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**NETWORKING IN REGIONAL
ECONOMY. FROM ACTION LEARNING
TO ENTERPRISE ANIMATION
– CASE STUDY**

Introduction

Researchers and practitioners describe regions as learning economies where business and public entities benefit from the strategic role of interlinks in their territories and are becoming increasingly open to a more knowledge-based work organisation. The concept of action learning offers a unique approach and practical toolbox where various aspects of interrelations can be activated for more effective support of change and growth. It helps to promote, boost and maintain the processes of inter- and intra-organisational development by building a collective learning capacity in a bottom-up and interactive fashion or simply enhancing capacities for action. Through the prism of action learning, this paper presents some of the methodological issues and practices observed in a Leonardo da Vinci project called “SME ACTION Learning Facilitators”. Promoting a regional network of academic animators and helping start-ups are at the heart of critical evaluation of the case study describing project activities in Upper Silesia, Poland.

1. Building a modern economy in regions

Building a modern economy in the regions is closely related to learning by business entities and by their institutional milieu. Regional development tends to be explained through the outcomes of learning and improvement processes in the institutional milieu [Asheim, 2005; Johnson, Lundvall, 1994; Ritsilä, 1999; Storper, Scott, 1995]. The emphasis is on the effects of cooperation under conditions of competitiveness among companies and various public and private organisations, in particular, from educational, political, and social sectors. It is stressed that the effects expand knowledge in the region and contribute to its development [Camagni, 2002; Capello, 1999; Hassink, 2005; Maskell, Malmberg, 1999]. Various studies point out that the development and competitiveness levels of the economy in the regions are determined, for instance, by the cooperative skills within networks [Lundvall et al., 2002; Cooke, Schienstock, 2000; Morgan, 1997], recognition of the necessary prospective knowledge, skills and competencies by people who already work and by those who are entering the labour market [Martin, 2005; Raspe, van Oort, 2006], and, in broad terms, the creativity and initiative of people [Landry, 2000; Hospers, 2003].

Enhancing actions and activities creating the necessary infrastructure which meet the challenges are readily taken up by political circles as well as business, social and academic ones. Since the beginning of the 1960s, we have observed that the hard infrastructure that promotes economic development has been installed in the regions. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the emphasis has been placed on undertakings aimed at developing the educational infrastructure, improving communications accessibility, economic restructuring or spatial regeneration. In its studies, the World Bank notes that since the mid-1990s the interest in initiating soft infrastructure support instruments [World Bank, 2001] has increased. These have been, in particular, instruments contributing to the enhancement of economic ties and increasing labour opportunities. They are, for example, the enhancement of networking and cluster-formation, training and informational activities, and various financial grants. It is essential since even with high quality preparation, promoting regional development through spatial infrastructure forms, from educational centres, incubators and research and development laboratories, through various technological parks and economic activity areas, should be, to a larger extent, accompanied by activities enhancing their human and social capital. In those works, it is crucial to use action learning tools competently, which helps to reach an agreement in the field of strategic and operational issues under networking cooperation and the processes of change in companies.

2. Foundations of action learning

Building in literature, action learning is defined as the development of an organisation in which the people learn actively. Action learning has three aspects: a) subject, with people being more active, involved and showing a greater level of responsibility while joining the organisation's development activities; b) object, with specific challenges and problems related to changes in the organisation being defined by persons affected by the changes; c) process, with the organisation's improvement being tantamount to the people's or organisation's learning.

As opposed to a similar concept of learning by doing, action learning has far more to offer. The action learning process does not refer to training, or searching for an answer "what would happen if", but it is related to specific remedial or developing activities implemented in the organisation. In the learning process, the key emphasis is placed on its direct usability for the organisation

itself, developing an active problem-solving culture, learning, and merging the solutions with the organisation. The action learning methodology assumes that active learning tends to result in the development of the organisation.

Active learning in organisations was described by Reginald Revans in his studies from the early 1980s [see: Revans, 1980; 1982]. Revans distinguishes simulation games, workshops and other forms of intra-organisational activities from action learning. Revans' experience, however, stretches back to the 1940s when he perfected teaching methods and replaced traditional instructional forms in the healthcare sector.

Action learning is closely related to the need for finding a solution to a real-time problem or challenge. For the organisation, action learning is a process of going from individual learning effects through team learning and an organisation's learning. It is a modern approach to building a culture of change in the organisation [see: Raelin, 2000] that is based on taking up challenges and learning changes by managers in an organisation [see: Pedler, 1996] and not based on learning by other people's example, which is one of the distinguishing factors of traditional training.

The basis for success of action learning is to connect and use: a) the learners' knowledge; b) competent raising of questions by an animator*.

The learners' knowledge and an appropriate learning attitude, in particular, raising questions constantly, do not themselves guarantee success of the action learning. According to Peter Smith [1997], it is conditioned by:

- an individual approach towards the learning process, that is, the outcome of preferences for simple assimilation of information or activity, for example, by asking questions. Also, this results from the determination to learn independently and to practice self-discipline as well as a general activity in the team;
- the participants' skills to learn, including the ability to obtain information from the group and gain knowledge based on that, reflection, familiarity with new IT technologies, etc.;
- the learning environment that determines the level of support by the organisation (some indicate mainly the employer), the significance (strategic aspects) of the action learning process the person participates in and the access to data and information.

* In the "classic" action learning concept, it is assumed that raising questions has precedence over using knowledge, including expert knowledge, while in the "developmental" model of action learning, the significance of knowledge and reflection is equal. See: [Raelin, Raelin, 2006].

Revans defines raising questions as an ability to select four basic questions that are key to creating the tools of action learning, i.e. where, who, when and what. The action learning process is not a strictly educational task but a method to solving real-time problems of the organisation, building teams, searching for solutions and inspiration, improving skills and people's activities through facilitating the process of obtaining information or reducing the time to obtain information and using it as knowledge in specific tasks. It is assumed that learning through various forms of activity produces diversified results. While reading we can remember 20% of the information on average and listening can be about 40% effective. The effectiveness of multimedia tends to be 60% and practical tasks can attain 80% effectiveness. Can you count on higher numbers if you are a manager in your company, an animator in your milieu or a practitioner in your organisation? For managers in companies, action learning means that we learn by making decisions and we make decisions because we learnt and are still learning. The animation process that makes use of action learning appears to look like a search path to success in which subsequent steps are a result of reflection [see: Bourner et al., 1996] – using the learners' information and knowledge and not showing a ready-made formula or solution.

Action learning is a process of jointly creating bases for making decisions concerning activities. On the one hand, this results in minimising risk through using the experience, knowledge and views of the team members. On the other hand, using the same methods of action learning without any additional analyses carries the risk of a subjective and emotional reference to a specific issue. Therefore, a momentary risk of a "bad decision" has always been part of the process. Nevertheless, organisations with a mature culture do not consider their decisions as good or bad because it is assumed that the process applying various learning tools builds a perfect organisation [Pedler, 1999]. In other words, we may expect to have the risk minimised in the entire process.

3. Action learning in practice – the SME ACTor Project

The implementation of the SME ACTor Project* (SME ACTION Learning Facilitator) is an example of works taken up to strengthen the modern economy in Upper Silesia, Poland. The project has been carried out in liaison with partners from six European countries: Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania,

* The SME ACTION Learning Facilitator Project is funded by the Leonardo da Vinci Programme (2007-2008); www.smeactor.eu.

and Spain. The project is aimed at supporting the existing or building new groups of companies as a result of applying action learning methods for animation works. The works are carried out by facilitators, or persons making it easier to solve real-time business and organisational problems. Applying action learning methodologies, facilitators prepare leaders in companies and organisations who make up a group of animators.

In Upper Silesia, the activities within the SME ACTor Project concentrated on preparing academic enterprise animators. In the future, they will become the most important figures to conduct the START program developed by six Upper Silesian universities promoting enterprise in higher education institutions.

While working with future animators, action learning methodologies were applied assuming that animating of an enterprise requires more support for competence and creating networks of interlinks among animators as opposed to the infrastructure itself. The role of animators is to motivate people for them to take up challenges and to facilitate the search for signals in the milieu and environment. They serve the entire environment through facilitating the process of obtaining information and learning. Enhancing interaction as a task of work leaders, animators rooted in their environments and persons who facilitate the building of the environments, requires a systematic approach. The action learning tools have had more supporters in this area.

The works under the SME ACTor Project provide about thirty tools which seem to constitute a palette of possible animation work methods. The tools can be grouped according to their application: analytical tools, e.g. cause and effect analysis and influence analysis; planning tools, e.g. goal-oriented planning and the time axis; creative thinking tools, e.g. brainstorming, 6-3-5, and word-plays and puns; and involvement enhancing tools, e.g. warm-ups and icebreakers. Another typology is obtained when the criterion is the number of participants: individual-work tools, e.g. a contract with myself, moderation and guidance; the tools in a small team, e.g. the task form, the five satisfactions – stakeholders analysis, the analysis of suppliers' and customers' needs, and planning; and tools applied in larger groups, e.g. a focus group, World Café, Open Space. Moreover, we may divide the tools according to their various applications with the "six thinking hats" method as an example of the most complex tool due to its variants and the PERT analysis applied in a narrowly defined task.

The majority of tools are known and used in various practical fields and, following the action learning concept, the more the involvement is aimed at solving real-time problems and taking up actions, the more useful the tools are.

3.1. Project methodology and works

The activities under the SME ACTor Project in Upper Silesia have concentrated around the following areas:

- 1) analysis of territorial context in the activities undertaken;
- 2) analysis of participants' needs;
- 3) preparation of a series of learnshops, and carrying them out;
- 4) evaluation of the activities.

Analysis of the territorial context in the activities undertaken covers, first of all, recognising the institutional milieu for the territory and a group of participants. In particular, the analysis comprises:

- identification of key actors in the area;
- identification of policies and enterprises with an influence on beneficiaries;
- preliminary identification of sector's and/or territorial challenges for beneficiaries;
- preliminary identification of possible leaders – animators.

Analysis of participants' needs allows for preparing the foundations of works performed in the learnshop series. This can be a questionnaire for the participants or direct interviews with them. The needs analysis is a directed source of information. It aims to collect information on beneficiaries' specific preferences. The analysis is to be considered as a point of reference for works and not as a final list of items to be completed.

Preparation of a series of learnshops is to develop a desired scenario of works using the results of the analyses and a specific plan (Table 1). The works are carried out as active workshop modules. The idea of a learnshop goes beyond the conventional workshop because it assumes tailoring of methods and tools that allows the participants to learn various techniques and processes during a meeting. It is worth stressing once again that the learnshop scenarios prepared before every meeting form a framework and due to the real nature of the problems they are constantly adjusted.

Table 1

Example of the learnshop plan under the SME ACTor Project

					
Module 4: Creative techniques					
Time	What for (Learning aims)	What (Learning content)	How (Methods)	How (Instruments, materials)	Who (Actors, partners)
Date	--/--/--	Duration	10.30-2.30		
10.30-11.30	How to use brain writing to create new ideas	Brain writing is a technique of a rapid concept or project development applied in a small group (3-12 people)	Plenary session and individual or pair work on a specific case on specific or participants' START project cases	Pinwands, moderation tools and materials, flip chart, writing implements, Tool 20 (brain writing and similar techniques), water, snacks delivered to the room	1 st tier facilitators All participants
11.30-12.30	How to use the Six Thinking Hats method by Edward de Bono	A very helpful role play technique to explain complicated cases/projects/problems	Plenary session – presenting the rules, working in groups on a specific case, presenting results (two groups)	Pinwands, moderation tools and materials, flip chart, writing implements, Tool 25 (Six thinking hats)	1 st tier facilitators All participants
12.30-12.45 Break					
12.45-2.00	How to use the method of consultations with colleagues	Case consultations with colleagues are a role play in real-time cases with strictly defined roles: case providers, case advisors, a moderator and a supervisor	Plenary session – presenting the rules; working in groups on a specific case, presenting results (two groups)	Pinwands, moderation tools and materials, flip chart, writing implements Tool 24 (case consultation with colleagues)	1 st tier facilitators All participants
2.00-2.30	Learn in the personal learning and planning	Considering possible personal improvement; prioritising possibilities	Plenary session – introducing the method; individual work – a contract with myself	Tool 2	All participants 1 st tier facilitators
2.00-2.30	Learn in team learning and planning (option)	Considering possible process improvement in a team	Plenary session – introducing the method; evaluating the learnshop	Moderation materials, flip charts, Message 12	All participants 1 st tier facilitators

Source: The authors' own resources.

The evaluation of the activities is to prepare a brief summary of each learnshop and plan the necessary changes in further meetings. The key evaluation element is to find out what the participants' opinions on the learnshop are and provide them with a summary and short commentary. This brings benefits such as enforcing additional reflection, facilitating openness for further works, deepening involvement and a good work atmosphere.

The arrangement of the process allows us to achieve an organisational learning effect based on real-time problems of a company, a group of companies or organisations and not going through training-like tasks.

The works under the SME ACTor Project were conducted with the vision of Upper Silesia as an area that learns, a region of knowledge and innovation. The basis for developing a specific action plan included:

- 1) a vision to build a network of academic enterprise animators at Silesian universities;
- 2) an idea to animate the development of companies under formation under various initiatives in Upper Silesia.

The undertaking was prepared with two target groups, or leaders, in mind – academic enterprise animators and companies at different incubation stages. The works path can be broken down into five stages.

The first stage involved formulating proposals addressed to six universities that were preparing for the START programme in the meantime. An integral part of the stage was a preliminary identification of partners in the business and local authority sectors that took up enterprise-support activities.

At the second stage, a detailed analysis of the context for the planned activities was made. Therefore, the key actors in the context of the enterprise-support in Upper Silesia were identified. The instruments and undertakings aimed at beneficiaries, i.e. good practices, programmes and expected activities, were identified and described. Based on the sector and territorial analyses, a preliminary identification of challenges for beneficiaries was made. The final element of the contextual analysis was to examine the competence of possible works leaders, which was related to the analysis of the needs of the beneficiaries in the first group, i.e. animators of activities in the academic enterprise.

The third stage preceding the activities taken up in subsequent learnshops involved developing and approving a scenario for the beneficiaries in the first group. The layout, order, and intensity of works were a direct consequence of the contextual analysis and needs analysis. It was assumed that individual learnshops would be dedicated to five thematic modules:

- an animator in the business environment;
- communication and visualisation activities;

- planning an individual development path, and evaluation;
- creativity techniques;
- solving problems and making decisions.

The fourth stage including learnshop works for sixteen academic enterprise animators proceeded with the assumption of continuous evaluation of works*. Figure 1 shows the final list of thematic modules under the action plan, including the time horizon considering Stage 3 and 4. The digits at the toolbox indicate the number of action learning tools recognised and applied in practice. It appears that learnshop works have been strongly identified with the START programme by referring to real-time challenges and problems of the network of academic enterprise animators at Silesian universities.

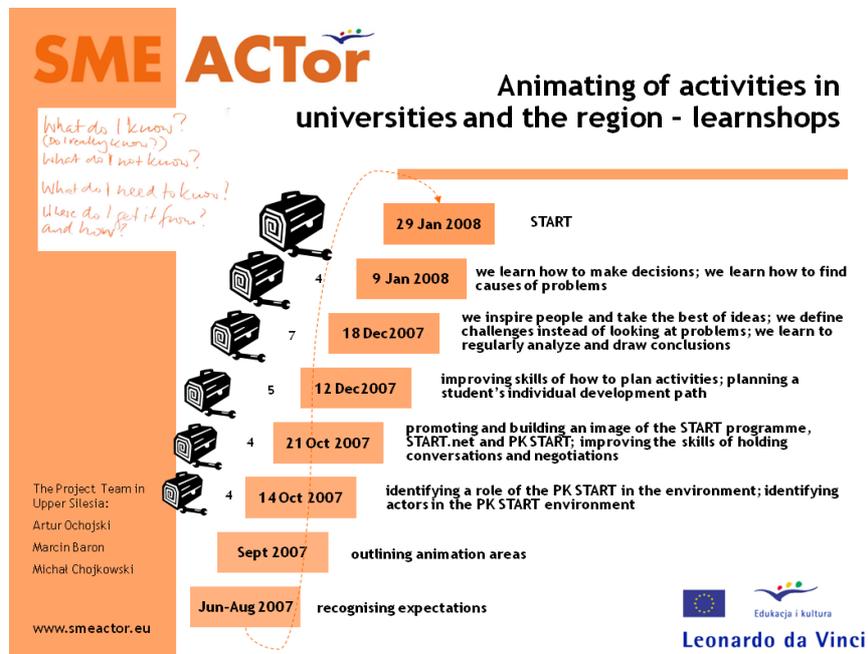


Figure 1. Works of the SME ACTor Project in Upper Silesia
Source: Authors' own resources.

* By adapting Moodle to meet the project needs, the results of the evaluation were regularly submitted to the learnshops' participants at www.smeactor.eu.

The fifth stage comprises the activities taken up for the beneficiaries in the second group, i.e. pre-incubated companies. The works were initiated after the first learnshop series so as to provide all participants of the previous stages, i.e., stages 1-4, with maximum experience in interactions within the economic environment.

Activities conducted together with the beneficiaries in the second group took the form of three learnshops addressed to five incubated companies. The work with the companies involved specific business issues. The final thematic modules concentrated on the following:

- personal development and recognising business needs;
- networking of companies;
- searching for customers and creating markets.

3.2. Applying action learning tools – methodological observations

Completing the learnshops as described above allowed us to formulate methodological observations related to the practical application of selected action learning tools.

Animators as moderators

As we already indicated, we conducted eight learnshops with beneficiaries in the implementation of the SME ACTor Project. The learnshops formed a planned series and were based on action learning tools. Despite careful planning, a prior contextual analysis and an analysis of beneficiaries' needs, it turned out that at each learnshop moderators had to be extremely flexible and responsive, and be able to replace some tools and pass over others.

For example, at one of the initial learnshops with future academic enterprise animators, specific tools related to the analysis of actors and suppliers' and customers' expectations were meant to be used. However, the tools seemed to be too difficult in the situation, thus, the moderators applied brainstorming to identify actors and their strategic rates.

Another example of a flexible and quick response to a situation at a learnshop is using icebreakers. Frequently, they are considered as a warm-up exercise to be used at the beginning of a session. However, the authors' experience shows that they tend to be a perfect tool for refreshing the thinking process in a group and changing the work atmosphere, thus allowing the group to easily get out of a difficult situation such as the inability to find a solution, or failure to reach

a compromise, etc. Leaving the topic of the learnshop out for a short time, even in a critical situation, is not a waste of time in the long run because it speeds up finding a solution in further steps.

It is essential and common in learnshop works, to prolong exercises and tasks, which consequently leads to delays in completing a learnshop. Thus, in the case of delay, a moderator has to be able to make a decision whether: a) to conduct the current exercise in full and risk not conducting the other tasks; b) to stop the process and sum it up at the then-current stage, thus, proceeding to further stages; c) to sum up the work up, suggest “homework” and smoothly continue the learnshop leaving the path for returning to issues recognised earlier. This is also connected with the moderator’s ability to assess to what extent a decision on problems has to be made during learnshops. It is common that during works some problems appear not to be significant any more or to have already been solved. It is important for the moderator not to attempt to preach to the converted or accept such attempts by the group but to flexibly use the time to explore other issues in greater depth and apply other tools to work with the group.

Moreover, it was noted that during longer sessions or in a learnshop series, introducing newer and newer action learning tools led to increasing the participants’ involvement and creativity. For example, at one of the learnshops, instead of brainstorming and the 6-3-5 technique, which were well-known to the participants, moderators decided to apply word-plays and puns. Similarly, when working with the group becoming weary, the gradual-disregard technique, or the five whys technique, replaced the case study discussion.

Accepting the role of the group work moderator, animators have to pay particular attention to influential and disruptive persons in the group (referring to personality, knowledge, and attitudes). The moderators’ task is to make sure that such individuals do not dominate the way of thinking in the group entirely or impose or take others’ opinions or decisions as theirs. If the learnshop with a group is part of a series, moderators gradually get to know the participants better, and, with the group’s profile, they prepare their learnshop plan so as to reduce the negative influence on the process by the strong individuals. This seems to be the most important factor in the moderators’ self-evaluation. And this is so because the authors’ observations indicate that the moderators’ flexible approach can be achieved only when they get to know their group better. Therefore, moderators should know in advance who the learnshop participants are, what their expectations are and what the conclusions after the learnshop should be. At the same time, it should be noted that it is unacceptable for

moderators to dominate the learnshop works: “At the learnshop, it is most important to let the participants act and talk when they need to and to listen to them attentively. It is they that have to feel that the moderator is for them and that he/she understands them”^{*}.

Animators as process facilitators in cooperative networks

The authors’ experience from the SME ACTor Project and other similar undertakings indicate clearly that animators can be strong and successful inasmuch as they know and understand the environment in which they live and work. This means that the animators’ success is possible only when they are active in the environment; when they try to be recognisable and significant actors. It can be noticed that the process participants expect animators to know how to explain the regional and/or environmental context and to recommend or assess the solutions being proposed. However, animators should not be the only one able to manage the group and its participants by identifying ideas, challenges, opportunities and possible methods of using them, but, to a large extent, they should know how to create the space for joint learning and collective reflection, and monitor and support the implementation of solutions accepted by a cooperative network.

Becoming process facilitators, animators have to devote their time to systematically plan the entire process in every detail, and then, when specific tasks are undertaken, they have to remember about constant verification and revision of the plans. This was demonstrated in the works under the SME ACTor Project in Upper Silesia. An international team carried out the work plan developed under the project. However, in the course of the process there were numerous modifications to the original plan and methodology, which facilitated working with the participants and increased their involvement. In other words, animators feel confident with clearly specified aims and activities, which also guarantee dynamics and orientation in the entire process. Yet we cannot follow the plan at all costs if we want to succeed in such a turbulent environment.

We should note, however, that, first, animators are expected to be impartial and neutral, capable of acting professionally and provide the cooperative network with information that they obtain in various forums and bilateral relations. This is far more important than being engaged with constant planning and selecting methodologies and tools for conducting further tasks. Thus, animators

^{*} A reflection by the SME ACTor Project participant quoted from the evaluation form.

as process facilitators cannot only restrict themselves to their typical managerial functions. Furthermore, it is worth underlining here that while acting as facilitators, animators do not have to have technical knowledge or experience in a specific field. They should have ability to distinguish their role from that of an expert and to be able to engage experts in issues that are currently of interest for a cooperative network. The animators' skills of gathering various actors round a common vision, creating an atmosphere for dialogue and inspiring joint activities are more important than those of managing or solving problems by experts.

Keeping the process participants interested

The experience gained from works in Upper Silesia illustrated the popular thesis that participants' involvement, keeping their attention and interest throughout the process and trying to ensure the continuity of ideas and activities are essential for all network initiatives and activities.

Learnshop participants liked the idea that the project was conducted by neutral animators and in a neutral place. In their opinion, this ensured the objectivity of the entire process. Therefore, the participants were sure that it was them that made decisions concerning solutions and were not influenced by any possible competitors or persons with unknown intentions or ambitions. What is more, the method of conducting learnshops enabled reducing the influence of too domineering participants. Thus, all felt that they were the creators of the solutions reaching the win-win type of compromise.

Another essential factor for the participants was to be aware that animators were not guides or experts with comprehensive knowledge of the issues being examined. At the very beginning of a learnshop series, the participants believed they would take part in a training session or even in informative-type meetings on the START project and not in a learnshop series that was meant to be (and actually became) a platform for the participants who, having been equipped with action learning tools, determined by themselves what the START project they would be responsible for at their universities should be. During the process, the participants understood the difference between their initial expectations and the work style proposed by the action learning concept and the resulting benefits.

However, it should be noted that both the quality of the group in the process and animating the animators' skills determine the participants' interest and involvement. Therefore, it is essential for animators to always take into account the type of group participating in a learnshop as a significant criterion for

selecting tools with respect to the extensiveness, complexity, and difficulty of tasks and case studies. The authors found that too difficult an exercise could be irritating for participants and tended to be treated flippantly. Simple exercise allowed the participants to easily understand action learning tools and to learn how to apply them in the future. It should be emphasised, though, that simple does not mean trivial.

In the case of learnshops for business people, it is important to modify and adjust the tools to the participants' needs and the type of problem that is the subject of the learnshop. Animators' flexibility bears fruit in the form of achieving relevant effects. To attract and interest business people, it is necessary to have a unique offer for them resulting in acquiring new knowledge and gaining experience. Therefore, a thorough recognition of needs and responding to them during a learnshop/meeting, making a constant synthesis, providing various opportunities and possibilities, and, most importantly, constant listening to what they want to say, allows for creating an atmosphere of acceptance and confidence to achieve success and attract participants for the next sessions.

At the same time, we should emphasise that the key to success in the tasks was to create an open and friendly atmosphere for the participants to feel comfortable, which supports producing a plethora of good ideas.

Applying action learning tools

The most important and, at the same time, general lesson learnt from the learnshops in Upper Silesia is proving the thesis that moderation and visualisation during meetings, or learnshops, and other action learning tools is a very innovative form of work with business people and other groups representing cooperative networks.

The authors believe that the activities stimulate the participants' imagination and help to produce new ideas. "Images can speak. Visualisation is a very useful tool to encourage people to take up dialogue and discussion", said one of the participants. Although some tools can be perceived as "funny" by some participants at first and at times even as "childish", at the end of the activities, the entire process allows them to understand that unconventional methods result in bold and innovative solutions.

Applying specific action learning tools during our learnshops, we noted a series of regularities essential from the animators' point of view that should be considered during similar activities:

- Edward de Bono’s technique of six thinking hats was used to order the participants’ knowledge and experience in relation to promoting enterprise across the universities. Despite positive responses from the participants and achieving the assigned aim, the added value was the experience manifesting itself in the fact that it was not necessary to apply the complete tool, i.e. all six hats, and sometimes it was even more effective to be selective. Thus, to get a specific effect, we could combine various colours, e.g.:
 - to make quick assessment, evaluate ideas: yellow–black–red hats;
 - to search for possible solutions: white–green hats;
 - to minimise causes and effects of errors: black–green hats;
 - to assess the progress of the process: blue–yellow hats.The conclusion from the exercise made by one of the participants was that, “As an animator, the most valuable activity you can sometimes carry out is help to order information and knowledge of persons you are assisting”. Six hats is a perfect tool in such activities.
- To diagnose all actors having an effect on the development of academic enterprise in Upper Silesia and actively participating in the process of creating the START project as described above, two tools were applied: an analysis of actors – five satisfactions – stakeholders analysis and an in-depth analysis of actors – an analysis of the suppliers’ and customers’ needs. The learnshop participants were not able to make full use of the capabilities that the tools offered. When the learnshop was in progress, its participants’ knowledge about the project was too scant. Although the tools were introduced too early and the learnshop result was not entirely satisfactory, the participants understood that replacing the role of a customer with a partner may result in better communication and finding common benefits faster. However, before the application of the tools itself attention should be paid to knowledge and the proper introduction of the participants to the learnshop process.
- While drawing the attention of future animators from universities that engage in the START programme to one of the problems they might have to face, e.g. lack of students’ interest in participating in the initiative, the use of the Ishikawa diagram was proposed. This allowed for expanding participants’ horizons and ways of thinking. They dealt with the problem strategically and horizontally by making a thorough analysis of numerous factors that could have had an influence on the situation but would not have taken them into consideration earlier. The Ishikawa diagram is a perfect tool for searching for the causes of a problem. However, it requires the participants’ good knowledge of the process under analysis. In the case of the learnshops, the method applied at the end of the entire series was extremely effective.

- While developing the skills of future animators in the process of creating business ideas, e.g. academic start-ups, word-plays and puns were demonstrated. Apart from arousing creativity, the tool can easily engage the participants in fully participating and allows for creating a very friendly work atmosphere. Matching the properties of a randomly selected item with those of a future/planned product or service allows us to become aware of many hitherto hidden qualities. What is more, the tool can be used instead of traditional and common brainstorming, which will certainly increase the level of participation and involvement of the participants feeling bored by its frequent and universal application.
- During one of the learnshops for companies operating within the Academic Enterprise Incubator aiming to search for possibilities of joint enterprises, a session was moderated with a method based on the 6-3-5 technique. At the beginning, the business people noted down the groups of their customers, and with the potential partner's groups described earlier they also noted down proposals of their products/services which could respond to their potential needs. With this simple method, the participants could easily specify further steps and actions to expand their activity across the market and define potential areas of collaboration.

Thanks to the learnshops, the animators were able to strengthen their conviction that competent replacing and/or mixing of tools was very useful in keeping the participants' interest and having them actively participate throughout the entire series, or a full learning process. Additionally, they discovered that in the learning process it was good to show animators' own experience and provide both their own successes and failures, and encourage participants to share the same with others.

Conclusions

Lessons learnt from the works allow us to precisely determine the animators' role and to find unique features of modern instruments to support enterprise. We can assume that the animators' work is:

- the skill of intriguing, encouraging to actively participate, and attracting young people, business champions, scientists and all those whose actions may be profitable for each university and the region;
- being where something interesting is going on because the key to success is information provided and used or contact in the area of transforming ideas into real (implementable) projects, for a student;

- constant improvement of skills and creating opportunities to make use of resourcefulness in activities being undertaken.

The conditions of good support for academic enterprise require the following criteria to be met:

- promoting creativity and enterprise in universities, that is, constant and simultaneous work by all animators (networks) in the region;
- individual work with a student and an employee of their university, business people, local authorities, science, and other social environments; and (most importantly);
- practical application of creative techniques, dialogue, and analytical methods with students involved, and developing entrepreneurial skills.

Additional conditions include:

- well-understood professional information background consisting in “screening” of knowledge for animators and beneficiaries;
- support of building networks of business and outside-business contacts at the level of institutions and instruments, and animators’ financial and non-financial incentives.

Yet creating enterprise animator networks depends mainly on a constructive climate in the region and readiness of key regional actors to take up challenges of a modern economy. Animators’ interpersonal skills, though the most important in operationalisation of actions and proper use of action learning tools, will not bring the expected effect in environments with a low level of enterprise culture.

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