

Psychodrama skills for trainers working with unemployed people

*The Austrian contribution to the Grundtvig learning partnership
Supporting Potential Development*

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■ Abstract

The Austrian psychodramatists organized in the Austrian Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Dynamics (OEAGG) gladly accepted the invitation to cooperate in the Grundtvig learning partnership Supporting Potential Development. The partnership had the main objective to develop and to promote new and adequate teaching and educational skills for teachers and educators which are working with people who are in a condition of disadvantage nowadays, particularly with job problems. Each organization had to carry out one thirty-hours training with 20 learners. The Austrian training had been carried out between April and June 2011 in Vienna by 4 experienced trainers using psychodramatic techniques. These techniques are presented in detail in the article and can be offered as good practice for international exchange.

■ **Key words:** *Grundtvig, psychodrama, role playing, sociodrama, unemployment.*

Abilità psicodrammatiche per i trainers che lavorano con persone disoccupate

*Il contributo austriaco al partenariato di apprendimento
Grundtvig Supporting Potential Development*

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■ Sommario

Gli psicodrammatisti austriaci organizzati nell'Austrian Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Dynamics (OEAGG) hanno accettato volentieri l'invito di collaborare al progetto Grundtvig partenariato di apprendimento Supporting Potential Development. Il partenariato ha avuto come principale obiettivo lo sviluppo e la promozione di nuovi e adeguati insegnamenti e abilità educative per insegnanti ed educatori che lavorano con persone che sono in condizione di svantaggio oggi, in particolare con problemi di lavoro. Ogni organizzazione doveva attuare un training di 30 ore con 20 discenti. Il training austriaco è stato fatto tra l'aprile e il giugno del 2011 a Vienna da 4 trainers esperti che usavano le tecniche psicodrammatiche. Queste tecniche sono descritte nel dettaglio nell'articolo e possono presentarsi come buone pratiche per gli scambi internazionali.

■ **Parole chiave:** *Grundtvig, psicodramma, role playing, sociodramma, disoccupazione.*

The Austrian Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Dynamics (OEAGG) was founded by Dr. Raoul Schindler in 1959 to promote research, training and application of group dynamics and group psychotherapy. Starting in its first years as a small group of friends the association has developed to an organization with nearly 1500 members and numerous programs in counselling and psychotherapy. In 2010 Mag. Maria-Anna Pleischl took over the position as general secretary. The OEAGG is Austria's largest private education organization for psychotherapy today. The association has memberships in the OEBVP (Austrian Federal Association for Psychotherapy), in the EAP (European Association for Psychotherapy) and in the IAGP (International Association for Group Psychotherapy).

As the atmosphere was open-minded several directions of group work and group therapy could be integrated. So the pioneers of psychodrama in Austria joined the association in the 1970ies. At the moment nearly 380 Austrian psychodramatists are organized in the Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Dynamics. The head of the psychodrama-section is Norbert Neuretter. When the psychodrama-section got the invitation to cooperate in the Grundtvig-learning partnership Supporting Potential Development the Austrian psychodramatists gladly accepted.

Objectives and backgrounds

In a constantly changing society and in a complex historical time there is the need to training and developing competences and resources which can help people to find right answers to the new situations again. In this context teachers and educators require instruments that enable them to offer also adequate responses to the needs of those who are in a condition of disadvantage nowadays (people which lost their jobs, migrants which need to find a new collocation, students they had to interrupt their studies for economic reasons and many others). The partnership had the main object to develop new and adequate teaching and educational skills. In order to pursue this main objective the partners carried out courses using actions methods (psychodrama or playback theatre). They recorded and tried to exchange good practice to start a European collaboration. Great importance was attached to use action methods as tools for developing potential and creativity helping the professionals to become more flexible in their work with the disadvantaged categories. Both teachers and educators and their clients should become aware protagonists of their personal and professional life.

After completion of the approval process seven European psychodrama and playback organizations could participate in the project. During the first meeting held in Milano in December 2010 representatives from Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Austria had planned the training schedules using psychodrama and/or playback theatre. Each organization had to carry out one thirty-hour training with 20 learners. The learners had to be professionals working with disadvantaged people; particularly with job problems.

There is a long research tradition in Austria on unemployment. It should be highlighted the pioneering work of Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel (2009) on the unemployed of Marienthal in the 1930ies. After the closure of a large textile factory in Marienthal (next to Vienna) suddenly an extensive unemployment was established. The research team spent six weeks on site. An attempt was made to raise the psychological and social impact of unemployment

(resignation, activity inability, excessive demand) on both the individuals and the entire community as fully as possible. The study provides a deep insight to life without an early prospect to employment and is still considered as a milestone in the development of empirical social research.

Kirchler (1995) examined the subjective causes of unemployment. A considerable part of the listed causes concerned personal characteristics of the unemployed: lack of motivation and interest, convenience and lack of endurance, physical and mental disabilities, alcoholism and addiction, over aging. The results suggest the image of an individual debt of unemployment. Also, an expert survey came to similar conclusions. Unemployed people can hardly identify themselves with other unemployed. This lack of identification leads to the development of isolation and victim attitudes. Thus, psychodrama and playback theatre, which are known to attach importance to groups, could be helpful to find ways out.

The Austrian Government and the Austrian Labour Market Service (AMS) are making great efforts to minimize unemployment in the country. The unemployment rate for Austria had been amounted 4.1% in November 2011 according to Eurostat calculation. The European average (EU27) had been 9.8%. Austria currently has the lowest unemployment rate in Europe. 68,000 unemployed persons were in trainings arranged by the Labour Market Service in end of November 2011. The trainings, according to a recent study, have several positive effects. For women with trainings in 2010 employment duration raised by 27 days to 212 days, while employment duration for women without trainings decreased by 31 days to 153 days. Also, on the annual income the trainings had positive impact for women. For males, a drop in employment was recorded at 23 days for those who had trainings. However, men without trainings were employed by 56 days less.

For 2012 almost one billion euros for actions of the active labour market policy is available in Austria. Two-thirds should be invested in trainings for the unemployed. The actions should be increasingly more significant. When the project partners had decided to select teachers and educators for unemployed as learners they had at least identified an important current group.

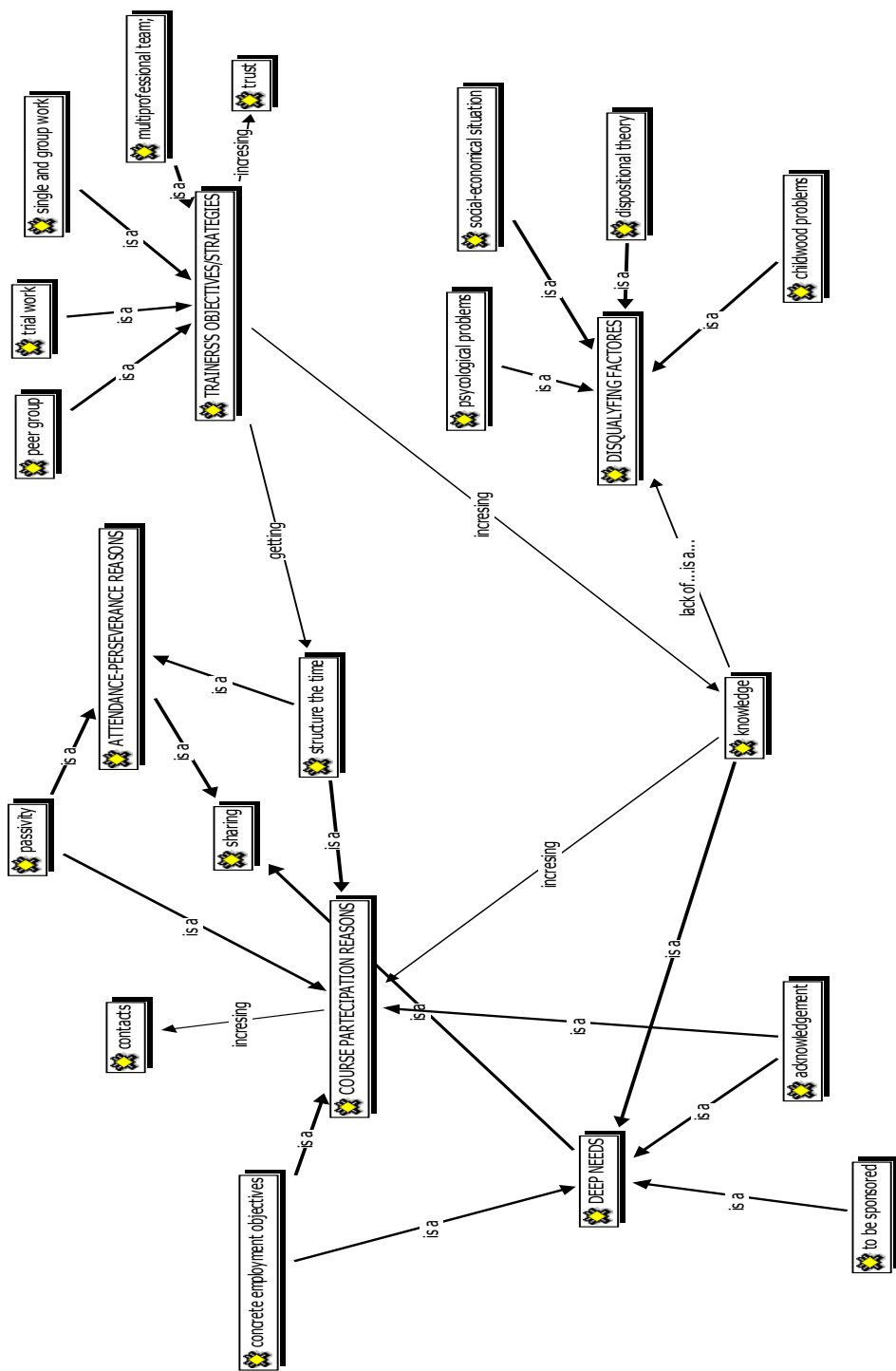
The training in detail

As mentioned, each organization had to carry out one thirty-hours training with 20 learners. The learners had to be professionals working with disadvantaged people; particularly with job problems. The trainings should help professionals to build a stronger competence and to exchange with colleagues from other European countries. Every partner had to grant three trainers with specific competence in psychodrama or playback theatre.

Learning group and trainer staff

The offer to attend the free thirty-hours training was directed in Austria to all members of the OEAGG. Responses exceeded all expectations. More than 100 people applied for participation. All selected learners in the Austrian training had been working with

Graph 1 - Pre-test results.



unemployed persons. 15 learners were female and five learners were male. All learners were willing to edit the scientific questionnaire (pre- and post-test) which the project partners developed to evaluate the project activities scientifically. It was not difficult to motivate the participants to cooperate. They were intrinsically motivated to a great extent.

The training took place between April and June 2011 in Vienna. Five training days each six hours had been realized (so totally 30 hours). Thus, the frequency of the training was about twice a month. 18 learners finished the training while two learners dropped out. The project management opted for four trainers to guarantee the minimum number of three trainers. All trainers had considerable experiences in therapy and training with disadvantaged people. They had demonstrable references on a theoretical and practical level. The opening session was supported by the head of psychodrama section.

The learners as experts on unemployment

The opening training session was first dedicated to warm-up for the project and the training group. Here, the first part of the scientific questionnaire (pre-test) was processed. The 20 participants had been considered to be experts on unemployment thereby. Project partners had developed five open-ended questions to clarify among others why unemployed people participate in courses and trainings, what their needs are, and what the training participation determines. The responses were evaluated by the coordinating Italian project partner with support from the University of Padua. In summary, the following reasons could be worked out for training participation:

- to avoid economic disadvantages;
- to pursue concrete employment objectives;
- to find time structure again interrupted during unemployment;
- to get acknowledgement.

The reasons for training participation clearly interact with the needs. Reasons to be difficult for training participation (*disqualifying factors*) primarily are: psychological and childhood problems and other personal dispositional factors. As successful training strategies have been proposed:

- to increase confidence, knowledge and information;
- to structure time;
- to work in single *and* in group setting;
- to work in multi-professional, and as key strategy;
- to put the persons with its peculiarities in the centre.

Graph 1 shows many details of the test.

The Austrian figure is related to other participating countries. Especially with Finland, there are notable similarities. The results also show relationship with Kirchler's studies mentioned above (Kirchler, 1995); particularly in the field of personal dispositional factors and internal attributions.

Participants (learners) of the training had the opportunity to train psychodramatic skills which they can use in their work with unemployed people. Of course, in a thirty-hours

training cannot be purchased a complete education in psychodrama. On the other hand, the participants had already acquired other training courses. So, the psychodrama techniques should be supplementary skills merely. In agreement with the project partners in the Austrian training psychodramatic techniques were used only (no elements from playback theatre). Each trainer had a thematic focus (e.g. role theory, social atom, sociodrama).

Essential psychodramatic techniques utilized in the training are described briefly now.

Doubling: the base of trainer-client relationship

There are many emotions involved in a learning process. People – whether they are unemployed or not – experience stress, hope, and anxiety. Coaches have to deal with these emotions. It is not sufficient to have only advisory competence. Emotions may be strong or well hidden. Psychodrama possesses a basic technique to cope with these emotions: *doubling*. It is the earliest psychodrama technique in developmental terms. Moreno (1959) derived doubling from the early parent-child interaction where mom or dad make available as a double for the infant to recreate emotions. In order to double, the coach (or another member of the group) stands behind the person and tries to empathize with her/him. The coach then is verbalizing from the perspective of the person her/his inner experience. Doubling is helpful to wake inner experiences of the person to be blocked at the moment.

The participants in training could discover the effect of doubling executing the following exercise: a person (the role giver) expressed a particular emotion nonverbally. A second person (the role receiver) – she/he was facing – tried to take the emotion and to reply. If the emotion was doubled sufficiently well the role giver felt suddenly understood. For experimental purposes, participants were asked not to double but to give an inadequate answer. The effect was amazing and there was the expected irritation immediately on the side of the role giver. In subgroups, the participants shared their experiences with empathy and double processes in their work with unemployed.

Roles: the sources of Self

The term *role* is omnipresent in psychodramatic discussion; particularly roles constitute the base of a person's self. "The self emerges from the roles", Moreno often said (Moreno, 1959). We understand the current role as form the self appears in a certain situation. The potency of roles had been shown in training by the following illustration.

Participants were assigned corporate roles, but the persons did not know what roles they had held (there were notes taped to the forehead, so that only other people could see the role). Selected roles were: chief, staff representative, secretary, innovator, cleaner, trainee, person who will be terminated next month, and some more. The subsequent task was to plan an all-day excursion. Objectives and sequences of this day should be discussed. Participants should conduct themselves in contact with the others as they assumed to be proper. In the

end, almost all players guessed their roles and acted in the prescribed roles. The sharing about play experiences bridged to role theory and the role unemployed. What role expectations are associated with unemployed and jobseekers? What role expectations they attribute themselves? What impact has the role to self-image?

The entanglement between the individual and the society based on roles had been demonstrated. The participants produced a roll diagram (Stadler, Kern, 2010) about a time in which they were looking for a job by themselves. So, they could gain more knowledge and personal experience.

Social atom: the smallest unit

Moreno had intensely studied interpersonal relationships. *Sociometry* is concerned with the measurement of interpersonal relationships. The results will open up opportunities for change and improvement for individuals, groups and societies. From psychodramatic perspective, we can never consider an individual in isolation. The surrounding persons (family members as well as non-familial members) must always be considered too. The complete personal unit is called the person's *social atom*.

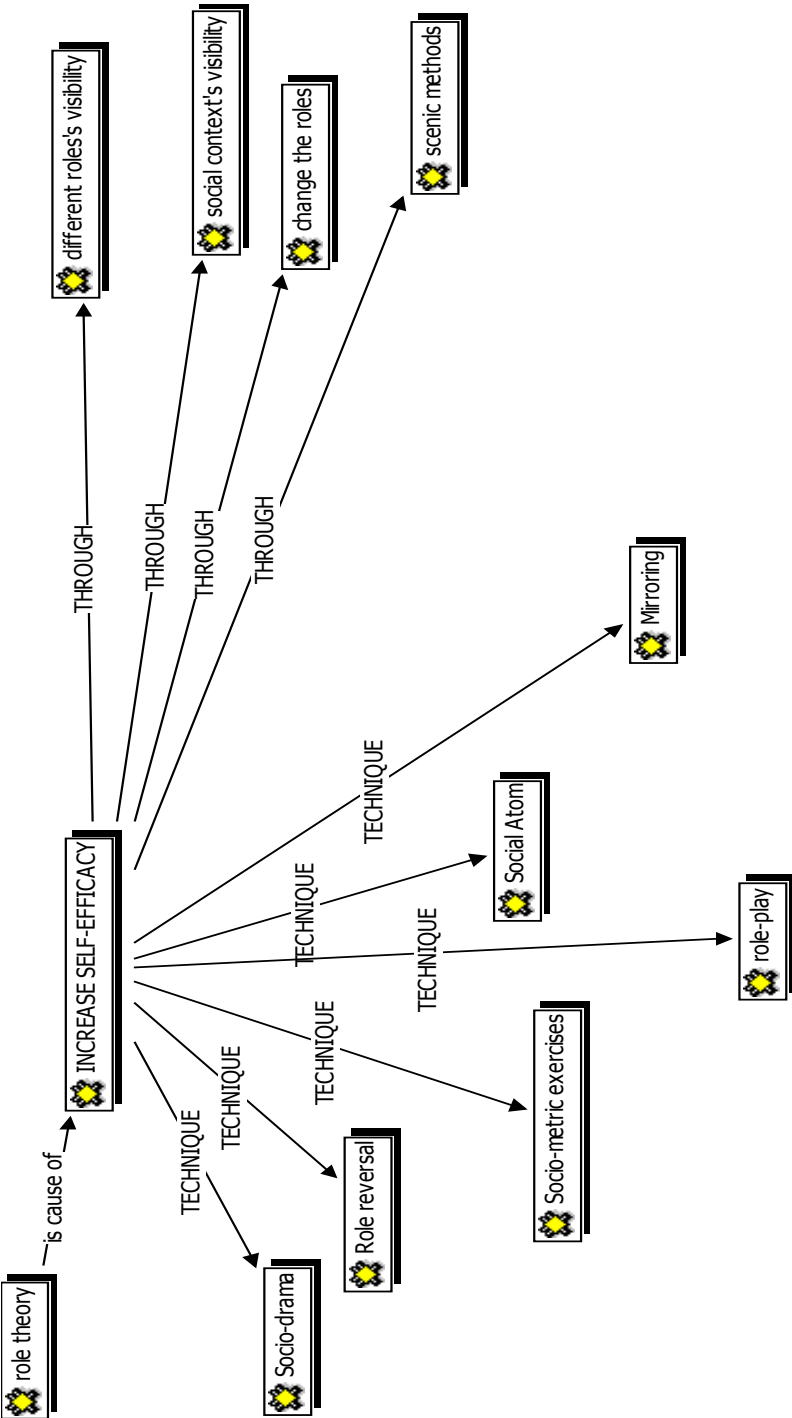
The focus in training was on interpersonal relationships associated with unemployment. In the social atom of an unemployed person those persons can be elaborated which are promoting the resumption of employment; and those persons which are impeding the resumption. There are different technical ways to create a social atom in a consultation process. Participants had the opportunity to practice several options. Sociometric work is particularly suitable for groups. Using sociometric differentiation exercises (as done comprehensive in the training) an overview on current group situation can be found quickly. Thereby, it is important to note what sociometric diagnosis may cause. The exercises could establish connections to the participant own work.

Sociodrama: making the social share visible

As we know from role theory, every role has individual share and collective share. This point is – related to unemployment – of major significance. For example, the referred results from Kirchler's studies (Kirchler, 1995) on subjective causes of unemployment intend a strong attribution toward self-inflicted unemployment. On the other hand, psychodrama emphasizes both own share and social share.

Sociodrama is a special staging process to make the social shares of roles visible. In the performed course the trainer first divided the group into three subgroups. The subgroups were asked either to prepare roles on the demand side of labour, on the supply side of labour or intermediate roles (like trainers for unemployed). Thus, a lot of roles from the world of labour were brought on training stage: consultants at the Labour Market Service, employees in the personnel office, mothers with dependent children, long-term unemployed, men with

Graph 2 - Trainer survey.



existential fears, trainers and coaches, and so on. Role play and sharing demonstrated the special strains of roles situated between supply and demand sides. Participants felt confirmed in their professional experiences.

Mirroring: the view from outside

Mirroring provides the client to consider his/her situation from an external point of view. When mirroring technique is applied the client leaves (accompanied by the coach) the play scene to examine the scene from outside the play stage. She/he is looking in a psychological mirror. The mirror confirms the person's identity. According to Moreno, mirroring is related to the child's ability to recognize itself in a (physical) mirror. This means a significant growth in the child's self-concept. The mirror technique is indicated when the client appears to be captured to rigid, retracted or otherwise inappropriate behaviour and does not become aware of this behaviour. The psychodramatic mirror is well suited for processing of resistances (von Ameln, Gerstmann, Kramer, 2009).

In training, the mirror technique was presented both for application in single setting and for application in group setting. Participants had opportunity to exercise the technique. They practiced psychodramatic mirroring using concrete counselling situations from their work with unemployed persons. Mirroring scenes had produced surprising and valuable insights. Benefits of scenic working had become evident clearly.

Results

The participant's (learner's) perspective

Most learners had been fairly satisfied with training days and project activities they participated. "*The project was interesting and instructive*" was frequently answered in the final feedback. "*It encouraged working with dramatic and creative methods*" was another significant response. Thus, the objective of project partners to promote action methods as tools for developing potential and creativity could be confirmed. Further, it was highlighted by some participants that the psychodramatic techniques presented had been theoretically justified. Participants also revised a learning questionnaire to validate results found. The desire to continue the training was expressed repeatedly. Finally, space was given to discuss suggestions for training improvements. Thereby, potential was noted in the transitions between the training days.

The trainer's perspective

Trainers of all partners were asked to indicate technical psychodrama (or playback theatre) aspects they found helpful to change learners' self-efficacy perception. Austria trainers considered in general that scenic methods are useful to visualize social contexts and make roles expandable.

Graph 2 shows the result of this trainer survey in detail.

The *reported techniques* (role plays including role reversal, sociodrama, sociometric exercises, social atom and mirroring) can be offered to the international partners as *good practice* for supporting potential development.

The objective perspective

Pre- and post-test survey was part of the scientific research project partners exerted. So, participants (learners) processed at the beginning and end of the training two personal inventories:

- the SAI-R: personal experience;
- the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE).

The SAI-R asks how strongly people have several feelings and thoughts trough a typical day (like to be creative, happy, uninhibited, and so). In brief, the SAI-R brought no significant changes between pre- and post-test in the Austrian investigation. There should be no greater disappointment about this fact. The investigation was carried out with healthy adults, and the expectation one 30-hours training could change the way to experience feelings and thoughts is hard to meet. We also know personality inventories in general are often very stable and it is difficult to detect changes. In addition, the result reminds to an investigation by Tschuschke and Anbeh (2004) on outpatient psychodrama therapy groups. Also there, the subjective improvements and satisfactions were higher than changes could be detected by inventories.

On the other hand, there had been little but remarkable changes at the General Self-Efficacy Scale when pre- and post-test results were compared. While bringing most of the ten statements no significant pre- and post-test differences, there are motivating exceptions. The statement “*I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough*” was answered more optimistic in the post-test (Mean Diff = .33, $p = .08$, two-tailed paired t-test). The main change however was noted in the statement “*I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events*” (Mean Diff = .33, $p = .01$, two-tailed paired t-test). Significantly more people reported increased confidence in the post-test. As we know, Moreno designed psychodrama to give right answers to new situations (and also new answers to old situations), so to deal efficiently with unexpected events too. The performed training gives a little but significant indication that psychodrama can really provide this.

Project dissemination

Project dissemination and sharing good practice are ongoing processes on both levels national and international. The results achieved in the training are motivating this process. The experiences of the participating european partners will enrich austrian activities in the future. ■

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