



**Virtual business skills
empowerment**

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VIBES
GUIDELINES
FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECT RESULTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

VIBES (Virtual business skills empowerment) is Erasmus+ funded project aimed at strengthening digital education readiness with particular emphasis on working in virtual multicultural teams. The project is delivered by a consortium of seven partners from five countries under coordination of University of Dubrovnik's research centre CREDO from Croatia. Over the course of the project a set of trainings have been developed for use in high schools and universities across European and international higher education spaces. These trainings tackle issues of communication dynamics, culture, ways of working and management and digital well being in virtual teams. Training courses are developed in scalable manner that allows their tailoring to competence training of target groups and accompanied by a rich collection of instructor resources such as reading materials, digital teaching tools and resources relevant for pre and post class activities. Carefully compiled into VIBES toolbox, these resources and prototype course provide a free and ready to use content & methodologies for all those interested in virtual team working skills development among high school students and university students at bachelor and masters levels.

The training materials developed by VIBES consortium are provided free of charge to all prospective instructors. They come in self-guiding and self-explanatory form and cover a number of issues relevant for in-classroom and virtual delivery such as length of session and its individual parts, tools to be used, methods to keep student attention, the palette of exercises and reading materials of different difficulty and pre and post training assignments. The materials have been fine-tuned through a piloting

procedure undertaken in the second half of 2022. Feedbacks collected this way have allowed the consortium to fine-tune individual parts of training and the prototype course as a whole. The valuable inputs collected this way have now been collected into current guidelines for implementation and use of project results.

The collected experiences constitute the pillars of this document - the guidelines for the use of project results. Their aim is to provide prospective users with some practical, experience-based insights gathered through piloting and initial implementation of developed materials. The guidelines cover a wide range of topics from organisation of training over tips for communication with target groups and participants, recruitment and group management. Particular attention was given to issues of blended learning and experiences gathered through online transmission of training. These experiences are crucial for delivery of trainings during challenging periods such as recent Covid pandemics or in groups of remote participants. Finally, the guidelines provide advices on increasing participant motivation as well as lessons learned through collection of participant feedback.

While providing starting point, these guidelines are not definite rules for implementation of VIBES training. Prospective users are encouraged and invited to experiment and enrich with their own ideas. In this process we point prospective users to VIBES living hub and its rich pool of knowledge and resources. As a living tissue VIBES is intended to grow and develop through implementation and co-creation with each iteration of the VIBES programme.

VIBES CONSORTIUM

2. ORGANIZATION OF TRAINING

VIBES trainings are developed for application in both traditional classroom and online formats. They can be delivered to high school pupils, bachelors and master students. Prospective instructors may use these trainings in monostructured groups but also in heterogeneous settings involving students from different education levels. The trainings seem particularly successful when involving individuals at different education levels and coming from different cultural backgrounds and when they combine traditional lecturing with individual and group work and discussions as well as energizing exercises (see course prototype for examples). It is particularly useful if trainings are embedded in the related parts of a wider curricula. Human resource management, Business negotiations or Business communication are examples of modules where our trainings may be particularly useful.

Prospective instructors are encouraged to open their classes with provision of as much information as possible about the tools and the expectations from students in order to ensure smooth application and interaction within the group during sessions. Instructors are encouraged to begin preparations for training delivery by thoroughly reading the guidelines. If the training is delivered by two or more instructors pre-session meetings are advised to discuss the delivery strategy, potential risks (lack of student

participation, time management etc.) and interactive tools to be used (PPT presentations, video materials, case studies, decision games etc.).

The delivery of trainings should pay attention also to education background of recipients. It should be anticipated that high school pupils do not come with as wide prior knowledge as their bachelor and particularly masters peers. To overcome this hurdle, we recommend brief introduction to the theory at the beginning of each session or separate short preparatory sessions for high school pupils that would provide them with missing entry competences.

At least part of trainings should take place virtually including both synchronous and asynchronous delivery. Students can be given shared learning space (involving both students and instructors) equipped with tools for social interaction (chat), video conferencing, synchronous processing of assignments, whiteboard for co-creation and collaboration and a voting tool for feedback on the teaching. In some environments these tools can be found within a single ecosystem (e.g. Google classroom or Moodle). In others, a combination of tools may be applied. Our pilot trainings were partly delivered by combining tools such as Webex, Zoom, MS Teams, Padlet, Google documents or Slack without observed efficiency losses.

The choice of individual tools falls on the instructor but it should be done with the aim to foster self-directed learning in an environment where students can learn from other students, brainstorm about possible



challenges and come up with suitable solutions to the identified challenges. The process should be guided with two principles: i) learning by doing and ii) self-reflection/analysis. For this to be achieved instructors are encouraged to organise students in (virtual) teams that allow them first-hand experience on what works and what does not in virtual multicultural collaborations. Student should be encouraged to reflect on their experiences through tools such as personal learning diaries that should be kept throughout the entire process.

3. RECRUITMENT

The recruitment of participants can take place through multiple channels. One of the approaches applied during our piloting session was to post an ad about the upcoming course to learner's Slack space and Microsoft Outlook e-mail client. In addition to posting ad, participants were triggered in period prior to first training session with postings through these channels about relevant YouTube clips, gamified content, scientific articles etc. These postings required from them to actively respond to questions and exchange/interact with other participants. According to collected feedback, learners were motivated to join the program because of the ability to get to know other people around the globe, the ability to practice English skills and the opportunity to learn about the topic.

In other instances recruitment could take place through groups from similar education domains or stakeholders involved in similar day-to-day activities. Students can be invited during regular teaching classes if they correspond to the training content. Professional relations with organisations and institutions working with young people and first job-seekers or associated partners of institutions can be exploited. Recruitment can be arranged also through VIBES learning hub, a free of charge platform that brings together both instructors and training beneficiaries. Finally, trainings can be organized adjacent to other events.

4. COMMUNICATION WITH TARGET GROUP AND PARTICIPANTS

Many break-the-ice techniques exist that ensure a successful start to the training, help to “break the ice” and foster collaboration once class is composed. In general, we noticed that for non-formal settings trainers / speakers should avoid to take themselves too seriously, but still without falling into the trap of being “too friendly” – all in all, there is still a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities which is what legitimise the very role and status of the speaker. In general, there is always a student / participant there is more open to carry on the discussion, raise questions / doubts / food for thoughts: he / she is indeed the icebreaker and, involuntarily, makes the other feel more comfortable in raising their hand and participating in the discussion – an effect that would be quite difficult to achieve (but not impossible) in online settings. Where ice-breaking techniques were used students involvement was encouraged by asking them to introduce themselves in order to tailor provided contents to their realities.

Overall, a trust-based classroom's environment is essentials to engage, and most importantly, to retain the attention and interest of participates. This requires few narrow-focused efforts from the trainers since the very moment he / she steps into the classroom and meet with participants for the first time. A calm and welcoming approach most definitely helps

participants in feeling comfortable not only with the trainer or the training content, but firstly and foremost with the environment they're in. Trainers are recommended to open each new sessions / the introduction with a new topic with some experience-based examples: this helps the content of training in being perceived as vibrant. Relevant examples should be used to trigger interests.

Bearing these in mind, it is advised to start course with welcoming e-mail from the lecturers. Such mail should thank lecturers for joining the course and express willingness of lecturers to also learn from learners. During this stage, learners should be guided to interaction tools (e.g. Slack) and explained how to use them. The process can be initiated by asking students to learn how to use features such as “random question of the day”. These questions should be prepared by teachers and can help rolling of communication (students can be asked for examples “what food would you choose if you could eat only one thing until you die?”). This type of unofficial communication before the course helps to break the ice and enhance learners readiness to communicate openly,

It is advised to draft collaboration agreement prior to beginning of first loop. This should define issues such as use of video during the meetings, communication protocols (how questions are asked etc), session breaks and similar. Instructors should also plan to devote short period of time prior to session to check functioning of communication technology.

During sessions instructors are encouraged to use ice-breakers and warm-

up activities to attain learner attention and focus and to develop a friendly and psychologically safe atmosphere where people are willing to share their experiences, thoughts and ideas.

During our piloting session we used several activities/short games, to break an ice in the room. For example, instructors used “time machine energizer” asking participants where they would travel and why if they had a chance to use a time machine and whether they would come back. More examples of such activities can be found from the web - under the name ice-breakers for virtual meetings.

During sessions chat functions were enabled and used as parallel channels of communication where students were able to ask questions about the content, take part in short quizzes or where instructors could personally activate participants that seemed passive. This did not necessarily focus on the course content but also on personal feelings, the experience of the development process and exchange with students from other countries and cultures. Such “dual” communication allowed to bridge classical shortcomings of virtual teamwork such as lack of body language and informal communication between the participants.

5. GROUP MANAGEMENT

People love to talk and express themselves when they have a feeling of having someone that is relating to what they are saying. From our experience we learned that even the most shy among participants (not to say the most disinterested) will not contain themselves from saying something at some point. This “breaking” point depends on the degree of freedom and flexibility perceived by participant. The speaker can influence the breaking point of the classroom by “recruiting allies” which in all cases are represented by the person / people emerging naturally as informal spokesperson of the group.

To moderate learner groups we used different tools. Students were divided into breakout groups of 4 to 6 students. Many different techniques were used to keep students engaged. They were assigned group and individual tasks, asked to share experiences from work or studying place. In all these activities instructors can be helped with resources such as YouTube or techniques such as Six Thinking hats method. While doing this it is important to give students as much time as needed to finish and reflect on each activity. Instructors should pay visit to each breakout room and give additional instructions if needed.

Throughout communication instructors are advised to directly address participants either verbally or via chat function. In order to involve everyone each individual should be directly addressed. Chat can be used for participants that do not wish to act verbally. Sufficient number of breaks should be allowed. Students can be triggered to participate using short games and movement sequences, quiz questions, changing methods of different tasks (whiteboard, voting tables etc.) or progress displays of



thematic developments during sessions. It is also worth paying attention to avoiding of lengthy lecturing. We advise delivering of theory in short (5-10 mins length) presentations followed by a practical activity. Virtual meetings make it very easy to lose attention and make versatility of activities even more important than in conventional environment.

6. BLENDED LEARNING AND ONLINE TRANSMISSION

To aid the learning process several different technologies can be used subject to learners becoming acquainted with such technologies. In order to avoid technical problems and for students to come prepared to training sessions e-mail can be sent few hours before beginning containing handouts and instructions how to download, install and access software required for training sessions. During pilot sessions Zoom and Webex were used as main technological solutions accompanied by Padlet for gathering answers from learners. These tools can be substituted with solutions such as Teams, Jamboard or Miro. Mural can be also used for whiteboard, content creation and collaboration. As student feedback reveals, they were particularly open to becoming familiar with new technologies and their different features. Communication with students can be achieved through Slack while Google drive can serve purpose of gathering homework assignments. YouTube and alike solutions may help to break the pace of lecture and to show the content while Mentimeter makes very useful and quick way of feedback collection. Below we provide list (not definitive) of additional solutions that can be used as tools in online delivery of training

Name	Functionalities
Genially	Quizzes, escape rooms, games
Wakelet	Collections of materials online
Canva	Infographics, mind maps, presentations, videos, worksheets
Padlet, Linoit	Online boards
Coggle.it	Mind maps
Google slides	Virtual classrooms, quizzes
Kahoot	Quizzes
Powerpoint	Presentations, videos
Loom	Videos
Adobe spark	Web pages, presentations, infographics, videos
Wordwall	Crossroad puzzles
QR monkey	QR code maker
Word cloud	Making word clouds
MS sway	Presentations, websites

7. PARTICIPANT MOTIVATION AND OPINIONS

Our experience suggests that several motives may be behind the motivation of participants to engage in trainings such as the ones provided by VIBES. Based on collected feedback participants wish to take part in VIBES trainings due to the opportunity to gain knowledge about virtual intercultural collaboration, to exchange with students from other countries and to work in groups. In other instances students stated desire to speak in English, curiosity and willingness to work on innovative content as their motives. Overall, the motives fall in two categories: enhancing virtual team communication and collaboration.

The sustainability of trainings and their evolution will depend on the collection of feedback from participants. In our piloting sessions feedback was collected and recorded verbally in the video call, in writing via Google Drive and interactively via Mentimeter. At the end of each loop (training session) learners were asked to use Padlet to express what they are taking away from the course. This allows instructors to learn what works and what does not. As part of final session students were also introduced to the topic of giving and taking feedback. Finally, students were required to make individual diaries where they should gather direct and indirect feedback about the course and their own experience.

8. ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO RECOMMENDATIONS

Similar to all trainings developed, those created under VIBES are living tissue and as such open to continuous improvements. All prospective users are encouraged to adjust provided trainings and accompanying materials to the context in which they operate. The timing of delivery is also of importance as having too many modules within a narrow timeframe may result in excessive burden on students. Instructors should invest efforts to avoid static expressions of the training and build a climate of co-development and co-creation of the content. For this, building a trust-based environment is essential as it allows the emergence of desired effects such as unfiltered and spontaneous provision of comments. Where several instructors are involved it is important to establish a joint objective and shared mindset prior to implementation.