



## **THE CASE: Organizing an Exhibition on Sustainable Aspects of Connecting Humans and Nature**

### **Context (where, who, how)**

In Slovenia, we started the pilot implementation of trainings as part of the Winnovators project in March 2023. The group included 20 women from vulnerable groups who came from rural areas or were part of the PUM program, which, under the auspices of the Slovenian Employment Service, takes care of the training of people who have dropped out of formal education for various reasons. The strategy for recruiting candidates was carried out in cooperation with local active rural women's groups, and the Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia, the national umbrella organization, was also involved. By working with their representatives, we were able to identify the goals of the women's group, which we obtained through the established information channels of the organizations involved. Due to the high number of applicants, we also formed a reserve list of 13 candidates. The training was also attended by 20 students from the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education, from two study programs: Double Subject Teacher and Art Education. Three mentors from the University of Ljubljana also participated in the pilot implementation. The trainings were conducted in such a way that the participants independently distributed themselves into four groups, each representing individual challenges. Within these groups, smaller teams of women from vulnerable groups and students were formed to work on joint projects, helping and encouraging each other.

### **Activity description (what, how, why)**

The introductory event that we held via Zoom served to get to know the participants and to define their duties during the training. We invited participants to join at least one of the four groups we had formed based on the challenges. We made sure that the students who participated in each challenge were those whose personal interests or field of study matched the content of the challenge. We spoke to them beforehand and directed them to the appropriate challenge. For example, students on the Double Subject Teacher program who specialize in computer science were placed in groups to develop simple interactivities or mini-games using the programming tool Scratch, or in the group to develop 360° virtual tours. Art education students were involved in the challenge that dealt with data visualization by creating materials using the Canva tool. In this way, we wanted to ensure that the collaboration between Winnovators and students was as successful as possible. We

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also assigned a mentor to each group who was responsible for organizing the work in the group and providing help and additional guidance. Within the groups, we allowed participants to form smaller subgroups themselves, making sure that at least one student worked with each Winnovator.

We organized the work so that the groups defined project tasks based on the wishes or needs of the Winnovators and related to the content of the challenge. Each week, the mentor of the challenge group created a series of shorter tasks to be completed by the next week. Although the tasks were the same for all groups, they varied depending on the content the Winnovators wanted to cover in their projects. Participants had to upload the results of the weekly tasks to the Winnovators online platform in the appropriate subgroup of the challenge. In this way, we wanted to encourage collaboration between students and Winnovators, as they had a specific goal to achieve each week and actively worked together to achieve it. We also wanted to encourage collaboration between the groups by regularly asking them to review each other's work and provide feedback, including praise and possible suggestions for improvement. The mentors committed to reviewing the uploaded content every week and providing feedback with pointers for further work.

We did not want to restrict the formation of smaller groups among the students and Winnovators through rules, but instead took a non-interventionist or unrestricted approach and left it up to their personal preferences as to who they wanted to work with or got on best with. To facilitate collaboration, we introduced various mechanisms: Introductory sessions and weekly remote meetings via Zoom, public posting of project drafts to bring together people with similar content interests, and fostering networks outside of educational institutions. Participants were also made aware of the chat option on the Winnovators portal, which they reportedly used frequently to communicate with each other. We felt this was beneficial as we did not want communication and content to be scattered across different tools, making it cumbersome and difficult to organize. They also communicated with the mentors via the integrated chat. Much of the communication also took place via email. We were keen to keep emphasizing that we were there to support them and encouraged them to write to us if they encountered any problems.

Collaboration took place in smaller groups when one or more students worked directly with a Winnovator, but we also required them to follow the work of other groups and provide feedback.

A good example of collaboration between a Winnovator, students and a mentor is a project that dealt with various aspects of coexistence between humans and nature. In this project, the Winnovator organized a photo exhibition for which she designed logos, flyers and posters. She tried to raise awareness of the practicality of

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sustainable aspects of life and summarized concrete guidelines from the literature that individuals can follow to create a more sustainable society. The project design involved students who were interested in this topic. They worked with the Winnovator to set goals and propose content that they felt should be addressed. Communication took place through discussions within the platform, sending emails and organizing remote sessions via Zoom. In the second part, when the Winnovator created visual materials to support the exhibition organization, the collaboration continued through the capabilities of the Canva tool, which enables collaborative content creation. In this way, the Winnovator received feedback directly in the tool and the students were able to demonstrate the functionality of certain functions using examples.

However, there were also bad examples where cooperation and communication between the participants waned after a few weeks due to their inactivity. To counteract this, we repeatedly contacted them by email and asked them to tell us the reasons why they were unable to participate in the project in order to help them overcome these problems. As the dropout rate was higher among the Winnovators, we encouraged the students to try to make informal contacts through other channels (e.g. social networks). Unfortunately, our attempts were unsuccessful as we were unable to convince them to continue working together.

The learning objectives achieved by the training participants were as follows: They learned about various digital tools that had been selected for their broad applicability. They not only learned about their functionalities, but also had the opportunity to use them in practical examples that they chose themselves. In this way, they developed their digital literacy and their ability to solve problems using technology and to think critically. As part of the project work, they learned how to design a relatively complex project in a structured way and implement it in phases. This required working in a group, collaborating, communicating organizationally and reflecting on their own work. The projects provided an opportunity to understand how knowledge from different areas can be successfully combined.

## Conclusion

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- Establishing projects that encourage collaboration between different groups (students, mentors, organizations) is crucial for the development of collective skills and knowledge.
- Actively incorporating modern technological tools for communication and co-creation of content can increase efficiency and enable better remote collaboration.
- It is important to provide mentors and guidance to participants to help them develop critical thinking and a better understanding of complex issues.
- Hands-on learning through project work is an effective way to develop practical skills and understand theoretical concepts.
- Choosing projects that address important social and environmental challenges can help develop social awareness and responsibility in participants.
- This approach can improve not only the individual skills and knowledge of participants, but also the collective capacity of the community or organization to respond effectively to complex challenges.

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