WHITE PAPER INTERVIEWS AND WRITING CASES (WP4)

Introduction

This white paper describes the experience of the project partners while carrying out Work Package 4 of the Erasmus+ CAPIRE project. It will explain what steps we took and why we chose that path. We will particularly zoom in on the obstacles and setbacks we encountered during the work and how we solved them. This white paper aims to help others learn from our problems and mistakes so that they can prevent or solve them more easily.

Team members

Although the senior supervising team members per country remained the same during the project, the members who were hired for the project and carried out the interviews changed. To begin with, the selection and hiring process took longer than expected. When the project started in November, three partners had already hired a project member who could immediately start to work. One partner managed only to hire one in the following April, and another only in June, so that they started with a delay. Because of the buffer time built into the planning, they could, however, catch up in time.

Two project members accepted a new job elsewhere and had to stop working on the project. Two others quit the project for other reasons. Two of them were replaced by new project members, and in the other two cases, the work was taken over by the senior members. All of these instances led to delays, but these could be accommodated in the planning.

A change of work order

Right at the start, the partners decided to change the order of the work process in WP4. According to the planning, we would carry out interviews with 16 expats in one country and, based on these, write twenty case stories, before proceeding to interview expats in country two. However, partners decided it was more practical to first do all 64 interviews (4 countries x 16) and then write all the case stories.

Difficulty in finding interviewees

Some of the partners could easily find expats from their country in one of the other countries who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences. However, some partners had great difficulty getting in contact with potential expats and securing their cooperation for an interview. This undoubtedly has a cultural origin. In many cultures, people do not react to emails from

people they do not know, and even when a contact is made, they are not always willing to share their experiences in an interview. Finally, after enormous effort and with the help of high-placed mediating persons and the senior member, the 16 interviews for each country could be completed.

From critical incidents to case stories

The partners had to derive from their interviews 20 stories per country about a critical incident, a situation that was strange, embarrassing or frustrating to foreigners. The stories had to be shortened and rewritten to highlight the critical incident. The rather coarse stories of the interviews had to be turned into clear and vivid case stories for the Culture Simulator.

Each case story had to provide four explanations for the critical incident. One of them has to be the most plausible explanation, but the others should look plausible too. It appeared to be quite a challenge to come up with good alternatives to the most plausible answer.

In addition, pedagogically effective feedback had to be written for the four explanations. We preferred to avoid terms like good and wrong, but instead used more or less likely or plausible.

Due to the various authors of the case stories, a variety of writing styles can be noted in the final cases. We think this does not impair the effectiveness of the Culture Simulator in terms of cultural learning.

The binational check

In principle, each partner wrote case stories about each of the other four countries, including the four explanations and the feedback on them. Next, the case story was presented to the partner from the host country that was concerned. This person was asked whether, for him or her, the story made sense and whether the explanation was correct. If the story made no sense to one of the partners, the person was asked under what circumstances the story would be logical for him, what elements should be added to the scene. This roused an in-depth discussion between the two partners about the story itself and the cultural logic at play on each side. This continued until both partners agreed on the story and the explanations, as well as on the cultural logic that was involved in the critical incident.

These fundamental binational discussions were very fruitful and provided new insights into the motivations and values that guide behaviour in both countries involved. This was perhaps the biggest success in the project.

The theme

Each case story ends with the Theme, which explains the particular cultural logic involved in this story, but which also applies in several other stories. A list of Themes determined for a specific country by one partner was shared with other partners, who refined and complemented it. In this way, for each country, we found a limited number of cultural logics that were responsible for the critical incidents of expats.

Learnings

The approach that was chosen, to conduct interviews with expats, derive stories with critical incidents from them, rewrite these and add explanations and feedback, proved to be very useful. Especially the binational cooperation on creating realistic case stories that made sense to both sides was particularly successful. These discussions not only prevented misunderstandings and wrong interpretations but also produced valuable new insights. It made partners from the host country aware of the tacit assumptions they held and helped to make these explicit.