

## The Pro-Skills' Philosophy

*Adult Education is based on the "belief that people can take hold of their lives, can make changes, that they are not helpless in the face of structural forces"*

*(M.K. Smith, 1994)*

**Pro-Skills** is a project part of the **European Lifelong Learning programme (Grundtvig)** and co-financed by the European Commission. The nine project Partners come from eight European countries and are represented by non-profit organizations with expertise in different fields of work: adult education, health promotion, addiction prevention.

Pro-Skills is concerned with the elaboration of a **practice-oriented training concept** for the promotion of **personal, social and self-management skills in socially disadvantaged people (especially young adults)** as basic conditions for Lifelong Learning.

### The background of the project

People with a difficult social background or that are experiencing social disadvantage<sup>1</sup> rarely have access to the offers of adult education and Lifelong Learning: for this target group, the lack or non-acknowledgement of social and personal skills represent a barrier. Apart from technical and methodological skills, social and personal skills are basic key competences of adults and important pre-conditions for the access and the successful accomplishment of any kind of formal and non-formal education. Furthermore they are essential for the development and consolidation of an individual social and cultural identity and are considered as important protectors against harmful and addictive behaviour thus representing an important tool to achieve a good quality of life.

These basic skills rarely are part of the curricula of adult education and there are no offers for adults to train these skills effectively in a protective learning environment; on the other hand, the number of adults facing conditions of instability and disadvantage lacking these skills is increasing: the first Pro-Skills project was targeted at filling this gap.

**Pro-Skills2**, the second phase of the project, focuses on a standardized "train-the-trainer" concept that qualifies for and supports professionals in the promotion of personal, social and self-management skills in socially disadvantaged adults. It aims at a broad dissemination and lasting implementation of the innovative elements of the Pro-Skills concept by making politicians and decision makers aware of the need for basic skills in curricula and educational offers in the field of adult education, Lifelong Learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> You can read more about "social disadvantage" – definition and aspects – in Pro-Skills1 Manual pp. 21-23 [www.pro-skills.eu](http://www.pro-skills.eu)

## **"Why" promote basic skills in socially disadvantaged adults**

In a continuously changing world, more and more special competences - in science and technology, as well as social and civic competences – are required to understand and deal with the challenges and complexities of modern day life, apart from the economic and social consequences of the global financial crisis.

In this context, the responsiveness of education and training systems to new demands must be improved in order to better meet the skills needs of the labour market and the social and cultural challenges of a globalised world, addressing as a matter of urgency the situation of young women and young men who face exceptional difficulties in entering the job market. In particular, more flexible learning pathways are required which will enable men and women at different stages in life to move between different education and training systems, as well as between formal and non-formal learning environments and which can attract non-traditional learners.

Within these needs **Pro-Skills partners chose to give specific priority**, addressing targeted approaches, **to the more vulnerable people**, particularly the low skilled, unemployed, younger and older workers, disabled people, people with mental disorders, or minority groups such as migrants, **who are at great risk of future inactivity and social exclusion and who are all dependent on social benefits.**

These people, being victims of specific unprivileged conditions or entire society, often perceive themselves as powerless and suffer a low level of self-esteem and self-efficacy in managing life events and health conditions. For this reason it is fundamental to offer them the opportunity to work on basic skills. Personal, social and self-management skills also influence the motivation to learn and become actively involved in and for the environment in which one lives.

The focus is on the personal basis and not on the external conditions that are difficult to influence always aware that living conditions, the way society is organised and the rules that govern it as well as social circumstances are further important conditions for integration.

The training of basic skills in socially disadvantaged adults aims at promoting an "inclusive" perspective into society. That is why the Pro-Skills concept better explains itself on the basis of certain ethical and philosophical principles.

## Life skills for unprivileged persons in Lifelong Learning: The background theory that supports skills based education

*"People who regard themselves as highly efficacious act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as inefficacious. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it."*

*(Albert Bandura)*

In 1986, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion and the World Health Organization recognized life skills in terms of making better health choices and enabling people to learn throughout life.<sup>2</sup>

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (WHO definition).

Life skills may be directed towards personal actions or actions towards others, as well as towards actions to change the surrounding environment making it conducive to health.

Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE)<sup>3</sup> has a long history of supporting child development and health promotion. It is now acknowledged as effectiveness approach to address a variety of issues of child and youth development and thematic responses<sup>4</sup>.

Expected learning outcomes include a combination of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills with a particular emphasis on those skills that related to critical thinking and problem solving, self-management, communication and inter-personal skills.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> **Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion First International Conference on Health Promotion Ottawa, 21 November 1986 Develop Personal Skills**

*Health promotion supports personal and social development through providing information, education for health, and enhancing life skills. By so doing, it increases the options available to people to exercise more control over their own health and over their environments, and to make choices conducive to health.*

*Enabling people to learn, throughout life, to prepare themselves for all of its stages and to cope with chronic illness and injuries is essential. This has to be facilitated in school, home, work and community settings. Action is required through educational, professional, commercial and voluntary bodies, and within the institutions themselves.*

<sup>3</sup> *The term life skills-based education is often used almost interchangeably with skills based health education. The difference between the two approaches lies only in the content or the topics that are covered. Skills-based health education focuses on "health." Life skills-based education may focus on peace education, human rights, citizenship education, and other social issues as well as health. Both approaches address real-life applications of essential knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and both employ interactive teaching and learning methods.*

*The term livelihood skills refers to capabilities, resources, and opportunities for pursuing individual and household economic goals; in other words, income generation. Livelihood skills include technical and vocational abilities (carpentry, sewing, computer programming, etc.); skills for seeking jobs, such as interviewing strategies; and business management, entrepreneurial, and money management skills.*

<sup>4</sup> *as expressed in UNGASS on HIV/AIDS (2001), UNGASS on Children (2002), World Youth Report (2003), World Program for Human Rights Education (2004), UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005), UN Secretary General's Study on Violence Against Children (2006), 51st Commission on the Status of Women (2007), and the World Development Report (2007).*

The effective programmes are targeting young people in school settings to promote healthy behaviours and prevent risk factors. But it is also demonstrated that life skills programmes improve learning processes and teaching methods.

Life skills education is based on studies conducted - through decades of research and experience - in behavioural science, and the disciplines of education and child development, on the way human - especially children and adolescent- grow and learn; acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills; and behave.

One of the most important theories that lie at the core of the life skills education model is the social learning theory (or social cognitive theory) by Albert Bandura.

The social learning theory focuses on the learning that occurs within a **social context**.

It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modelling. ***"Most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action."*** (Bandura 1977)

Moreover the social learning theory asserts that people are **more likely** to engage in certain behaviours when they believe they are **capable** of executing those behaviours **successfully**. This means that they will have high self-efficacy. In layman's terms self-efficacy could be looked at as self-confidence towards learning.

Social learning theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences.

Self-efficacy is central in the theory of Bandura as it is referred to as the own concept a person has about the possibility to be able to face challenges and problems and to take control of the events in life situation and social context. ***"Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations."*** (Bandura 1986)

The self-efficacy is not an innate capacity but it is learnt during life time and it can increase or be reduced depending on life events.

Another important aspect of the social learning theory is the self-regulation concept that explains how people choose their learned behaviours. The self-regulation process occurs when the individual has his **own ideas** about what is **appropriate** or inappropriate behaviour and **chooses** his actions accordingly.

Self-efficacy and self-regulation are strictly related to the possibility to use one's own competences and resources and activate life skills. On the other hand life skills are necessary to be able to face problems and situations and improve self-efficacy.

---

<sup>5</sup> WHO INFORMATION SERIES ON SCHOOL HEALTH Skills for health: Skills-based health education including life skills: An important Child-Friendly/Health-Promoting School of a Child-Friendly/Health-Promoting School

In Bandura's theory the individual is active and is able to control and manage life's events which mean most of all that everybody can learn how to do it.

It is thus possible to learn life skills: they are important protective factors to help people not to get lost in adversity, maintaining self-esteem and self-confidence, internal locus of control, and a sense of life purpose as well as social support from family, friends and community.

Several studies in community psychology have shown that these resources are fundamental in coping with vulnerability and different kind of stressors (Rappaport & Seidman 2000; Wiley & Rappaport 2000). The ability - due to the personal competence to find personal and social resources (life skills and social support) - to face stressing events and bad conditions is directly linked to social inclusion or disadvantage situation.

Life skills are also related to the sense of empowerment, "the process by which people increase control over events that influence their lives." Empowerment is also a pre-condition of the psychological wellbeing, and "cannot be given but come from within individuals and the group that they have formed." (Laverack 2007)

The Pro-Skills team considers social and personal skills as basic competences you need to manage your life and important pre-conditions for the access and the successful accomplishment of any kind of formal and informal education. Furthermore they are essential for the development and consolidation of an own social and cultural identity and they are seen as important resources for a healthy life style.

Unfortunately these basic skills are rarely part of the curricula of adult education, and few offers exist for adults to train these skills effectively in a protective learning environment. (Pro-Skills training concept)

For this reason it is important to offer a chance to start a new process of development and learning, improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective to this target groups.

## The Pro-Skills ethical manifest

The Pro-Skills concept is built on certain ethical aspects, to use the concept in our spirit the user has to approve and embrace these views.

Our belief starts in a view of equal opportunities of every man and woman which means every human being is equal. With the Pro-Skills concept and as a result of the Pro-Skills intervention we strive to empower participants to be active in achieving a more even distribution of wealth, influence and active participation in society and everyday life.

Although our concept involves skill training this in no way means we do not acknowledge our target groups being skilful. Our target groups master skills to survive in their environment and these are, as every skill built on experience and reflection. Pro-Skills training offers a way to transform skills to be more useful and productive in an active participation to change disadvantaging conditions. This statement also reveals our overall belief that marginalization or disadvantage means locking out groups and individuals from our society. This directs the focus to the societal structures in our Pro-Skills training.

Our Pro-Skills concept therefore aims at empowering and connecting participants to take active part in changing conditions in their life and in society.

Conclusive this brings us to the point of communicating these views to participants or potential participants in our intervention. To communicate how we define problems, our strategy and aims by using the Pro-Skills concept is essential and a step that can't be overlooked. There are both ethical and pedagogical reasons connected to this. The ethical dimension involves considerations on equal opportunities and addresses every human being's right to decide in which process of development he wants to take part in. This is also related to the legitimacy our concept receives from the participants in both ethical and pedagogical terms. The pedagogical approach has a bearing of the importance of meta-cognition, also as a basic pedagogical principle, first as the awareness of development as a key component in learning, secondly as the right to be aware and master development and learning. This we regard as basic principles and key components in the Pro-Skills concept of learning.

Our aim with Pro Skills training is to add value in life and in health. Our knowledge interest focuses on life value<sup>6</sup>. This knowledge interest has the potential to make a difference in managing life and uneven conditions in order to change both life and conditions. This also benefits, in our way of defining it, health by improving the participants' sense of coherence.

---

<sup>6</sup> This is in contrast to the most common recognized value of education, exchange value, where you strive to achieve predefined goals to exchange them on a market. This on the other hand doesn't necessarily mean that exchange value could not support life value and vice versa. It should be looked upon as a main focus of the skills knowledge interests.

## The Pro-Skills philosophy

**Our vision** lies in a view of equal opportunities of every man and woman, with particular attention to the empowerment of socially disadvantaged people, and in the need for a common effort to achieve a more fair and inclusive society

**Our mission** is to enhance Lifelong Learning education offers to contribute to human wellbeing and health by promoting personal, social and self-management skills in people with a difficult social background, as basic conditions for a real chance to take actively part in improving their life conditions

### Our Core Values

*"There is no escape from value choices in Welfare systems"*  
(R.M. Titmuss, 1977)

#### **Equal Opportunity,**

Education is the gateway to opportunities. All human beings have the civil right to equal opportunities of access to education, to develop their potential, independence and identity. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and teach and the guarantee of equal educational opportunity for all.

#### **Social Justice**

An equal access to Lifelong Learning is fundamental to pursue social change against issues of poverty, discrimination, unemployment and other forms of exclusion. This is vital for building social integration and respect for the worth, dignity and equality of every individual in our diverse society.

#### **Democracy**

The strive to ensure equal access to Lifelong Learning and other resources for socially disadvantaged people, refusing any kind of discrimination is an effort that can contribute to build real conditions of democratic life in our society.

#### **Participation and active citizenship**

Socially disadvantaged people are encouraged to participate meaningfully in decision making, to modify their difficult life conditions, build their own future and thus contributing politically to the wellbeing of the community.

#### **Solidarity**

The endeavour on behalf of people with a difficult social background refers to an attitude of solidarity: as worth, potential and key competences of individuals are enhanced; solidarity helps to realize equality among human beings.

### **Autonomy**

In order to promote responsible self-determination in socially disadvantaged adults, we believe in the need of discovering existing resources and strengths, as human beings must become protagonists of their life.

This goal can be achieved by the enforcement of basic skills, but also by interpersonal relationships and environmental opportunities.

### **Collective Action**

Individuals are strengthened when they work together for the common good. As professionals with an educational and preventing role, we believe that we can improve both professional status and the quality of Lifelong Learning offer when we act unite and advocate collectively.

### **Partnership**

Partnerships with families, organizations, politicians and other stakeholders are essential for the quality of education and the empowerment of individuals, accordingly we believe that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change.

### **Cultural Identity**

We treat each person in a caring and respectful manner, mindful of individual and cultural differences or personal values, aiming at promoting sensitivity to and knowledge about cultural and ethnic diversity. Social and cultural identity is also a learning resource and can become an important foundation for a healthy sense of self-esteem.

## **Pro-Skills educational concept of Lifelong Learning**

Lifelong Learning is “[...] *all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.*” (European Commission on Education and Training, 2006).

Lifelong Learning, formal or non-formal, spans the whole of life; it comprises both theoretical knowledge as well as practical skills, it encompasses the acquisition, improvement and extension in whatever form, of skills of all descriptions.

The Pro-Skills concept includes elements and basic principles of some innovative approaches such as self-regulated, productive, cooperative and experience-based learning in adult education<sup>7</sup>.

These approaches seem to be more effective for the sustainable support of knowledge and skills than traditional teaching methods. The learners are rather subjects of the learning process than objects because they train to regulate their learning process by themselves.

Founded on the concept of empowerment, the focus on personal key competences to manage life events also affects the capacity of organizations, groups with similar interests and community to influence life environment and health behaviour.

That is why this methodological choice also reflects Pro-Skills’ ethical and philosophical principles.

---

<sup>7</sup> You can read more on these approaches in Pro-skills1 Manual, pp 15-20 [www.pro-skills.eu](http://www.pro-skills.eu)



## Methodological principles of Pro-Skills concept

*"Theory without practice leads to an empty idealism, and action without philosophical reflection leads to mindless activism"*  
(Elias & Merriam, 1980)

**Human beings have potentials, resources and competences** that can be developed to reach life goals and wellbeing. Emphasis is placed on the individual's personal growth and self-direction in learning.

An **experiential approach** to learning is favoured as the learner's experience is enhanced as the main determining factor for participation in decision making and change.

**Stimulation of all the senses** makes people "feel" what they experience: the feelings associated to real experience help to enforce learning capability and value of change. Simulation of real life situations helps to ensure that the trained skills will be transferred into every-day life.

**Non-conventional** methods are preferred on the belief that pre-defined schemes, traditional and recognized methods, or technological instruments, etc. could be felt as a barrier to real learning by socially disadvantaged people.

This "**unplugged**" approach calls for an effort from the trainer to be more authentic and spontaneous and encourage the participants.

A surplus value is given to a **protected environment** in which individuals are allowed to practice, experiment and feel, sustained in their potentials, without experiencing judgement or performance evaluation.

A common effort is given to promote and enhance a **trusting and authentic relationship**, to support people's sense of self-worth and the feeling of self-efficacy which is a fundamental precondition for the learning process

Pro-Skills innovative teaching approach is based on a large use of games and relational dynamics exercises that act as tools for the aims and goals expressed by its philosophy: they stimulate people to go deeper to their thoughts and feel their experience "here and now", to promote a change in life-conditions based on their own resources. In practice they aim at creating the conditions to the participants to absorb the knowledge or exercise the skills necessary to reach their goal concerning their needs; helping people to create relations and through the interaction to obtain a solution to a problem.

People can react in different ways to this kind of exercises or find a good chance to confess very deep feelings and situations: trainers must be very careful in using these techniques and games, handle the dynamics which are developed with efficiency and be able to control the situation also by offering alternative solutions. That is why it is important to make a contract with participants to engage people to certain commitments and make them more responsible for their choices.

In order to make the trainers able to use this methodology to reach the goals expressed by Pro-Skills philosophy we suggest this training proposal: we believe that a successful realization of Pro-Skills training concept with socially disadvantaged people requires a collection of skills, characteristics and tasks that seems necessary to work within this perspective.

Many trainers already have the knowledge and skills to use such games and techniques, but they have to be aware of the fact that, within Pro-Skills concept, these same methodologies assume a new significance. That is why trainers who are interested in Pro-Skills must be trained in the way we suggest, also through this short handout.

By using this training proposal that refers to a holistic approach, trainers could have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their-selves and their role within the complex learning and social needs of this changing world.

Pro-Skills concept is a piece of work in progress that needs further development and improvement: trainers and professionals who want to embrace the Pro-Skills philosophy and be engaged in everyday practice with this "subjective" perspective connected to human rights, must keep alive collective thinking and exchange. An important need is also referred to collect experiences of Pro-Skills concept implementation with final target groups in order to allow evaluation of the same: in a period of lack of public financial resources, sustainability and dissemination of this proposal among other professionals and their organizations depends on the concrete results and values we are able to demonstrate.

We are finally aware that it should be integrated into a wider programme of interventions, enhancing stakeholders' involvement and social dialogue at different levels between public services (social and health), education and training providers to address the high goal of a more fair and healthy society.