

THE ENID-TEACH PROJECT IN THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY “EPALE”: IMPACTING PARTNERSHIPS OF COOPERATION OR JUST SHARING GOOD PRACTICES?

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Abstract

This proposal looks at the relationship between the ENID-Teach project [1] and the community platform for Adult Learning in Europe - EPALE. The project aims to train university academics in digital pedagogies, promote flexible teaching models and re-establish the ReColn-TaD cooperation network between university professors. The EPALE platform is a European Union initiative for adult education with the aim of promoting knowledge sharing and building a transnational community of educators.

The aim of this presentation is to report about the strategy for using EPALE by the Portuguese ENID-Teach team, explaining the decisions made and sharing the experience gained.

The results obtained are positive and it is possible to conclude that EPALE, despite some limitations, is a valuable tool for European dissemination, collaboration and network building with some impacts in building partnerships of cooperation. It is a platform for sharing and cooperation for those who have links to the field of adult education and is an asset to the university environment.

Keywords: ENID-Teach project, NOOC, EPALE, Virtual Community.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the current global context, characterized by the acceleration of technological transformations and the widespread impacts of the post-pandemic times of COVID-19, higher education faces the pressing challenge of adopting innovative pedagogical practices that respond to the demands of an increasingly digitalized society. The pandemic crisis has highlighted the need for flexible educational alternatives, capable of transcending the limitations of traditional teaching and providing effective learning experiences, even in physical distancing scenarios. In this sense, the integration of digital pedagogies is emerging as a strategic priority for higher education institutions, particularly in terms of training teachers and building international collaborative networks.

The ENID-Teach project was a structured response to these demands. With a focus on training university lecturers in the use of digital and flexible methodologies, the project sought not only to foster pedagogical innovation, but also to strengthen cooperation links between European higher education institutions. The initiative set out to (r)establish inter-university networks that had been compromised due to the social distancing imposed by the pandemic restrictions, and to reactivate the transfer of knowledge and innovative practices, thus promoting a lasting transformation in teaching and learning processes.

As part of this project, the strategic use of the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) stands out. Created by the European Commission, the platform is a multilingual, collaborative space for sharing good practices, educational resources and experiences among adult educators. As well as promoting the democratization of access to knowledge, it offers a technological infrastructure for the establishment of transnational communities, thus aligning itself directly with the objectives of ENID-Teach.

In this sense, this article aims to report on the experience of the Portuguese team in implementing ENID-Teach at EPALE, highlighting the strategies adopted to take advantage of the platform's potential in accordance with the project's operational objectives. In articulating these potentialities with the objectives, the aim is to reflect on the challenges and opportunities inherent in integrating digital pedagogies into higher education, as well as the impact of this approach on building more inclusive, dynamic and resilient inter-university educational ecosystems.

The paper is divided into three main sections. First, the ENID-Teach project and its implementation context are presented. The second section focuses on EPALE, explaining its mission and objectives. It is also framed within the EU's adult education policy and the importance of OER and the promotion of cooperation networks in the platform's mission is discussed. Finally, the third section is dedicated to

reporting on the use of EPAL by the Portuguese project team, presenting the strategy and evidence of the experience.

2 THE CONTEXT

2.1 The enid-teach

The ENID-Teach project focuses on digital pedagogies, seeking to train academics in this area, promote an innovative pedagogical model for digital university teaching and (re)establish bridges of cooperation between university professors. It fits in with the need for a shift towards a more digitalized and flexible teaching model, especially given the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, the genesis of the project goes back to the pandemic crisis, caused by the COVID-19 disease, when it imposed social isolation at different stages (depending on the evolution of the pandemic) and the adaptation of the educational system and the learning processes of universities, also forced a digital model. On the one hand, such social distance has caused the disappearance of inter-university networks which, under normal circumstances, would have continued to be a space for cohesion and cooperation. Against this backdrop, the aim of the project is also to (re)establish the university network that enables the strengthening of links with the various professionals at European universities. By focusing on teaching staff, the project sees them as intra- and inter-university anchors, thus facilitating the creation of a knowledge transfer network of good digital and flexible practices in higher education.

In this sense, the project integrates digital pedagogies into several dimensions: Training, Resources, Good Practice Guides and Research, and a cooperation network (ReColn-TaD). In the Training dimension, the project provided online training in the form of NOOCs (Nano Open, Massive and Online Courses), aimed at higher education teachers on flexible digital teaching practices. This training program covered several training actions, structured into 5 NOOCs: Connected and Critical Thinking; Collaborative Learning and Research; Active and Gamified Learning; Flipped Learning and Designing digital flexible learning programs. NOOCs are a variation of online courses, lasting 25 hours (equivalent to one week of study). The methodology focuses on microlearning, based on microclasses or learning units in various complementary formats, where the content is broken down into small steps to speed up the learning process.

As for the Resources dimension, the project developed several multilingual and accessible Open Educational Resources (OER), also focusing on microlearning and different pedagogical methodologies. A Guide to good practices in flexible digital pedagogies was also developed, providing practical guidance for teachers.

In the Research dimension, the project included a research component related to the development of the digital skills training program in flexible methodologies and the evaluation of the effectiveness of NOOC-based microlearning. It also included research into the design of the other dimensions mentioned above and various scientific dissemination projects, such as participation in publications and events of this nature.

In the case of the ReColn-TaD Cooperation Network (International cooperation network for knowledge transfer of and digital learning facing postCOVID crisis), this was one of the central products of the ENID-Teach project. The idea was to bring together a group of university professionals and their institutions in a European network, with the aim of promoting cooperation between universities through their professors, promoting the exchange of good practices in flexible digital teaching.

In administrative terms, the project was organized in a consortium between several European institutions, led by UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), from Spain, which acted as the main coordinator of the project, being responsible for the overall management and coordination of the work. The other partner institutions were: ECO Digital Learning, SL (Spain), responsible for the ECO e-learning platform; Universidade Aberta (Portugal): specialized in distance learning and digital pedagogies; MAG SRL (Italy), with experience in European projects and OER development; Università degli Studi di Catania (Italy), with experience in teacher training and innovative methodologies; Savoir Devenir (France): experienced in digital education projects and the implementation of training programs; Burgaski Svobodni Universitet (Bulgaria), with expertise in the research and development of adaptive learning systems. The ENID-Teach project (www.enidteach.eu) was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ program, ref. 2021-1-ES01-KA220-HED-000027551.

2.2 The epale community

The Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe - EPALE is a key initiative of the European Union's adult education policy. It was created in 2015 by the European Commission with the aim of "facilitating the sharing of knowledge and good practices concerning adult education and to support the building of a transnational community of adult educators in Europe" (Ludden et al., 2018) and to support the building of a multilingual community made up of "European professionals across Europe: teachers, researchers, academics, volunteers, national policy-makers and influential organizations responsible for adult education, (...), national and regional centers and institutes" (Brakoniecki, Bednarz & Respondek, 2022, p. 70).

Thus, one of the main objectives that characterizes EPALE's mission is to be a pan-European adult learning community where users can establish contacts, exchange experiences, publish and comment on content. In other words, to find inspiration and partners for projects (Brakoniecki, Bednarz & Respondek, 2022, p. 76). Users have access to a variety of features for publishing content, including news, blogs, educational resources, teaching materials, events and other activities related to the field of adult learning, allowing them to follow the most important trends in the adult education sector, both at European level and in relation to individual countries. In this way, the platform addresses different topics related to adult learning initiatives (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 38), providing specific resources on the quality of teaching methods and literature on adult education and training policies.

One of EPALE's main features, and at the same time an advantage over other platforms, is that it is multilingual, offering users content in all the languages of the European Union (EU). This feature is crucial to achieving its pan-European character and broadening its impact. "Thanks to EPALE's multilingualism, which will allow people from all over Europe to use all the website's functionalities and resources" (Brakoniecki, Bednarz & Respondek, 2022, p. 68). As it is available in 24 languages (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 28), it allows users to access content and interact with each other in their mother tongue. A particularly important feature for building a transnational community of adult educators.

In the field of management and administration, EPALE is the responsibility of the Directorate-General Education and Culture (DG EAC) (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 3), which manages the Erasmus+ Program in the context of which it is funded (Bertomeo, 2023, p. 106), and the 36 National Support Services based in each member country. In this way, it is aligned with the priority of Erasmus+ (an EU program for education, training, youth and sport) to support the development of the skills of adult education staff and, in a broader perspective, to contribute to improving the quality of adult learning in Europe.

EPALE's ambition is to become the leading adult learning platform in Europe, based on sharing and finding partners to develop European projects. According to a study commissioned by the European Commission in 2017 (Ludden et al., 2018), the launch of the platform "has significantly contributed to creating a virtual space for the ex-change of information and best practices and the building of partnerships and cooperation in the sector" (Brakoniecki, Bednarz & Respondek, 2022, p. 72). However, the same study also states that their contribution to the creation of a transnational community of adult educators has so far been "fairly limited" (Ludden et al., 2018), p. 106). The main reasons given are that the community is highly fragmented and that EPALE's potential has not been fully exploited due to various technical problems. However, the same study also notes that EPALE has many strengths and great potential as a unique multilingual, transnational and multifunctional online platform that offers users an "all-in-one solution for discussion, peer-to-peer networking, news sharing, project results, good practices and events" (Brakoniecki, Bednarz & Respondek, 2022, p. 72).

2.3 EPALE in EU Adult Education Policy

The development of EPALE is rooted in the European Union's education policy, which emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning and skills development as key elements in responding to the economic crisis, demographic ageing and the European Union's broader economic and social strategy, as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy "for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth acknowledges lifelong learning and skills development" (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 25). By facilitating access to a community of adult educators and to resources and tools that can be used by adult education agents in the exercise of their profession, the platform presents itself as a tool for supporting the achievement of the objectives of the strategic framework for Education and Training (European Commission, 2021) and for improving the general level of skills in the EU. In this sense, the study on the impact of EPALE in its first two years of operation (Ludden et al., 2018) also argues that, despite its limitations, EPALE is an important tool for EU policy on adult learning, with the potential to play a key role in promoting lifelong learning and skills development in Europe.

2.3.1 *The importance of REA*

Open Educational Resources (OER) “are educational support materials that can be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 1), and are considered fundamental “to motivate greater individual engagement of learners with information, ideas and content” (ibid., p. 7). EPALE actively promotes the use and sharing of OER, encouraging their use, contributing to the democratization of access to knowledge and to a more equitable and inclusive adult education system in Europe. It also aligns with UNESCO’s principles of open access and knowledge sharing and Open Science (UNESCO, 2022) in the following ways:

- Promotes open access - as an open, multilingual platform, it facilitates access to a wide range of adult learning resources and materials, including OER, in line with UNESCO’s mission (2022) to democratize access to knowledge, particularly in higher education institutions.
- Encourages the sharing and reuse of resources - by encouraging users to share their own experiences, resources and good practices, it fosters the creation and adaptation of OER for different contexts and learning needs.
- Supports collaboration - through communities of practice and other collaborative tools, it promotes collaboration between adult educators in the creation, adaptation and use of OER, but also of ideas and projects.
- Contributes to professional development - By making OER and other learning resources available, it supports the continuous professional development of adult educators, a goal framed in UNESCO’s OER strategy.

In short, by aligning itself with UNESCO’s OER principles, EPALE contributes to the creation of a more open, inclusive and innovative adult learning ecosystem in Europe.

2.3.2 *The importance of Networks*

At the core of its mission, EPALE is a “virtual space for the exchange of knowledge and information on good practices in adult education and facilitating networking between educators” (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 4), “breaking down geographical barriers and putting professionals from very diverse cultures in contact from the perspective of innovation” (Bertomeo, 2023, p. 108), encouraging the sharing of knowledge, experiences and good practices.

This importance that EPALE places on building networks is evidenced through several functionalities and features, such as those highlighted below:

- Transnational Community - aims to create a transnational community of adult educators, breaking down geographical barriers and promoting collaboration between professionals from different countries.
- Collaboration tools - provide collaborative and cooperative features such as discussion forums, communities of practice, and a user directory that facilitate interaction and networking among users.
- Sharing resources and events - the possibility for users to share content of various types and characteristics (such as OER, news, events, blogs, among others), makes EPALE a centralized space for the dissemination of information relevant to the community.
- Search for partners - through the functionality that allows the search for partners, the platform facilitates the formation of partnerships for transnational cooperation projects.

In the field of networks, EPALE appears as a fruitful field of work for the ENID-Teach project, since ReColn-TaD is intrinsically linked to the platform. Considering that the ReColn-TaD network serves as a basis for the development of an international distributed network where professors are the main connecting nodes between universities, based on the EPALE platform, the connection between them is crucial for the success of the project. While the first represents the cooperation network, the second is the platform that enables communication, collaboration and expansion of the network. It is therefore recognized that the construction of a virtual space with EPALE characteristics enhances a more cohesive, proactive and inclusive community, contributing to improving the quality of adult education and creating a more effective learning system.

3 RESULTS - THE USE OF EPALE BY THE ENID-TEACH PROJECT

It is recalled that this article aims to report the experience of using EPALE by the ENID-Teach project, more specifically, highlighting the strategy implemented by the Portuguese partner team (ENID-Teach Portugal), based in the R&D unit of the Distance Education and eLearning Laboratory (LE@D) (2) of the Universidade Aberta, Portugal, financed by National Funds through the FCT, within the scope of the projects UIDB/04372/2020 and UIDP/04372/2020.

Overall, EPALE played a crucial role, serving as a catalyst for the dissemination, collaboration and development of the work of the Portuguese team. The two initiatives share a common vision of promoting innovative and flexible teaching practices for adult learning. EPALE, as a European platform dedicated to adult learning, provided a technological infrastructure and an active community that amplified the impact and reach of ENID-Teach Portugal.

In more detail, it was understood that the importance of EPALE for ENID-Teach Portugal was multifaceted:

- Dissemination – with its broad reach and diverse community, it offered an ideal platform for disseminating the project's results and products, such as promoting NOOC courses and sharing the OER produced.
- Network building - facilitated the building of contacts between professionals in the field of adult education, contributing to the construction of a network of educators, researchers and community and policy makers at university level.
- Sharing good practices – on the one hand, it made it possible to share good practices implemented by the project, on the other, it showed other innovative experiences in flexible digital pedagogies, allowing the Brazilian team to come into contact with initiatives and projects from other countries.
- Event promotion - the use of EPALE's features to promote events increased the visibility and impact of the project, particularly in attracting target audiences to carry out the planned training activities (NOOC courses).
- Support for collaboration - the platform's collaboration features were used by ENID-Teach Portugal to work together with other partners, share experiences, learn about other realities and communicate ideas, facilitating the development of the project.

As EPALE is an open and collaborative platform, creating an ecosystem that nurtures innovation and excellence in adult learning, the Portuguese ENID-Teach team benefited from this network specifically, from its potential to reach a wider audience and generate greater impact in the sector.

3.1 The Strategy of Use

The Portuguese team assumed EPALE as an essential space for the dissemination of the project, given that the use of the platform was one of the initial premises of the project. Thus, it prioritized the dissemination of ENID-Teach and the promotion of the ReColn-TaD network, seeking links with other entities and professionals with interests common to the project.

The publication of news has become one of the most used features (8 publications), making it possible to highlight issues related to the project and, for example, participation in the media, as is the case with the interview with Radio Canal UNED (Faculty of Education of the National University of Distance Education, Spain) and the e-poster presented at Encontro Ciência 2024 (the largest event dedicated to Science in Portugal).

Blogs also contributed to this objective, including the publication of a text about the ReColn-TaD Network, publicizing its objectives and inviting EPALE users to join. According to the plan strategic aspect of the ENID-Teach project, EPALE was the main space for recruiting members to expand the network.

Groups and Discussions are EPALE spaces that function like traditional forums, through which the EPALE community is invited to interact and debate, according to specific discussion topics. In this sense, the ENID-Teach Portugal team produced 4 publications, of which the proposal for a debate around gamification and active methods in distance education stands out. It is worth noting that, according to the project's work plan, the Portuguese team had responsibilities in managing NOOC 3 - Active and Gamified Learning.

The Events functionality was also used to announce the courses promoted by the project. In this sense, an event was scheduled for each NOOC (in the various editions that took place in a total of 15 events) disseminating information about each one and the registration form.

As for learning resources, many of the OER produced by the project were shared, with special mention being made of the Video Lesson (interactive videos on NOOC 3 topics) and the aforementioned e-poster.

With this work strategy, the user from the Portuguese team at EPALE (<https://epale.ec.europa.eu/pt/user/169903>) received the Community Hero Badge (a badge given to the most involved users) and became part of the platform's Hall of Fame. Subsequently, he was considered (on 25-06-2024) the most participative among the 2889 registered users in Portugal.

In summary, the involvement of the Portuguese team of the ENID-Teach project with EPALE followed a comprehensive strategy, aiming to explore the various functionalities of the platform to disseminate the project, share content, collaborate with other professionals, build networks with the community. Simultaneously, the mission of the ReColn-TaD network was being promoted. Through this strategic approach, we sought to maximize its impact and contribute to the promotion of flexible and innovative teaching practices in the area of adult learning, in line with the mission of ENID-Teach.

3.1.1 *Some Limitations*

Although EPALE is recognized as a valuable tool for the objectives of ENID-Teach, some limitations were found that, in some way, affected its use by the project. Such as:

- Community fragmentation: the EPALE community is highly fragmented, confirming the conclusion of Brakoniecki, Bednarz & Respondek (2022, p. 73), which made contacts and network building difficult. This fragmentation may have limited the project's ability to reach a broad and diverse audience for the ReColn-TaD network.
- Technical problems: As identified by the study on the impact of EPALE (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 63), the ENID-Teach Portugal team also encountered the same technical problems, such as the slow performance of the platform, the lack of some functionalities related to usability and difficulties in searching for information. These problems may have compromised the motivation of EPALE users to access and interact with the project's content. But, above all, they conditioned the team's experience in using the platform.
- Low usage: Although EPALE aims to be a platform for all professionals in the field of adult education, the study mentioned above reveals that its usage is relatively low among users contributing content and OER, as well as organizations. (Ludden et al., 2018, p. 6, our translation). This low utilization is likely to have reduced the impact and visibility of the ENID-TEACH project, however, the contribution of the Portuguese team is recorded.

Despite recognizing these limitations, the ENID-Teach Portugal team was able to adapt its EPALE usage strategy to continue achieving its objectives.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this presentation, the relevance of the EPALE platform for the ENID-Teach project has been highlighted, demonstrating how a digital education initiative in higher education can benefit from a European platform dedicated to adult learning. EPALE and its community played a crucial role in the project, expanding its impact and reach.

The analysis of the experience of the Portuguese ENID-Teach team in using EPALE reveals the importance of the platform for the following issues: a) Dissemination of project activities and outputs, such as NOOC courses and OER. b) Construction of the ReColn-TaD network with other university professors, researchers and decision-makers. c) Sharing good practices and experiences in digital and flexible pedagogies. d) Promotion of events, increasing the visibility of the project and attracting target audiences to training activities. e) Support for collaboration between partners, facilitating project development.

It was also found that EPALE, by promoting open access and knowledge sharing, aligns with UNESCO's principles for OER, contributing to a more open and inclusive adult learning ecosystem. The platform also stands out as a virtual space for exchanging knowledge and good practices, encouraging the creation of networks between educators and the search for partners for future community projects.

Despite the limitations encountered, such as community fragmentation, technical problems and low utilization by some target audiences, the ENID-Teach Portugal team managed to operationalize the use of EPALE.

Finally, it is concluded that the articulation between the ENID-Teach project and the EPALE platform demonstrates the potential for synergy between the two initiatives, that is, between digital education in higher education and adult learning.

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