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## **ORGANISING A STUDY VISIT NEEDS MOTIVATION FROM INSIDE**

### **Hosting a visit is an opportunity to get out of routine**

**Planning a study visit requires a strong motivation from inside.** As I was able to experience, both as participant and as organiser, study visits spring out mainly from the enthusiasm of the organiser. In my case, after almost twenty years of dedicated work in the field of the European cooperation, I wanted to give my Association (Proteo Fare Sapere CAMPANIA) the opportunity to come out from routine.

What makes me happier is to have been able to allow many headmasters and teachers of Caserta, Salerno and Ischia to be involved in the activities of the visit. Some of them took part at the first session, others attended the closing lunch and the delivery of certificates of attendance to the participants on the last day, and others took part in many activities.

Students of the schools participated actively as guides and hosts. In the Vocational School for Tourism and Catering, where we had lunches on four out of five days of the visit, students were able to show their competences in reception, restaurant, kitchen, tour guide.

We are very satisfied, as Association, about the experience we did and we are going to host another study visit at Salerno next December.

We carried out all the planned activities, even if the programmeme was a little overloaded. We involved a great number of partners: the University of Naples and of Caserta, Campania Region, the Buonarroti Institute of Caserta who provided the participation of teachers and teachers trainers, hosted activities, contributed greatly to carrying out what we had planned. Most present experts involved also their institution; they spread information inside their schools, departments and organisations; they involved staff in participation and had the study visit on their plan of activities. The hosting schools not only have offered places and facilities, but they also selected the responsible teachers who prepared a warm welcome, prepared students, reported projects and educational activities.

Cohesion and empathy deserve particular mentioning; they characterised relationships in the group and between the group and people who welcomed it.

One consideration I would like to share: the group report was completed after the conclusion of the visit; I got the impression that for this reason they didn't produce a totally shared document.

## **How to ensure active involvement of all participants and how to use the diversity of their professional backgrounds to the benefit of the visit**

I think that this is one of the most difficult challenges of the visits: not only have the participants **different professional backgrounds** but they also have **different expectations**, and this can be difficult to manage. Participants also have **different attitude** concerning their personal involvement in the visit's activities: someone can be very active and stimulating; others can appear more receptive. The organiser should pay attention to this and **create appropriate communicative contexts** to care for different communicative styles.

As soon as we receive the list of participants, we have to study carefully the profiles of the participants and their expectations before the visit. We have to **inform** school headmasters, experts, helpful authorities **about participants** and their profiles: we can send materials, invite them to a preparatory meeting and fix appointments at their institutions. This will arouse guests' and participants' curiosity and expectations: they both will be much more involved.

Some host headmasters or invited to participate to the meetings could become interested in the profile of some participants and ask for a contact with him/her. It can happen that they will ask to have the possibility to welcome them in their schools or in spare time. At Caserta, for instance, a headmaster at the beginning of the meeting on the first day asked if there was anybody interested to visit his school. There were four and one morning, before they started activities, for one hour, he hosted his foreign colleagues. He offered a cup of coffee and let them visit school labs and discussed of some projects with the teachers in charge.

It is also important to **encourage contacts among participants before visit**. The organiser can send them a speech outline; a topic for discussion for further studies; this gives the opportunity to understand that the commitment of the participant is not only his speech.

It's very important to hold a **meeting in the evening before the beginning of activities**. This can be a key element to create a good leaning to be involved. But anyway, it shouldn't be a working meeting. The best thing is to offer a drink, as we did at Caserta, with typical local products, fixing the time according to the stated arrivals. It can be an excellent starting point for the first approach to break the ice, to get to know one another out of the working context. In this first moment, there is place to express possible particular needs, maybe already expressed in the first contacts from distance between hosts and guests. Some participants take the chance to give a little gift to the hosts (a book, cartoon, typical products). It's a meeting useful to discover, to show inclinations, curiosity, interests; this helps very much to start working on the next day as friends, as people who know each other well.

We should take great **care of the emotional aspects** of the participants, mainly when they have to encounter people who do not know one another.

During the first meeting, it is useful to agree on the ways for the presentations of participants; we'll identify our needs and levels of competence in the language of the meeting. We are going to plan the time schedule for presentations. Every day two or three participants (based on the number) will summarise the daily activities, according to criteria that will make the participation of everybody easier in a well-balanced way.

### **How to foster the discussion on the daily activities and how to use it as a stimulus for the group cohesion**

I experienced this technique during my visit as participant at Royan in France. I'm going to tell you what happened: in the visit there was a Danish colleague, who didn't speak French and wasn't able to understand it well (the visit was in English). He wasn't very talkative and even if he had an evident interest for the visits and activities, he didn't interact very much with other participants. I worked with him on the summary of the second day and this was very useful to know him and to have a first conversation with him.

I suggested the activity also for the visit we hosted at Caserta. There were 5 French speaking participants (3 French and 2 Belgian) and 5 not French speaking (1 from Turkey, 2 from Spain and 1 from Romania) with different levels of knowledge of French. I arranged, for the five days of working, that **daily "reporters"** (reports) were two, one French language and one not. This report should be short, summarise main ideas emerging and give the opportunity to other participants to take part in the conversation. Participants discussed and prepared their daily report not in a working time. At the beginning of the meeting of the next day, in pairs, they presented it to the group.

I saw colleagues positively charged, discussing during commutes, waiting for transport, during working breaks, sharing impressions, thinking things through.

Besides the usefulness for drafting of the final report, this activity was useful to foster the cohesion of the group, to motivate everyone to participate more actively and equally to the work, to create more intensive exchanges. The last two days, for different reasons, we weren't able to make the daily report and in the group report the participants expressed regret that this activity was not finished as they considered it a good idea.

### **Informal evaluation after the visit**

This idea came from my experience of training done in a Comenius 3.2 course in Paris, in 1998, on "Quality in the European Projects Management".

Participants were asked to **choose an image (photo, drawing, painting or object) representative of their personal experience of the visit and to comment it**. This served as a stimulus to maintain relations after the visit; this also allowed participant to express impressions, feelings and ideas that the participants had not expressed either during the visit or in the report.

I wanted **an assessment that would be an expression of what the participants had felt**, and I invited them to express in all sincerity, in a free and creative way. 8 out of 10 replies were

received. There was a wide variety of answers and a richness of emotions; but the emotional involvement has not, however, neglected aspects of content and substance of the work they carried out. But this remained in the background.

I suggest this form of assessment because not all participants felt they were equally involved in and taken into account in preparing the final report. Two colleagues have left half a day before and expressed ideas that have not been fully implemented.

### **How to ensure media coverage for the visit (press, web, television, school internal news)**

Before the visit I **contacted a journalist**, I already knew, of the most important of the Campania regional newspaper, 'Il Mattino', who also deals with school news. I had an appointment and went to talk to him. I explained to him what a study visit was; he had already published another article on the initiatives of our Association and was very happy with my proposal.

I would have preferred him to interview the participants, but he was very busy and he did not promise me that. He asked me a note with **the documentation of the visit**, which I sent to him (the description of the visit, the list and profiles of participants, the programme). Unfortunately, I did not have a photo.

On the second day of the visit, participants were very pleased to find at breakfast a copy of "Il Mattino" with the article on their visit.

Before the visit, I **prepared a press release** and I spread it on various websites: National Proteo; Didaweb, a community network of school stakeholders engaged in the collaborative research/action, the Local FLC (Federation of Knowledge Workers, the largest Italian trade union of School). Some colleagues, spontaneously, advertised on the website of their school, someone else has advertised on Facebook.

During the fourth day of work, in Salerno, the **school** that was hosting the visit has **invited a local television network to interview some participants**. It was broadcast in the evening service on TV.

Just after the visit, one of the French participants has created a Facebook group 'Les Amis de Caserta', to which almost all the participants gave their contribution and which is still active today.

As a result, I have been contacted by people who wanted to participate in the visit from other regions of Italy; other regional Proteo and authorities have requested information on how to arrange a visit.

**The coverage of the visit by the media is very simple.** You only need to prepare a press release, succinctly, to provide the newspaper editors or reporters, contacted directly, all the elements to contextualise the visit and understand its value.