Report on the

1st Project Managers Online Discussion Event

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1. Introduction

The primary objective of the DESIRE project is to identify how new project results in science education can reach teachers and schools more efficiently. The online discussion events (ODE) of DESIRE are used to facilitate the sharing of experiences about dissemination between stakeholders in science and math education. The ODEs have the purpose of collecting qualitative data for the DESIRE Project.

This report is a summary of the first project managers Online Discussion Event which took place in the period 17-19 September 2012 and was moderated by Marisa Hernández, researcher in Science Education at the Centre for Research in Science and Mathematics Education (CRECIM), in the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona, Spain.

During the three day event project managers were invited to discuss how they are informed or find out about European and national science education project results and how they communicate or disseminate project results. The following sections contain summaries of the discussed themes each of the three days and the outcome of the discussions.

2. Day 1

The first day of the 1st project managers' online discussion event had a focus on the various dissemination channels that project managers usually use to get results from Science Education projects. To structure the discussion, different types of dissemination channels were mentioned, and project managers were invited to point out the channels they prefer to use and why.

This first day had a high level of participation and there was almost the same interest in discussing the use of Social Media tools (22 posts) and the use of other more traditional dissemination channels (19 posts).

Regarding social media channels, Facebook was considered by some participants a useful channel to make projects known by teachers, to exchange and get to know the latest news from education projects, to announce an event targeted at teachers or to invite them to participate in a project.

> *"I think Facebook is a powerful channel to make your project known by teachers. Many of them are using Facebook to exchange and get to know the latest news from education projects"*

Nevertheless, this channel was not considered too appropriate to disseminate other kind of project results, such as resources or tools. Moreover, some participants consider that it would not be advisable to maintain a Facebook profile parallel to the project's main website.

> *"My experience on Facebook as a dissemination channel with teachers is that it does not work. Traffic from facebook towards project pages are negligible"*

There has been some discussion on how to take advantage of this channel to reach different audiences.

Twitter was also considered a channel to bring traffic to websites of education projects although some reservations about this channel were also expressed:

> *"I would however not count on Twitter as unique channel to disseminate results of science education projects. It is very difficult to assess the real impact of a Twitter campaign on the engagement of teachers in projects"*

Linkedin was suggested by one participant as a useful channel to get to know aspects of projects that do not usually appear in more established channels.

There was also a brief discussion devising a social network just for project managers that would allow connecting research groups, sharing documents, interacting with others in an asynchronous and synchronous way, etc.

Regarding more traditional dissemination channels, the discussion was mainly focused on the attendance to face-to-face events such as conferences and workshops in order to network and find out about project results and future project developments. Another reason that was argued to opt for face-to-face events is to provide stakeholders all the necessary background to understand and find project results usable:

> *"Meeting teachers face-to-face enables to engage them in a more sustainable way as it seems to be easier to participate to a project when faces can be put under names… It is essential to get teachers familiarized with your projects and provide them with the background information that will engage them on the longer term."*

Obstacles for dissemination such as the huge amount of information that flows in the digital era were highlighted by several participants. In this case, face-to-face events were also considered key to facilitate keeping up to date around certain strands. Newsletters are also appreciated to get relevant information related to your field. However, some gaps still seem to exist for project managers concerning the dissemination of information from projects funded by the European Commission.

Other participants explained some dissemination strategies they used in particular projects such as using advertorial space from various leading news media to show the core messages of the project in those leading dailies.

> *"This dissemination measure provided great value for money in view of the relatively low cost of those advertorials and of the sizeable circulation of those traditional media outlets"*

Some participants consider that a good dissemination strategy is to use both social media channels and traditional dissemination channels to guarantee reaching stakeholders.

> *"Only some teachers are reached [with Facebook] as a large part of them are using more traditional channels like newsletters or specialised websites. It should then be used with a combination of other channels"*

3. Day 2

During the second day of this event, we were discussing our best and worst experiences concerning dissemination of project results. Some of the best experiences were related to the involvement of stakeholders as ambassadors, steering committee or national coordinators, so that they could also spread the word of the project by organizing information days to explain to other schools the outcomes of the project, or communicating the activities and results of the project to their colleagues and media in the language of their country, or sharing their experiences on a blog.

"From our experience, one of the best ways to raise awareness of teachers is word of mouth"

Other participants agreed on the importance of the role of this first group of teachers to reach the target audience and create a wider network.

"The teachers knew who to contact and what channels to use to get the message across, however there seems to be no 'general blueprint': what works in one country, may turn out it be quite inefficient in another. The local knowledge is the key"

Other good examples have to do with disseminating project results in the framework of workshops or seminars for in-service professional development purposes, out of schools or within schools. However, some participants agree that these workshops are time-consuming and might not be a suitable format for any kind of project.

"We have tried workshops in schools and found that albeit rewarding were very time consuming. Having said that, this is a kind of format that I suspect will not work for all projects. You really need to talk to the teachers' interests"

There was also some discussion about the need for and types of incentives (remuneration, recognition, network, training, etc) for teachers or other stakeholders involved in the project.

Another innovative experience consists of including podcasts in a project website for dissemination purposes.

"Best experience is a podcast on a website. It prompted a lot of enquiries about the project"

The participants have been also discussing measures to improve the dissemination plans of a project. Again, the main point focused on involving some stakeholders from the beginning of the project or involving them on dissemination strategies as intermediate stakeholders.

"It is quite common in the UK to have a steering committee for projects where stakeholders are kept up to date with the developments of the project and can give their opinion. This seems to me the best way at regional/national level"

Some participants also elicited their doubts concerning the number of teachers you can reach in practice using this strategy.

"I think it is important to select which teachers can actually play this role with their peers. The other question is, how far will this method go? how many teachers can you reach this way?"

Finally, we have briefly discussed the issue of the criteria project managers use to evaluate a dissemination strategy. There has been some debate around considering (or not) exploitation of results as an indicator of the effectiveness of a dissemination plan. This is one of the key issues that are still under discussion.

> *"I think it is important to define what is evaluated when assessing dissemination activities: number of people that are aware of the projects? number of people that actually use the results in their practices or participate? Number of visits on a project website is a very common criterion used to evaluate the results of a dissemination strategy but it is not always representative of the use of your results by teachers. It is often difficult to get information from all the teachers that are involved in a project. From my experience, it happens very often that teachers have been using your resources for a long time without telling the project manager"*

4. Day 3

The third day discussion was focused on factors that are relevant to catch the attention of stakeholders. Issues such as timelines for disseminating project results, appealing formats and contents to be disseminated were tackled during the 3rd day.

Regarding timelines for dissemination, different points of view arose in the discussion. Some participants pointed out that normally it is risky to try to disseminate project results that are still under development because some stakeholders might lose interest if they do not find these results useful, applicable or fully understandable.

> *"It depends of the project of course, but I think normally there is little to disseminate in the first half of the project, and the results start to be interesting for teachers during the second half. Trying to do dissemination before you risk to lose people's attention as the "product" or relevant result of the project is still under development. The public is interested in something they can already use, apply or fully understand"*

Other participants suggested that one good solution to promote further dissemination after a funded project finishes is to create/use portals centralizing all the project results.

> *"Some very good tools and resources available on websites of finished projects are not disseminated anymore as the funding has stopped. One solution is to create portal centralising all these project results like the scientix portal (www.scientix.eu)"*

Other strategies relate to a "low intensity" dissemination involving stakeholders during the whole lifetime of the project in order to establish stronger relationships with stakeholders, and to enhance the chances of influencing future decisions through research.

Concerning content and format of dissemination, all the participants agreed that the way project results are communicated should be adapted for different stakeholders. According to this, the focus, length, language and style of the documents or other channels that are used for dissemination should be different for each target audience.

"For policy makers, you may talk about the more general targets and long-term aims. For teachers, you need to tell them why is it important now and how can they use the content now. Quite different!"

Finally, one participant contributed to the discussion mentioning that an attractive title or strong tagline is all important in catching people's interest for successful dissemination.
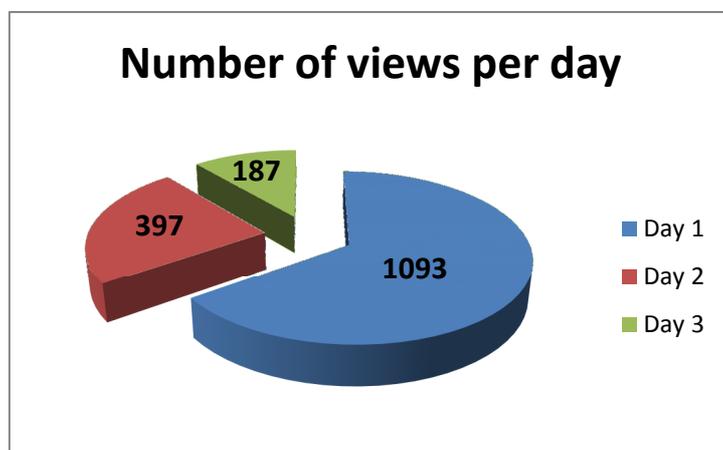
5. Participation

Along the three days event, there were 80 posts. The distribution of the posts per day is shown in the next figure:
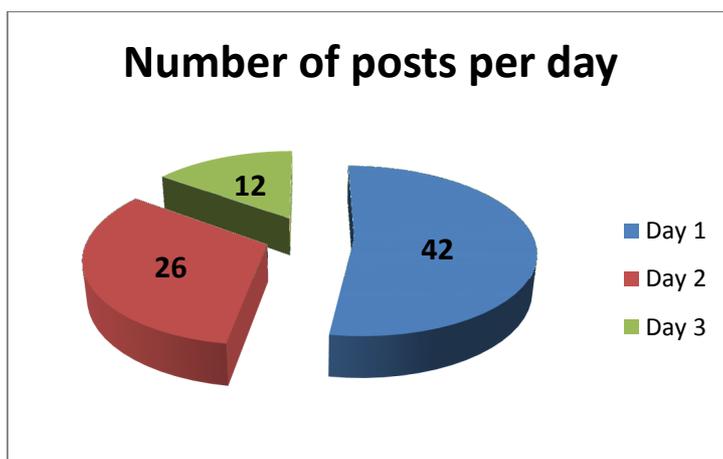
As shown, the first day had the highest number of posts and this number decreased day by day. However, the statistics from this first project managers ODE show that the event had a reasonable participation level from which we can drag useful ideas and experiences of the participants that can contribute to the identification of better dissemination practices in future STEM projects.

As shown in the next figure, there were also hundreds of views of each category (Day 1, Day 2, Day 3):

The high amount of views might be interpreted as the result of a successful dissemination of the event. We believe that some viewers might have hesitated to participate due to:

- Time constraints, since the event took place in a period of the year when many project managers were attending conferences, on holidays or preparing the academic year.
- Technical difficulties that arose during the 1ˢᵗ day of the event, since the participants did not have permissions for posting comments.
- Participants might have considered that there was a lack of incentives for contributing to the discussion.

6. Conclusion

It was possible to determine the experience of the participating project managers about almost all the threads discussed and the quality of their posts was very good. We consider that the participation level was quite acceptable and we would like to give this format of event a second trial to collect more qualitative data for the research purposes of the DESIRE project.