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Acknowledgements

Dr Roger Morris. Source material and discussion of abstract.
University of NSW College of Fine Arts Library. Research material
Jennifer Aldred. Proof reading, discussion and development of the idea.
Marcus Aldred-Traynor. The idea.

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Profession and Professional Work in Adult Education in Europe

In the recent decade it became more important to reflect about the work which is done in adult education, who is doing it and how he/she is qualified to do that. It is somehow the reaction on the shift to the learner, who is more and more seen as a self-directed and self-responsible actor apparently without the need of any professional help. So I would like to talk about trends and challenges in the professional development of adult educators.

Already the expression "professional development" of adult educators suggests that there is – or might be - a "profession" of adult education. Is that so?

We talk of "profession", when special knowledge and skills are needed to carry out a job in this field. But this is not all. Normally, special training or education, usually at a high level, is formally required to get access to the profession, to take up a job in the field. Such as is the case in the fields of medicine, law and religion, for example. And finally, the members of a profession are regarded as experts and enjoy a high level of respect from the general public. And accordingly they have themselves a high level of self-esteem.

What is the situation in adult education then? Are there needed special knowledge and skills? Is special training required to allow people to take up a job in adult education? What about the prestige and self-image of adult educators? And finally, what is an adult educator after all, whom do we consider as belonging to this group and why? If we talk of professional development of adult educators in Europe, it will be necessary to have these questions in mind.

My institute has recently set up a European research group – the first meeting was in October last year - which deals with the issues of competence and professional development of adult educators in Europe, and I am going to summarise here some of the discussions that this group has had so far.

Adult education as an occupational field

Let's have a look at Adult education as an occupational field first: Adult Education/Continuing Education is the educational sector which

is most closely connected with many other societal sectors. In contrast to the school or higher education sector, adult education has not a clearly delimited institutionalized structure with its own internal rationale and dynamics. Adult education in some form or other is present in many appearances.

Adult education has developed in different contexts and is structured different in sub-sectors, which are partly overlapping. This is true for most European countries. In some countries, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, adult education is very closely connected to the societal areas in which it has originated and continues to develop such as social movements or the business sector. In other countries, especially in the North and West of Europe, there exist also different fields of adult education that are defined by a certain type of institution, such as folk high schools, private commercial providers, institutions of social and cultural education or technical colleges. In all cases, the whole picture of adult education (and the related „profession“) can only be understood against the background of its historical development and its current links with other societal sectors.

Across countries, the articulation of the field of adult education differs considerably, although usually one will find in most countries a broad distinction between vocational training and education on the one hand and liberal or general adult education on the other.

Also, the bases on which adult education provision rests differ considerably. Often laws or initiatives have been implemented in one given sector of adult education only and have there created very specific structures and institutions which are governed by this particular law or funding regime. One will normally find, also, that the responsibility for adult education does not lie with one particular ministry but is spread over various ministries, such as education, labour market, social affairs, culture or science.

This may be one of the reasons, why many activities which could be considered as some kind of adult education are not always understood or termed as such. Often adult education activities have better chances of funding when they are not labelled as adult education but demonstrate a relation to labour market programmes, regional development schemes or social movements for example. This has an obvious impact not only on the terming of the activities but also on their image and self-image and on the definition of their aims

Professionalism

If professionalism in adult education is discussed at all, then the debate usually refers to one particular sector within adult education rather than to the whole picture. There are various reasons for this:

For one, the sectoral context prevails over an overall perspective on adult education activities. An “animator” in a museum is seen as someone very different from a “trainer” in a company, even though they do things that are quite similar

In no country the access to a job in adult education is regulated for the whole field of adult education. Such rules do exist only for individual sectors, especially in vocational training or second chance education, where adult learners study to obtain a state diploma or certificate.

Proper educations for adult educators do exist in some countries – for example in Germany University degree courses leading to a diploma in adult education. However, since these courses are not compulsory, they failed to exert a shaping influence on adult education as a profession.

Continuing training for the professional development of adult education staff is usually offered within the individual sectors of adult education (by associations, companies etc.). The qualifications that are generated through these trainings are very diverse and hardly comparable. Thus, a key prerequisite for the existence of a „profession“ - a systematic and regulated education for the exertion of the work – is lacking.

The employment conditions of adult education staff are more or less insecure everywhere. A permanent full-time job in adult education is the exception rather than the rule in all countries. However, we lack reliable data in this regard. Not even the numbers of staff working in adult education are available in most countries, even less so are data on further details of their work conditions.

Many adult education staff members do not even see themselves as adult educators but rather as belonging to a certain social or business context. This is especially true in cases when the adult education activity is related to other organisational contexts (such as companies, cultural institutions, associations etc.) or when the adult education activity represents only a part of work in the job.

So virtually in no country we can find a debate on adult education as a profession. What can be seen though in many cases, is an intense debate on the competencies and skills needed by people working in certain jobs in the field of adult education. This debate is

less intense in countries where the institutional structure of adult education is less developed, but even there it has started. Countries such as England or France on the other hand have developed quite differentiated approaches to the debate on competencies in adult education – normally with a focus on vocational education and training. The existing competence profiles vary enormously from country to country, being sometimes more differentiated, sometimes of a more generic character. Some refer more to „core skills“, others more to instrumental skills. In no case however have the identified competencies been made a compulsory prerequisite for taking up a job in adult education in general.

Employment conditions of adult education staff

If we look at the employment conditions of adult education staff we find that only a small minority works exclusively for adult education and in an institutional context. The majority of people who contribute with their work to adult education and learning has either fairly insecure employment conditions, working on a free lance basis for example; or they have a job which is only in part related to adult education activities, for example company employees with training duties or persons working in cultural institutions.

It is difficult to apply identical categories to the various groups of adult education staff in different countries. This is still relatively easy in the case of teachers in school or higher education institutions, who are also concerned with adult students; but it is much more difficult in the other fields and sectors. All in all, the spectrum of adult education staff is extremely broad – which is not surprising given the integration of adult education in all societal sectors.

Where there is a concern with professionalism or professional development it is often targeted at the small minority of adult educators which is full time employed and works exclusively in adult education. But it is safe to estimate that this minority represents at best 10 % of all those people who are active in one way or another in adult education. This relation varies from country to country and sector to sector – f.e. it is less in confessional contexts, more in the community sector. Less in eastern and southern Europe, more in the north.

For the professional development in adult education it will however be especially interesting not to concentrate on full time professionals only – which do not exist in great numbers in any country – but to take into account also other groups who work only

partly for adult education, or who are not even considered as adult educators, at all or do not consider themselves as such, but whose activity is nevertheless relevant for adult education. The updating of their skills and competencies will be of crucial importance for assuring a high quality level of adult learning. The problem is that we know relatively little about these more “hidden” groups of adult educators, about the concrete activities of relevance to adult education that they perform in their jobs and about the skills that they possess or that they would yet need to improve. Here is a challenge for research and analysis work to provide a basis for the further professional development of the field.

Adult education related activities

As mentioned before, adult education related activities are widely spread and can be found in practically all societal fields. An overview on adult education which covers all is hardly possible even within one single country. Any attempt at a comparison between countries with their differing societal structures must then necessarily fail.

For a common approach to the professional development of adult educators in Europe it seems therefore necessary rather to identify different fields or clusters of activity in adult education which will then allow identifying sets of skills and competencies that are related to each of these fields. For this purpose a rather broad definition of adult education is needed which makes it clear what in our understanding belongs still to adult education and what is distinct from it.

If we define as adult education any activity that is concerned with the learning of adults; as anything that is done to enable and support the learning of adults, then we may find a number of activity fields which may have different emphases in different countries but which can be essentially found in all of them. These are:

- teaching
- management
- counselling and guidance
- media
- programme planning
- support

The mentioned fields of activity are not complete, nor do they have clearly defined profiles, but they may nevertheless help the analyses. To each activity field there belong a number of activities which may be carried out in very different societal or institutional contexts. These

activities may vary over time and they are differently shaped in different countries.

All these fields play an important role for the professional development of adult education. Some of them have always been seen as directly being related to adult education, for others the awareness of their relevance for adult education has only developed more recently.

Teaching represents the classical activity of adult educators. But the notion of teaching itself is changing. With the paradigm change towards learner-centred approaches the activity of teachers is also changing its character, a trend which becomes apparent in the use of alternative terms such as facilitating, coaching, moderating etc. New skills are required from those who teach, such as the planning of settings for learning other than the traditional classroom course, for example at the workplace. In many cases those who teach belong to the more hidden groups of adult educators – those that work only partly for adult education, or those who would not even consider themselves as such because the teaching – even under a different name, is only part of their duties.

Management has only recently come to be seen as an activity field of adult education in many European countries. And still, the debate on management and the development of management skills is often not linked at all with adult education. Nevertheless management issues are relevant for many adult educational contexts. Not only for the managers of adult education centres and institutions who have of course to deal with issues such as quality management, staff development or educational marketing. Also in companies questions of staff development, career planning and management of human resources are related to activities which are increasingly seen to be a part of adult education. And more recently management activities such as fundraising, project management or the building and steering of regional cooperation networks have grown in importance for many adult education contexts and actors.

Counselling and guidance too are an area whose importance is ever more increasing in adult education and this is true for all countries. Especially the counselling of learners belongs here, which means supporting the learners in the search for appropriate offers and in analysing their learning needs. To the activity field of counselling belongs also the setting up and updating of information systems and data bases and the checking of relevant information on offers. Learner counselling also includes the guidance of learners

throughout the learning process, the counselling in the case of learning problems or the evaluation of the learning achievements. Sometimes this form of counselling is also seen as being part of the “teaching”; however if one considers the skills needed for counselling, it seems appropriate to define it as a field of its own.

And last not least, another very important part of counselling has developed a lot over the last decade: the validation of individual competencies and the recognition of prior and experimental learning.

Media use can be seen as another distinct field of activities and it is one which is still developing fast. It involves especially the production and the use of learning software for adults, the cooperation with IT experts, the development of teaching and learning opportunities with interactive media and on the internet.

Programme planning is often equated with the planning of an offer of an educational institution. However, programme planning involves a broader and more differentiated spectrum of activities and related competencies. For example, programme planning includes also the development of training offers for companies or the negotiation of a regional development programme with adult educationally relevant parts. Especially programme planning in cooperation with other actors, such as companies, local authorities, associations and other educational institutions becomes more and more frequent and requires a distinct approach.

Support: This broad activity field has so far not been the main concern for professional development in adult education. It involves the whole technical, administrative or organisational support of adult learning and very diverse activities such as answering enquiries of potential learners on the phone, administering course registration, providing classroom equipments and many more. Staff providing for these services will often not consider themselves as adult educators or be considered by others as such, but also these activities have a direct impact on the quality of the adult education provision. Professional development also in this field should therefore contribute to enhancing the appropriateness of these services for adult education purposes.

Challenges

The professional development of adult educators in Europe poses several big challenges:

The first one is to identify the training needs of a target group which is extremely heterogeneous. This, in turn, requires a good

knowledge of the activities that adult education staff is required to perform. Such knowledge is an essential prerequisite for the development of appropriate training offers that cater for the different training needs.

I have here expanded on this aspect mainly, but there are at least three more big challenges related to the professional development of adult educators which I can only mention here, by way of concluding, but which it is important to bear in mind as well:

There is, first, the issue of quality: the question of how the quality of training offers can be evaluated and assured.

There is, second, the issue of motivation: especially for those groups of adult educators who are not full-time professionals it will be necessary to find ways to reach them and to motivate them to update their skills.

And there is, finally, the political issue: the question of how and to what extent the professional development of adult educators should be integrated at the policy level. This will be especially interesting in view of a balance between the various educational sectors within the spectrum of lifelong learning.