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I futuri dell'istruzione degli adulti

a cura di Marco Catarci, Paolo Di Rienzo, Massimiliano Fiorucci

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Christel Schachter (Università degli Studi di Firenze) • Contatti: redazioneejalce@gmail.com

Coordinamento editoriale: Lorenza Venturi

Capo redattore: Alessandra Ceccherelli

Design e layout grafico: Miriam Guerrini, INDIRE – Ufficio Comunicazione

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Contatti: rete.ruiap@gmail.com



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Training adults for sustainability: the practice of action-learning

Angelo Fanelli¹

Keywords

Sustainability; Action-Learning;
Soft skills; European values;
Adult learning.

Abstract

The paper discusses the action-learning methodology developed in the last 2 years within the context of the KA210-ADU Crescendo project implemented in Italy, Spain and Turkey focusing on training adults in rural areas for sustainability. The paper summarizes the lessons learnt and systematizes reflections aimed at fellow trainers in the EU learning field.

“E qual è quei che disvuol ciò che volle
e per novi pensier cangia proposta,
sì che dal cominciar tutto si tosse,
tal mi fec’io ‘n quella oscura costa,
perché, pensando, consumai la ‘mpresa
che fu nel cominciar cotanto tosta².”

Dante, *Inferno* II: 37-42

1. Introduction

For lack of a charitable word, the EU is living a “Kuhnian” revolution. Granted, the old continent is not alone; yet, we Europeans stand to lose quite a lot from the current “pugnacious reshuffle” – our ambitions: a democracy not in name only; an inclusion above identity labels; a culture beyond nationalism; a technology for the people, not against it; an economy less inimical to the Earth. Absent a sizable collective effort, the architecture of EU values will soon be a foregone illusion – pipe dreams of an ancient epoch, rather than the explicit articulation of consensually agreed-upon principles, meant to be scrutinized and, ultimately, to inform our lives³.

Akin to the proverbial bird carrying a single drop of water in its beak to extinguish a forest fire, this paper illustrates the potential contribution of *action-learning*, a training method developed in the last 2 years within an Erasmus+ adult training called “Crescendo”⁴. A previous paper in *EPALE Journal* (Fanelli, 2024) offered a first batch of observations about participant involvement in training design (“bringing participants into the kitchen”). This paper completes the picture with data from the by-now concluded experience of *Crescendo*, illustrating the main characteristics and outcomes of Action-Learning – a practice-oriented, value-based methodology touching all the different phases of the training process, from project-writing to participant recruitment & selection, to training implementation, and finally to the follow-up & sustainability of project results.

Documenting an adult learning experience on sustainability can be of help to fellow trainers to increase the effectiveness of lifelong adult learning overall, as a tool to understand the problems we are currently facing and to explore solutions, keeping the ambitions of the European project alive and real.

2. Action-Learning: bridging values and behaviors

Many of us working in adult learning have been trying to *operationalize* “European values” through *value-based learning* (Knoch et al, 2022); in this way, we embark together with our participants in an intense departure from

the established structure, roles, and routines of learning; we explore an epistemology centered on self-discovery (both of participants *and* trainers); we try out a pedagogy going beyond mere cognitions to incorporate the body and emotions; we bring participants “into the kitchen” of the design of training interventions (Fanelli, 2024); we embrace experiential frameworks like theatre, exploring “the iceberg” of human values under the surface of the water; in two words: we *act* – and the double meaning of the verb is not coincidental.

Faced with a similar challenge, Augusto Boal brought to completion the Theatre of the Oppressed as “an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions” (Boal, 1995, p. 18). Within the domain of EU adult education, our aim is pretty much the same: searching for solutions to social and personal problems; connecting what we declare with how we behave; figuring out what we really believe and how to pursue it; putting some sense in what we do every day.

The link to Boal is meaningful in many ways: first, because many of Boal’s “games for actors and non-actors” (2022) are useful in the pursuit of an adult work centered on values; secondly, because it reminds us that in order to comprehend problems and search for solutions – transforming stated values into real outcomes – we are called on to tinker with the *practice* of training; last, because such tinkering cannot but start with the protagonist: the participant, the adult learner with her challenges, ambitions, and frustrations.

A second reference for the perspective of Action-Learning is Wenger and Lave’s work on *communities of practice* (CoP) and the key idea that we should look at *where* learning actually occurs: “learning takes place through our participation in multiple social practices, practices which are formed through pursuing any kind of enterprise over time” (Farnsworth et al. 2016). We trainers tend to overstate the importance of what we do in the training space, and disregard how social “places” such as CoPs allow the sharing of information, facilitate networking, motivate participants to pursue learning and connect learning to real-world effects within participants’ professions and lives.

A third contribution is Marsick and O’Neil (1999) seminal work on Action-Learning – the gist of which may sound blasphemous to many corporate trainers: for real learning to occur, the participant must be actually motivated, and – by Jove! – motivated by his or her own personal goals. In other words, training must serve a “dual purpose”⁵. We trainers often focus on our own (and our sponsors’) goals, forgetting that participants are actual human beings, with lives that extend beyond their work roles.

Inspired by these contributions, our take on action-learning started with some questions: can we facilitate collaboration among participants around their own work and life goals? Can we facilitate the bottom-up emergence of a shared definition of “sustainability”, rather than impose a top-down set of theoretical concepts and precepts? Can we generate opportunities for participants to develop relationships of mutual help? Can we renounce the trainer’s crown of kings and queens of knowledge in favor of grass-root, grown-up learning?

Faced with such questions, we started to see “operationalizing values” not as a top-down cultural trans-mission but, rather, as a *translation*: participants are active protagonists in making sense of a social discourse and, literally, in embodying it into their own lives. Whether the discourse is about inclusion, democracy, technology, or (as in the case of *Crescendo*) sustainability, Action-Learning operates in-between the two fingers in Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam: bridging the tiny-yet-infinite distance between values articulated at the social and political level and real-world outcomes *within the individual*: our participants’ (and our own) attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, in whatever domain we’re operating. It is here – at the level of *practice* – that Action-learning situates the “point of contact”: practical learning endeavors and practical outcomes relevant for our lives.

The *Crescendo* experience illustrates how such a connection occurs in practice (sic). Briefly, in the winter of 2024-5 this Erasmus+ project involved 31 rural entrepreneurs in three parallel 36-hours pilot trainings in Italy, Spain and Turkey. Co-designed with participants in the previous winter (Fanelli, 2024), the program included 5 “thematic

modules” of 4 hours each and two “transversal modules” of 8 hours each⁶ (Theatre and Action-Learning) and was intended as a test for a future training intervention around soft skills, sustainability, agriculture and rural areas. Throughout *Crescendo*’s entire life-span, Action-Learning provided multiple bridges between social values and individual lives in a process of trial-and-error that generated effects at each stage of the “training value-chain”.

Project & training-design

At the project level, we translated the EU objective of “transition to a climate-neutral agriculture” into an overall *Crescendo* aim of “giving a voice to actors already pursuing sustainability in their work in agriculture and linked fields (e.g., tourism, etc.)”. LiberoPensatore, the coordinator of the Ereasmus+ project, has been operating for a decade in rural Central Italy, so for us trainers the translation was a very tangible outcome – something to which we relate personally. In turn, this led to the goal of “allowing participants to explore, update, and ultimately communicate their values related to sustainability”, in the belief that “real” sustainability (as opposed to greenwashing) comes from *practicing what you really believe*: using voice consistently with one’s beliefs. The next step was to define specific pedagogical goals targeting “an identified set of soft skills” with an experiential, value-based, and practical methodology⁷. Relying on the European Skills, Competences and Occupations classification (ESCO)⁸, we identified 28 soft skills and developed related measures of training effectiveness. Downstream from project-writing, participants intervened actively in the subsequent detailed design of the training sessions within an international Conception Workshop (“bringing participants into the kitchen”: Fanelli 2024).

Participant recruitment & selection

After refining the entire training program with an initial group of Italian participants, we strove to recruit and select participants which would be more open to participating actively in the following stages, based on two criteria: a) being involved with sustainability in their current work or life; b) willing to work and share their own “individual communication project”. An initial online survey allowed us to collect participant data on these two elements which were subsequently integrated into the training program⁹.

Table 1 presents a summary of the projects of the Italian participants and how they evolved over time¹⁰:

Name	Age	Profession	Initial learning goal	Individual communication project at half-way through the training	Project status at the end of Crescendo
Antonio*	55	Tour Guide + chemist	n.a.	The Farmacy of Sustainability	Event within Perugia Weekend of United Arts (Feb. 12 th 2025).
Davide	53	Bus driver	“Improving communication styles”	Supporting other participants’ projects	n.a.
Diego*	42	Permaculture expert + gardener	“Make a presentation on regenerative gardens, why they are worth it. Write a project to get agroforestry financed”.	n.a.	n.a.

Marta	49	Gardener + nature-based therapist	<p>“Introducing myself, my talents, put my skills to use for co-created horticultural therapy projects and sensory gardens useful to the community. How to present a project to a women’s prison? To an association hosting people with disabilities or to a nursing home? How to present a project in order to find entities supporting its financing?”</p>	Cultivating oneself and flourishing. A participatory urban garden project for women	<p>Mini-workshop within Perugia Weekend of United Arts (Feb. 12th) Event @ Mani di Luna vineyard (April 12th 2025) Presentation in final dissemination event Further events @ organic farms Looking for partners to develop a full project</p>
Noemi*	36	Wine Influencer	<p>“New ways of communicating. Building public interventions. Having a new experience”.</p>	n.a.	n.a.
Rocco	46	Farmer, bio-dynamic wine producer	<p>“Build a mini video presentation of the company also for company visits or fairs. Improve my empathetic side with people and the ability to communicate effectively without arguing.”</p>	Natural wine: the pleasure of knowing yourself	<p>Presentation and wine-tasting within Perugia Weekend of United Arts (Feb. 12th 2025) Event @ Mani di Luna vineyard (April 12th 2025) Presentation in final dissemination event</p>
Samuel	42	Theatre practitioner	<p>“Learn to communicate and share effectively in as many ways as possible”</p>	Things Were Better When They Were Worse: Tales of Human Sustainability	<p>Exhibition within Perugia Weekend of United Arts (Feb. 12th 2025) Event @ Mani di Luna vineyard (April 12th 2025) Presentation in final dissemination event Intervention in E+ training</p>
Simona*	60	Agronomist	<p>“Communicate to farmers”</p>	The gold of my garden: an olive-culture project at the school of S. Sisto (PG)	<p>Presentation in final dissemination event</p>

Valentina	44	University Employee	“Creation of a video useful for making the communication of a public institution accessible/ understandable, with particular reference to the sectors represented by the participants in the Crescendo project”	Supporting other participants’ projects	n.a.
Valentina*	46	Project Manager	n.a.	The Pilgrimage of Sustainability: A LiberoPensatore Project in the Footsteps of St. Francis	Presentation within Perugia Weekend of United Arts (Feb. 12 th 2025) Presentation in final dissemination event Presentation @ May 11 th event (Festival dei Cammini di Francesco)
Virginia	37	Theatre actress + agri-tourism owner	“Build a mini presentation video for a natural pond waterproofing project in the agritourism company”	Naturally Theatre: Bringing Theatre into Local Farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event @ Mani di Luna vineyard (April 12th 2025) • Presentation in final dissemination event • Planning further events @ organic farms

Table 1: Crescendo participants’ individual communication projects (*= participant took part in the Conception Workshop, Feb-March 2024)

Training implementation

Action-Learning operated indirectly within all training modules: trainers were instructed to include participants’ projects within the module they were responsible for, deploying games and exercises incorporating participants’ projects. As an example, the “Art & Fairy tale module” brought participants to express their own “communication projects” as a clay sculpture, an object which subsequently became part of a fairy tale authored by participants themselves; the Theatre module proposed specific exercises to allow participants to express their own projects physically, and so on: an inclusion facilitated by the experiential nature of all modules.

Action-learning also had a direct effect through a transversal “action-learning module” comprising 4 hands-on sessions devoted to working collectively on participants’ projects: “communicating in writing”, “communicating in video”, “public speaking”, and a final session on “implementing the project”. Whilst the experiential modules bridged the socially-stated values of sustainability with the “reality” of participants’ bodies, emotions and subconscious, the practical nature of the AL module focused on participants’ *projects* created a second bridge in the opposite direction – from the learning experienced by each participant within herself, out onto her presence in society: her current work around sustainability in agriculture, tourism, or whatnot. The explicit goal of the module was to bring each project towards *implementation*, regardless of the initial stage of completion – as shown in Table 1, start and arrival points differed, from vague initial ideas to already-structured needs identified at

an entrepreneurial level; yet, as trainers, we cannot but be amazed at how participants were able to appropriate the *Crescendo* experience turning it into an opportunity to pursue their personal goals. The final dissemination event was a “guiding light” throughout the process, providing participants with a stage on which to live-test their project with real stakeholders, and use project dissemination as an opportunity for marketing, promotion, partner-search, and networking.

Training evaluation

The training phase is the most obvious (albeit not the only) context where we expect an effect in terms of transforming stated values into individual attitudes, skills, and behaviors. We measured *Crescendo*’s training effectiveness with *Participant Skill Improvement*, comparing participants self-assessment before the training on each of the 28 ESCO skill items with assessments taken after each module of the “degree to which they felt an improvement” on each of the same items. Table 2 presents the results related to the Italian participants (cells contain average evaluations on a 5-points Likert scale from 1=very little to 5=very much; heat map represents intensity of effect)¹¹.

Broad ESCO skill	Narrow ESCO skill	Crescendo Training Modules					
		1 ICE-BREAKING (n=6)	2 SYMBOLS & METAPHORS (n=7)	3 ART & FAIRYTALE (n=8)	5 GUIDED MEDITATION (n=5)	A THEATRE (n=22)	B ACTION-LEARNING (n=26)
Communication, collaboration & creativity	S1.0 Entertaining people	3,2	3,4	3,8	2,6	3,6	3,4
	S1.0 Capturing people's attention	3,3	3,4	4,0	3,0	3,6	3,4
	S1.14.2 Expressing yourself physically	3,7	2,9	3,8	4,2	3,9	3,2
	S1.4.1 Presenting information: Engaging in debates	3,0	2,9	3,8	2,4	2,8	3,5
Knowledge	K0321 Language acquisition – Body Language	3,5	3,3	3,5	4,4	3,9	3,3
	K0431 Management & Administration: Conflict Management	2,5	2,6	3,4	3,0	2,6	2,8
Life Skills & Competences	T6.4 Appreciating diverse cultural & artistic expressions	3,5	4,0	4,5	3,6	4,0	3,7
	T6.4 Expressing Yourself Creatively	3,3	3,6	4,4	4,0	4,1	3,8
Self-Management Skills & Competences	T.3.2 Taking a proactive approach: showing initiative	3,3	3,0	3,8	3,2	3,5	3,5
	T.3.3 Maintaining a positive attitude: Approaching changes positively	3,5	3,3	4,0	3,8	3,6	3,9
	T.3.3 Maintaining a positive attitude: coping with stress	3,3	3,4	3,9	4,0	3,5	3,8
	T.3.3 Maintaining a positive attitude: managing frustration	3,3	3,6	4,0	4,0	3,4	3,7
	T.3.3 Maintaining a positive attitude: showing confidence	3,3	3,6	4,3	3,8	3,6	3,9
	T3.1 Working Efficiently: Time Management	2,3	3,3	3,6	3,2	2,8	3,4
	T3.2 Taking a proactive approach: Making Decisions	3,0	3,3	3,9	2,8	3,1	3,4
	T3.4 Willingness to learn – Exercising Self-Control	3,3	3,9	4,0	3,6	3,7	3,9
	T3.4 Willingness to learn: Exercising Self-Reflection	3,7	4,0	4,1	4,0	3,6	4,0
Social & Communication Skills & Competences	T.4.1 Communicating: Addressing an audience	3,2	3,6	3,6	3,0	3,9	3,9
	T.4.1 Communicating: promoting ideas, products and services	3,0	3,3	4,0	3,0	3,1	3,7
	T.4.2 Supporting others : Assessing others' feelings	3,7	3,4	4,0	3,2	3,4	3,9
	T4.1 Communicating: Resolving Conflicts	2,7	2,9	3,5	3,2	3,0	3,0
	T4.2 Supporting Others: showing empathy	4,0	3,4	4,3	3,2	3,7	3,9
	T4.3 Collaborating in teams and network: working in teams	3,3	3,6	3,6	3,2	3,5	3,7
	T4.3 Collaborating in teams and network: Cooperating with colleagues	3,2	3,7	3,6	3,2	3,7	3,7
	T4.4 Leading others: building a team spirit	3,0	3,3	3,9	3,2	3,4	3,4
Thinking Skills and Competences: Processing information, ideas & concepts	T2.1 Thinking critically	3,3	3,4	3,8	3,0	3,1	3,4
	T2.1 Thinking Quickly	3,5	3,7	4,4	3,8	3,8	3,9

Table 2: Evaluation of training effectiveness of Crescendo modules on ESCO skills

As Table 2 shows, each module impacted a different set of soft skills. Overall, the results suggest (albeit with a different reliability of the means, given the different sample size for each module) that the training had an impact which was perceived by participants as significant across a wide range of skills. The advantage of the ESCO classification is that it provides a very specific reference – one that is relevant in our participants’ lives while being at the same time relevant for the overall goal of “turning stated values in real-life outcomes”. For us, trainers, observing an effect across several (though not all) skills, means knowing that the “translation of values into real-world outcomes” has occurred, at least to a degree.

Follow-on and project sustainability

For us trainers, action-learning was also an opportunity to understand that our job doesn't end with the acquisition of skills. The usually problematic "follow-up" and "project sustainability over time" acquired a pedagogical quality – an opportunity to motivate participants to pursue their individual projects in front of a "real audience" and to continue after the end of the project. Analogously to an "open theatre rehearsal", the *Crescendo* final event helped participants pitch their projects to potential clients, partners, stakeholders and so on. Once the goal of "real world outcomes" was internalized by participants, opportunities emerged to put the newly acquired skills at the test. For example, Virginia, theatre practitioner and owner of an agri-tourism, partnered up with Rocco, an entrepreneur producing bio-dynamic wines, and Marta, a gardener and expert of wild herbs, to organize a 4-hours event at Rocco's farm where each of them "tested" their individual projects on paying customers. In another case, an Arts festival held by the Perugia Municipality inspired Antonio, a tour guide and chemist, to turn his shop into a "pharmacy of sustainability" where three other participants "performed" their competences in contact with the public of the Festival. Some of the individual projects of the *Crescendo* participants will continue to develop after the end of the project – giving us confidence that the "middle-earth" of the dissemination phase can become an explicit "point of contact" between the socially-stated values of "sustainability" and the real-world outcomes of participants' values, attitudes, behaviors and work-related results. From the perspective of the aims of the Erasmus+ program, we believe that this is an interesting way to conceive of "follow-up" and "project sustainability in the long term": haphazardly, hesitatingly, temporarily, in a somewhat half-baked way – yet the two fingers have touched within the lives of several of our participants.

As two participants expressed it:

I liked [...] sharing the possibility of participating in an event all together, ... experimenting in the field the training and the communication philosophy transmitted during the course.

[I learned that] you must externalize and practice in order to also learn from the feedback of a community or network.

3. Against "soft skills"

As in Dante's descent, for the European enterprise to not be "unresolved and wasted in thought" we need assistance out of "the desert" we're currently roaming – within the domain of adult learning, such assistance may be provided by pedagogical approaches which "operationalize" values not as a set of mandated beliefs, but rather as *platforms* for exploration, scrutiny and elaboration which acquire meaning only when actually *embodied* within the lives and goals of adult human beings. It follows, that Action-Learning may not be applicable in training contexts focusing on skills that do not impinge upon the subconscious – in *Crescendo*, we used it to explore an innovative way to train for sustainability – one that still needs further testing, deeper and more extended applications but which nonetheless offers, I believe, useful insights and suggestions.

The last one of them is a call for the abolition of the term "soft skills" altogether. Seen from the perspective of those who are tasked with developing them within themselves, of engaging in the sometimes painful effort of "discovering what lies beneath the surface of one's conscious" – let alone the oftentimes disparaging one of changing it – seen from this perspective, these skills definitely don't feel "soft" when compared to notions which tickle our cerebral cortex without really changing a iota of who we are, our beliefs, attitudes, habits, and values. Let's rather call them instead Deep Skills – for persistence won't suffice to develop them: you also need the patience and courage to dive in, in order to rise up.

Notes

- ¹ Angelo Fanelli (Ph.D., University of Florida, Università di Bologna) lives and works in Umbria since 2008 as a coach, consultant & trainer after 15 years as an international researcher in the field of leadership, management & human resources. In 2009, he founded Libero Pensatore APS focusing on cultural heritage and sustainability. Since 2020, he's been involved in Erasmus+ projects on sustainability, soft skills, mental health. He practices Theatre, Yoga, Hiking, Cooking and is a passionate experimenter with sustainable agriculture; Email: angelo@liberopensatore.it.
- ² As one, who unresolves What he hath late resolved, / and with new thoughts Changes his purpose, / from his first intent Removed; / e'en such was I on that dun coast, /Wasting in thought my enterprise,/at first So eagerly embraced.
- ³ "Everything that is affirmed must prove its worth or disappear. The greatest achievements of human society in every field are due to the scientific method that lies behind this unfettered approach. But this spiritual freedom has not survived the crisis created by totalitarian States" (Spinelli e Rossi, 1941).
- ⁴ 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 Tecnologico Rural (Zaragoza, SPAIN: movimientotecnologicorural.org), and the Bureau of European and Foreign Affairs of the Governorship of Kocaeli (Kocaeli, Turkey: kocaeli.gov.tr).
- ⁵ For a comprehensive review of AL research: Cho & Egan (2009); O'Neil & Marsick (2007).
- ⁶ Ice-breaking & teambuilding; Communicating with Symbols, Metaphors & Analogies; Communicating through Art & the Fairytale; Communicating in conflictual situations; Guided meditation: see www.agricrescendo.org and on the Erasmus+ Results Platform.
- ⁷ The experiential and value-based elements were discussed in Fanelli 2024 so they will not be reiterated here.
- ⁸ Cfr. <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/en/about-esco/what-esco>.
- ⁹ Further discussion of participant selection is provided in Fanelli (2024).
- ¹⁰ The project website www.agricrescendo.org provides the complete report on the Crescendo project, course manual and training notes, quantitative & qualitative data on the training effectiveness across the 3 countries.
- ¹¹ Beyond the ESCO skills results presented here, the national reports available on the project website contain multiple measurements of the training effectiveness of Crescendo, both qualitative and quantitative.

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