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Paper

Participatory Quality Assurance in Capacity Building Projects: A Mixed-Methods Model for Work-Based and Cross-Cultural Skill Building

Abstract

This paper presents an innovative, participatory quality assurance (QA) model designed to support capacity building and lifelong learning in flexible, work-based and cross-cultural training environments. Developed within an Erasmus+ capacity building project for youth workers in selected Mediterranean countries, the model integrates participatory evaluation, the most significant change (MSC) technique, participatory instant messaging (PIM) and survey-based methods into an integrated QA framework. Although situated in the youth work sector, the approach directly addresses the EQAF2026 theme by demonstrating how QA can enhance the quality, relevance and trustworthiness of capacity-building and vocational training in diverse professional contexts. A central feature of the model is its multi-stakeholder design. Trainers, facilitators, youth workers and young people contribute continuously to assessing progress, identifying challenges and shaping improvements. PIM enables real-time, low-threshold engagement across linguistic and cultural boundaries, allowing participants to share written reflections, micro media artefacts and structured feedback throughout the project lifecycle. MSC provides a narrative-based lens through which participants articulate meaningful changes in their professional practice, while pre- and post-training surveys introduce analytical rigour and comparability. Together, these elements create a dynamic QA system that balances contextual sensitivity with methodological robustness. The model's value extends well beyond its original context. Its flexibility, digital accessibility and emphasis on stakeholder co-creation offer opportunities for transfer to other higher education settings, particularly in capacity building initiatives, vocational education, continuing professional development and micro-credential programmes. As higher education funding increasingly prioritises labour market relevance, societal impact and cross-sector collaboration, this QA model offers a scalable approach for assuring the quality of work-based and community-embedded learning. The paper concludes by outlining how participatory, mixed-methods QA might support innovation, strengthen cooperation with external partners and enhance institutional responsiveness to stakeholder needs.

1 Introduction

This paper examines how metric-driven performance management and participatory quality approaches were integrated in an international capacity building project. We explore how evidence gathered for project accountability can be interwoven with reflection, cooperation and improvements in professional learning across organisational, linguistic and cultural boundaries, and the potential lessons for QA work in HE more generally.

1.1 Contribution

Is quality assurance about demonstrating performance and compliance with external standards, or about creating a quality culture? Harvey and Stensaker's (2008) responsive quality culture offers a way to connect these purposes: external requirements become opportunities to review practices and pursue improvement, while accountability remains explicit. In this view, quality work should support cooperation and organisational learning while responding to agreed objectives, reporting requirements and different institutional contexts. These challenges are particularly apparent in flexible, work-based and cross-

cultural learning. Standard feedback instruments may overlook informal learning, differences in professional practice and uneven opportunities to contribute.

How, then, can a responsive quality culture be developed within an international project, understood as temporary organisations (*sensu* Andersson, 2006), where the challenge is building shared practices among partners brought together for a limited period? We suggest that participatory approaches and a democratisation of analysis can broaden the evidence considered and create opportunities to discuss what quality means across a project's settings. In the paper we examine how participatory digital dialogue, most significant change narratives and surveys can together generate credible evidence for improving professional learning. Our interest concerns both the evidence produced and how its interpretation supports cooperation and learning within the project. For university QA staff, programme leaders and external training partners, the contribution is an examination of how integrating these methods can connect performance management with shared reflection, informing quality assurance for lifelong learning and capacity building partnerships.

1.2 Project context and learning needs

OUR FUTURE (Fostering Resilient Futures through Global Citizenship Education and Participatory Video Labs for Youth in Morocco and Tunisia) is a 24-month Erasmus+ capacity building project supporting youth workers to engage young people in thinking, feeling and acting in relation to the future. Coordinated by Progettomondo, the partnership brings together ZaLab in Italy, Association Qualification des Jeunes (AQJ) in Morocco, Association Forum des Sciences Sociales Appliquées (ASSF) in Tunisia and Linnaeus University (LNU) in Sweden. Youth work activities take place in Italy, Morocco and Tunisia.

The project combines the development of global citizenship education (GCE) and participatory video (PV) activities to help young people connect personal experiences with global challenges, explore their hopes and anxieties, and develop their capacity to shape possible futures. Youth workers develop materials through transnational training, collaborative design and local testing with young people. Training is therefore linked directly to professional practice: participants adapt activities to their settings, reflect on young people's responses and refine their facilitation approaches. The resulting toolkit, "Step by Step, Story by Story", provides adaptable activities and workshop sequences, with practical instructions, resources and facilitation guidance to support use across diverse youth work contexts.

2 Approach

Quality work in OUR FUTURE was framed as a shared responsibility for meeting project commitments and for learning from one another: especially the relevance of learning for youth work, inclusion across linguistic and cultural contexts, application in practice, and opportunities for participants to influence activities. The strategy presented at project kick-off connected accountability to partners' own ambitions, asking both whether goals were achieved and whether they were appropriate. QA responsibilities were divided between monitoring, evaluation and validation. The project management led monitoring as part of their overall responsibility, tracking delivery, schedules and reporting. LNU led evaluation and output validation, with all partners contributing evidence, interpretation and

recommendations. A quality handbook translated this approach into practical responsibilities and procedures, presented in simple English; supplementary WP3 guidance subsequently integrated reflection more closely with participatory video testing and organisational routines. Methods included surveys, participatory instant messaging (PIM), most significant change (MSC), activity reports, participatory evaluation workshops and peer review, alongside routine monitoring of project participation, delivery and project outputs.

2.1 Quality assurance framework

The project proposal provided indicators, targets and intended evaluation methods, but implementing these required decisions about what to measure, whose judgments counted and how evidence would inform improvement. For example, the target that 80% of youth workers report increased self-efficacy required an interpretation of capability appropriate to youth work across different settings. This required in turn some reflection on practice in different contexts to operationalise the indicator into performance metrics that could be measured through a survey. The resulting QA framework followed a plan–do–check–act cycle, connecting collaborative activity development, local testing, feedback and revision. Participatory evaluation within this served two purposes: generating evidence and creating opportunities to negotiate judgments about quality and necessary improvements. Partners considered both performance against agreed targets and experiences that those targets might not capture.

Table 1: QA instruments from the project

Instrument	Purpose	Stakeholders
Three-wave panel survey	Evaluating outcomes at baseline, midpoint and at the end of the project against specified metrics	Youth workers
Adapted survey	Evaluating activity outcomes in a pre-post design using an instrument for data collection adapted to the population (eg dartboard for youths)	Youth
PIM	Direct contact with youth workers carrying out project activities	Youth workers
MSC	Aggregate and reflect on project experience using social learning	Youth workers, project managers
Activity reporting	Record and reflect on project activities	Youth workers
Monitoring	Collecting project delivery data	Project managers
Peer review	Independent expert scrutiny	Youth workers, project managers

Responsibilities and opportunities to contribute varied: Trainers supported methodological development and reviewed experiences of applying GCE and PV. The project co-ordination team planned reporting and established a peer review process (involving partner representatives who had not participated in testing assessed outputs) for validation of outputs. Youth workers tested activities, completed surveys and reports, contributed reflections through PIM and participated in evaluation workshops. Young people contributed through “dartboard” exercises and discussions embedded into testing activities, with their qualitative feedback initially mediated through youth workers’ activity testing reports. The QA team facilitated evaluation around project meetings and reporting, and coordinated the peer review.

Hard quality methods (such as surveys) and soft participatory methods (such as PIM) were combined to evaluate project outcomes against proposal targets and foster learning within the project. Methods were matched to groups, and Table 1 summarises the instruments and stakeholder roles: repeated

surveys followed youth workers' development, accessible participatory exercises gathered young people's perspectives, and peer review scrutinised materials. Regular organisational discussions and project meetings provided settings for interpreting evidence and jointly agreeing changes.

The QA strategy emphasised accessible information, translation where needed and voluntary participation, and built on the project ethics strategy with parental or guardian consent and age-appropriate agreement for minors, alongside a duty of care to avoid pressure, harm or stigmatisation. Confidentiality arrangements required secure handling of personal data, including identifiable messages and media, restricted their use to project evaluation and learning, and required specific participant—and, for minors, guardian—permission before further sharing photographs, videos or recordings.

2.2 Methods and methodological development

To track the effects of the project on youth workers, they completed a self-administered three-wave panel survey at baseline, midpoint and completion. Baseline and endpoint scores were compared on three self-efficacy indices (12 items covering emotion regulation, procedural self-efficacy and support request) and three participatory video indices (15 items covering knowledge, confidence and preparedness). For young people testing activities, surveys were replaced with dartboard ratings of workshop aims at entry and completion. Photographic records of these dartboards were numerically coded and scaled to quantify the direction and magnitude of change. Exploitation event attendees were surveyed for feedback.

Figure 1: Example of dartboard instrument

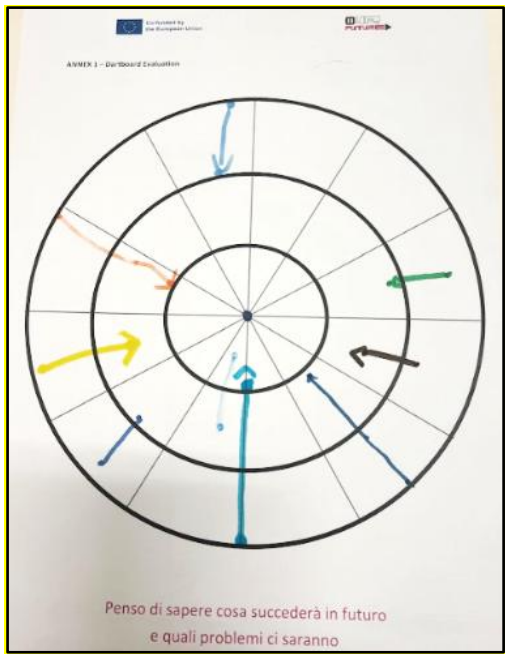


Figure 1 illustrates the visual concentric dartboard layout used for real-time youth evaluation.

Participants placed physical or digital markers across targeted workshop aims—such as "Future Literacy Knowledge" and "Team Collaboration Capacity"—where proximity to the center bullseye

indicated confidence to understand the challenges of the future, allowing for numerical encoding and scaling by the evaluation team to quantify the magnitude of change from entry to completion.

PIM uses facilitated sequences of instant messaging activities as an extended workshop (High et al., 2025), combining structured prompts with informal interaction. In this project, it drew on the social affordances of WhatsApp, linking youth workers in different countries and contexts, between meetings and training events. Initial prompts explored good youth work and professional capability; subsequent tasks offered warm up activities ahead of in-person workshops or invited short reflections immediately after testing activities. Country WhatsApp groups supported local exchange, while an international group enabled sharing across the partnership. Contributions included text, photographs, video and voice messages. English was the common project language, supplemented by Italian, French and Maghrebi Arabic to support understanding and participation.

MSC (Davies & Dart, 2005) elicits discussions of meaningful change and uses collective selection of narratives (including discussion of the reasons for choosing particular accounts) to make participants' values and interpretations more visible to one another. The original design embedded this process within PIM: country groups would develop and discuss accounts, select material and forward it to the international group for wider reflection. Sharing was intended to connect local experiences with collective learning about achievements, difficulties and possible responses. Following review during year one, this was refined and integrated with other monitoring and evaluation activities.

The methods had complementary purposes: surveys tracked specified outcomes, PIM sustained dialogue around practice, and MSC supported judgments about which changes mattered and why. Their integration connected comparable measures with contextual accounts and collective interpretation. Alongside these channels, activity reports and structured webinar discussions were deployed to gather iterative feedback during the development and testing of the toolkit materials. This feedback directly informed a formal peer-review process dedicated to the validation of project outputs. By synthesising local activity reports and workshop feedback, the framework ensured that grassroots participant experiences actively shaped subsequent revisions to the materials and guided local facilitation decisions.

3 Discussion

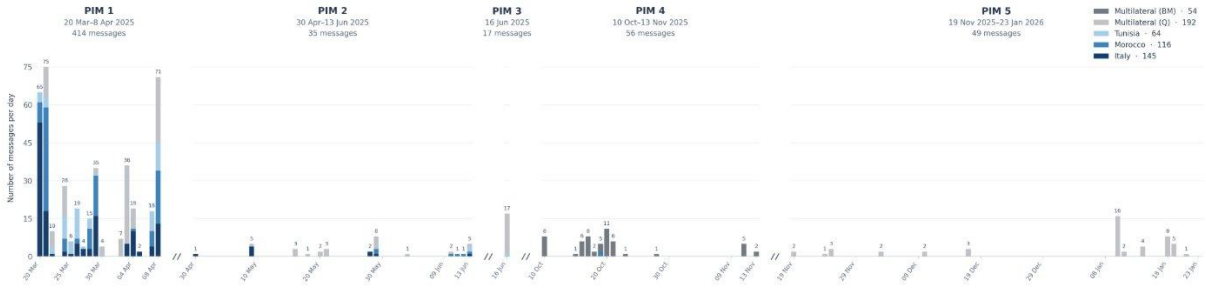
Implementing the framework required continuing adjustment to participants' working practices, languages and opportunities to contribute. This section discusses what the instruments produced, how difficulties informed changes to provision and evaluation, and how evidence moved between participatory dialogue and measurement. These experiences illuminate both the possibilities and limits of an integrated approach.

3.1 Participatory methods – fitting MSC to the context

PIM brought youth workers into contact on WhatsApp across countries between formal project events. Figure 2 shows activity across five waves, comprising 571 participant messages (ie. excluding facilitator contributions). The initial implementation phase revealed significant contextual variations in how digital

platforms are experienced. The first waves combined country groups with international sharing, embedding an MSC logic of reflection, selection and discussion. However, some teams preferred collective discussion in their regular face-to-face meetings. Language also shaped access. Italian and Moroccan contributors often used local languages, while some youth workers contributed more visibly through PIM than in other project activities. Neither message frequency nor length establishes whose experience was adequately represented.

Figure 2: Daily PIM activity in five groups across five PIM waves (March 2025-January 2026)



Participants also differed in their use of WhatsApp, with some experiencing project messages as intrusive. Facilitators clarified voluntary participation and notification settings, shortened the next wave and suspended activities during summer leave. The adjustment concerned the social organisation of participation as much as the technology. The change meant the MSC technique had to be reworked from PIM Wave 2, which attempted to implement a digital MSC selection process. The mechanism proved unworkable in practice for Work Package 2 (WP2) due to barriers in international sharing and differing team dynamics, as well as some misunderstanding of what was required. A redesign of MSC for WP3 was developed during a project training in Beni Mellal, Morocco, where a new, more integrated methodology for MSC was tested and documented. PIM tasks were simplified, to a photovoice (Liebenberg, 2018) derived observe (image) – reflect (text) routine. The refined approach successfully matched the collection and collective interpretation of narratives directly into existing project and organisational routines rather than relying exclusively on a digital-first workflow. This adapted methodology was subsequently deployed in PIM Wave 5, where youth workers were asked to post a photograph and an explanatory title after each participatory video session to highlight key moments of celebration or learning.

Table 2: PIM outcomes

Measure	Italy	Morocco	Tunisia	Multilateral (Q)	Multilateral (BM)	Multilateral (management)
Number of participants	8	7	8	21	22	10
Main purpose	Reflection on youth work; discussion of group choices	Reflection on youth work; discussion of group choices	Reflection on youth work; discussion of group choices	Sharing PIM work across countries; preparing and reviewing activities	Coordinate on-site trainings; share workshop outputs; follow up on evaluations	Partner coordination; logistics; reporting
Messages	201	155	151	332	266	199
of which non-English	38%	16%	2%	2%	7%	1%
prompted by the facilitator	61%	61%	34%	48%	1%	13%
response to/interpretation of a photo/video	22%	15%	10%	20%	7%	4%
Number of photos uploaded	20	22	17	140	8	8
Number of videos uploaded	0	2	0	3	0	0
Number of emojis used	80	13	30	123	111	54

Sharing MSC between contexts happened directly in the International WhatsApp group and team reflections fed into co-ordination meetings. For example, after the first round of testing in WP3, partners

selected photographs and explained their significance, discussing energy, inclusion and group dynamics alongside challenges. The discussion in turn led to suggestions for the workshop guidance which was the main WP3 output: Progettomondo requested basic filming and storyboard tools, ASSF sought clearer instructions for final production, and AQJ stressed adaptation to local situations and participant input. These exchanges connected accounts of participation with concrete development needs, while retaining flexibility in facilitation.

PIM also supplied material for activity reports, helping youth workers recall and explain significant moments. Its contribution was therefore both relational and evidentiary. Rather than a separate reporting obligation, the messaging recorded a resource for later assessment while the selection process helped connect everyday experiences with questions about the quality and future use of the materials produced.

3.2 Survey methods – professional learning and changes to provision

All youth workers in the project were invited to complete a web-based, self-administered panel survey at three time points: baseline, midpoint, and project end. The baseline survey, administered before WP2, covered respondents' personal characteristics and professional experience. It included 12 items on self-efficacy and 10 on respondents' confidence in developing future literacy and a range of soft skills in young people. The midpoint survey, administered before WP3, retained the baseline questions and added 15 items on respondents' knowledge of PV and their confidence and readiness to run PV workshops with young people. The quantitative evaluation relied on tracking individual trajectories through matched pre- and post-training responses, though data collection suffered from uneven response rates across the partnership. Out of the 15 youth workers who participated in the initial transnational training, complete baseline and endpoint survey links could only be verified and matched for 13 respondents due to intermittent digital access and survey attrition. For the broader local testing phases, tracking individual youth trajectories proved even more challenging; while over 80 young people participated across the three implementation countries, consistent pre-and-post 'dartboard' datasets were successfully matched for only 42 participants. The quantitative evidence suggested learning while revealing differences that aggregate results could obscure. In WP2, all 15 youth workers attending the Verona training reported increased confidence across the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions of facilitating future literacy activities. These retrospective dartboard ratings captured perceived development, rather than independently observed competence. Young people's ratings were generally positive, although the assessment identified attrition and variation between groups.

The WP3 survey compared responses from October 2025 with March/April 2026. Across respondents completing both rounds, average knowledge, facilitation confidence and readiness to use PV increased. Knowledge showed the largest gains; confidence showed the smallest. Country averages differed, and the Tunisian results included unchanged readiness and reduced confidence. High initial scores and a smaller sample limited interpretation. Among five respondents with up to five years' experience, three reported reduced facilitation confidence despite an increase in the group mean. The findings therefore invited further enquiry into support needs rather than a uniform account of success.

Qualitative feedback helped interpret these patterns. Youth workers requested more technical instruction and clearer workshop guidance. Activity reports, webinar discussion and peer review converged on the importance of sufficient time for group development and filmmaking. Reviewers rated the longer workshop more favourably, particularly its anticipated socio-emotional contribution. The partnership consequently concentrated the final guidance on the 24-hour format, incorporating facilitation advice, technical resources, case studies and frequently asked questions. The quality lead checked revisions against the review recommendations; time constraints prevented a second full peer review.

For young people, incomplete dartboard records and inconsistent workshop labels in the WP3 assessment prevent a secure overall percentage. Taken together, the instruments informed changes to provision, but neither self-reported gains nor expert expectations establish lasting changes in professional practice or isolate the contribution of QA from training and mentoring. The reports do not establish complete response rates for all instruments, so comparisons should remain tied to the respondents and records available, with missing evidence made visible in subsequent review.

3.3 Integration of methods

Although the different methodological strands drew on different traditions, their integration achieved some synergy. For example, the project plan set a target for the proportion of youth workers reporting increased self-efficacy. Youth workers were invited to define self-efficacy for their practice, recognising that their roles vary across cultural and institutional contexts and with the challenges young people face. PIM1 used prompts for participatory concept elicitation in country groups and a multilateral group, asking what it means to be a good youth worker. Through inductive thematic analysis and in vivo coding, recurring patterns were identified while acknowledging contextual differences. These themes were operationalised through 12 survey items with Likert-type response options.

The second example moved in the other direction, using participatory enquiry to interpret an indicator. At Beni Mellal, discussion explored what it meant for young people to feel more comfortable engaging with the future. The English wording suggested familiarity or pleasure, while the Italian interpretation emphasised an absence of disabling discomfort. Forum theatre, drawing on forum theatre (Boal & McBride, 2020) opened discussion of how the future entered young people's lives and the films they might make. This informed attention in WP3 reports to how activity participants approached the future. The assessment consequently distinguished capacity to face uncertainty from confidence that things would turn out well, alongside continuing anxiety for some participants. This distinction matters: increased engagement need not mean greater optimism PIM images and MSC discussions provided experiences through which this distinction could be explored and related back to reporting. Integration therefore involved more than converting qualitative accounts into survey items or numerical dartboard scores. Indicators also became prompts for discussion, translation and exercises. Evidence moved between measurement and interpretation, allowing participants to question what a result meant and what response it warranted.

4 Conclusion – critical reflection and methodological limits

Quality assurance in OUR FUTURE combined performance indicators with participatory enquiry to connect accountability, improvement and shared learning. The contribution lies in the relationships established between these activities. This experience suggests that a responsive quality culture can be developed through paying attention to how different QA stakeholders make sense of the world and adapting processes to them rather than vice-versa. This required reflexivity and adaptation, such as when PIM + MSC was adapted to organisational routines or evaluation language was refined.

The evidence comes from a single project, which was well documented, but not designed as a research project on QA. The evidence shows responsiveness and integration in project processes, but there is also some evidence that less active contributors, people facing language or digital barriers, and those uncomfortable with messaging may remain insufficiently represented. Young people's perspectives were often mediated through youth workers, rather than through direct participation in project-level judgments. There is less clarity about whether the approach caused improved learning or established a durable quality culture, and establishing these outcomes would require follow-up with partners and participants, including those who contributed less visibly.

For higher education, the case offers a design proposition for work-based learning and external partnerships but could also be adapted for other QA processes involving multiple stakeholders and a desire to build up a responsive quality culture. A potential application at LNU would be programme councils, where teacher and student representatives review the quality of educational programmes biennially. Course evaluations are survey driven, but student representative contributions are rather ad hoc. Support on low-effort participatory methods for them could improve their capacity to build on evidence from course mates to 'speak truth to power'.

In general, the approach shows potential where learning depends on cooperation across organisational and cultural boundaries. Its value relies on skilled facilitation, accessible participation and the capacity to build from interpretation into action. These require time and expertise, as well as willingness to revise the QA process itself. Future evaluation could examine whether these investments improve provision and organisational learning to justify their demands, and when the approach remains useful after a temporary partnership ends.

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