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Training across national frontiers: mid-term results of the NECOBELAC project

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Abstract
The NECOBELAC project (NEtwork of COllaboration Between Europe and Latin American-Caribbean countries, LAC), funded by the EC within the 7th FP and coordinated by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (Italy), has developed flexible, integrated, modular, and extensible teaching modules on scientific writing and open access publishing. The training methodology is based on a two-level approach (training for trainers and local training) and includes the use of topic maps as an innovative tool based on semantic web technology. The results of one-year training for trainers activity performed in Europe (Italy, Portugal and Spain) and LAC countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia Cuba, Mexico and Peru) show how international cooperation can help in developing a sound teaching programme taking into account international quality standards, best practices and cultural differences.

Key words: publishing; public health; training activities; topic maps; international cooperation; Europe; Latin America.

Introduction

Scientific research is a complex process which foresees the publication of its results. Unless this "act of making something publicly known" (publication) occurs, the whole process is meaningless. This is even truer in research concerning public health where the need to shorten the time-lapse occurring between research and its applications is pressing (from bench to bedside as in translational medicine). Yet, the writing and spreading of research findings have to face many obstacles. Writing for scientific publications and submitting an editorially correct paper have always been a difficult task for graduates and young researchers, who often experience the problems at their own expense (requests for major revisions, rejections from publishers and so on). Moreover, disseminating information through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially in an electronic environment, represents a new commitment for authors, editors and librarians, who have also to learn how to cope with the open access opportunities, now recognized as an important challenge to the democratization of knowledge, but still highly debated at global level.

NECOBELAC (NEtwork of COllaboration Between Europe and Latin American-Caribbean countries, LAC) is a European project focused on scientific writing and open access publishing in the field of public health. The project involves Italy, Portugal, Spain and UK in Europe, and Brazil and Colombia in Latin America, and therefore speaks four different languages (English, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish). It started in February 2009 and the time is right to sum up and comment on the mid-term results of its activities.

All joint efforts are spent in delivering training activities both in European and LAC countries, trying to ensure a valuable training methodology and to widen the network of individuals and institutions involved.

NECOBELAC has participated in three EAHIL events: Dublin (2009), Lisbon (2010) and Istanbul (2011). This has contributed in promoting the project activities and in increasing the interest of an international audience. Moreover, the different stakeholders in science communication (researchers, librarians, editors, policy makers) had the opportunity to share opinions and experiences on quality and equitable access to information, and this is pivotal to scientific cooperation on a global scale.

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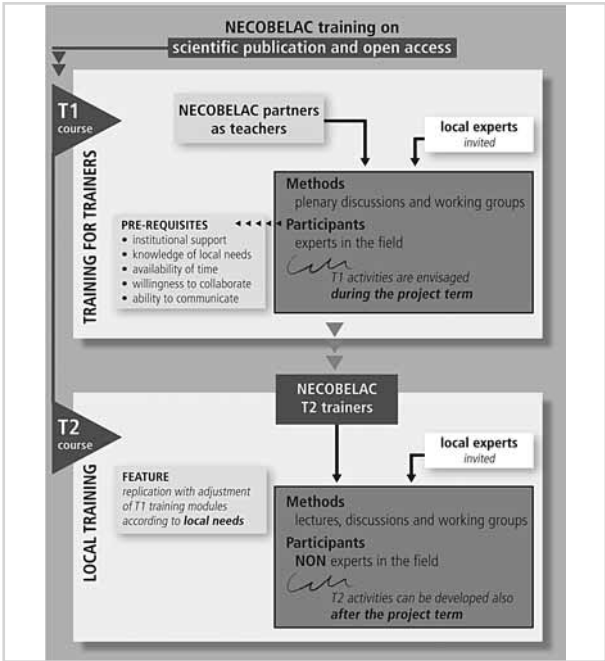
Fig. 1. *NECOBELAC training methodology.*

Training methodology

NECOBELAC partners provide a two-level training approach based on flexible, integrated and extensible modules: T1 courses (addressed to trainers) and T2 courses (addressed to final users at local level). Figure 1 shows the structure of NECOBELAC training methodology, the participants' pre-requisites and other features. The strength of this approach is the commitment of T1 trainees to replicate teaching sessions in T2 courses.

Training is supported by the innovative use of topic maps (dynamic interrelated structures of concepts)
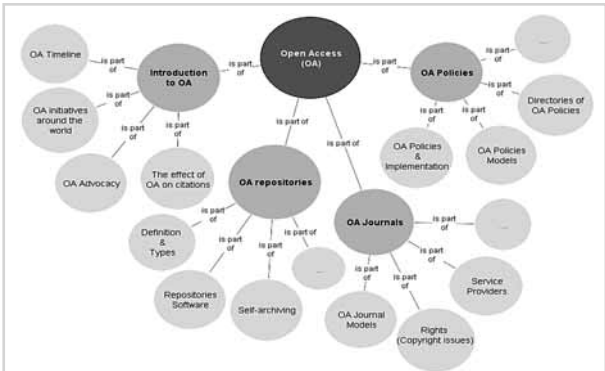
especially designed for scientific writing and open access publishing issues. The maps are based on semantic web technology (Figure 2) and their content is constantly updated with new resources, which concern also legal, economic and technical aspects. All materials included in the maps have been conceived as support for the attendees of T1 courses in their replication activity (T2 courses) as trainers.

Topic maps stimulated active participation of project partners, professionals and trainees involved. All stakeholders contributed in their construction by proposing "bricks" of knowledge to enrich the basic architecture of concepts. Topic maps reflect the whole strategy of the project, which stems from the idea of providing useful communication tools and strengthening active collaboration among partners and course trainees. As a further support, a manual for trainers is available within the "Training Activities" section of the project website (www.necobelac.eu). This document reports the relevant NECOBELAC content both for possible scientific publication and open access teaching events. A sample modular structure of courses is given along with a brief description of the main modules. Courses can be arranged and adjusted according to local needs, duration, facilities, number of participants, number of trainers, etc.In order to stimulate interaction among the members of the NECOBELAC community worldwide, the project website has been conceived as a sort of "open space" offering publications, videos, PPT presentations, interviews of experts, a newsletter, news, events, and links to web resources.

Results

As of April 2011, 7 T1 courses and 11 T2 courses have been performed in Europe (Italy, Portugal and Spain)

Fig. 2. *Example of a NECOBELAC topic map on open access publishing.*
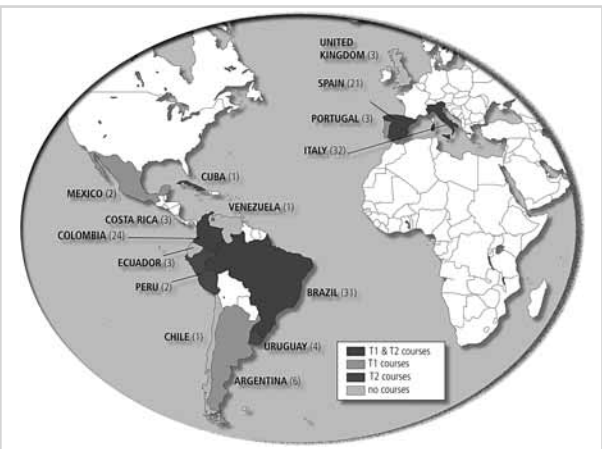

Fig. 3. *Types of training activity in the NECOBELAC network (in brackets the number of institutions per country).*

and Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico and Peru) involving over 1,000 participants as a whole. Figure 3 shows the type of training activity performed in the NECOBELAC network, which currently comprises of 59 and 79 institutions in 4 countries in Europe and 11 in Latin America respectively (from April to July 2011 about 40 new institutions have joined the project). These figures prove the success of NECOBELAC and stress the general need for training in health information production and dissemination. Sharing international quality standards and best practices means also overcoming cultural differences and helps in facing problems of language, behaviour, level of access to information, technological skills, etc. beyond national boundaries.

Conclusions

The impact of the NECOBELAC project is not easy to be measured in the short run since it implies a cultural change in information dissemination practices. However, it is clear, at the moment, that the achieved results related to the key aspects of the project – training, cooperation and networking – have already led to synergies and to best practices in publishing, in disseminating information and in promoting open access publishing throughout the world.

The NECOBELAC experience has been helpful for the professionals willing to organize courses on scientific writing and open access in public health. They have taken full advantage of the modular programmes developed by the project and by its network of public health institutions in European and LAC countries. A bi-directional approach leads to cross-fertilization: NECOBELAC international cooperation has contributed to the capacity building process by embedding new information dissemination practices in distant geographical areas with diverse cultural and technological scenarios.

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introduction

NECOBELAC (Network of Collaboration Between Europe and Latin American-Caribbean countries) is a European project involving Italy, Portugal, Spain and UK in Europe and Brazil and Colombia in Latin America. Focused on **scientific writing** and **open access** publishing of research results in **public health**, it aims at abating cultural barriers limiting the free and proper circulation of information by means of **cooperation** and **training activity** addressed to different stakeholders (researchers, librarians, editors, policy makers).

training methodology

NECOBELAC acts through a **two-level training approach**:
T1 courses (training for trainers) and **T2 courses** (local training) (Figure 1). The courses consist of flexible, integrated, and extensible modules. The methodology includes the use of **topic maps** as an innovative tool based on semantic web technology for the dissemination of sound and validated contents.
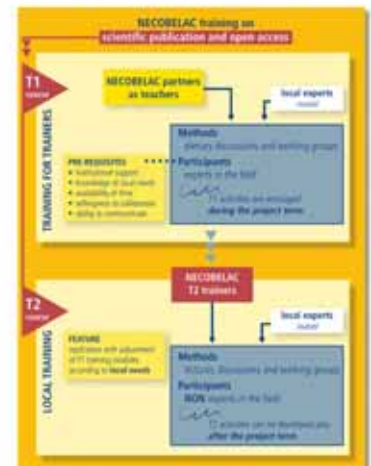
Figure 1. NECOBELAC training methodology

results

PUBLISHING TODAY:
a challenge towards democratization of knowledge

Scientific research is a complex process and foresees the publication of its results. Yet, spreading research outcomes has to face many obstacles, such as:

- *writing an editorially correct article*
  it is a difficult task scientists need to learn, especially graduates and young researchers often receiving manuscript rejections or requests for major revisions.

- *disseminating information through ITC technologies.*
  it represents a new commitment for authors, editors and librarians who have to learn how to cope with the open access opportunities.

At present (April 2011), **7 T1 courses** and **11 T2 courses** have been performed and planned both in Europe (Italy, Portugal and Spain) and Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico and Peru) involving over 1,000 participants as a whole. Figure 2 shows the type of training activity performed in the NECOBELAC network, which currently includes 4 countries in Europe and 11 in Latin America for a total of 59 and 79 institutions respectively. These figures prove the **success of the project** and stress the general need for training in health information production and dissemination, sharing international quality standards and best practices thus **overcoming cultural differences**.

Figure 2. Types of training activity in the NECOBELAC network
(in brackets the number of institutions per country)

GRAPHICS: Sandra Salinetti (ISS)

conclusions

NECOBELAC training experience in Europe and Latin America shows how **bidirectional international cooperation** is an added value contributing to the capacity building process by embedding new information dissemination practices in distant geographical areas with diverse cultural and technological scenarios.

NECOBELAC partners

NECOBELAC in brief

COORDINATOR
Istituto Superiore di Sanità (Italy)

DURATION 2009-2011

LANGUAGES
English
Italian
Portuguese
Spanish