



TEACHING MEDIATION

EUTOPIA-MT: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT THROUGH DIGITAL WORLDS

Editors

Alessandra Delli Veneri and Orazio Miglino



FEU

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Preface

EUTOPIA-MT (*European Training Organization Programme for Innovative and Alternative Mediation Tool*) is a European research project belonging to Leonardo da Vinci Programme based on the cooperation among three different Countries: Italy, Cyprus and Northern Ireland, joined by the opportunity to test a new way of teaching and training mediation skills through *digital worlds*.

EUTOPIA-MT is a “*transfer of innovation*” project (TOI), this means that it represents the adaptation of a pre-existing model to a new context. In this case, the transfer of innovation took place following two different paths: a technological and a methodological one.

For what concerns the technological path, a 3D graphic multiplayer tool for communication modelling (EUTOPIA), developed by Relational Sciences Department at the University of Naples “Federico II”, was applied in Ireland and Cyprus, that is to say in different countries from Italy (where EUTOPIA was born). Using EUTOPIA in new countries and with new goals allowed its re-examination, looking at the tool’s limits and potentialities.

In relation to methodological aspect, the project tested the training curricula to become a peacekeeper realized by Passaggi Cooperative, a non lucrative organization settled in the Spanish quarter in Naples, through its implementation in foreign countries.

Two concepts guided the whole experience: we improved a specific kind of *e-learning*, helping the development of a *learning by doing* strategy. The project, in fact, was conceived to employ both face-to-face and on-line meetings, defining a blended curricula for those professionals interested in mediation skills training. This experience gave them the chance to test a new way of being trained, considered the high value assigned to distance learning through a multiplayer on-line role-playing game platform (MORPG) that allowed them to get in touch synchronously. In the “digital world” they could experience their skills in managing a conflict situation, like those typical of the three European countries involved in the project.

Moreover this experience can be considered very different from the traditional setting one, where there is a teacher, an expert, who deals with knowledge, who is the well skilled one, who says what is right and what is wrong, defining a specific hierarchical way of teaching. EUTOPIA-MT allowed people to participate and build their own learning process, joining the decisional process and the outcomes evaluation, with the help of a tutor.

Despite the difficulties of being far from each other in the conflict management, without the chance of looking, touching, hearing the others, people found a new way to interact and to act on a conflict situation. Working on the distance gave them the opportunity to feel the conflict in a new perspective: being separated, in fact, helped them to filter the emotions coming from the field, allowing an elaboration process, sometimes difficult in such controversial situations.

The project experience represented itself a process of conflict management! The partnership met some difficulties in organizing the foreseen activities and mediation skills were required to overcome the obstacles sometimes arisen during the period.

Any how, far from being the best way of training people in mediation skills improvement, EUTOPIA-MT can be undoubtedly considered one of the most suitable tool to train people in this field.

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EUTOPIA-MT: the whole experience

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Europe has been the theatre for a growing number of inter-community conflicts related to poor integration of immigrant population and new immigration from the developing countries. In this situation a steadily growing number of professionals come into contact with inter-community conflict in their daily work, but in many cases they lack the skills to perform their work effectively.

The main objective of our project has been the development of a training system that could facilitate mediation skills improvement.

EUTOPIA-MT (European Training Organization Programme for Innovative and Alternative Mediation Skills) has employed an e-learning platform and a teaching methodology with the objective of making possible to conduct mediation with role-playing games at a distance. The teaching methodology exploits a specially developed

technology platform allowing a small community of players to communicate, interact and play on-line.

The immediate effect is to create a body of teachers and trainers with the ability to use innovative technology in mediation skills teaching/training. The larger and more important effect, which is still in progress, is to make this kind of teaching available to much larger populations than is currently possible. Given the political and social impact of inter-community conflict this is an extremely important goal.

The recent past has seen the development of best practices for teaching and developing such skills. The research identifies that there is a diverse range of mediation training available in the different countries. Training is mostly in a lecture/lesson format, even if it seems important an interactive element too, through the use of role-plays and scenarios. Mediation training attracts mainly adults, but some forms, particularly peer mediation, are focused more on young people.

However, nowadays very few of the potential beneficiaries have access to this kind of training. Though Dewey (1938) described learning as “intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience” (he believed that learning through experience was the “progressive” alternative to more traditional education), the experiential dimension offered by learning by doing process proves to be difficult for different reasons, such as the potential influence of knowing each others’ identities, or the learning process slowdown caused by emotional involvement, or even high costs in the training organization. EUTOPIA-MT project aims to use technology to make mediation training available to far larger populations than is currently possible.

To reach this goal, the project had brought together two existing products: (a) an innovative methodology for mediation skills teaching, based on role-playing in the classroom; (b) a web-based simulation tool (EUTOPIA) allowing teachers to use the same techniques with online learners.

“Learning by doing” was the starting point of the entire project. Learning through experiences and field involvement gives people much more possibilities to build their knowledge than theoretical and traditional methods.

In order to disseminate and test the new training models and the new tools, three pilot experiences in three different Countries of the European Union (Italy, Northern Ireland and Cyprus) were organized. We checked our didactic goal creating training classes in three different conflict contexts: 1) an urban social conflict (Naples), 2) an urban social

conflict coming from an international conflict (Belfast); 3) and an international conflict acting in the city area (Nicosia).

The target group was made up of young professionals interested in mediation strategies. Their goal was not only to improve their own knowledge but also to explore a new way to manage their long-life learning.

2. Background

EUTOPIA-MT represents the current development of a previous experience in Information and Communication Technology, EUTOPIA, developed by Natural and Artificial Cognition Laboratory.

EUTOPIA (Miglino *et al.*, 2008) was used to provide innovative training practices and to improve negotiating skills and intercultural awareness of professional trainers, front-office staff and other staff in contact with the public. The training offered focused on the kinds of negotiation workers engage during their everyday professional activities (rather than on classical managerial negotiation). The training methodology was based on a blended strategy combining classroom learning with e-Learning based self-study. Both the classroom learning and the self-study sessions made intensive use of a novel simulation environment. The environment incorporated technologies from Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MORPG) (Okamoto *et al.*, 2007). The use of simulation ensured that users can "learn by doing" at home as well in the classroom (Miglino, 2007). In a following chapter (see chapter 3 "*EUTOPIA-MT: the platform*") the platform will be described.

Today EUTOPIA-MT seems to be very close to the experiences of the partners involved in the project, in relation to conflict management and mediation training. It has shown a good level of usability in all three situations explored where the historical background reports a deep involvement in conflict management.

The three areas currently have differing experiences and uses of mediation, which are based on the specific social problems in the three locations. In Naples, the particular issues are associated with the presence of organised crime and a growing migrant population; in Cyprus the major issue is the continuing division of the island between Turkish-ruled north and Greek Cypriot south; and Northern Ireland is a divided society in a period of political transition following an extended armed conflict. Mediation skills and practices are probably

most extensive in Northern Ireland, but each of the three areas identified both a potential and an interest in developing and extending skills in this area and of further building training capacity.

3. Training activities features

The aim of our project was to develop a new integrated training mediation model (with a strong prevalence of on-line activities) in order to improve people's working skills in this field.

Models and tools have been designed to comply with the needs of professionals operating in mediation/negotiation field, who wanted to improve their performance, as well as the organizations they belong to.

The training has been organized in a sequence of activities:

1. Design of the simulation environment.
2. Training of tutors.
3. First *face-to-face meeting*, introducing the goals, contents, methodologies and tools of the project and finalizing the "learning agreement" with the participants
4. Remote simulations, using an on-line platform for synchronous group interactions in a *virtual interaction environment*.
5. Second follow-up *face-to-face meeting* for a final evaluation test.

Four sessions have been scheduled: each one consisted of a simulation meeting and a follow-up meeting. Participants, divided in subgroups, simulated a conflict situation and the linked mediation process, supervised by their tutor. The system gave the tutor the chance to choose the "script" for the session.

Classroom training took place in two full days and lasted approximately eight hours each. The first day of classroom training took place before the interactive sessions. The second day took place when the trial concluded.

Tutors' training consisted of a 6 hours classroom course organized by EUTOPIA-MT staff in each of the 3 different countries where the trial was held.

The goal of the online training is to let participants get in touch synchronously in verbal (textual) and non-verbal mode within a predefined communicative scenario (script), in order to test participant communication strategies. As part of the activities scheduled in the teaching plan, the participant takes part in synchronous sessions (together with other participants and the tutor) designed to simulate

mediation with specific content and goals. All activities are followed by a tutor, who provides feedback on strategies and evaluate outcomes (how far the group has achieved its own specific goals, how far it has achieved the general goals of the exercise).

Each participant takes part in at least four sessions. Each session consists of:

- A preliminary message sent by the tutor via e-mail.
- The simulation itself
- A feedback meeting, during which the tutor analyzes the interactions, draws conclusions and organizes the next session.
- A forum (via web) where tutor and participants exchange ideas and suggestions.

The follow-up meeting at the end of the course lasted approximately eight hours. However this arrangement can be modified to meet the needs of the organizers and the participants. The final meeting aimed to measure the outcomes of the experimentation, to learn about participants' experience and to collect ideas for the improvement of the prototypes.

4. Future trends and conclusions

While the first trial in EUTOPIA-MT project was intended to test the usability of a MORPG environment, EUTOPIA, in teaching mediation skills; the second trials had been focused on testing its effectiveness and efficiency in terms of learning process. We used users' feedbacks to revise the programme with the aim to make it friendlier to people's idea of e-learning and on-line training.

One of the main principles come from this experience is that playing the whole mediation training experience in 3D environment could be distracting. Users agree that 3D world, and in particular moving their avatar, modify their gestures, exploring the environment, may divert the attention from the core of the interaction: the written messages.

On the other hand, 3D environment could be employed in a beginning phase, where it can be useful in the people's engagement towards MORPG methodology.

Anyway, all participants found the experience interesting and fascinating. Educational simulation should comprehend both 3D graphic and a phase where environmental resource remains in the background while people can focus on communication front.

From tutors' point of view, three main factors have been highlighted: a) debriefing tools seems to be very useful (Susskind, Corburn, 1999); b) EUTOPIA can be used according to different modalities, both at a distance (different geographical locations) and in the same place (safeguarding anonymity), this aspect can be well applied in the blended training class' organization, where both theory and practice take part; c) EUTOPIA seems to work well in such controversial situations, where it could be useful to have a filter instead of direct contact; trying to achieve a negotiate working through an on-line tool could help people involved to cool their emotional dimension, while working around a table could sometimes exacerbate the discussion. In other words, the distance (that initially seemed to be a barrier in relational dynamics) may function as a positive factor in a learning mediation skills process.

Data come out from the trial (questionnaires analysis and interactions observation) highlighted that almost all people lived strong emotions while playing the session, like anger and frustration, and that, though operating in 3D environment, they managed to learn new communication strategies.

At the moment, we are testing EUTOPIA applicability also to disaster readiness training (see DREAD-ED project, www.dread-ed.eu), in order to help those at risk to learn how to react to specific events. People involved in risk situations need "soft skills", such as communication and understanding of information under conditions of stress, problem-solving with partial or contradictory information, decision-making in the face of competing demands (this experience perfectly fits with the difficult situation we are living in Abruzzo with the earthquake occurred in March 2009).

Another evolution of the project could be also the applicability of the software at the job-organization world, improving overall effectiveness and efficiency as well as performance of individual workers within small and large enterprises in both the public and the private sector.

Finally we believe it could be a resource to employ within the field of adolescence uneasiness management. The idea is to train young professional with Psychology Degree (three-year degree) to work with adolescents groups in relation to several unease areas: school drop-out, bullying, peer relationships, parents-sons relationships, and sexual orientation. It's important to consider adolescence as a period of life full of potential, where it could be possible to help people to empower themselves while to live without any goal. To reach this goal, it's basic

to train psychologists involved in developmental psychology to face young adolescents, group dynamics, problem solving, quality communication and to develop soft skills.

EUTOPIA-MT represents one of the first attempts to apply on-line role-playing game strategies to vocational training and educational psychology. Although it has been designed to be used in mediation/negotiation field, EUTOPIA-MT shows a high level of applicability to other kind of scenarios.

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Methodology

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The transfer of the training tool to realities different from the ones for which it had been created raised, since the beginning, some issues of methodological nature.

These “issues” especially relate to the “relationship” between different elements, among which a balance had to be found. The first issue referred to **the selection of the partner organizations** where the product had to be transferred. It was not only a selection of logistic or political nature but it also regarded the methodology, because it concerned the previous experiences of the partners and the availability of their users/clients to experiment new ways of learning. In this case the “relationship” was the one between “traditional training” and “training with innovative tools” and each partner analyzed its own point of equilibrium between the two experiences.

Another issue of fundamental importance was the relationship between **actual conflict scenario and virtual conflict scenario**. Also in this case, the choices of partners were different depending on their local needs and stories.

A further “point of equilibrium” which was aimed at during the transfer was the one between an **audience of users/clients professionally involved and a younger audience** and for this reason more adaptable although less skilled. Also these choices had a somehow different influence on the trial for the three involved partners. Another adjustment was made for the role of the Tutor and the search for an equilibrium between **Remote Tutor or Tutor in person**, as an attempt to recover the need for a training relationship out of the media tool. Let's move to the detail.

The software available at the University of Naples “Federico II” and created in cooperation with the Department of Cognitive Sciences

and Technologies of the National Council of Research (CNR), was able to offer a 3D virtual environment where interact with other subjects (“players”) trying to build relational strategies aiming at reaching an agreement (Berruti *et al.*, 2007).

In order to organize the implementation of these strategies, first of all it was necessary to create scenarios where one or more conflict elements act as starting point. Unlike previous trials – where scenarios were only inspired by reality but completely apart from it – during this trial we have chosen to transfer the teaching tool to places strongly involved by actual conflicts. The necessary characteristics to transfer through the teaching tool were three: to act in a place of conflict with “actual” workers involved daily in mediation and/or negotiation activities between the parties; to involve organizations which “actually” offer training for these workers in order to be able to compare the innovative teaching tool with the set of traditional tools used and being part of the local cultural background; to select “actual” scenarios which could offer a number of elements from local life, somehow able to “hit” – positively and negatively – the interests and emotions of participants.¹

The choice concerned three conflicts different from each other, and this broadened the range of elements brought to collective reflection, and enriched the scientific debate about the efficacy and advisability of the tested tool.

The Institute for Conflict Research has been involved for many years in studying the dynamics of the conflict – never solved – between the unionist protestant community and the catholic republican community of Belfast, Northern Ireland. This conflict is astonishingly still present in the urban and social fabric of the town although the peace treaty signed in 1998, which put an end to more than 30 years of violence.

INDEX Research and Dialogue is a Cypriot organization which has been working for many years to promote the dialogue between the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities, as well as to study and analyze the conflict and reconciliation process which – often in a disastrous way – took place in Cyprus, still today a divided island.

¹ “What we look for are people who can bring changes to the conflict situation, so called change agents. If possible, a group of actual or potential change agents from one conflict context should participate throughout the same training process. Such peer groups can give birth to ideas and approaches jointly during the process and support each other directly and morally” in A.A.V.V.; Nonviolent Conflict Transformation. Training Manual for a training of trainers course; Kurve Wustrow, PDCS, CSDC, IFOR, PATRIR; Bratislava 2007.

The Cooperativa Passaggi is a structure of social usefulness that works in the field of juvenile discomfort and drug-addiction, as well as in the field of integration of immigrant communities in the non-easy Naples metropolitan area, a place which is already overwhelmed by phenomena of unemployment and underdevelopment and a strong presence of crime organizations. Therefore, the Cooperativa offers constantly mediation training for its own social workers involved in tasks of assistance, support, coaching and so on.

So, all partner organizations had their own consolidated methodology to train their own experts and workers or other workers who benefited from the training courses carried out by these organizations. They accepted to use the software EUTOPIA with some participants to be selected and to return a feedback about the efficacy of the tool also by measuring the skills acquired through it, but not only. Other evaluation elements had to be the “friendliness”, its general “appeal”, but most of all some features strictly connected to conflict and its management.

The main question was: **which potential has the virtual tool compared with traditional ones which in a place of conflict become a “surplus value”?** The answer was different depending on the partners and environmental conditions, but it relates to the advisability to create an interaction between people somehow sharing the effort of “mediation of conflicts” but strongly separated – either physically or only politically – by the conflict itself, which strongly reduces the possibility of compromise or the opportunity of common training courses. Like in the case of Cyprus, where *“the cross-border euphoria and interest have dwindled. Most people [...] have gone, seen, observed; and although it has altered some of the primary and pre-conceived images of each other, they will not cross the border unless there are substantive reasons to do so”* (Sitas et al. 2007). In other words, the tool can be fundamental in places where workers do not have the possibility to reach a single training place or where – due to strong tensions – the meeting with the other party is never “neutral” or “free from conditioning”.

The issue of conditioning proved to be relevant from a pedagogic point of view as concerns Cyprus, where tackling the so-called “Cypriot issue” was not believed as advisable by the partner organization itself²,

² Many of us, who deal with and within the Cyprus conflict, know that economical or environmental activities like Sustainable Tourism, can bring the two communities closer to each other, like in the case of the project “Dialogues of Peace”. See Grazzi E.; *Dal*

which preferred a scenario of environmental conflict, which could be placed in the North or in the South of the island without any distinction, and where there are places of great landscape and natural interest and therefore very appealing for tourism exploitation. In this sense, the borders of the virtual conflict did not match the actual ones of the ethical-national separation of the island, but those – very actual and topical – of the stakeholders: the environmentalists on one side and entrepreneurs on the other side, with local authorities and the public opinion in the middle. For the workers who acted in the mediation of this conflict, this was also an exercise of participated planning (online) and with a great teaching interest.

On the contrary, in Northern Ireland, scenarios strongly connected to the intercommunity conflict were chosen, but we have to consider that Belfast – although experiencing a dispute and mistrust between the communities – is not living anymore the separation as strongly as in Nicosia.

Also the Neapolitan Cooperativa chose to use a scenario complying with daily life, but the actors were not the same who are involved in solving the actual conflict. In summary, see table A:

	Actual conflict	“Other” conflict
Actual actors	Belfast	Nicosia
“Other” actors	Naples	

We have different choices for each partner depending on local needs and conditions. As regards Belfast, workers used the tools of mediation in a familiar scenario. As regards Nicosia, they used the tools of mediation in a new scenario, so one can wonder if and how the skills acquired or exercised during the simulations can be transferred in the relevant fields of action of the workers joining the course. As regards Naples, workers used the tools of mediation in a typical scenario but which is usually lived by other workers. We have to wonder if and how “virtual” mediators can have a successful exchange with the workers who are usually involved in disputes like the simulated ones.

This possible “transfer” of skills and experiences from one user to the other represents another aspect of the methodology used by EUTOPIA-MT. In selecting the users to be involved in simulations, the partner organizations preferred different subjects. As regards Northern Ireland, participants were 50% professionals and 50% students. As regards Cyprus, they all were young people, both workers and students, without previous mediation experiences at professional level but, anyway, involved in mediation activities. As regards Naples, they were people having previous experiences of specific training courses about mediation and transformation of conflicts, with a few experiences on the field. Therefore, simulations allowed us to observe the different attitudes of users depending on the “mix” of tools implemented. See Table 2:

	with specific training	Without specific training
With experience	Belfast (50%) – Naples	Nicosia
With little experience	Belfast (50%)	

Cognitive and psychological skills, among which computer skills, mediation strategies, were implemented to reach agreements, to promote the dialogue, to try negotiations, within the selected scenario.

In the end, was this exercise useful to participants? The evaluation of the skills at the beginning and at the end of the trial was another main point of the methodology. In order to make this evaluation, we did not only use questionnaires, a typical tool of training, also for remote training, but we wanted to test innovative tools also in this case which were consistent with the main criteria, that is, post-simulation online measurement windows and chat.

The first tool allows us to record an almost immediate and irrational feedback both on the experience (how the experience was like, how they felt during and after, with or without reaching an agreement, how relationships with the other avatars were managed, communication...) and the technical-practical aspects (functionality of commands, criticalities, bugs...). Then, in a further stage, reflection replaces the immediate feedback in order to read, or better self-

evaluate, the implementation of one's own skills and professional features during the action.

In this self-evaluation, participants are not left alone. Two elements are fundamental, taken from the traditional "in person" training but usable in a different way: the training community and the tutor. Thanks to the chat, participants can and are able to exchange sensations and reflections like inside a classroom and the role of the tutor can be the same as within an "in person" environment, with the limits and potentials of a remote meeting.

If we have already spoken about the potentials (being able to meet in places of conflict where displacements are very limited and one can be involved in a more distant way and therefore manageable), as concerns the limits we tried to overcome them by introducing some tools: first of all, the starting meeting to share and to get used with the tool and to share expectations which prepares the participants in the sessions that will be implemented remotely. Also in this case, partner organizations chose different equilibriums by mixing "distances" and "proximity" depending on the local context.

Then, the role of the Tutor who, remotely, can follow from outside the virtual events or take part in them as facilitator or regulator of the dynamics. Also in this case, the organizations could choose among diversified tutorial behaviours. Whereas the tutors who did not know participants personally had a more "external" role vis-à-vis the development of actions and a non-prevailing training relationship, on the contrary those tutors who knew some of the participants were able to communicate more during the simulation and after, with suggestions, remarks and proposals³.

In short, a versatile tool with many potentials, provided that the organization that wants to use it is able to set it up and make it consistent with its own training and operational needs. It is preferably used by young people with remarkable computer skills and it can be surely used as complementary tool which does not replace traditional ones.

³ About tutor's role see the paragraph "La flessibilità del formatore" in Borgato R.; *Un'arancia per due. Giochi d'aula ed esercitazioni per formare alla negoziazione*. Franco Angeli, Milano 2004; pagg. 19-21.

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EUTOPIA-MT: a MORPG platform

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1. Introduction

EUTOPIA is an on-line platform that allows the production of a particular type of serious game: an educational Multiplayer On-Line Role Playing Games (MORPG). Besides it is an extension of a light version called SISINE (Berruti *et al.*, 2007; Miglino, Di Ferdinando, Rega, Ponticorvo, 2007; Dymowski & Moldawska, 2007).

By a formative/teaching point of view, EUTOPIA has the role to transfer the methodological tradition of the Psychodrama (Moreno, 1946) from the real world to a virtual 3D world.

The platform provides the normal functionality expected by Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (Madani, Chohra, 2008), as well as additional functions that allow a trainer to set up games, intervene during game play, record specific phases of a game, annotate recordings and discuss them with the players.

2. EUTOPIA features

Teachers can write scripts for on-line multiplayer games. In designing a multiplayer game they can choose the roles, goals, bodies and personalities of individual players. Once the game is in progress, they

can watch what is going on from any viewpoint, intervene at any moment, send messages to players, or activate special “events”. When it is over, they can become critics, leading a group discussion and analysing the strategies adopted by the players. This step of debriefing becomes fundamental for the learning process.

As well as preparing scripts for on-line games and assigning characters to users, there are two other ways in which teachers/tutors can intervene in learners' interactions with EUTOPIA. One is to take the role of one of the characters in the simulation. The other is to act as an invisible stage director. In this second role, teachers can: a) invisibly observe the interactions among players; b) access the players' “private characteristics”; c) listen to private messages (“whispers”) between players; d) “broadcast” messages visible to all players; e) exchange private messages with a specific user; and f) activate events, changing the course of the simulation.

Learners that play the act reach the virtual stage-set where they can interact each other controlling a virtual alter ego, the avatar.

Once logged in, they join a 3D graphical environment in which they are represented by avatars, and can use them to explore the environment.

Players communicate via short texts and various forms of paraverbal and non-verbal communication. For instance, they can control how loud they want to speak (shown by the size of characters used in the bubble cartoons) and in what tone of voice (shown by the shape of the bubble). Players can control avatars' gestures and body movements. They can also ‘whisper’ messages to each other: these are audible only to the other partner in the conversation, and to the tutor. Finally, they can communicate with the tutor to ask for advice or clarification or to raise any other question that concerns them.

In particular, EUTOPIA kit is made up of three software with different functions:

1. Editor – Creation of group sessions and of the elements needed for the training. Editor is used by tutors.
2. Client – Interaction with other users inside the group sessions. Client is divided into:
 - Master for tutors
 - Player for user
3. Viewer – Visualize the previous recorded group interaction sessions, recorder editing and add personal comments. Viewer can be used by users.

In order to carry on an online training course on conflict mediation and negotiation through EUTOPIA software, a tutor should:

1. create a storyboard using EUTOPIA Editor with all the information on the scenario where the mediation takes part (ex. story, mediation objective, characters involved in the story, characters features, events and messages, etc...). Please note that the storyboard must be considered as a sort of “acting plot”;
2. upload the storyboard created on EUTOPIA server to make it available to all users;
3. define features, users and the characters association for the specific role-playing session;
4. start the role-playing session;
5. join the role-playing session as a tutor through EUTOPIA Master.

EUTOPIA Player allows managing all the activities foreseen for the final users:

1. interaction with other users within group sessions (Role-playing Session);
2. free interaction with other users (Free Chat);
3. Software Testing (Demo Session).

These first two activities count on the connection of the client with a server reachable via internet or by a local line.

An offline function is available to experiment EUTOPIA Player options and potentialities. It deals with a testing environment which can be useful in a beginning training phase.

EUTOPIA appears as an *environment* which represents a well-defined setting (a room, a building, a block, a town), in which it is possible to interact with other users, represented by *avatars*.

The environment is represented in 3D graphics allowing participants to move around in the space and to approach other *avatars*.

The simulation environment includes:

- a graphics settings’ library;
- an avatars’ library.

Each avatar has its own features and can be associated with:

- a set of facial expressions;
- a set of gestures.

All avatars use the same categories of facial expressions and gestures. The way these appear depends on the features of the individual avatar.

The first step is to create a storyboard/script which defines the starting point for a story. All scripts are based on a standard structure which determines the way it is stored in the database. Each script has a *name* (a brief definition which defines the activity), a *description* of the activity, a *story* (a detailed, perhaps even quantitative description of the scenario, of the events related to the mediation issues, and of possible outcomes), a *maximum available time*, *group goals* and *success criteria* (information about one or more goals common to all participants in the interaction).

Each script has a “general goal”. The success of the training course depends on how far this goal is achieved. Additionally the script describes partial goals for each online session. Of course partial goals are related to the general goal.

The software gives the chance to choose and define the personality of the different characters that will be involved in the session. We can define for each character:

- features (sex, age, social status);
- characteristic elements (physical aspect);
- role in the story;
- personal story;
- personality aspects (associated with specific non-verbal communication capabilities);
- individual goals.

Starting from a script chosen by the tutor, each participant plays the role of one of the characters, associated with an avatar.

Each participant knows the story in which his/her character is involved, knows the goals shared by all participants, knows the goals of his/her character and his/her own individual story (which is not known by the other participants).

During the simulation, the tutor can introduce new elements which may influence the interaction: unforeseen difficulties and new resources. All these events are foreseen in the script, which provides a description of the event and the way it should be presented. The tutor activates events, at what he/she deems to be the most appropriate moment in the simulation. An event could be either a text (letter, fax or document) which appears on the screen, or be represented by an

"avatar" character who enters the scene and delivers a message (text and other non-verbal elements).

3. On-line sessions

Simulation sessions are scheduled by agreement between the tutor and the participants. Each session involves the following phases (which are very similar to the phases in a typical face to face role-playing game).

1. Materials organization:

Before the beginning of the simulation, the designer implements or edits one or more scripts, using the forms and tools provided by EUTOPIA. In this way he/she enriches the EUTOPIA script library.

2. Preparation:

The tutor chooses one of the script and defines the time and date of the simulation. The tutor goes on to:

- Define the environment;
- Chooses the characters to be played by each participant.

3. Preliminary communication:

The tutor sends each participant a personal e-mail which describes:

- the scenario;
- the character the participant will be playing;
- the specific aims of the session;
- the general aims of the game (over more than one session).

It is important the tutor should include information creating continuity between the goals of the different sessions. In particular the tutor should define broad goals covering several sessions.

4. Introduction:

The tutor confirms the broad goals of the course, the learning objective of the simulation, the roles played by participants and the correspondent avatars. He/she invites participants to read the script and their own individual aims.

5. Interaction:

Participants start the session by using the features of the platform. They can discuss with the whole group or single participants (in what is known as "whisper" mode). The tutor follows the interaction

constantly. During the session he can record the session (the recording can be reviewed afterwards), add notes and comments to the recording in real time, get involved in the conversation, either by sending messages to the group/single participants (direct communication) or activating external events which may change the condition of the interaction (indirect communication). The tutor (or better a second tutor) may participate in the interaction playing the role of one of the characters. During the simulation sessions, participants can communicate through two channels: verbal channel (textual communication via chat) or non verbal channel (communication via behaviour: volume and tone of the voice, mood, gestures/movements, proxemics, etc.).

6. Review:

At the end of the interaction, the tutor watches the simulation recording, notes his/her impressions and conclusions and analyzes the results (if necessary in quantitative terms). It is very important he/she should assess whether group and individual goals have been achieved and to what extend.

7. Feedback:

The tutor sums up the most important aspects of the session and the way in which the participants have conducted the mediation. He/she makes it clear whether and to what extent the participants have achieved their individual and group goals. Feedback can be provided immediately after the simulation or in a later meeting. The discussion of the results of the session is conducted in the simulation environment, in free chat mode.

8. Free interaction:

Participants and tutors exchange ideas and suggestions freely in a web forum. The forum allows them to exchange recorded game sessions with comments.

9. Evaluation of learning outcomes:

During the training experience, players are asked to fill questionnaires on their learning process, in order to give the chance to collect data and analyse the final outcomes.

4. Conclusions

EUTOPIA's goal is to test the use of multiplayer role playing game simulation as a way of teaching personal skills, which are hard to teach with traditional techniques of e-learning. To build attractive, easily usable tools we have also had to pay great attention to the graphical interface and interaction design to facilitate the online environment for the learning purpose.

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EUTOPIA-MT: a field experience

Introduction

In order to disseminate and test the new training models and the new tools, three pilot experiences in three different European Countries (Italy, Northern Ireland and Cyprus) were organized. The didactic goal was tested through training classes in three different conflict contexts: 1) an urban social conflict (Naples), 2) an urban social conflict coming from an international conflict (Belfast); 3) and an international conflict acting in the city area (Nicosia).

The target group was made up of young professionals interested in mediation strategies. Their goal was not only to improve their own knowledge but also to explore a new way to manage their long-life learning.

In the following paragraphs, the three field experiences are described.

1. Cyprus

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1.1 Introduction

Throughout much of the 20th Century Cyprus has experienced periodic political crises arising out an antagonistic relationship between its two major ethnic populations. Approximately 80% of the island's inhabitants are Greek Cypriot and 18% Turkish Cypriot but there are also small minorities who have special status afforded by the constitution named as Marinates, Latins and Armenians as well as a

significant number of third country nationals who do not have citizenship rights.

Cyprus secured independence from Britain in 1960 after a protracted struggle mounted by large sections of the Greek Cypriot population. The power-sharing arrangements were put under considerable strain in late 1963 at which point the Turkish Cypriot community withdrew from state institutions and formed enclaves. Varying degrees of polarization punctuated by UN mediated talks characterized the next decade, a period which culminated in the Turkish intervention/invasion of 1974. From that point on the major communities have lived apart following the forced dispersal of the populations into ethnically homogeneous hinterlands. The UN brokered talks which have proceeded on and off throughout the late 1970's, 80s and 90s.

By the late 1990s a new impetus to negotiate was set in motion given the path of the Republic of Cyprus towards accession to the EU. By the turn of the century, and with accession scheduled for 2004, there was appreciable movement amongst the principle interlocutors. In 2003 the authorities in the north relaxed rules governing the crossing of the Green Line allowing the two major communities to come into direct contact for the first time in nearly 30 years. The following year, and after a long and protracted period of intense negotiation, a comprehensive solution to the 'Cyprus Problem' known locally as the Annan Plan was submitted to two simultaneous referendums, north and south. Accepted by the Turkish Cypriot community (66%) it was rejected by the Greek Cypriot community (76%). A week later the Republic of Cyprus became a member of the EU, yet the island remained divided. Following these events there was very little obvious sign of political movement, let alone rapprochement or the resolution of deep-seated differences. However, since 2008 there have been on-going talks between the leaderships of both communities which may result in a new comprehensive settlement emerging in the near future.

Consequently, the practice of negotiation, mediation has been prominent within Cypriot society for many years but the styles, methods and rationalisations embedded within these processes require brief elaboration;

- Dialogue, negotiations and mediation tended to be vested in the hands of elite groups who act on behalf of others rather than being an embedded practice more widely shared.
- There is little evident trust extended towards other negotiating parties which frequently overspill into accusations of bad faith.

- Frequent questions are raised about whom the real interlocutor is (Turkish Cypriots, the Turkish state or the Turkish military) or what other interests might be at stake, pursued by the US or the UK for example.
- The appearance of consensus in relation to key issues and related terminology which frequently amounts to a formal consensus as to the categories employed but with a markedly divergent interpretation as to the imply content (Taki, 2009)
- There is little attempt to postulate the importance of a 'win/win' outcome but a near exclusive, ethnocentric calculation of loss and gain.

In sum, the practice of negotiation and mediation that have tended to dominate the Cypriot public sphere for many decades but with little positive outcome when measured against the objective of securing a comprehensive solution. Importantly, these practices percolate through society affecting a wide range of social spheres (International Management Institute, 1996).

Beyond this dominant issue there is one other prominent arena within which these practices have consistently surface, gathered together under the broad heading of social dialogue. This much vaunted system is said to bind together leading social partners – primarily the Trade Unions and Employers Organisations in a process of consensus building leading to agreements that are also convergent with the interests of the state (Taki & Officer, 2009).

Otherwise, it would appear, the wider practices of negotiation and mediation are not a prominent aspect within society. In comparison with elsewhere, the justice system, social services, the CSO sector etc, make very little recourse to either specific techniques or general practices of this order. This was borne out by the needs analysis conducting in the context of this project which registered a small number of organisations and networks through which the practice and/or provision of training in mediation and negotiation skills is delivered. These include **The Cyprus Academy of Public Administration** (CAPA), founded in 1991, it functions as a department of the Ministry of Finance and has as its primary mission the building of capacity within the local civil service; **The Cyprus International Institute of Management** (CIIM) founded in 1990, it is a not-for-profit independent educational institution which incorporates training on negotiating skills within its programmes aimed at managers within a

number of its programmes¹; **Private Consultancy Firms** in the private sector who offer mediation/negotiation courses directed towards firms and enterprises; **The Cyprus Mediation Association**, established in 2000, is a CSO which provides a platform for individual trainers and facilitators in the field to offer their services in the fields of education, community, the family and the commercial sphere; The two major **TU federations, SEK and PEO** as well **PASYDY** which represents public employees, do offer training and negotiation skills trainings to their members but these tend to be ‘bought-in’ rather than delivered by TU trainers themselves. Finally, **The NGO Resource Centre**, founded in 2006, provides an informal mediation service and actively seeks to introduce training of this nature to the sector it serves and there has been a history of **bi-communal initiatives** which have included conflict resolution training, particularly between 1993 and 1997 (Wolleh, 2002).

It is apparent that Cyprus is significantly under resourced in terms of the provision of either training opportunities in relation to mediation/negotiation skills or specialized bodies within society as a whole which are engaged in such practices. Where training is offered it tends to be orientated towards very specific sections within the population – principally middle and senior managers, trade union officials and civil servants. The training provision available appears necessarily skewed towards the particular needs of the sectors in which trainees are located. Consequently, there tends to be a limited range of paradigms, frameworks and practical methods which may not be suitable in pursuing other outcomes relating to community, family or inter-ethnic conflicts.

When asked about the possibility of accessing and using an on-line training package respondents generally welcomed the possibility, particularly from within those sectors where training opportunities do not currently exist. However, it was noted that computer use in Cyprus is limited, particularly amongst the older generation, which may adversely affect access to online methodologies. Language issues were also raised – the two principle communities speak Turkish and Greek. English proficiency served to both limit the people who could become involved in training and to screen out people who did not receive higher education qualifications. More positively, online training was seen to have a potential benefit in drawing people together who might

¹ See Centre for Administrative in the Euro-Mediterranean Region ‘Summary of Cyprus’ (2005).

not be prepared to meet in the same room. Further, the possibility of trans-national training and communication was seen as a significant benefit. This response was particularly pronounced amongst the second cohort of users who tended to be younger and more cognoscente of new technology and its application.

1.2 Materials and methods

The methodology proposed involved both face-to-face training, online and self-training elements. The initial training included a full day session which gave the opportunity to participants to receive more training on negotiation approaches, issues and practices. Considering that participants had little to no negotiations training it was decided to design the face to face session on the basis that it should provide an opportunity for the participants to develop new skills through training and be in a better position to utilise successfully the online training opportunity presented. This was followed by the online phase which utilised and tested the software.

INDEX, as the host organisation, employed the questionnaires developed as part of the Eutopia-MT programme, distributed as hard copies. Feedback sessions took place between sessions as well as after sessions as this resulted in a second form of data generation through moderated group discussions. These proved a much richer source of information which also allowed participants to correlate their experiences and prompt further information to be provided. The group discussion were moderated and conformed to a semi-structured format. INDEX also gathered data via face to face, individual, discussions with participants allowing room for a particular issue to be thoroughly aired. The user group convened in the first trials were largely composed of activists within civil society organisations and educationalists with a predominance of women which, as a group had little experience of previous negotiations training. The second cohort different from the first in that the group's average age was younger, reflecting the fact that whilst many were active in civil society organisations they were still in full-time education. It should also be noted that this group was computer literate and able to use the programme with very little prior preparation.

In testing the software a specifically Cypriot story-board was developed which, in outline, involved a series of issues familiar to most of the participants. The Akamas Peninsula is in the far west of Cyprus

and is an area of outstanding natural beauty, to the extent that the European Council has included it within its Mediterranean protection programme. In a report, commissioned by the Cyprus Government and financed by the World Bank, it was recommended that it be treated as a Biosphere Reserve which would include a large National Park area. Yet there are significant and diverse communities of interest who have a stake in the areas development including local residents, developers, green activists and people living on the island as a whole. How the future of the area could be negotiated by these varying groups provided the story line and the avatars each represented a different set of interests. It should be noted that this approach meant that a series of central issues (property, the public interest etc) which are close to the heart of the Cyprus Problem could be opened up for discussion but without that then being reduced to a crude inter-community conflict.

1.3 Results and discussion

There were a number of identifiable problems which hindered the smooth running of the sessions and which also had an impact on the participants. On occasion the program would stop running and throw people out without warning. Concentration and flow was broken in this way. The characters would sometimes not respond to the arrow commands, nor would they be as fluid or mobile as expected. Participants were also initially frustrated at not being able to sit the avatar down, as well as by the stiff nature of their movements. A safe assumption would be that people, especially of younger age groups, who are familiar with electronic games and related means of communication, had a higher expectation in terms of the presentation of the software, which easily led to frustration.

Yiouli Taki, David Officer That noted, participants were generally satisfied with aspects of the experience and the potential the software the enormous opportunities in exploring unsafe or unfamiliar relations or situations; that was generally intuitive making it easy to grasp. Finally, an important conclusion in the Cypriot context, that it was anticipated that were communities choose to remain physically separated; this was a useful way of ensuring safe contact and engagement without actually meeting.

Interviews and group discussions revealed the difficulty, in its present state, of such a program being employed as a standalone tool of use in negotiations training session. But it was nevertheless judged to be a good complimentary tool to be used in conjunction with other methods. Importantly, participants commented on some or a fair improvement in their negotiation skills. Given this evidence, there are indications that the package can be valued as a tool of some utility in delivering the outcomes which are central to its purpose. However, its full utility has not yet been met despite the potential that participants recognised in what was being offered.

In both the main trials that were conducted between February and March and again in September, 2009, there was a generally favourable evaluation of the software and the on-line experience of using it in a group setting. Future reorientation of the software suggest by participants included placing a greater emphasis on non-verbal forms of communication (including gestures) and the pitch and volume of spoken communication rather than assuming that the free movement of the avatars from one location to another was essential to on-line interaction. Finally, in an actual setting where the vast majority of participants had to use a second language (English) to facilitate communication there will always remain a downside to exchanges reliant on this form of mediation.

2. Northern Ireland

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2.1 Introduction

After twenty five years of violent conflict and more than a decade of political transition Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society, with the aspirations of the majority Protestant community to remain part of the United Kingdom contrasting with the desire of the minority

Catholic community to join a unified Irish Republic. The process of transition from conflict to peace has not resolved all the issues but differences are now addressed through dialogue, negotiation and mediation rather than violence. This transition has ensured that the Northern Ireland peace process is widely regarded as one of the major successes of recent peace building activity and provides some lessons and learning for other conflict transformation work. The attempts to resolve many persistent problems have encouraged the development of a diverse array of groups and organisations using various forms of mediation and negotiation skills.

The transition has involved the participation of a wide range of individuals, groups and organisations in a diverse array of conflict transformation and peace building activities. A number of different groups and organisations, including government bodies, voluntary organisations and community-based groups have focused on the development and utilisation of mediation skills, including responding to disputes, developing practice and delivering training. The main providers of practice and training for mediation and negotiation skills are from the community and voluntary sector and include, such as Mediation Northern Ireland, Peace and Reconciliation Group, Workers Educational Association, Family Mediation Northern Ireland and the Labour Relations Agency. Similarly, within the state-sector, the Youth Justice Agency is involved in the implementation of youth conferencing training and services, while bodies such as the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Office of the Police Ombudsman also use mediation within restorative processes.

The needs analysis highlighted an extensive network of practitioners and trainers in Northern Ireland in the field of mediation and negotiation. There is also considerable interaction between sectors and employees of state sector bodies often attend training events provided by organisations in the community and voluntary sector and there are well established networks and partnerships between both sectors. Many of the groups and organisations are also part of a wider UK or Irish network through an affiliation or accreditation of training provision.²

² As highlighted in the needs analysis there was a limited if non-existent experience of anything like the proposed Eutopia-MT on-line mediation training programme, but there was a general expression of interest in exploring the possibilities of the proposed methodology and of participating in the trial programme.

2.2 Material and methods

As in all scenario designs it is important to make sure that the role-play is well prepared and it has been described by the Peace and Reconciliation Group as a:

‘...powerful learning tool because it forces us to put into action the skills and processes we have read and heard and seen.’³

They also make the point that:

Role-playing isn’t always comfortable. It requires us to momentarily suspend our own reality and take on the reality of another. At times that the discomfort may be due to the feeling the pain of the role-play character because it has touched something deep in our own experience.

The storyboard for that was developed for the Eutopia-MT scenario was based on events along an interface area, i.e. a contested boundary area between a predominantly Protestant area and a predominantly Catholic area. The interaction took place on the Protestant side, although this served very much as a ‘starting point’ for the scenario. The aim was for the players to build on this ‘basic’ scenario to explore a situation in which they would have to interact and reach agreement with characters from the other side in order to achieve their aims.

The use of an interface as the basis for the scenario was also useful as it is a common type of local problem and was therefore something to which a broad variety of participants could relate. In preparing for the training the participants were fully briefed about the scenario and also the character’s background and personality and what was therefore expected of them. Whilst participants were interested in the novelty of working online, they noted that the graphics did not resemble an interface area in Belfast and this, to a certain extent, made the use of the visual environment somewhat redundant.

Given the existing variety of mediation and negotiation training available in Northern Ireland ICR staff felt that the Eutopia-MT programme could best be introduced as a complementary tool or instrument for the different forms of training that was already being

³ Peace and Reconciliation Group Resource Pack for Mediators. Role Plays. Derry Londonderry: PRG, 2008: page 4.

offered. We therefore targeted a mixture of established practitioners as well as people who were new to this area of skill development. It was also felt important that we should first approach the different organisations and training providers and show them how Eutopia-MT could possibly work and how it could be used in a training format. This meant that the delivery of the Eutopia-MT training programme had to be flexible to adapt to times when participants could attend the various sessions. Even so it proved difficult to co-ordinate times when some groups would be willing to participate in the programme.⁴

Many of the participants from the different organisations had had previous experience of some levels of mediation and or negotiation training and many people were unsure of the possible benefits of the Eutopia-MT programme. ICR therefore decided in most cases to adopt a shorter session than had been anticipated and to reduce the total number of sessions being provided. The decision was made to combine the introductory session, which focused on the background and context, with the introductory session to Eutopia-MT. In some cases this involved participants playing an interactive session straight after familiarising themselves with the Eutopia-MT programme.

By drawing on the contacts that had been established during the needs analysis and the first trial the following groups and organisations were contacted with the aim of participating in the second trial:

- Youth Justice Agency;
- Peace and Reconciliation Group;
- Northern Ireland Alternatives;
- Mediation Northern Ireland and
- INCORE, University of Ulster.

Due to difficulties in loading the software on some, particularly older, computers it was agreed that the training would take place within the offices of ICR as the organisation's computers all had the software loaded and any problems could be easily addressed. On two occasions, however the training was delivered at other organisational premises, with few difficulties. In those two instances the computers were in different offices which provided a simulation of more remote

⁴ In the case of INCORE and the Youth Justice Agency participation was not possible due to other commitments however sessions were held with PRG, Northern Ireland Alternatives and Mediation Northern Ireland.

engagement than when all computers and participants were in the same room. The participants had limited input in the installation of the software apart from logging in and out and running the programme.

Participants in general were curious about the idea of using an on-line tool and many were surprised at the ease of using the software. There was also a feeling that the format allowed participants to play out their characters more easily than in a 'traditional' role play setting. It was also agreed that the fact that storyboards could be easily created would allow for different groups to design their 'own' versions to meet their particular needs more readily. A number of the participants also felt that the computer technology might particularly appeal to groups of young people involved in various training programmes.

Regarding the actual use of the software participants found that the interface was not as intuitive as perhaps anticipated. They also found that on occasion the avatar 'got stuck' and seemed unable to move.⁵ Participants also felt that to be more realistic each of the characters should have access to a fuller range of moods and not be limited to what was specified in the storyboard. Another participant suggested that being able to interact with the surroundings and not just have an overt focus on mediation or negotiation would be useful. The point was also made that the storyboard could be made to feel more realistic if the buildings and surroundings were made more to look like Belfast. One participant made the point that the programme could be made to feel more realistic if the characters could actually sit down.

As most of the interaction took place using the key-board there was a feeling among participants that in order to maintain a conversation, good keyboard skills were necessary. The extensive focus on the keyboard also led to the dialogue being stifled and on occasion slightly out of sync as one participant posed messages as another character attempted to communicate. Participants rarely, if ever, used gestures or facial expressions to convey a sentiment as they felt that it was easier to convey messages by what was written and by the tone of voice. An over-riding issue among all participants was in the limited scope for any form of effective interaction among the avatars and one of the participants described the process as similar to 'being in a chat room'.

⁵ In one case one of the avatars stood in the corner of a meeting room throughout the session and could not really see the other avatars. In another case an avatar managed to 'jump off' the main square and ended up hovering in the air and could not get back into the session.

2.3 Results and discussion

Even though none of the participants had come across a programme like Eutopia-MT before the overall impression of the programme was a positive one as participants felt that the software was innovative and easy to use. There was also a feeling that the programme offered a different approach to conducting training and building negotiation and dialogue skills.

On a more critical note, participants felt that the technical side of the programme could be improved: for example on occasion became avatars stuck or span aimlessly around. There was also a feeling that little consideration was given to the broader context or the environment or even to personal facial gestures or expressions due to the emphasis on what was being written in the dialogue box.

The overall impression of the programme among participants was a positive one with Eutopia-MT being seen to have the potential to complement more traditional ways of mediation training, without necessarily replacing it.

3. Italy

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3.1 Introduction

If we consider the historical origins of the endemic underdevelopment of the South of Italy, along with remarkable conditions of poverty, we can identify the reasons of the urban social conflict in Naples in the contrast between (also socially and culturally) deprived social classes and all the Institutions which are often unwilling, inefficient, ineffective especially as regards the active policies to solve problems and tackle main needs. Naples is going through a very crucial moment of its history. *“The waste crisis is the ephiphenomenon of a more general crisis which relates to several fields of public life: lack of confidence in*

institutions which do not carry out efficient policies; deep rooted patronage practices and waste of public resources; structural unemployment; high failure rate of educational institutions; importance of criminal organizations, deterioration of the environment, poor production activities. Furthermore, the town is the privileged place of a Mediterranean model of immigration which joins a territory where a high unemployment rate is reported" (Laino, 2004). Therefore, in the town, there are repeated demonstrations of citizens who ask for employment, safety, clearness, in a vicious circle of complaints without a strong capacity of taking actions.

In the last 5 years, Cooperativa Passaggi tested a number of activities about the issue of mediation of conflicts in urban social contexts, with a special reference to issues of socio-cultural discomfort among the weakest classes of the population. In particular, the most relevant experiences were: the Peacekeepers course for peace mediators (VVAA, 2006) promoted by the Regional Government of Campania; a project of vocational guidance for disadvantaged young people who left school or fail to comply with compulsory education⁶; a project of socio-cultural integration in favour of children from immigrant families⁷. In particular, the Peacekeepers experience represented an exercise to develop and broaden the abilities of the Cooperativa on the issues of the mediation of conflicts. In fact, in this case, we applied teaching methodologies and trials which were oriented to the training of mediation on the territory. This teaching methodology was based on the "management of conflicts" module, which aimed at developing practical skills in the field of negotiations, problem-solving and mediation, also through simulations and role-play activities.

The need analysis about the training for the mediation of conflicts in Italy pointed out a situation where there are forefront and excellence experiences, but where the global picture shows a rather unsatisfactory training for mediation/negotiation. *"In Italy, the skills relating to these fields are not very widespread, and the few acquired experiences do not allow to have a clear and sharp reference picture since this kind of training is still at its beginning"* (Arielli, Scotto, 2003). The data analysis

⁶ Project *Missioni locali - Servizi per l'occupabilità* relating to Equal 2 phase Community Project, carried out in Naples from 2005 to 2008.

⁷ Project *Children in rete* funded by Fondazione Vodafone Italia relating to activities of school support, social and cultural integration for immigrant children, which is being implemented.

started by interviewing privileged witnesses working in the Institutional, Private and Social Private fields.

Analyzing the questionnaires, it was clear that high-training experiences are still only an academic prerogative and this kind of training does not leave much room to practice and professional training. The methods adopted in training are mainly traditional (interactive lessons, role plays, stages/apprenticeship and “in person” lessons). Almost nothing (only 4% of interviewed Organizations uses Information Technologies for teaching) is the use of online methods and tools. 42% of performed training is accredited and financed for 80% of the total by public funds (local governments, State bodies, European Social Fund) which do not often guarantee continuity and create quantitative and qualitative gaps. 75% of interviewed organizations never experienced online training, although 64% of them think that it is interesting.

3.2 Materials and methods

The scenarios designed to carry out the two trial cycles focused the attention on issues and protagonists who, in Naples, are actors involved in *micro urban social conflicts*. In order to design our scenarios, we referred to the field of the Third sector and local welfare policies, a field where many layers (institutional, private and social-private levels) and possible kind of conflicts overlap by involving several classes of people and several socio-professional frameworks.

The main issue developed in our scenarios is the conflict at local level between local institutions and third sector organizations which carry out social services in favour of weak or disadvantaged people. The mutual object of mediation is to find an equilibrium or compromise between the several positions that trigger different ways to protest and to claim one’s own needs between the various stakeholders (educators – immigrant and non-immigrant mothers – volunteers).

The model was the conflict that occurred during the project “*Nidi di Mamme*” (“*Mothers’ nests*” carried out in Naples by the Associazione Quartieri Spagnoli (Furfaro, Portanova, 2003). The services offered by this project relate to educational activities addressed to early childhood, social integration and prevention of the social risk carried out in neighbourhoods that lack in services for that age, where the level of discomfort and social marginalization of resident citizens is very high. In this case, the nature itself of the project and the

complexity of the action implemented gave the opportunity to point out “... an important feature of the project, which also was one of the causes of difficulty: interaction of various figures, who in many cases lived the action according to different goals and, therefore, having to manage moments of tension, which were not always easily solved with the dialogue and organizational precautions” (Laino, 2002).

During the first cycle, scenarios were conceived as an organized set in four separated “episodes” linked to each other so to form a single context where also the conflict developed as an *unicum*; on the contrary, during the second cycle, we aimed at a different organization of scenarios which were independent although they are linked together two by two.

The organization of the second cycle of trials tried to bear in mind the experience of the first cycle in order to avoid the fragmentation due to the long interval between the sessions; to avoid losing the emotional potential generated by participation and to focus the effort to reach the fixed goals.

In summary, the main changes between the two cycles of trials were:

- to build scenarios with stories starting and ending during the development of one session.
- to change the criteria to identify participants: by selecting younger users and, most of all, more directly involved in activities of mediation and negotiation in particular with immigrants.
- to include situations of conflict in the scenarios which involve immigrants more directly.
- to involve users of immigrant origin who are deeply integrated in the society and territorial context.
- To increase the time devoted to get used to the tool and scenarios⁸.

3.3 Results and discussion

In terms of achieved results, it is worth clarifying how the trials were absolutely influenced by the lack in active and continuous involvement

⁸ In this regards, a stage was carried out at the “Mothers’ nests”, managed by the Association Quartieri Spagnoli, in order to promote a better knowledge of the situations and issued represented in the scenarios.

of participants (like the one of a traditional training course) and the short time available.

As regards the number of beneficiaries involved, data show how there has been a remarkable basic interest (confirmed by the good number of initial adhesions), which was followed by a significant rate of defaults at the beginning of the course. On the contrary, among those who had started the trial, the default rate was physiological and restricted to low percentages. Globally, the trial involved 21 participants (7 males, 14 females) 3 of which quit during the sessions.

As regards the practice, it resulted that trials are a kind of “experimentation of the experimentation” meaning that all the participants (including tutors) had the sensation of not always being able to control what was going to happen in the next moment. A number of problems which allowed to evaluate and show that, also in difficult situations, the psychological attitude, the kind of individual (and personal) re-action and the emotional involvement bring positive effects.

Analyzing the final evaluation questionnaires, it resulted a substantial satisfaction of participants vis-à-vis the experience in general and, in particular, the usefulness of the tool in given organized and/or institutional contexts (for ex., a school class) was evaluated as very positive, for the improvement of the level of interaction with some pupils and/or in cases which were particularly hard to manage.

Considering the reflections made during the meetings about the final evaluation, it results that the tool seems to have good chances of implementation in the interaction with teenagers and young people, who show a strong bent/familiarity and skill in using hi-tech media. At the same time, a negative remark was reported about the general applicability of the software at the current stage of its technical and graphic development and handling. In practice, by increasing the familiarity and experience of its functions, a decrease in the evaluation was reported since, at the same time, there was a higher awareness of the limits of the tool. A higher applicability of the software was reported in situations of strong conflict such as family or couple mediation.

From the evaluations analyzed and discussed at the end of the two cycles of sessions, a few reflections resulted about the potential of the tool and about its teaching-training contents.

The need for improving avatars' potentials was strongly recommended in order to enrich their identity in the long term. For example, it was shown that avatars were not allowed many behaviours,

like violent attitudes. It was suggested to build a sort of “portfolio” for avatars with the possibility to gain functional “credits” to express a possible change of attitudes and values during the course.

In particular, it was very interesting to observe how the strict compliance with the storyboard limited the development of creative forms or also “comic or playful” forms of mediation. On the contrary, in some cases, the individual and creative initiative which “broke” the fixed border of the scenario was the starting point to solve the conflict. As Scravi maintains: *“a conscious and reasoned adoption of playful attitudes, as well as the systematic use of creative responses, can help negotiators, mediators, facilitators, and other “third parties” build common ground and transform conflict”*⁹, by determining what we have called a sort of *“playful displacement”* of the situation¹⁰, by giving the opportunity for a creative solution of the conflict because the *“humour (...) allows us to investigate the dynamics of change and resistance to change, as well as identity, authority, belonging, power, and imagination. It challenges our frames and enables us to explore the unexpected in creative ways, to see with different eyes the things we do (or do not do) when we react in tensions and conflicts with a merely linear behaviour of defense-offense, and thus it offers opportunities for more creative conflict resolution”* (Scravi, 2008).

The role of the tutor was very discussed. Some believed that it should be a “mere” observer¹¹ who does not have the possibility to

⁹ The Role of Play and Humor in Creative Conflict Management. Marianella Scravi (2008) in Negotiation Journal, vol 24(2) page 158.

¹⁰ Cfr. Why humour matters in Active Listening? An intercultural approach to conflict transformation. Marianella Scravi in ESSEC Business School –Paris & PON, Harvard Law School – Special conference: “New trends in Negotiation Teaching:Towards a Trans Atlantic Network” Nov. 14-15 2005, (page 4) where the importance of the displacement and cognitive dissonance is pointed out as important factors to treat simple conflicts of interest. *“...if you have in mind that communication happens always at three levels and with three forms of languages (three codes): verbal, body and emotional, the movement of double displacement corresponds to the gentle elaboration of a (lighter or deeper) trauma. In a complex world it is crucial to know how to deal in a gentle, light, creative and playful way with displacements, cultural shocks, cognitive dissonances which are important aspects of what we usually refer to as “plain interest conflicts”*

¹¹ About this issue, Scravi suggests how: *“in general the correct attitude to adopt as an active listener (...) is the direct opposite of what is conventionally expected on the part of a good observer: impassive, neutral, self-assured, heedless of his own emotions and ready to conceal or ignore his own reactions to what he hears”*. Cfr. Why humour matters in Active Listening? An intercultural approach to conflict transformation, Marianella Scravi in ESSEC Business School – Paris & PON, Harvard Law School – Special conference:

direct the game and, therefore, poorly interventionist. Some others, on the contrary, believed that his intervention should be more direct and incisive: in any case, it was necessary to better define the role for the participants.

As regards the evaluation of the mediation/negotiation skills, an increase in the implementation of such skills was reported, supported by the improvement of technical aspects and know-how of the ways of management and operation of the software.

About the possibility to feel empathy with the avatar, the discussion pointed out how the mediation of the screen tends to deactivate or to slow down the triggering of identification and reaction mechanisms, thus leading to mediated and non-natural replies.

In evaluating the relationship between the efficacy and limits of the software, sometimes conflicting indications emerged which stressed out how some elements of apparent weakness are strengths at the same time. Some users felt themselves favoured by the type of characters and the context of the story, because they were very close to their professional lives and, therefore, well known. This means that the level of attitude to play the role was depending on the familiarity of the user with the stories.

In some case, the empathy in playing the role proved to be self-defeating since it pushed the user to emphasize the behaviours of the character.

The set of reflections raised a basic issue about how to consider the tool: that is, if it has to be seen only as a simulation of reality or a sort of *relational/emotional exercise*.

In terms of a “relational/emotional exercise” (versus the virtual simulation of reality like second life), the limits which emerged (idle time, the filter of the screen or keyboard, etc.) can become tools and opportunities. In this “protected place” or “non-place” (Augé, 1999) – where there is time to stop, to see what happened, to make corrections and change – you can practice and make preparation and functional exercises to implement the professional attitude through the dialectic between the reproduction of reality versus simulation aiming at developing the actions as “exercise” of mediation of conflicts.

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The EUTOPIA-MT project - lessons learned and future prospects

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1. Introduction

Earlier chapters of this book have described the experience of the EUTOPIA-MT project through the eyes of the direct participants. My role in the project was different from theirs. I helped to develop the project “idea”; later I contributed to developing the official proposal; during the project, I occasionally participated in meetings, talked to the partners, and helped to resolve problems but I was not involved in day to day management. It is from this perspective - close to the work, but far from the operational details - that I will try and pull together the various threads of the discussion in the previous chapters, identifying some of the practical and “philosophical” lessons we can draw from the project. But I will reserve this discussion for the last part of the chapter. First it is necessary to summarize what we wanted to achieve when we began the project and what we actually achieved.

2. What we were trying to do

As has already been amply illustrated in the previous chapters, the key focus of EUTOPIA-MT was on “conflict” or more specifically “inter-community” conflict. Decades of “conflict research” and practical experience on ground show that in many situations, solving or attenuating a conflict requires the active involvement of a neutral mediator. In minor conflicts of short duration, mediation may be conducted informally, by “persons of good will”. But in many recent “peace processes” - notably in Northern Ireland and in South Africa -

mediation is the task of government organizations and NGOs expressly created for the purpose. The emergence of these organizations has meant that, at least in some situations, mediation has been “professionalized” but this does not mean that the need for mediation has been fully satisfied. Rather the contrary. Entrenched inter-community conflicts are marked by conflict on many different scales - from national, regional and local politics down to the day to day relations between young adults living in “interface areas”¹. Even where professionalized mediation is strongly entrenched, the “supply” of mediators is often insufficient. In situations where mediation is less well established (as in Cyprus or Naples) the situation is obviously worse.

In both situations, there is a need for new mediators. This implies a need to *train* new mediators. In many case the training involves complex role playing games in which a trainees act alternatively as mediators in a re-enacted conflict and as directly participants. This kind of training, though effective, places heavy demands on the time of trainees and trainers. In other words it is inherently expensive.

Against this background, EUTOPIA-MT aimed to reduce the cost and increase the availability of training in mediation. More specifically, the project intended to take the role-playing techniques already used in professional mediation training, and use them as the basis for a new training methodology based on so-called Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games.

Briefly, the project created a software environment, in which a trainer could create a “script” describing a situation of inter-community conflict. The trainer then proceeded, as in conventional training, to assign roles to the participating learners. Learners would then act out their roles, interacting in a virtual, navigable, environment provided by the system. The use of online technology meant it was no longer for all users to meet in the same room. As we will see later on in this chapter this represented an important advantage.

What we can see immediately is the essential difference between EUTOPIA-MT and other forms of e-learning. Fifty years ago, computers were commonly seen as “electronic brains”, “thinking machines”, “general problem solvers” that would soon overcome the limitations of the human brain. “Expert systems” were designed to

¹ In Northern Ireland, “interface areas” are areas along the boundary between catholic and protestant communities in urban areas. Minor conflict in interface areas , especially among young people, has the potential to escalate into serious violence with national repercussions.

capture the knowledge of a human expert and ultimately to replace them. In the 1980s and 1990s Information Technology was touted as a replacement for teachers (e-learning), doctors (e-medicine), and administrators (e-government).

By contrast, EUTOPIA-MT was less ambitious. When we designed the project, we had had no illusion that an artificially-intelligent computer could find solutions to conflict or act as an “artificial mediator” or an “artificial tutor”. What we built was essentially a communications tool - similar in many ways to a telephone, or an email system. In EUTOPIA-MT, in other words, it is not the computer that finds the solution to a problem, or that teaches how to find the solution. Mediation and teaching rely entirely on the human users of the system. Our goal was not to resolve problems but to provide a communications environment that empowered human users to find solutions on their own.

3. What we achieved

The system created by EUTOPIA-MT was a technical success. The EUTOPIA-MT authoring system meant that tutors could script a potentially infinite range of scenarios for role playing exercises, adapting them to the needs and personal experience of learners. The EUTOPIA-MT virtual environment provided an avatar-based system of communication in which learners could interact without knowing each others’ personal identities or their community of origin. A broad range of user interface controls gave users the possibility of complementing their verbal (written) communications with other forms of non-verbal and para-verbal communication (tone and volume of voice, facial expressions, gestures). Special tutoring tools enabled trainers to “record” sessions, analyze them and provide useful feedback to participants. After we had resolved some initial problems, the software proved to be usable and stable.

EUTOPIA-MT conducted two rounds of user trials in Northern Ireland, Cyprus and Naples. The results demonstrated that the tools and methodology developed in EUTOPIA-MT did indeed have strong potential. Creating scenarios for the learning exercises was easy. Learners and tutors enjoyed the role playing games. One unexpected advantage was that EUTOPIA-MT attenuated the effects of the physical division between the communities in conflict. Local organizers from Northern Ireland and Cyprus both told us that learners from one

community would not normally cross into the area controlled by the other community. With EUTOPIA-MT this was not required. It was a major advantage.

But this having been said, it should be admitted that the project encountered real difficulties. Some were technical or usability issues. In Cyprus, for instance, local Internet providers had installed filters which prevented the EUTOPIA-MT software from communicating with the central server. This forced learners to receive their training in a central location rather than in their homes, as originally intended. Again in Cyprus, poor keyboard skills prevented many users from fully exploiting the potential of the system. In all three test sites the majority of users failed to use EUTOPIA-MT's extensive capabilities in paraverbal and non-verbal communication. User reports suggested that these functions were difficult to use and that they distracted learners from their interactions with other learners. Many users were disappointed by the graphics and interaction possibilities offered by the EUTOPIA-MT virtual environment - comparing them unfavourably with the "production values" of commercial videogames.

In general, however, technical and usability problems were not severe. The main difficulty encountered by EUTOPIA-MT was not technical but organizational and social. In short, it was not at all easy for EUTOPIA-MT to reach its intended beneficiaries. In Cyprus, the local organizers decided that it was not possible to organize a trial that focussed directly on the inter-community conflict, choosing instead to focus on an environmental conflict, only indirectly linked to the intercommunity issues. In Naples, attempts to work directly with conflicting immigrant and indigenous communities were unsuccessful, forcing the organizers to recruit learners among trainers and educators with no direct link to the conflict. The only trial which succeeded in reaching the communities originally targeted by the proposal was in Northern Ireland. It is no coincidence that the practice of mediation has a far longer history and stronger popular support in Northern Ireland than in the other two situations targeted by the trials.

4. Lessons learned - prospects for future development

The experience of EUTOPIA-MT confirmed some of the initial intuitions on which the project was based. It also taught the partners a number of important lessons and pointed to new prospects for future development.

The first conclusion we can draw from the project is that it confirms the value of using Information Technology as a tool rather than as a cheap replacement for a teacher. EUTOPIA-MT placed the design and control of learning exercises firmly in the hands of a trainer; the dynamics of the “game play” depended on learners, rather than on any form of artificial intelligence. This strategy made it possible to offer participants a far richer, more open, learning experience than would have been possible, if we had forced them to interact with an “artificial teacher” or with computer-controlled players.

At the same time the project gained flexibility. If we had used the computer as a teacher, each learning exercise would have required a lengthy development effort, costing many person months or person years, while tying trainers and learners to a small set of inflexible scenarios. By contrast, the EUTOPIA-MT strategy, allowed trainers to rapidly develop their own scenarios, personalizing their work for specific target populations with specific learning needs. As a beneficial side-effect, the costs incurred for the development of the platform and the learning materials were extremely low.

The second lesson we learned is that low budgets have costs. During the trials we discovered that learners’ expectations in terms of graphical realism and user interaction were strongly shaped by blockbuster video-games with Hollywood-sized budgets. This is obviously the wrong battlefield for low budget, university-managed projects. EUTOPIA-MT taught us that we need to compete in the areas where we are strong - such as teaching methodology, support for tutors and content - and avoid competition in areas where we are weak - such as highly interactive 3D graphics. In a nutshell, the key to success for low cost e-learning projects is to be as different from a commercial videogame as is humanly possible.

This brings us to the third lesson we have learned from EUTOPIA-MT. Our experience in the project shows that in many cases the success or failure of an e-learning project is independent of technology or even learning methodology. In EUTOPIA-MT all three trial sites used the same technologies and the same methodologies yet the project was relatively more successful in Northern Ireland than in Cyprus or in Naples. In reality, the main factors underlying these differences are historical, political and social: in Northern Ireland the peace process has strong popular support and mediation is widely perceived as making a useful contribution; in Cyprus and Naples, on the other hand, the will to overcome intercommunity conflicts is less strong and mediation has shallower roots and a lower degree of social acceptance. Our

experience in the trials reminded us that the key to success for any training project, conventional or otherwise, is the target population's perception of need, and its willingness to participate in the program on offer. To hope for widespread participation in a program that does not meet a strongly felt need is utopian.

So what kinds of needs is it possible to meet with technologies and methodologies proposed by EUTOPIA-MT? In the last analysis, what EUTOPIA-MT offers is a way for learners to practice and improve their ability to interact with others. Seen in this light, there are many possible areas of application. In management training, there is an increasing emphasis on soft skills such as inter-personal communication, negotiation, and persuasion. The technologies and methodologies developed in EUTOPIA-MT would be an ideal tool for trainers working in this area. Medical colleges and hospitals are investing in courses to improve the way doctors and nurses communicate with patients. Role play with a tool similar to EUTOPIA-MT could be extremely valuable in this kind of setting. Public authorities are increasingly aware that effective management of natural disasters, industrial accidents and terrorist attacks depends on the communications skills of emergency managers and workers on the scene. Tools such as EUTOPIA-MT could make an important contribution to building these skills. Another possibility would be training for family mediation or other forms of counselling. There can be little doubt that the field of potential applications for EUTOPIA-MT and EUTOPIA-like techniques is vast. The team responsible for EUTOPIA-MT is beginning to explore these areas in other projects.

To do so effectively it will doubtless be necessary to improve some of the technologies we deployed in the project. One particularly interesting possibility would be to automate tools for paraverbal and non-verbal communication, automatically capturing gestures, facial expressions and psycho-physiological data and using the data to pilot the actions of the avatars representing users in the virtual environment. We are currently investigating this and many other possibilities for technological improvement.

But in one essential respect, we continue to adhere to the original philosophy that inspired the EUTOPIA-MT project. In whatever area we work - and we are not limited to e-learning - we see computers, not as a replacement for human beings, but as a tool. Computers can help teachers to reach more learners and to improve their learning, they can help mediators to resolve conflict, but they can do none of this on their own. They do not replace human agents - they can only make them

more effective - and only when the surrounding environment allows. Computers are no substitute for well-paid, strongly motivated teachers; they cannot remedy the deficiencies of an inefficient public administration; they cannot repair damaged inter-community relations. If we see them as a panacea, we are victims to an illusion. Yet EUTOPIA-MT shows they can make a real contribution.

We should not hope for more.

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The last twenty years have seen the development of best ways of teaching and developing mediation skills. Role-playing is a widespread didactic methodology in this context. In this way, mediation skills learning process becomes an experiential dimension (Learning by Doing). Nevertheless there are some problems not yet overcome: a) knowing the identity of those who are involved in the role-play may influence the scenic action; b) the emotional involvement could be elevated and invalidate the learning process; c) the organization of a role-playing session could mean high costs. EUTOPIA-MT is a European research project that aims to overcome these limits through a MORPG platform employment. Its effectiveness has been tested in three situations of inter-community conflict, respectively in Cyprus, Northern Ireland and Southern Italy. The final outcomes of our experience are described in the book.

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