

Teachers and Trainers in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

Professional Development in Asia and Europe

29-30 June 2009 in Bergisch Gladbach/Germany

Sabine Wiemann, Guy Tilkin, Holger Bienzle

**Acting in networks – a key professional
competence of adult educators**

Deutsches Institut für Erwachsenenbildung
German Institute for Adult Education

URL: <http://www.die-bonn.de/asem/asem0905.pdf>

Published: 09.06.2009

State of information: 09.06.2009

This document is published with the following [creative commons](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/) licence:



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/de/>

Acting in networks – a key professional competence of adult educators

Sabine Wiemann/Guy Tilkin/Holger Bienzle

Networks of adult education professionals and institutions at regional, national and international level play an increasingly prominent role in the field of lifelong learning.

In this context networking can be understood as the process of building up ties between people and/or organisations for multiple reasons: access to information, ideas or funds, political mobilisation, benchmarking, support or mutual assistance in professional crisis situations. Moreover, networks face high expectations they cannot always meet: they are supposed to solve structural deficits. In a more realistic perspective networks should focus on three core functions (Bienzle, H. et alia (2007), *The Art of Networking*. European Networks in Education. Vienna):

Networks are about networking

First and foremost, networks should bring together practitioners, experts and policy-makers in a specific field and create an organisational framework for intensive contacts and exchange.

Networks are about learning

A network should provide ample implicit and explicit learning opportunities for all the actors involved. Personal and organisational learning should have a prominent place on the network agenda.

Networks are about shaping practices and policies

Although the creation and maintenance of suitable provision for networking, sharing experiences and learning for actors inside and outside the network would already be a considerable achievement, networks should go one step further. A network should make some sort of measurable impact in the educational field concerned.

As a consequence of the increasingly networked character of educational work, networking, i.e. the ability to act effectively in networks and to coordinate complex and multiple network processes can be regarded as a key competence of practitioners at all levels of hierarchy in educational institutions.

This key competence is not altogether new, but requires a fresh perspective on a range of socio-personal, management and – with a view of the huge potential of Web 2.0 for network sand networking – technology application skills, which need to be enhanced, reflected and applied in the context of networks.

ComNet: An Example of Networking Competence Development in the Field of Adult Education.

There is hardly any field of educational action where the notion of network(ing) has not been postulated as a guiding principle and a key competence of practitioners at all levels of the

hierarchy. Networks and networking are generally considered to have high potential for solving structural problems in education.

ComNet and the preceding project *Euoweaving* were conceived against the background that networks play an increasingly important role in European lifelong learning policies. In contrast to this growing importance it appears that the results of some of the funded networks are below expectations in terms of contribution to the educational field concerned. One of the reasons for this seems that many network co-ordinators and partners do not have a sufficiently clear picture of the concept of a network as a specific cooperation structure and of adequate activities and management processes.

In the publication “The Art of Networking” a particular type of educational network is dealt with: European networks in the framework of the EU funding programmes for education and training. It is addressed to professionals in education – teachers, trainers, programme developers, managers, researchers and evaluators – who are already involved in networks or may wish to be so in the future.



While the publication has its main focus on education and its corresponding funding mechanisms in the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme we consider much of its content to be relevant also for other strands of the programme – networks in vocational training, higher education and in other fields such as cultural or regional development.

“The Art of Networking” was very well received but the team felt it was necessary to go one step further: to elaborate networking in terms of competences and turn this material into international course material. The Grundtvig application for the ComNet project was approved with the following aims:

1. to enhance adult education practitioners networking knowledge and competences in general, for acting effectively in professional education networks at local, regional, national and European level
2. to increase the number and quality of Grundtvig networks in the Lifelong Learning Programme by focusing on the specific knowledge, skills and tools necessary to planning and implementing networks.

Thus, the project makes a contribution to increasing the quality of adult education in Europe by developing a European training course aiming at

- contributing to the professionalisation of adult education practitioners through the acquisition of networking skills which are becoming more and more important for all groups of educational staff: trainers, programme developers and managers
- promoting cooperation between adult education institutions in Europe;
- laying the foundation for more and better applications for Grundtvig networks;

- increasing understanding of the network concept in the funding programme and introducing management strategies and practical tools for successful network implementation.
- increasing the quality and impact of networks funded by the European Commission.

The training course develops competences in the following fields:

- Network theory
- Social networking skills
- Networks in EU funding programmes
- Setting-up a network
- Network management
- ICT tools for networks
- Learning in a network
- Network evaluation
- Policy & advocacy
- Making the network sustainable

Methodology

The training course has three integral parts: The five day face-to face seminar is embedded within two phases which are facilitated by an internet-based platform for collaboration and learning, and by other synchronous and asynchronous online communication tools.



A major course focus is on practice orientation, i.e. participants are encouraged to share in the course real cases, challenges or plans related to their own networking practice. Thus, The Art of Networking ensures that the training content is relevant for participants' professional practice and create an added value through the opportunity for joint problem-solving. During the face-to-face seminar short theoretical inputs are combined with action-oriented methods to promote peer-to-peer learning. Many of the networking and networking competences dealt with are put into practice during the training, and participants are invited to develop concrete plans on how to integrate the new knowledge into their professional practice. The pilot course was successfully realised with 24 participants in November 2008. During the pilot the course organisers put much emphasis on feedback and course evaluation activities to find out whether participants' needs were met and to ensure that the training can be optimised accordingly.

In September the ComNet course material will be published and courses will be run on a regular basis. The first one will take place in September 2009.

The course material is prepared in a modular way, i.e. training modules can be composed in various ways according to the training needs and characteristics of the target group(s), and the time available for training. You can find an exemplary module hereafter.

Example of (page 1 of) one of the training modules:

Module 5: How to make the network sustainable

Introduction

Whatever is done or produced, make sure that the world knows about it, that products and outcomes are used in a broad context and that they last as long as needed.

In this module we are dwelling in the realm of not always clearly defined concepts such as: dissemination, sustainability, 'valorisation', exploitation and mainstreaming. These concepts have to do with visibility, communication, contacts, relationships, impact, policy making, integration, and as such are the core business of networking.

It is clear that the impact of EU funded educational programmes and project results needs to be improved. Exploitation of project results in the sense of dissemination, adding European added value and the mainstreaming of these results is one of the key tasks of networks. The network's own exploitation must guarantee the quality and continuation of this valuable task.

All funded networks will have to include a exploitation and dissemination plan in their application. It will have to be part of the work plan, with the allocation of tasks to partners and sub-contractors. Therefore network partners should have a common view on the relevant concepts and know what their tasks are in this respect.

Competences to be enhanced

- > Awareness of the need to and added value of dissemination and exploitation at micro and macro level and awareness of the role of networks in all this
 - > Knowledge of the right concepts used in this respect
 - > Ability to conceive a long term view on the network and its outcomes beyond the initial funding period
 - > Knowledge of the relevant techniques and strategies leading to sustainability
 - > Ability to plan the dissemination and exploitation in terms of timing, tasks and priorities
 - > Ability to adapt activities and outcomes for the benefit of exploitation and dissemination
-

Overview of learning activities

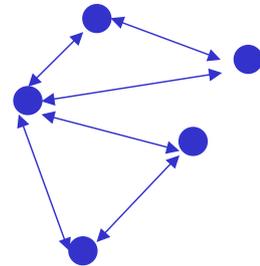
- > Activity 1: Learning about concepts
 - > Activity 2: Elements of sustainability for a network
 - > Activity 3: Planning the dissemination & exploitation of your network
 - > Activity 4: Learning about rationale behind dissemination and exploitation
-

In the final publication each module will be introduced analogically and followed by a detailed description of each of the listed activities. Respective learning objects for each activity will be delivered in a digital version together with the publication.

Networking is a key competence of practitioners in education, and networks are considered to have high potential for solving structural problems.

A network should attempt to make a visible impact on the educational field concerned, beyond its direct participants. A network's impact can concern either the development of educational policies, or the practices in learning and teaching, or - in rare cases – both.

However, networks should be realistic about the level of impact possible. They need to focus on a few core aims: Less can be more!



Further information are available on the website: www.networks-in-education.eu