NATIONAL AND KAPODISTRIAN UNIVERSITY OF ATHENS
SCHOOL OF LETTERS

MSC PROGRAMME IN COUNSELLING AND CAREER GUIDANCE

LABORATORY OF EXPERIMENTAL PEDAGOGY

CENTERS FOR VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 1st INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

ATHENS (23-25-1-04)

PROMOTING NEW FORMS OF WORK ORGANIZATION AND OTHER COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR COMPETITIVENESS AND EMPLOYABILITY

With the Support of the European Committee

ATHENS 2004

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THE epal PROJECT AND ITS UNIQUE ELEMENTS

Mike FITZIMMONS, Chair of the Board of Greater Manchester Company

The epal project is based on the creative use of new media and technologies, combined with innovative approaches to the design and delivery of public services, producing a unique resource for 13-19 year olds in Greater Manchester. It is an electronic information service, fronted by Asha, an electronic personal assistant, imaginatively combining contributions by young people for young people; information, advice and guidance; opportunities for consultation, dialogue, and participation with a range of public and voluntary sector agencies; and opportunities for young people to develop their skills and knowledge both electronically and in face to face settings.

The primary aim is to provide a multi-channel electronic platform through which a virtual community of young people can access information and services supported by a virtual community of specialist agencies. Young people can also participate in ongoing design and development, contributing their own content if desired.

The objectives are to:
- contribute, alongside more traditional ways of doing things, to improved outcomes for young people; measured in terms of their capacity to negotiate the risks and challenges of teenage life
- maximise their opportunities for personal and social development
- gain achievements in terms of informal and formal education
- achieve a successful transition to adulthood.
- innovatively and creatively exploit new technology to support and promote wider participation of young people as citizens, in social and political life.

How does it work? Young people are able to interact with an "epal" in order to acquire information, communicate with others and interact with relevant agencies and organisations. Key background and contextual information is provided covering a wide rage of topics, usually in partnership with agencies working in the field. The technology involved enables the system – the "epal" - to highlight and broker access to local sources, networks and opportunities.

This method of delivering services to young people is twinned with another, equally innovative mechanism, of enabling young people to participate in the development and "content" of the project. This has been around enabling young people to develop skills in a variety of areas such as Urban Music, Animation, Styling, Photography, Journalism – which in turn facilitates these young people to publish, "content" to epal. A consequence of this is that epal gains credentials both locally and digitally, that aid with the take up of the electronic Personal Advisor services. Therefore, the epal project is significant in that there is a structured "back-end" of information and resources, with a youth focussed and produced "front-end".

The unique characteristics of epal

1. Integration with mainstream public services
It is fully integrated into the newly emerging Connexions Service (the Government's flagship youth support initiative targeting 13-19 year olds). The Connexions Service provides information, advice and guidance to 13-19 year olds, in order to help them make informed choices and fulfil their potential. Part of this is around careers, education, training and employment, but also embraces wider youth issues, from drugs and alcohol, through to a host of other specialist support services. Through epal, Connexions is able to deliver services more effectively and efficiently; to a wider range of young people than would be possible through face to face methods, and in ways more in tune with many young peoples' lifestyles and preferences. It makes these services substantially more accessible – both in the sense that electronic access suits the needs of some young people more than face to face approaches may do; but also in the sense that it provides potential for imaginative presentation of materials, more in tune with young peoples' learning styles and expectations.

2. The strength of its partnerships
Underpinning epal is a robust partnership structure, involving all key agencies working with young people, including youth services, Youth Offending Teams, Probation, schools, colleges, the Learning and Skills Council, training providers, transport agencies (GMPTE), health (drugs, alcohol, physical and mental health); the Police and other specialist providers. Working through and integrated within this partnership structure, epal is a vehicle for delivering a very wide range of services and information about services online. It includes a comprehensive directory of services across Greater Manchester, information about courses, leisure opportunities and events, volunteering opportunities, issues relevant to young people and places and people to talk to about those issues. It is also a vehicle for consultation and participation - ensuring that services are designed and delivered in ways that meet young peoples' needs and engaging young people as active citizens in the wider public arena.

3. The range and quality of information and services which it makes accessible.
A robust partnership network, combined with the core contribution of the Connexions Service, ensures that the information and services accessible through epal are of good quality, relatively comprehensive and wide ranging in character. This is critical to ensuring success in terms of credibility with young people, accuracy and maximising the potential usage of the resource.

4. Its strong emphasis on youth participation and involvement
There is a special emphasis given to this aspect of Connexions, which reflects the Government's wider concern about youth exclusion and the lack of wider opportunities for youth involvement and participation in public and political life.
Working through a range of methods, including face to face "skillshops" and events designed to promote young peoples' creativity and involvement, as well as a variety of "online" methods of engagement, epal offers multiple opportunities for engagement and involvement.

Young people can contribute their own content. They can moderate content contributed by others. They can rate content provided by agencies. They can engage in discussion forums about issues relevant to them. They can engage in dialogue with agencies and decision makers who might otherwise be inaccessible. They can participate in consultation exercises about key issues and services, and make their needs and views known. Work is also taking place to engage young people more effectively in the governance of epal and as participants in project work (e.g. market research) that the project can develop.

A key factor is that the design and structure of epal ensures that the look, feel and content of the site reflect young peoples' needs and aspirations. It ensures that the resource is able to sit comfortably within a youth culture dominated by commercially driven services and products which heavily influence young people. Although epal has a very strong public sector ethos in terms of delivering services and support, this is achieved within a context that is young person centred, attractive and engaging - without being patronising. This ensures that the resource is popular and attractive to its target group; in turn making epal a tremendous opportunity and vehicle for public agencies seeking to engage with or deliver services to young people.

5. Its underlying community development principles and their potential
Underlying this methodology, is a set of principles borrowed from community development but applied in the context of emerging e-government. What epal drives forward is a set of electronic communities – with young people at their centre – plus a range of agencies and partner organisations, which may not otherwise be accessible. These can be defined around areas of common interest (issues, etc), or geography (neighbourhood, local authority area, etc); or wider civic issues (consultation, engagement, participation), and have very real potential for supporting and improving "real communities" (introducing young people and their projects from different areas to each other; sharing and disseminating learning). It is important to see epal as a dynamic process – something with potential that will grow and develop over time.

6. Personalisation
epal is personalised and personal. Young people have the option to register (and to do so at differing degrees of detail) when they enter the virtual epal community. They are guided in doing this, and in searching and finding information, by a personal assistant (Asha), who functions in the manner of a wise elder sister - helping young people negotiate around the resource to access what they need. Young people can personalise their information searches, gain on line access to a Connexions personal advisor, and contribute to the site. They are also able to customise their home page.

7. Localness
Although there are a range of web based services for young people nationally, these do not have the local content that is essential to the epal concept. This includes directly accessing locally based services on line (Connexions in the first instance, but with potential for other agencies to experiment in due course), but also the local character of the information available. This is mainly provided through the directory of services, but also through the contributions made by local young people, agencies and organisations, in terms of content.

8. Accessibility and Scale

The accessibility of epal does not just cover issues around access to information or services, but also the technological aspects of accessibility, including mobile phones, pcs, and emerging channels such as digital television. It has been designed from the outset to be scaleable – in its partnership and youth involvement methodology and its technological content and design. Technologically, the design of the resource means that it can cater for an expansion in the number of users, and for an infinite expansion in the content carried. It has also established a methodology for experimenting with the delivery of online services, and for engaging young people and partner agencies in the process. The project also aims to experiment with a further new technological dimension, by piloting content suitable for a youth access digital television channel in due course.