

Study Visits knowledge sharing seminar
Thessaloniki, Greece 22-23 September 2011

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FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS:
You have resources to make your visit pleasant and worthwhile!

Key issues for first time organisers

- **Preparing and planning** is important, but you can only plan to a certain point. Over-planning can be too constraining, too complicated to stick to. Build a **flexible plan** around key constraints and foresee options and alternatives. Leave extra room for exchange, for getting behind schedule, particularly during the participants' presentations and outside visits.
- **Managing the group's dynamics** is perhaps the single most important aspect of hosting a study visit. It's the participants' visit too, they can help carry the visit or make it difficult for various reasons. Get the group to work together on your side, not against you. Identify your main allies in the group, and monitor for sources of discontent or tension to cut them short before they infest the group. Before your participants arrive, **use information in Olive to find out what they are interested in and what they do**.
- Be ready to adapt your goals and expectations to the participants'. Be tolerant of their limitations and encourage them, as some may not have sufficient language skills to make their presentation clearly for example. Some participants may have special needs or desires that do not fit with your plans or the group, for example eating and going to bed early, while you planned otherwise. **Be flexible with their desires, within reason**. In case of diverging requests, stick to the plan or find a common ground.
- Bottom line 1: follow your instincts as a host. If you are interested in your topic, if you like exchanging with people from other cultures, and if you have a sense of hospitality, you certainly have the resources to collaborate with the participants to make their visit pleasant and worthwhile.
- Bottom line 2: **there are no absolute golden rules**. Each visit is different, in a different context, on different approaches to different topics. Organisers are different, each with their own style. Each visitor is different; each group of participants develops its own dynamics. What works well in some cases may not be adapted in others. So take advice, but rely on you instinct to see if that advice is good for your visit (see bottom line 1).

Building a balanced programme

▪ Stakes and motivation of different parties involved in a study visit

Participants should be motivated by the topic, but organisers should be aware that participants may also choose a visit based on other criteria: study visit *language* (particularly for visits not in English), *location* (a place or region they would like to visit, particularly for more touristic or attractive places), and *time of year* (participants may only be available to take a week for a visit at certain periods of the year).

Organisers should not take for granted that participants are all highly motivated by the topic. Use Olive to check on participant motivation: see what number of choice your visit is for them, and look at their other choices to see what their interests are. Also check for *special needs* (eating, handicap, etc) in relation to planned activities.

Organisers and their partners in hosting a study visit (guest speakers, sponsors, etc.) also have their own motivation that may not necessarily be simply to promote exchange on their topic at the European level. Some may seek to network, to show off their tools and experiences, to impress their national partners by organising in international workshop, etc. Such goals are not necessarily bad goals, but *organisers must keep in mind that the visit is above all to be organised for the visiting participants.*

Take time **at the start of a study visit** (during the welcome/ice-breaking phase) to have participants each **briefly and openly express their understanding of the topic, their motivation** for participating in the study visit and **what they hope to get out of the visit (expectations' check)**. This can help organisers to better know the group and group expectations, and thus better adapt the contents of the visit.

▪ The different “times” in a study visit programme

A possible approach to “balancing out” activities in a study visit plan can be to analyse **different types of “times” or of activity** and non-activity times during the visit:

- participant work time: participant presentations and work on the group report work, i.e. during which work is actively produced by participants,
- hosting activity time: guest speakers, visits, host presentation, etc., i.e. activities during which the participants are the audience,
- informal exchange time: any time during which participants exchange with host partners or other participants, about the visit or about other related topics,
- group touristic / leisure time : specific outings to show sites, access local culture, etc, (not directly related to the topic, but which can be important for group dynamics and informal exchange time),
- free time: individual free time for resting, shopping, etc.

The typology is not important; organisers can identify different categories that fit their plan. What is important is **distributing those different types of formal work, non-formal work and relaxation times in a balanced manner** throughout the duration of the visit so that each day is varied and no particular day is too demanding. In particular:

- avoid long periods of presentations (participant or host speaker) as participants are mostly “passive” and tend to lose concentration, take a siesta, etc.;
- use “down-time” (travel time, waiting) and meals as informal discussion time by encouraging exchange and questions on what has already been done during the visit;
- provide sufficient “recovery time”: remember that participants have to work in a foreign language on a topic they may not be very aware of, and that this requires extra efforts on their part to follow and to be involved. They may need or wish to have a certain amount of free time simply to recover, or to shop or visit.

Coping with different levels of language ability

Typically some group members will be more proficient in the study visit language than others, and sometimes some participants may not in fact be proficient enough to participate or make their presentation. But once the group has already come and your visit has started, it will be too late to do much about participants with insufficient language skills. Typically participants with insufficient language skills often will do one of two things:

- Some will make great efforts to say what they can, even if their presentation is not very relevant or clear. In this case it is important to honour their efforts, not to show impatience or dissatisfaction which could offend them.
- Some will be shy and say they cannot give a presentation: in this case it is important to encourage them, to help them if necessary.

Here are some tips that may help in dealing with participants language difficulties:

- Before the visit:
 - provide simple clear documents with definitions of key concepts and terms pertaining to the SV topic;
 - warn invited and hosting speakers about possible language difficulties (speaking slowly, simple terms, avoid idiom and expressions).
- At the beginning of the visit : review key concepts and terms, and answer questions regarding the general topic of the visit.
- During and following complicated presentations (particularly native speakers):
 - play the role of an ‘idiot’: ask questions about more complicated points to have the speaker re-explain those points;
 - eventually summarise what has just be said in a simpler manner and question the group to see if they have understood key points.
- For presentations of participants with insufficient language skills
 - be supportive and tolerant of their difficulties, or of the partially inadequate nature of their presentation (avoid offending them);

- try to help clarify points that may not be clear, or that they had difficulties expressing clearly.

Being flexible, helping participants, and coping with the unexpected

Being flexible and coping with problems is part of a study visit, and closely related to managing group dynamics. This has implications regarding both the composition of the hosting team that actually stays with participants, and regarding recommendations for how to deal with problems.

▪ **Hosting and the host team**

A study visit is hosted by an organisation but often most of the preparing and the hosting work is done by only one or two people. During the visit it is important that:

- the main host person or persons should be with the group from beginning to end to favour the bonding process with participants and maintain group dynamics;
- at all times, the main host should not be alone, but should have someone to help with individual problems, logistics, etc.

▪ **Dealing with problems and the unexpected**

As a host, you will probably receive *various individual requests* for help or for adaptations in the programme, for example. To deal with individual problems it is best to have a second host at hand and all times so as to not disturb group work for individual needs. **Try to satisfy individual needs within reason, as long as they do not affect group interests.**

Unexpected problems or events that affect the visit plan or the group as a whole can happen. Organisers should be mentally prepared for the unexpected, and have some margin to adapt to such problems.

One solution which helps is to plan alternatives or “Plan Bs” ahead of time. You may not know what will go wrong, but having options will make it easier to adapt.

If you need to make major changes in your plan, or if you encounter a group demand for change of plan, be as flexible as you can. What is most important is not to jeopardise the cohesion of the group or the purpose and functioning of the study visit as a whole.

In many cases, changes will involve cancelling or cancellation of outside visits, attractions, etc. The group members may be disappointed but they can also help “fill in the gap” in the form of informal exchange time – go for a coffee, take a walk to a nearby site. It is also good to have a financial margin allowing you to cover extra unforeseen costs if need be.

A relatively collective, democratic and/or participatory approach to adapting visit plans can be helpful as the participants are included in the decisions. However, avoid asking them to participate in too many decisions about options, etc. You are the organiser and you know the context of the visit; they rely on you to make the best decisions without losing too much time over changes that may be necessary.