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SONETOR: Using a social computing platform to train Cultural Mediators

## **Abstract**

This paper presents the training approach adopted in SONETOR project ([www.sonetor-project.eu](http://www.sonetor-project.eu)), which aims at developing a training platform that will integrate existing social networking applications with modern adult education methodologies and specially produced content and services, in order to assist Cultural Mediators in developing formal and non-formal skills and competences and in applying them during their work with immigrants. The paper presents the actions we took in order to organize the user community that would participate and benefit from the project, a report on the cultural mediators' training needs, a draft profile of Cultural Mediators, the SONETOR platform, the main outcome of the project, and the guided and peer learning scenarios that can be realized with it.

## **Introduction**

Over the last decades, the scale of migration has been growing considerably throughout Europe. EU Member States received a total of 3.8 million immigrants while at least 2.3 million immigrants are reported to have left one of the EU Member States in 2008. According to Eurostat data (Statistics in focus, 98/2008), from 2004 to 2008 the population of EU Member States increased, on average, by 1.7 million per year, solely because of the high net migration. These data show that immigration is a key issue of European policies and governments. With the increase in immigration, racism and xenophobia are also on the rise. People find it difficult to live with diversity, to transact and to do business with "unknown" people in unfamiliar environments. This misunderstanding is generated by lack of knowledge of the "other". If we are to achieve peaceful cohabitation, we must facilitate acceptance of migrants by appreciating their diversity and the opportunities their presence offers.

Thus, there is an increased need to assist foreign citizens toward a smooth cohabitation in the host country. This need can be covered by Cultural Mediators, professionals who are trained to facilitate relations between local and foreign citizens, and to promote reciprocal knowledge and comprehension aimed at favoring a positive relationship between persons of different cultural backgrounds. The main characterizing elements of Cultural Mediators are communicative competence, empathy, active listening and good knowledge of both the hosting country and country

of origin (culture, laws, traditions, etc). To meet the requirements of their role, Cultural Mediator must possess a combination of formal and non-formal skills and competences that can only be developed with a combination of formal training and personal and practical experience.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) systems and platforms could provide support to the specific training needs of Cultural Mediators. Social networking applications are increasingly penetrating formal educational and training settings and lead to the development of new training practices, which realize modern theories of learning (i.e. social constructivism, peer learning etc.) in contemporary networked environment.

Training with the use of social software tools can:

- Facilitate closer relationships and more frequent interaction between students and teachers. This is facilitated by their sharing of work and references and their engagement in discussions.
- Create a repository of learning products and artifacts of reflection
- Give a digital presence on the Web to manifest one's cultural identity
- Create a platform to participate in the community for lifelong learning to keep reflecting on current issues, etc.
- Provide an architecture that allows learners to access content (e.g. other users to access learner's as well as for learner to access outside repositories) through different modalities taking care of rights management, security and privacy concerns,
- Connect to different services that could be for educational content, courses etc.

The SONETOR project ([www.sonetor-project.eu](http://www.sonetor-project.eu)) aims at developing a training platform that will integrate existing social networking applications with modern adult education methodologies and specially produced content and services, in order to assist Cultural Mediators in developing formal and non-formal skills and competences and in applying them during their work with immigrants.

The project aims to achieve the following concrete objectives:

- A detailed comparative user needs analysis in the fields of legislation, training, collaboration and skills definition in order to clearly define the competences and skills that professional cultural mediators must possess and their training needs
- A project portal serving as a focal communication point for European Cultural Mediators and other stakeholders. The portal will contain a training platform composed of social networking tools, which will be used to train Cultural Mediators with the help of adult education and peer learning methodologies
- Guided and unguided (peer) learning scenarios on topics related to the everyday practice of Cultural Mediators, such as Health, Education, Public services, etc. The scenarios make use of digital content modules and are delivered via the training platform

- Training sessions per participating country, with the participation of members of the learning community of Cultural Mediators

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we describe the actions we took in order to organize the user community that would participate and benefit from the project. Then we report on the cultural mediators' training needs we identified during the research phase of the project. Based on the outcome of this study, a draft profile of Cultural Mediators has been developed; this is described in section four. The SONETOR platform, the main outcome of the project is presented in section five, followed by a description of the way the two types of training are realized with it. Conclusions are the last section.

### **Organizing the learning community**

One of the most important objectives of the project is to help establish a European learning community of cultural mediators who will be using the SONETOR platform to exchange experience, advice and best practice. The whole idea is based on the way open source user communities function. A staged process was put in place.

In the first stage, Core User Groups (CUG) were formed. CUG members will serve as the "core" group for promoting platform usage in each country. They were individuals selected based on their qualifications and experience with working with immigrants, the domain of their activity and the interest they showed in using the platform. Their tasks include contribution to platform specification and design of training scenarios, platform testing, development and uploading of training content and invitation of more users.

At the second stage, each member of CUG will invite at least 10 new members to join the community. Thus, an initial learning community of at least 250 cultural mediators across Europe will be formed in the course of the project.

The members of this community will subscribe to some of the areas of cultural mediators' activity, as they are reflected in the unguided scenario tab of the SONETOR platform (Figure 8), thus forming Scenario Core Communities (SCC). These people will collaborate from a distance in developing the content of the respective training scenarios, by uploading episodes, digital content, blog posts, etc. and by commenting on the content uploaded by their SCC peers.

In each partner country, a national moderator has been appointed to manage the local community at a national level; national moderators are members of CUG. As new members subscribe to the platform and join the existing communities, SCC communities will expand, thus expanding the "experience base" of the community.

## **Identifying the training needs**

In order to compile the training needs of cultural mediators, three domains were researched. Firstly, the legislation under which cultural mediators act was studied and coded in the form of a wiki, after realizing a detailed desk research about the status quo of cultural mediators in all partner countries and at a European level. Secondly, collaboration needs, competences and skills of existing and potential cultural mediators were identified. Collaboration needs analysis was helpful in order to define the specifications of platform services, as well as for drawing up a concept map that was used to formulate the job profile. Finally, training need analysis was carried out in order to define the topics and content of the training scenarios.

In addition to desk research, a two stage field study was put in place with the help of a selected sample of stakeholders who interact with immigrants. During stage one, a questionnaire was distributed and the answers received were analyzed. Then, interviews were conducted with some of the respondents, in order to obtain an extended range and depth of information necessary to determine the knowledge, skills and competences of cultural mediators, as well as their training needs.

Legislation analysis showed that no uniform system is in place across Europe. In some countries the regulatory system appears to be sufficient, while in other it is not. The main improvements proposed are: facilitating and streamlining procedures for legalization of stay, facilitating the integration between immigrants and citizens of the host country, supporting public institutions in dealing with immigrants, extending the duration of individual integration programs and allocating more resources to agencies dealing with immigrants.

The main barrier in communication with immigrants is lack of language knowledge, both by immigrants and residents of the host country. A consequence is lack of knowledge of each other's culture. In general, communication problems are of two types: those which primarily relate with immigrants and those that affect both the immigrants and the people interacting with them. The first group may create barriers such as suspicion and deception, domestic violence, lack of understanding of the standards and laws of the host country, lack of understanding of legalization procedures, high expectations and poverty. The second group creates barriers such as stereotypes, different ways of perceiving the world, cultural filters, lack of understanding of the other's way of thinking, different attitude to religious matters and cultural backgrounds.

Respondents pointed the following desirable qualifications when working with immigrants: immigration law, psychology, family studies, education, social policy, sociology, cultural studies, linguistics, political science, philology, international relations, international law, social science or cultural mediation.

Regarding the appropriate skills, they distinguish the following: knowledge of immigrants' languages and way of thinking, knowledge of immigrant culture, ability to remain calm, administrative and psychological skills.

Abilities that would be useful include: communication skills, curiosity, openness, tolerance, empathy, creativity, understanding, accuracy, self-organization, respect, self-control, resistance, power, accuracy, solidarity, sociability, self-confidence, honesty.

Diagnosing and solving various problems related to the process of adaptation of immigrants to the social, cultural and civilizational conditions of the host country requires that the person filling the role of cultural mediator has a knowledge of anthropological and sociological type. On the one hand, cultural mediator should have knowledge about the cultural and civilizational diversity of the world, and knowledge about how this diversity is reflected in the diversity of styles and ways of thinking of people coming from different cultures and civilizations. On the other hand, cultural mediator should have a knowledge about the principles and mode of operation of the social system in the host country.

To put it more precisely, the area / block type of anthropological knowledge should include basic knowledge in the field of intercultural communication, with particular emphasis on knowledge of factors posing the most common barriers and problems in interpersonal communication resulting from the variety and diversity of cultural and civilizational contexts, elementary knowledge of proxemics (branch of science that studies anthropological differences in perceptions and evaluation of physical and symbolic space, reported in people from different cultural and civilizational), and of course elementary knowledge on ethnic map of the world.

The area / block type of sociological knowledge should include knowledge of the social network of the host country, with a particular focus on the areas of knowledge and competence of the institutions included in the system of institutions providing social assistance. In addition, cultural mediators should have basic knowledge of the legal system of the host country, with particular emphasis on legal regulations concerning foreigners and immigrants. Almost everyone among the "experts" who took part in the survey emphasized that the main difficulties they encounter in their professional work, and which are likely to affect the cultural mediators, is the complexity of laws and regulations that regulate areas such as health care, education, and the labor market.

To effectively carry out their responsibilities, cultural mediators should also have a specific set of practical skills that enable them to effectively fulfill the role of an intermediary between immigrants and the reality of the host country. A set of practical skills enabling cultural mediators to successfully and effectively carry out their roles would include working knowledge of foreign languages and a predisposition to learning foreign languages, skills related to "completing administrative matters"

and ability to efficiently interact with the system of institutions in the host country. The importance of knowledge of computer usage and social media is increasing.

### **Profiling the Cultural Mediator**

Our analysis of the training needs of cultural mediators indicated that they come from divergent backgrounds and occupations, while many of them originate from the communities they are mediating for. Thus, we defined two types of cultural mediator profiles. The first one described cultural mediation as a complete and autonomous occupation; the other defined it as a qualifications module that is added on top of existing qualifications (i.e. a qualified caretaker who also acts as cultural mediator). Some of the key responsibilities of both types of cultural mediators include:

- Maintain and develop a communicational basis between the mediator, the client and the institution.
- Plan and carry out spare time activities to get the migrants involved more directly in the new culture.
- Develop ideas and create offers for the clients to think about the different cultural habits.
- Respond to the questions of the clients and provide them a professional guidance through bureaucracy. Follow up talks through telephone and personal visits to make sure they understood rituals and habits as well as the relevant legal framework.
- Maintain and develop existing and new relationships to migrants through planned individual support (personal visits etc.).
- Monitor and report on activities and provide relevant information to the responsible management.
- Carry out researches, concerning specific questions and problems of the clients.
- Liaise and attend meetings with other companies/institutions in order to find shortcuts and synergies. So the necessary functions to perform duties and aid cultural consulting can be better developed.
- Provide the public also with information about positive examples of integration.
- Attend training and to develop relevant knowledge and skills (ICT and language...).

Then we described the cultural mediator job profile in a way compatible to European Qualifications Framework (EQF) using knowledge, skills and competences. We focused on EQF levels 5-7 and divided the qualifications into four categories, of the eight that every individual in the knowledge-based society of the 21st century should aspire to develop, as defined in the European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. These are Social and civic competences (SCC), Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship (SIE), Cultural awareness and expression (CAE), and Digital competences (DC). A sample of the listed KSC per level and category follows:

- Using the technical terminology related to social and civic skills (SSC, Level 5 and above)
- Being able to introduce and instruct apprentices/ peers and immigrants in different steps of socialisation processes (SSC, Level 5 and above)
- Being able to place him/herself into the position of the immigrants – to show empathy (SSC, Level 5 and above)
- Being able to monitor and direct operations in hazardous situations concerning personnel environment until – other – authoritative assistance arrives (SSC, Level 7)
- Being able to use information from various sources – handbooks, reports, internet etc. (SIE, Level 5 and above)
- Helping colleagues to find necessary details (SIE, Level 5 and above)
- Being able to realise the valid laws for working time (SIE, Level 7)
- Being able to make prompt important decisions (SIE, Level 7)
- Knowing well how to communicate freely using the cultural related terminology, abbreviations, nomenclature and similar (CAE, Level 5 and above)
- Knowing the characteristics and understand behaviour related to different cultures and ethnic minorities (CAE, Level 5 and above)
- Knows how to use interactive platforms, social media tools for interaction with the target groups of immigrants (DC, Level 5 and above)
- Being able to complete forms, certificates, reports and other written templates for special software programs used in the daily work (DC, Level 6 and above)

### **The SONETOR platform**

The main achievement of the project is the SONETOR platform, a web based portal supporting learning and social networking, which is accessible at the address [www.culturalmediators.eu](http://www.culturalmediators.eu). The platform has been built by integrating open source tools, such as Joomla, Moodle and BigBlueButton. For the moment, access to the platform requires registration of the user (see Figure 1). The user can use his/her login credentials, or request for an account to be created, in a very straightforward manner. For those requiring assistance, an FAQ tab is available upfront.

After entering the platform, the user (that is, the cultural mediator) can access a range of services, all of them planned to enhance his skills and knowledge and to bring him/her in contact with peers (Figure 2).

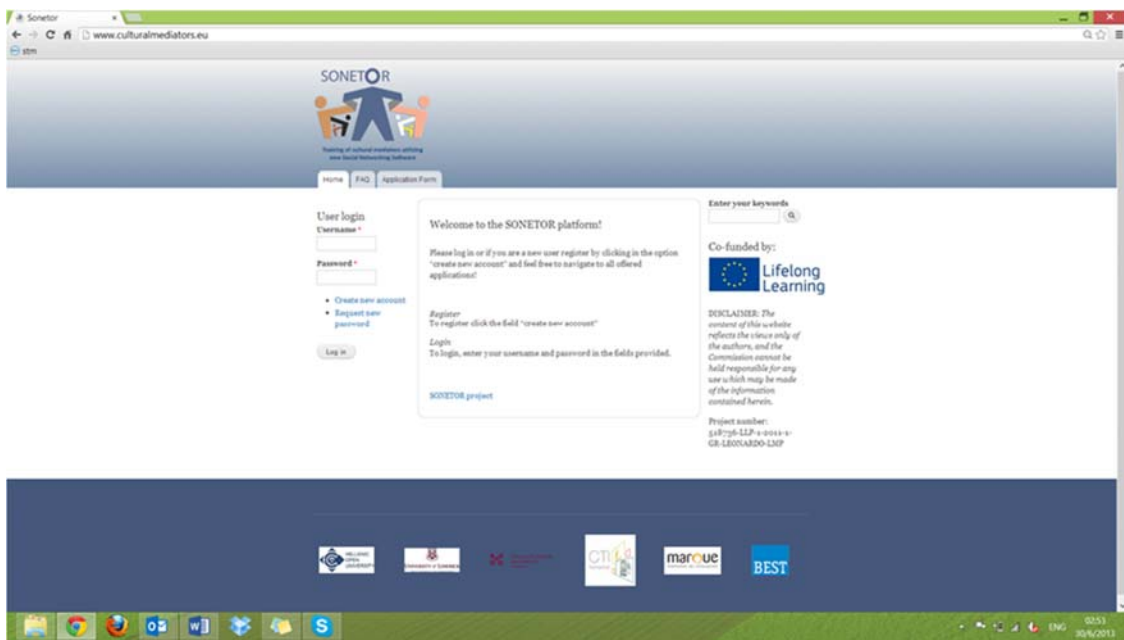


Figure 1. The initial (login) screen of the SONETOR platform

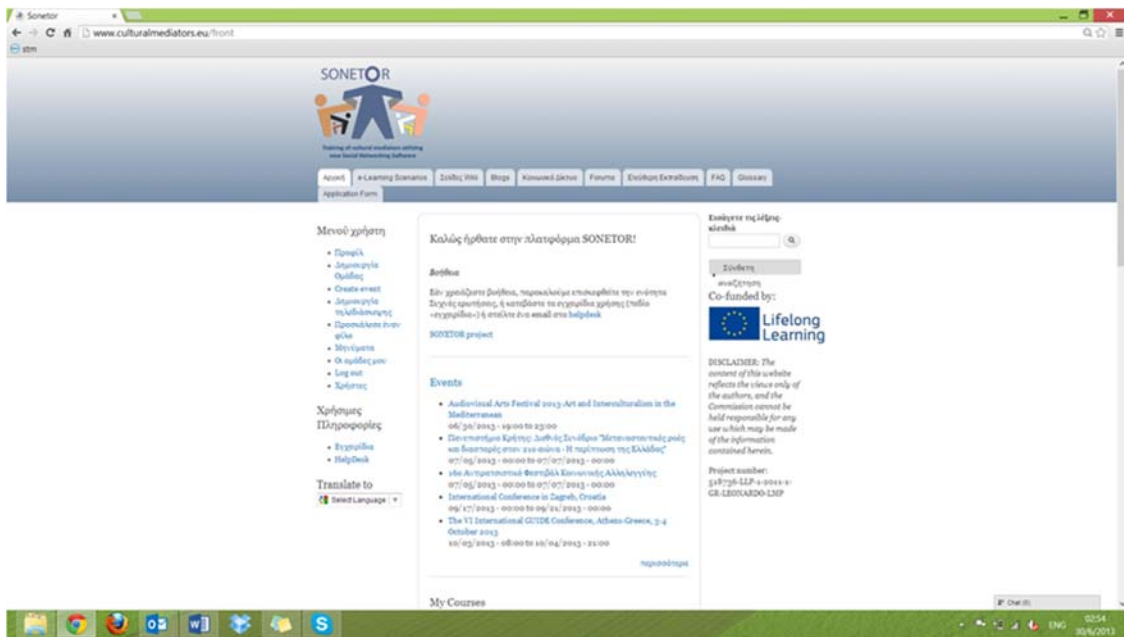


Figure 2. The main screen of the SONETOR platform after login

By using the items on the left, the user can customize his profile and participation in the community, invite friends to join, see pending personal messages or start a teleconferencing session. The middle section provides announcements, events and information on recent activity on the courses the user



has joined. The right column provides a tag based search facility, which allows the user horizontal access to the content of the platform, using the keywords he/she enters as filter.

The topmost bar lists the main services offered by the platform. These include:

- Guided training scenarios: these comprise a series of sequentially ordered steps that end users must follow in order to receive a certificate. Each step contains text and multimedia content that must be studied, as well as a set of questions and exercises that must be answered in order to proceed to the next step (Figure 3). Guided scenarios are currently designed by the project partners with help by the national moderators. They are based on episodes described in the context of unguided scenarios enhanced with multimedia content modules and quizzes
- Wikis: users can create wikis for any topic related to cultural mediation. Wikis are used in order to generate a body of knowledge on a specific topic in a collaborative manner. Currently, a wiki of terms related to cultural mediation is available
- Blogs: this service allows users to post articles declaring individual opinions on perspectives on matters related to cultural mediation (Figure 4). Other users may comment or provide their own point of view. It may also be used as an announcement / news service
- Social media: this service integrates links to the popular social media, as well as facilities that allow a user to maintain a list of contacts among the platform users
- Forums: this service is similar to blogs, but it is advisable to use for short postings or discussions (Figure 5). It is very helpful for building community spirit among users. All users are requested to present themselves in a special "getting to know each other" forum; discussions on other topics (among them one that attempts to detail the competences of cultural mediator) are ongoing, as well
- Unguided (peer) learning scenarios: they constitute the main learning service offered to end users; in fact, they are developed by end users themselves! Specific areas of cultural mediators' activity have been selected and end users are asked either to upload related episodes or comment on episodes uploaded by their peers, based on their experience (see Figure 6)
- FAQ: contains comprehensive information on how to use the platform, as well as on which social networking service should be used for a specific task. We decided this would be a useful addition, as many cultural mediators were not experienced with the capabilities of social networking tools
- Glossary: this is a wiki-based "official" glossary of terms related to cultural mediation (Figure 7). Currently, it is maintained by the project partners, but in the future, cultural mediators themselves should assume responsibility

As one can see from the screenshots, each service is offered in a separate tab. This enhances platform modularity and allows for easy additions or deletions of services in the future.

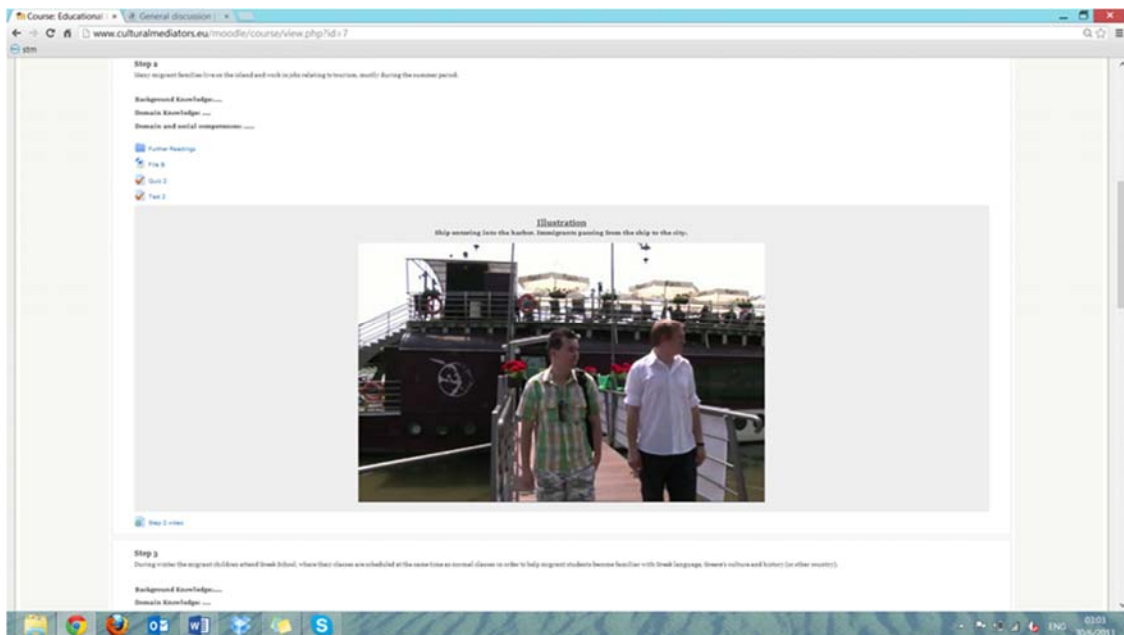


Figure 3. Excerpt from the guided scenarios offered at the SONETOR platform

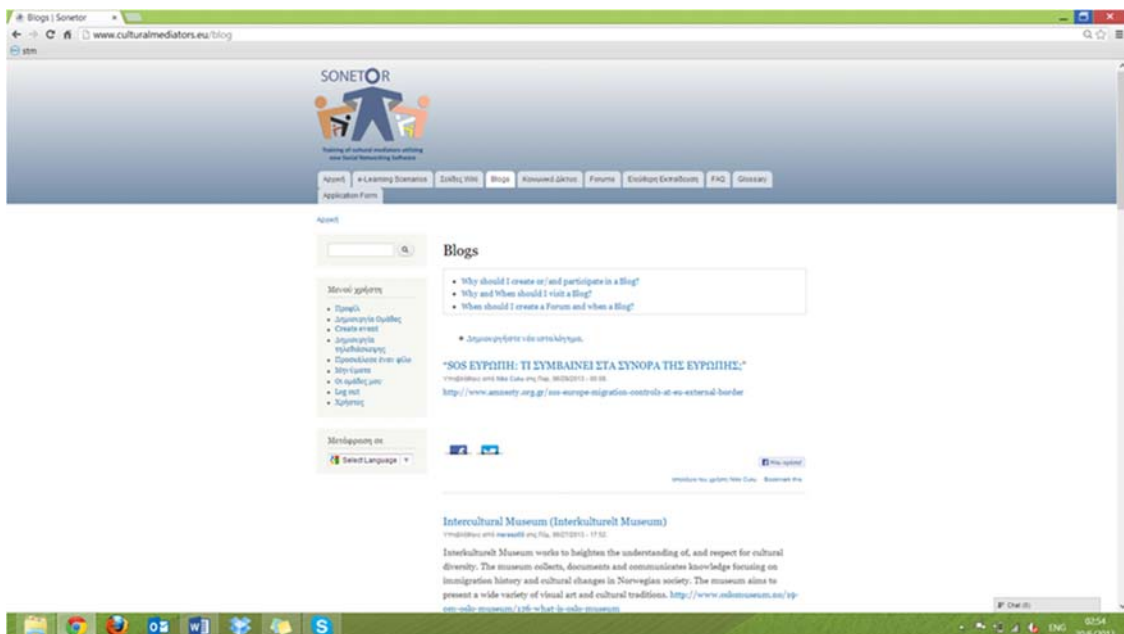


Figure 4. The Blogs tab of the SONETOR platform

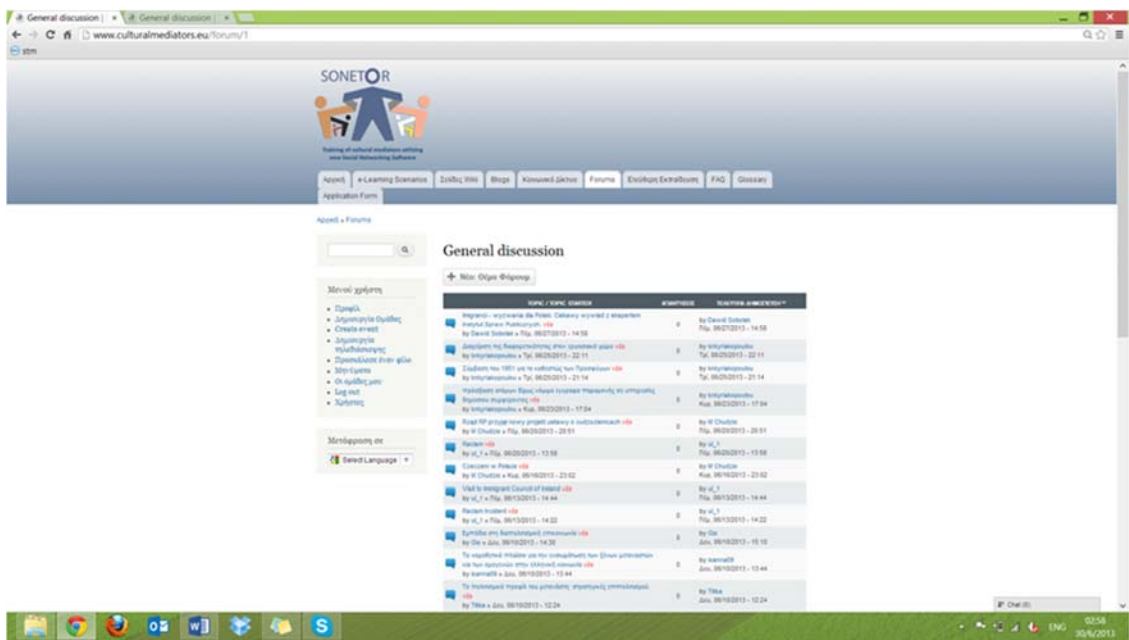


Figure 5. The Forums tab of the SONETOR platform

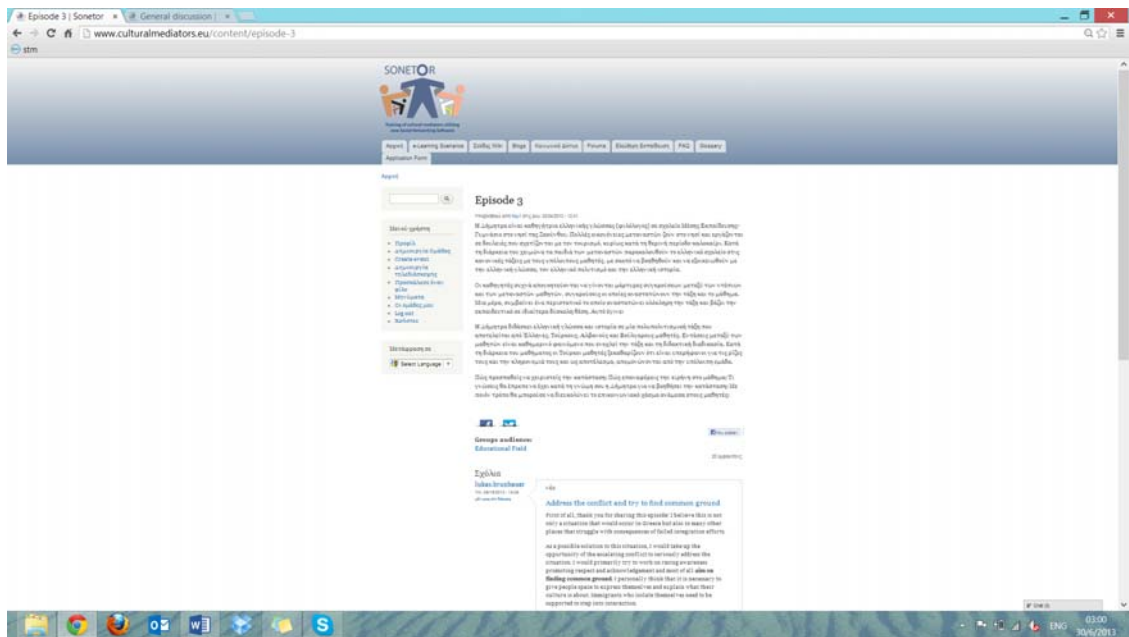


Figure 6. Excerpt from the unguided (peer) learning scenarios offered at the SONETOR platform

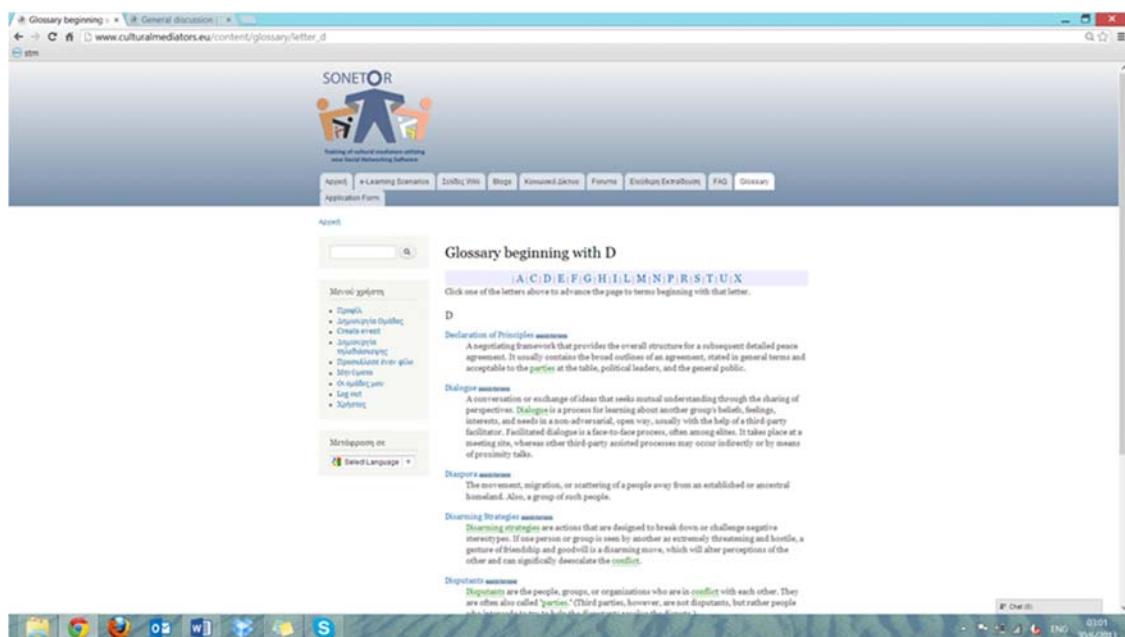


Figure 7. The wiki-based Glossary tab of the SONETOR platform

A specific problem that arose during platform development was support of multilingualism. Not only major European languages should be supported, but also cultural mediators must be able to upload content in their own language. This issue appears at two levels: user interface and content. The interface of the platform is available in all partner languages; each user, at registration time, must select his/her language of preference.

Regarding content, we dealt with this issue in two ways. Firstly, we have embedded in the platform the publicly available Google translator service. With it, users can get a descent but not accurate translation of any content module in any language. Secondly, we ask end users to officially translate important content modules first in English and then in any other language they wish.

In this way, we overcome at a low cost the problem of supporting end users' native languages, thus removing the most important obstacle in communication, that of now knowing the language of the hosting society.

## Training cultural mediators

As mentioned in the previous section, the platform offers two types of training opportunities, via guided or unguided training scenarios.

Guided training scenarios consist of a sequence of training steps that each user must complete. Each scenario is associated with knowledge, skills and competences identified in the profile of cultural mediators; thus, when a user completes a specific scenario, he/she is awarded a certification

for a specific qualifications module. Access to guided scenarios is free to any registered user platform.

These scenarios are developed by the project partners, based on episodes that appear frequently in the unguided scenarios area. These episodes are firstly selected in collaboration with national moderators. Then, special educational content modules are developed to illustrate the episodes and justify the decisions made or actions taken by the cultural mediator. Finally, a set of assessment questions are prepared for each step of the training process. Of course, the links to the unguided scenarios are maintained, because we want trainees to be able to access the ongoing dialogue about these episodes.

Unguided training scenarios constitute the essence of the peer learning service offered by the platform. Currently, four areas of cultural mediators' activity have been selected, based on the preference of end users: education, health, housing and law (Figure 8). Within each of these, end users can upload episodes of cultural mediation, based on their individual experience. Each episode contains a description of a situation where the intervention of a cultural mediator was necessary, the actions he/she took and the results; it may also be accompanied with questions regarding the situation or the actions, or documentation justifying the approach. Other end users are expected to comment on the approach taken, supply similar situations and the actions they took, provide response to questions raised by their peers or even upload supporting documentation.

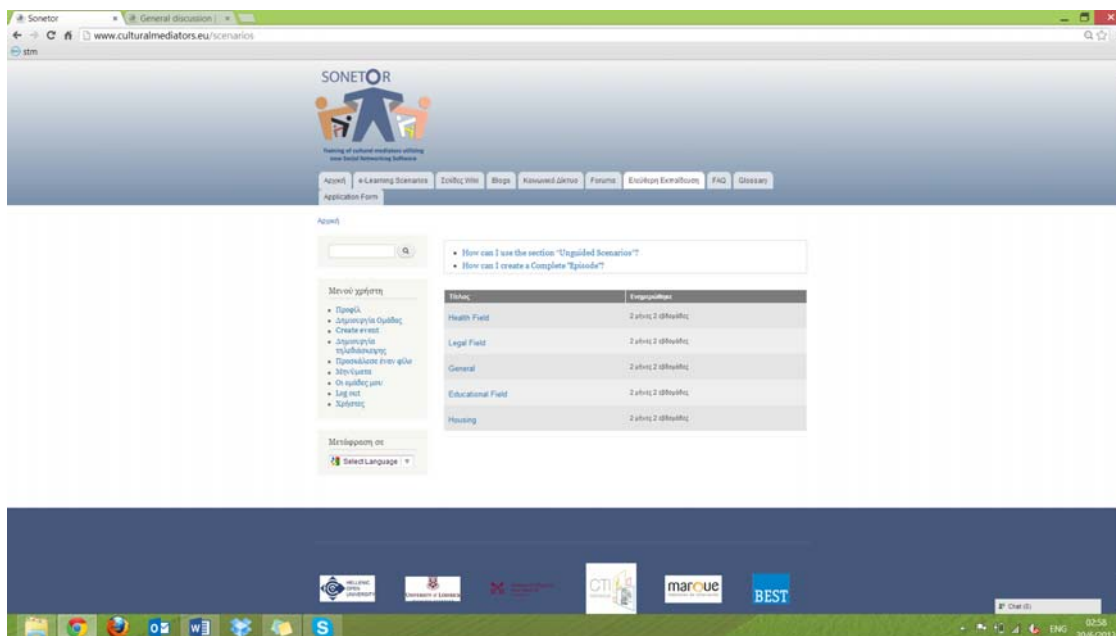


Figure 8. The Unguided Scenarios tab of the SONETOR platform

In this way, we aim at facilitating the collaboration among members of the European community of cultural mediators. The exchange of experience eventually leads to the specification of best

practices, which can be uptaken by members of the community. In addition, community members can overcome the cultural differences among themselves, and benefit from each other's experience.

## **Conclusions**

SONETOR is a transnational cooperation project, which aims to enhance Cultural Mediators' formal and non-formal skills and competences through the development of innovative contents and methods. It aims to improve the competences and skills of any professional who formally or informally interacts with immigrants by promoting innovation in vocational training of Cultural Mediators through the social networking training platform. The main products of the project (job profile, training content and scenarios, social networking platform) can be used in such changing environments.

The project will develop state of the art ICT-based pedagogy, content, learning services and practice. Pedagogical methodology combines peer learning and adult education principles for lifelong learning. Learning services will be deployed via a special social networking platform, using digital content developed by the consortium and the emerging community of Cultural Mediators, ensuring transfer of knowledge, culture, best practice and experience at a European level. Ultimately, the project will support the exchange of working experience and real life situations among the members of Cultural Mediators communities within the context of training scenarios, which will act as apprenticeship pathways. The project develops innovative ICT-based content and services and practice for lifelong learning through the novel combination of peer learning and adult education pedagogical principles with the help of social networking services and innovative digital content.

Lastly, the training scenarios will involve all stakeholders and will be realized with the help of a special social networking platform applying principles of peer learning. Thus Cultural Mediators will participate in a European learning community, achieving personal development and sustainability beyond the lifetime of the project.

## **Acknowledgement**

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