory and strive to actually bring participants in contact with “what’s under the surface of the water”, things start losing the neat appearance of textbook concepts. Once you’re swimming with some kind of marine creature, suddenly the wish to correctly place it within the nomenclature mutates into a different urge. Putting aside the issue of the time needed for such an endeavor, opening up doors for participants into their values radically changes both the quality and the amount of effort required on the part of the facilitators. We discovered that the preliminary accord on the VBL pedagogic philosophy was actually nothing compared to the effort it took to constantly remind (ourselves and) participants what we were doing and why. With 8 trainers all agreeing beforehand on “exploring the submarine domain of values” we still brought to the workshop different approaches, different depths, so to speak, different emphases on the role of body, cognitions, emotions, placing participants in different situations. We found ourselves constantly threading the fine line between chaos and order, heavily relying on moments of reflection, of engaging in the orienteering questions: “where are we?” “what did just happen?” “how does this relate to my professional goals?” and so on⁹. The result was a training resembling James March’s (1971) “technology of foolishness” (Bøje, 2020): an apparent “road to nowhere” where the end result is understanding what our goals (values) really were to begin with, what we really want, and are willing to strive for. Us trainers, were constantly put in front of the possibility (the need, sometimes) to throw away the plan we had prepared in favor of focusing our attention on the processes unfolding in front of our eyes – speaking for myself, what became immediately evident is that while I could bring participants to “reach, discover, reflect on, and understand” their values, I just didn’t have the time and resources to work on the “maybe, just maybe, change and act on” part. Granted, at this stage we were “in the kitchen” and not in the “dining room” of the pilot courses which will be held a few months from now, however my hunch is that the endeavor of “changing values and acting upon them” requires much more time and resources than we have at our disposal at this point. From the viewpoint of the project, bringing participants to be able to know what they believe in, why they’re doing what they’re doing, and to learn different ways in which they could communicate as much to the outside world would be a success.

6. Awareness of anomaly: preaching to the choir or staring the wall?

Engaging with VBL is a humbling experience because Value-Based Learning embodies a change in the training paradigm away from an exclusive focus on cognition. To paraphrase Kuhn (1962, pp. 52-53), “discovery commences with the awareness of anomaly, i.e., with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations” that govern normal training. It is such “awareness of anomaly” that makes VBL so impactful – the “awareness of anomaly” we experienced firsthand, as trainers, and observed in our participants:

...I’m super-tired, but [the experience] made me lighter somehow, it showed me some of my own criticalities, some of my own willpowers from a viewpoint that makes them feel less heavy, and actually turning them into something interesting to work on.

The comment from a participant triggers several considerations. Putting aside redundant self-congratulations for us trainers (which ironically resemble Gene Wilder’s “it...can...work!”), the major issue concerns the *selection of the right participants and trainers* for a VBL training. We observed this in the *Crescendo* selection process, whereby multiple online/offline presentations (approx. 30 potential participants from agriculture) brought us a group of 6 participants strikingly similar in their profiles: relatively young, equally divided between men and women, relatively versed in new media, all of them with previous experiences abroad, and having lived “change-of-life” situations. These elements made our participants particularly aware of what we were intending to do with *Crescendo*, and therefore open to the possibility of “anomalies” emerging from the process – or actually seeking them. Clearly a process of self-selection which on one hand made the Conception Workshop a succes-

ful experience for all – yet, at the risk of “preaching to the choir”, i.e. having a group of participants which are already predisposed towards sustainability and actually working on it, as well as already predisposed towards the idea of exploring their own values. The “average profile” of the central Italian farmer being quite different, it is evident that we would have ended up somewhere else had our participants been a more representative cross-section of the target group (i.e., older, male, not exposed to experiences abroad, etc.). It stands to reason that Erasmus+ are the best chance for “niche innovators” (such as our participants) to acquire a voice in the larger fish-tank of conventional farmers (and EU policies on sustainable farming should acknowledge such need to sustain agency among the periphery of the paradigm). Anecdotally, those “traditional” (potential) participants who did attend the *Crescendo* presentations ended up not enrolling because they realized quite quickly that *Crescendo* involved actually doing things and being involved personally, as opposed to just sitting and listening some “expert” talk¹⁰. The same can be said about the profile of the trainers involved, whereby the major feature behind the success of the program has been (and remains) each trainer’s openness to exploring his or her own values – starting with the basic ontological idea: “possessing the Truth and being there to regally share it with the plebes” vs. “being there to facilitate others and one’s own learning” – and this consideration extends to the strategic role played by lifelong learning in sustaining innovation in EU farming. Although I am speaking for myself here, I believe each one of us trainers had at some point the “maybe, just maybe” realization that Knoch and her colleagues refer to – something that, in and of itself, tells me we could (may)be on the right path¹¹ - just maybe¹².

Note

¹ Angelo Fanelli, Ph.D., University of Bologna and University of Florida, is a linguistic coach and soft skills trainer in private settings and Erasmus+ projects.

² Knoch et al. (2022) define values as follows: “Together with skills, knowledge and attitudes, values are essential to put competence behaviours in motion. Values are the basis for forming attitudes (for example, if a person holds the value of openness, their attitude will probably be open-minded), while attitudes influence behaviours (using the same example, a person who is open-minded will most likely be welcoming and interested in those different from themselves). In order for this movement to happen, a person needs to be willing and motivated to act or rather have the inner-readiness to put values and attitudes, together with knowledge and skills, in motion” (Knoch et al, 2022, p. 33). Five features of values described by Knoch et al help us further understand their definition: “1 – Values are a guiding principle for taking decisions and actions.; 2 – Values evolve through life. They can be acquired and lost, or have their priority changed with experiences. 3 – Values are part of the identity and personality of individuals. 4 – Values can define the culture and identity of a group, organisation, region and/or country. 5 – Values help us to determine what is important to us” (Knoch et al, 2022, p. 39).

³ 2023-1-IT02-KA210-ADU-000158029 Title: Creative communication and Soft skills for agriCultural Entrepreneurs for the sustainable Development Of Europe (CreSCEnDo). Project coordinator. Associazione Libero Pensatore APS (Perugia, Italy: liberopensatore.it). Project partners: Associazione Smascherati APS (Perugia, ITALY: humanbeings.it), Asociacion Desarrollo Tecnológico Rural (Zaragoza, SPAIN: movimientotecnologicorural.org), and the Bureau of European and Foreign Affairs of the Governorship of Kocaeli (Kocaeli, Turkey: kocaeli.gov.tr).

⁴ It is worth noting here the multiple meanings we assigned to the word *Crescendo*: the growth of plants, growth as human beings, as well as a progressively increasing musical dynamic (such as the 1st movement of the European anthem “Ode to Joy”). Moving towards sustainability is to progressively grow in discovering and in acting according to our deep values of sustainability and ultimately, as human beings.

⁵ Linguistic Coaching is an approach to coaching developed by the author, still unpublished.

⁶ See also Moroni, C. (2024). *CRESCENDO: creativity and communication for the future of agricultural entrepreneurship*. Disponibile in: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/crescendo-creativity-and-communication-future-agricultural-entrepreneurship>.

⁷ The workshop was held for four days in Perugia between Feb. 27th and March 1st, 2024 and saw the participation of 2 trainers from each of the partners and a total of 5 participants working in sustainable agriculture.

⁸ “It also means that the learner does not digest the values presented, but is expected and encouraged to be involved in reflecting on them, approaching them critically, with the aim of really adopting the values and acting on them, to bring about change and shape society” (p. 35)

⁹ As a matter of fact, this very article for EPALE Journal – written while the project implementation is still ongoing - stems from the very same need for “orienteeing”: taking the time to step back from the process, to systematize what happened so far, and to remind ourselves what we are doing and why we are doing it. I hope the sharing of our experience will be sufficient for the editors of EPALE Journal to forgive me for using the outlet as a means for such a personal and collective self-reflection.

¹⁰ In the in-person presentation of Crescendo, we tried to give potential participants a taste of what Crescendo was about, so rather than explaining we actually did a short experiential session of 1.5 hours and debriefed the participants afterwards. A farmer who attended had an interesting comment which, I believe, summarizes well the predicament: “I decided not to enroll because when I’m in my vineyard pruning or picking grapes I’m already doing all this stuff of being in contact with nature or with myself, so I don’t need this”.

¹¹ Just for the sake of completeness, I list here the Role of facilitators in VBL as specified by Knoch et al: “Providing safe and encouraging learning space(s); Ensuring that everyone’s voice can be heard; Encouraging the process of self-discovery; Promoting values; Supporting reflection and critical/dialogic assessment; Creating experiences for incorporating values; Challenging discriminatory values; Encouraging learners to (try to) change their values; Empowering learners to act on values”. From my viewpoint, it is quite clear that there remains very little space for the task of “Imparting the Truth”.

¹² The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their precious comments helping to improve the paper.

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