

# **CIEA 2008**

## **Varied methodological approaches for teaching and extension**

**Teleacademie for farmers in the Black Forest  
Germany**

Wednesday, 20 August 2008

**26<sup>th</sup> International Course on vocational Training  
and Education in Agriculture**



**Forum Pro Schwarzwaldbauern e.V., St. Georgen**

## **Teleakademie for Black Forest farmers**

**Without the know-how of mountain farmers, it is going to be difficult to maintain the delightful Black Forest countryside. However, many young farm owners do not have the corresponding day-by-day experience, nor have they undergone the appropriate technical training. The “Teleakademie für Black Forest Farmers” has collected the necessary knowledge and is now in the process of passing it on to interested families through its courses.**

The more beautiful the landscape, the more difficult it is to farm it. It is not simply that going uphill and downhill calls for more effort. Both arable farming and animal husbandry require particular experience and special knowledge. The agricultural training centres are also further away. If anyone were to carry out a Pisa study into the agricultural training situation in mountain regions, such as the Black Forest, its results would show that amongst those inheriting farms it has already become the exception rather than the rule for them to have undergone training in farming, but they still cling to their farms, which are characteristic features of the countryside.



*The know-how of the mountain farmer is becoming the factor in shortest supply.*

The “Forum Pro Schwarzwaldbauern” is a registered non-profit association, which has recognised this whole problem and, back in 2002, the International Year of Mountains, declared know-how to be the factor in shortest supply for maintaining the Black Forest as a recreational space. The idea of the Teleakademie for Black Forest farmers came into being as a result of a proposal submitted in the context of a programme for new ideas organised by doIT-regional (a Baden-Württemberg initiative for strengthening rural regions). In essence, its aim is to make the empirical knowledge that still exists available again through the use of modern media. It is a fact, after all, that more and more remote Black Forest farms are using the internet for reporting data on their herds or for booking farm holidays. So, why not facilitate education and the transfer of knowledge online too – especially in situations in which increasing multiple job-holding is eroding still further the time available for attending organised events?

### **Cooperation with Furtwangen University**

It seemed obvious to tackle the project in cooperation with Furtwangen University, which is located in the middle of the Black Forest, and has IT as one of its main disciplines and which has already set up a Teleakademie for providing further education for its former students. That made it possible to leverage the resources of

an experienced regional institution. There is an additional aspect to this cooperation concerning regional policy, since Furtwangen University had its original roots 157 years ago, when it was founded as a specialist training centre for the clockmaker's trade. The aim back in the nineteenth century was to make the clock industry, which had grown out of a farm handicraft, into an economically viable sector.

The task facing the project's production team, which was comprised of members of the association's executive board, was to bring together the existing but fragmented detailed knowledge and to give it a practically focussed and didactically logical structure. There were no similar prior projects or models to guide them, but they did have various different contacts with farming institutions, including those in the mountainous regions of the neighbouring countries. One point was clear from the very beginning: the Teleakademie was to offer more than e-learning. Its aim was to provide a blended-learning service, with online courses and face-to-face events dovetailing with one another.

After a period of preparation, which lasted approximately one year, the Teleakademie went online on 1 January 2006 as the first distance-learning institution for farmers. Its programme is structured into an open component ("open forum") and a course component comprised of two modules, "A future in farming in the im Black Forest" and "The farming year in the Black Forest".

### **Open forum**

The freely accessible "open forum" was set up on the welcome page, with the deliberate aim of promoting a culture of discussion. The issues presented and debated in the forum have included declining producer prices for milk, genetic engineering and direct payments. In the light of its first year of experience, the Forum Pro Schwarzwaldbauern took the decision to present more general questions for discussion rather than specific farming problems; typical topics include landscape and nutrition. The thinking behind this extension in the subject matter was to encourage an exchange of views with people outside of farming too, including consumers.

### **A future in farming in the Black Forest**

From the vantage point of prevalent agri-economic concepts, Black Forest farms are being considered more and more as anachronistic, but, despite that, structural change is only slowly having an impact on them. Further weight was lent to this provocative thesis by a study carried out by the office of agriculture in the town of Donaueschingen, looking into the situation and needs of farming families. This study formed the basis for developing the course programme. The outcome was a four-day face-to-face seminar clearly focused on its target group. During the winter of 2005/06, it was developed and tested with the members of the association's executive board acting as a pilot group.

This seminar's thematic blocks are analysing the farm, recognising the family's strengths and weaknesses and developing a concept for one's own farm. The seminar was run live for the first time in the winter of 2006/07 in the district covered by the Central Black Forest countryside conservation association (Landschaftserhaltungsverband) and was attended by eight families. The essence of the participants' feedback was that it was a course that made it feel fun to be a farmer!

The face-to-face seminar is complemented by the Teleakademie course component. Course documents and an Excel spreadsheet are available online for analysing and planning the farm. In addition, the seminar participants can stay in touch with one another afterwards and can exchange their ideas via an online workspace, where they can also use the seminar lecturers as coaches.

### **The farming year in the Black Forest**

Farm work is seasonal; nature and the animals make sure of that. At higher and higher altitudes, the farming year is compressed through longer winters and shorter summers. To cope with that, this module offers online information and learning units on what jobs are waiting to be done in a particular month. Its principal subjects are “meadows and the animals that graze them” and “farming life and the farmed landscape”. More than twenty families took out a subscription to this part of the course in its first year alone.



*More than twenty families subscribed to the “farming year in the Black Forest” course during the first year it was on offer.*



*The participants meet up to pool their experience roughly once every eight weeks.*



*In summer, the course participants  
and their lecturers discuss meadows in situ.*

The contents have been culled from an informal network of domestic and foreign experts in mountain farming. In order to establish personal contact with these lecturers and other participants, the internet programme is complemented by specialist meetings and guided tours of Black Forest farms.

### **The Black Forest farmers' learning habits**

An evaluation of the data from the first half of 2006 provides interesting findings as regards the behaviour of the website's users. The mean number of visitors was 33 per day, eleven of them to the subscription-based course component. In the context of the online course, 175 files were downloaded each month, which corresponds to six a day.

In winter, the peak times for visitors were around midday and in the afternoon. With the coming of spring and more outdoor work, the peak times shifted to the morning and evening.

### **Uncharted terrain with good prospects**

The Teleakademie for Black Forest farmers has entered terrain that had previously not been worked on methodologically and didactically. In recognition of this, it received the 2007 prize for innovation in continuing education awarded by the BIBB (German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training).

The experience to date has created a mood of optimism amongst those involved, given that the programme as a whole is unique and tuned to meet special needs. By way of contrast to printed didactic materials, the online programme can have additions and updates made to it relatively easily. It is a big challenge for those looking after the project on an honorary basis to keep its contents up-to-date and to expand them.

**In the "farming year" course, I don't even have to leave my farm to find what I'm looking for and what suits our circumstances. (Rolf Epting of St.Georgen-Langenschiltach)**

## **Dates and facts**

Duration:	November 2005 to December 2007
Location:	St. Georgen
Target group:	New owners (through inheritance) of Black Forest farms
Building up a	<i>Teleakademie</i> for Black Forest farmers, including a web portal for blended learning.
33	visits per day, including eleven to the subscription-based course component
175	files were downloaded as a monthly mean in the context of the online course (six per day)
50	visitors to the two courses during the first year

## **Project initiator and contact**

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