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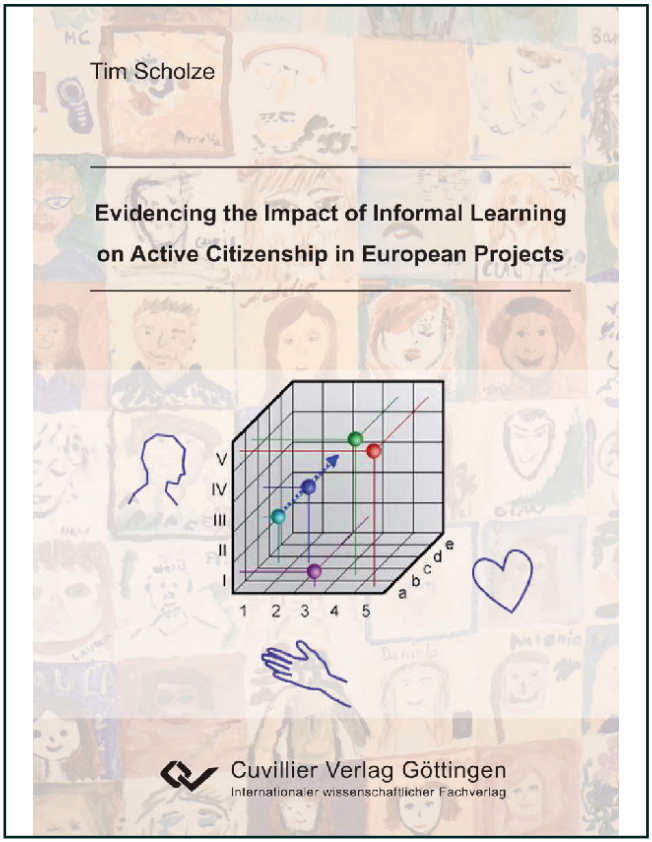
Evidencing the Impact of Informal Learning on Active Citizenship in European Projects



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1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Until 2005, existing projects, networks and research studies on active citizenship rather concentrated on formal education in schools or on an academic level and mainly address to 'active citizens' belonging to mainstream groups in society[2].
They often only gave little space to NGOs, which are the main facilitators of informal learning for citizens in practice.
This led to research designs in which major stakeholders were not directly involved - for instance those organisations working with "difficult" target groups, those which do not have the resources (either financial or skills) to carry out intensive evaluation and those in which the "activity" of the educated citizens is very difficult to discover (e.g. in closed groups as socially disadvantaged youths, victims of violence, back warded communities etc.) but also self organised learning activities.
It can be concluded that despite multitudinous research activities on Active Citizenship in most of the cases the beneficiaries (learners) as well as "their" NGOs were not involved in research and thus being mainly regarded rather as research subjects than as research partners.
The subject of this survey, the ACT approach, aimed at offering an alternative approach to the issue by actively integrating grass-root projects in evaluation and research activities.

There are certain system built obstacles concerning the remit to evaluate the impact of informal learning on active citizenship because of a rather unclear terminology and understanding of central concepts like Active Citizenship and Informal Learning.
This was a rather unexpected discovery since Active Citizenship and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning are seen as vital in improving social inclusion and in increasing economic productivity and thus range at the top levels of the political agenda and in the programme documents of the Lifelong Learning Programme[3].
Consequently, an additional remit evolved to investigate relevant literature and local and regional projects to clarify the meanings and uses of the terms Active Citizenship and informal, non-formal and formal learning to clearly describe research design and its basic assumptions.

Active Citizenship
Having researched a large part of European literature about the issue, it must be stated that meaning and scope of definitions concerning Active Citizenship vary largely with the backgrounds and the motives of authors and the intentions of the awarding authority. They may be politically influenced, relate to formal or rather informal learning environments, follow utilitarian approaches (inclusion in working environments) and strongly depend on either communitarian or liberal positions of the authors.
For ACT, this instable explanatory model was a major problem since the large variability of meaning also limited a comprehensive description of citizenship competence. How can Active Citizenship Competence be evaluated if the concept varies to a large extent, especially in a not-formal learning environment?
In contextualised learning, in real life, beyond the walls of schools or universities, relevant citizenship competence can only be regarded in connection with the living context of the individual. From

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2 For instance in: University of Surrey 2001-2004: The ETGACE-Study.

3 Official Journal of the European Union (2006) Decision of the European Parliament and the Council establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning; (13): "adult education' means all forms of non-vocational adult learning, whether of a formal, non-formal or informal nature; There is a need to promote active citizenship (35); Leonardo da Vinci objective d: to improve the transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning; also mentioned in Article 33, Transversal programme".