

TEACHYOURWORLD: THE EVALUATION OF A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR ENTREPRENEURS

Luca Scacchi, Marina Cariello, & Mariagrazia Monaci

*Department of human and social sciences,
Università della Valle d'Aosta - Université de la Vallée d'Aoste (Italy)*

Abstract

This contribution presents an evaluation study conducted within TeachYourWorld, a cross-border Italian–French initiative supporting the digital and green transition of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The project is funded by the European Union through the INTERREG VI-A programme (ALCOTRA) and is coordinated by a consortium of Italian–French partners (Progetto Formazione Srl, Confindustria Valle d'Aosta, Fondazione Brodolini Srl SB, Digital League – Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes), while the University of Valle d'Aosta is responsible for the evaluation activities. Nine SMEs from diverse sectors participate in tailored digitalization actions targeting production, organisational, and commercial processes, supported by senior experts and young trainees. The programme's training component (the “Academy”) integrates intensive learning events (two Summer Camps) with specialised online and face-to-face activities (workshops and tech-clubs), designed on the basis of preliminary assessments of firms' needs. Given this articulated structure, the evaluation framework includes participants' emotional responses as part of training effectiveness. This approach aligns with research recognising emotions as relevant indicators of outcomes in work-related and entrepreneurial learning (Endres & Kleiner, 1990; Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, & Paloniemi, 2020). The study focuses on emotions typically linked to learning and performance—such as satisfaction, enjoyment of learning, hope, pride, anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness, and boredom—due to their influence on motivation, engagement, and performance (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Emotional data are collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted with SME participants at different stages of the Academy. The poster will present preliminary findings from data gathered in spring 2026 and discuss implications for evaluating complex organisational training programs and for integrating affective dimensions into assessment models.

Keywords: *Corporate education, emotions, evaluation and assessment.*

1. Introduction

This contribution presents an evaluation study conducted within the project *TeachYourWorld, Cross-border academy for the digital and green transition of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises* (SMEs), an Italian–French initiative funded by the European Union through the INTERREG VI-A programme (ALCOTRA). It is coordinated by a consortium of Italian–French partners (Progetto Formazione Srl, Confindustria Valle d'Aosta, Fondazione Brodolini Srl SB, Digital League – Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes), while the University of Valle d'Aosta is responsible for the evaluation activities. The project aims to address challenges faced by SMEs by designing and developing innovative business solutions for digital and green transformation through cross-border cooperation. Numerous studies have identified cross-border cooperation as a key driver of growth and internationalization for SMEs (Zanger, Hodicová & Gaus, 2008; Raposo, Ferreira & Fernandes, 2014; Makkonen & Leick, 2020).

The initiative was launched in autumn 2024 and involves nine SMEs: four French companies in Haute-Savoie and five Italian companies in Aosta Valley. These SMEs operate in different sectors: a bookstore; a retailer of agricultural products aiming to create a high-quality meat distribution business; a company specializing in engineering analyses; a company engaged in the trade and customization of metal sheets, kitchens, and bathrooms; an energy monitoring and management company; two companies focused on the digitalization of industrial processes; a digital consultancy firm for cable television; and a startup intending to develop an application for sustainable tourism and sports. The participating companies vary in size (ranging from startups with no turnover or revenues of only a few tens of thousands of euros to firms with consolidated markets worth several million euros; from family-run businesses to companies

employing several dozen people) and exhibit diverse levels of digital maturity. Through the provision of experts and consultants, as well as an assessment of digitalization conditions, the project aims to co-design and develop tailored innovative solutions for each company (for example, a digital e-commerce platform, process analysis and the development of a management information system, a customer management app, software for remote activity management, etc.).

A specific component of the project focuses on complementing the intervention with a training pathway for companies, called the Academy. This involves students and young people participating in internships and traineeships to support the implementation of the proposed innovations.

2. The training activities of the *TechYourWorld* Project

The project specifically includes a set of training activities focused on digital skills, as well as exchange visits and internships for young participants, who will have the opportunity to follow the development of innovations within SMEs in the two territories. The training activities are organized within an "Academy," which over the course of 2025 and 2026 delivers six workshops on digitalization and sustainability; three Tech-Clubs, consisting of evening public events featuring tech leaders, entrepreneurs, or professionals who have distinguished themselves in digital innovation in sectors related to sustainability; and two "Summer Camps," namely residential activities offering training courses aligned with the innovations under development within the participating SMEs. The training activities cover five specific macro-areas: (a) digital tools for accessing new markets; (b) big data and data analysis; (c) digital solutions for logistics; (d) cybersecurity; and (e) digital technologies for sustainability.

The marked diversity in terms of sector and size of the participating companies, together with their heterogeneous needs related both to digital development and training, led to a reconfiguration of the intensity and organization of the Academy pathway. Particular emphasis was placed on assessment moments focused on the specific conditions and needs of each company, as well as on dialogue and knowledge exchange among the different entrepreneurial realities. This reconfiguration made it necessary to revise the expected outcomes (i.e., increased awareness of SMEs' knowledge and competencies), leading to a renewed focus on the specific conditions and needs of the SMEs. This was achieved through the assessment of increased awareness regarding each company's digital and sustainability-related situation and needs, as well as the knowledge and skills acquired during the various training activities, using primarily qualitative tools rather than simple quantitative questionnaires aimed at measuring improvements in learning outcomes or competencies.

3. Design and objectives

The research unit of the University of Valle d'Aosta is responsible for the evaluation of the project and, in particular, for assessing the achievement of the expected results related to business digitalisation and the training pathway. This presentation specifically illustrates the data collection process and the initial results of the evaluation of the project's training intervention.

The project's evaluation framework explicitly incorporates participants' emotional responses as a core indicator of training effectiveness, reflecting research that views emotions not as mere by-products of learning, but as meaningful markers of learning processes, behavioural change, and longer-term outcomes in professional and entrepreneurial education (Endres & Kleiner, 1990; Hökkä et al., 2020). Emotions are understood as situated and socially mediated, emerging from the interaction between learners, content, peers, and organizational contexts. This approach is grounded in theories of achievement emotions and adult learning, which highlight the reciprocal relationship between affect, cognition, and performance (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). In entrepreneurial settings, where learners integrate new knowledge with prior experience and confront uncertainty and risk, emotions offer valuable insights into both perceived quality of the training and its ability to promote long-lasting learning and behavioral changes. The study focuses on emotions commonly linked to learning and performance outcomes: satisfaction, enjoyment, hope, pride, anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness, and boredom. These emotions are known to influence motivation, engagement, self-regulation, and performance (Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Positive activating emotions are generally associated with higher motivation and engagement, whereas negative emotions may hinder or, under certain conditions, stimulate learning.

The first hypothesis posits that participation in the Academy will be associated with an increase in positive learning-related emotions—specifically satisfaction, enjoyment, hope, and pride—over the course of the programme, reflecting growing familiarity, perceived relevance, and a strengthened sense of competence and agency (Hökkä et al., 2020).

A second hypothesis concerns engagement, proposing that positive activating emotions will be positively associated with behavioural and cognitive engagement, while boredom and hopelessness will relate to lower engagement and weaker perceived relevance of the training.

The third hypothesis adopts a nuanced view of negative emotions, suggesting that moderate levels of anxiety or frustration—particularly in early stages—may trigger reflective learning processes, whereas persistently high levels of anxiety, anger, or shame are expected to be associated with reduced motivation and perceived effectiveness.

A further hypothesis addresses temporal dynamics, anticipating emotional shifts across different stages of the Academy, with mixed emotions in early phases and increased pride and satisfaction in later stages as learning consolidates.

Finally, the framework assumes that emotions are also socially constructed, hypothesising that shared emotional narratives emerging in group settings will shape collective engagement and participants' overall perception of the Academy's relevance to professional practice.

4. Methods and expected results

The study involves approximately thirty participants in the Academy activities (entrepreneurs, employees, and interns) in 2025 and in the early months of 2026. To test the hypotheses, emotional data are collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how participants interpret, articulate, and negotiate their emotional experiences over time. By linking these emotional narratives to perceived learning outcomes and engagement, the study aims to provide a richer and more comprehensive assessment of training effectiveness, extending beyond traditional cognitive or performance-based indicators.

The poster presents preliminary findings from data collected in spring 2026 and discusses the implications for evaluating organisational training programmes by incorporating affective dimensions into assessment models. As the Academy progresses, the expected results indicate an overall increase in positive, learning-related emotions (e.g., satisfaction, enjoyment, hope, and pride) among participants. This emotional shift is anticipated to be accompanied by higher levels of behavioural and cognitive engagement in training activities and a stronger perceived relevance of the learning content for participants' contexts. Moderate levels of challenge-related emotions (e.g. anxiety or frustration) in early stages are expected to support reflective and adaptive learning when appropriately scaffolded. Over time, emotional patterns are expected to stabilise toward greater confidence and ownership of learning outcomes. Collectively, these findings are expected to demonstrate the value of incorporating emotional dimensions into the evaluation of professional and entrepreneurial training programmes.

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