



# Professional Development through Communities of Practice - Cultivating Exchange and Learning Using the Example of the Online Portal Wb-Web

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## Abstract

*We report on an ongoing development of an online portal for adult educators in Germany. Based on a huge requirement analysis, we started implementing an online portal that aims at professional development by providing information material, networking opportunities and (from early 2019 on) also a learning area for pedagogical competence development. The online portal and its further development are accompanied by research that recently gave reason to believe that the current networking opportunities need improvement in some areas.*

*First, we will discuss the status of the professionalization of adult education in Germany in order to understand why a portal like ours is needed. After that, we will provide insight into the status of our portal and finally shed light on our current topic of community development.*

**Keywords:** *Communities of practice, networking, adult education;*

## 1. The Role of Adult Education

The importance of adult education is constantly increasing. The half-life of knowledge is becoming shorter, learning and keeping competencies up-to-date is more and more important. As a result, adult education is also becoming more important. Along with this development, the question of quality of adult education is rising. In the following, we would like to focus in particular on adult education in Germany, as our field of research and work so far mainly relates to the German-speaking region.

### 1.1. Adult Education in Germany

The question of the qualification and professionalization of people that engage as lecturers, course instructors, counsellors or trainers in all areas of adult education (we call them adult educators in the following) is now increasingly being raised in Germany.

The recently published *wb-personalmonitor* (an ongoing monitoring study) [1] provides an in-depth insight into this area. Of the approximately 700,000 people working in adult education, approximately 530,000 are involved in teaching activities. Although almost 64% of these adult educators have an academic degree (polytechnic, university or doctorate), the question of pedagogical qualification arises for adult educators. After all, pedagogical activity is one of the core activities of this group. Pedagogical degrees can be considered as an indicator of professionalization since only those can be identified as a common denominator in the pluralist world of adult education. However, in terms of the total number of adult educators, only one third has such an initial pedagogical qualification [1]. This is because no formal pedagogical qualification is needed in order to engage as an adult educator in Germany. Therefore, many adult educators often lack a sound pedagogically founded knowledge or instructional approaches and methods and often rely on personal teaching experience and field knowledge when designing learning arrangements.

### 1.2. Adult Educators' needs and expectations on online-based portals for professional development in German-speaking regions

To this day, in Germany, there are hardly any comprehensive offers for a theoretically based and contextualised qualification for adult educators that are concerned with professional action in pedagogical situations. However, since adult educators are often employed in precarious situations, a full-fledged qualification would not be an option for professionalization in the vast majority of cases anyway. Adult educators are more interested in self-study materials and guidebooks than in seminars that require attendance [2].

As self-study materials and guidebooks are well suited for being presented online, we started developing an online portal for the professional development of adult educators. In order to address

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the needs and expectations, we conducted a requirement analysis with more than 1,300 adult educators from Germany, Austria and Switzerland to gain insight into their wishes for professional development in online-based settings [3]. The main requirements can be clustered into three areas:

(1) Need for information on pedagogical topics:

The respondents expressed a high demand for theoretical knowledge on the instructional conception and methodological-medial implementation of educational offers as well as on learning processes and learning barriers of adult learners in general. Besides the need for knowledge on the topics mentioned, concrete aids to action in the form of Open Educational Resources are particularly sought-after [3].

(2) Need for a learning area for competence development:

In addition to the desire for rapid pragmatic assistance, the respondents expressed interest in a learning area for competence development or testing knowledge as well as skill development for dealing with questions of instruction, methodology and media use [3].

(3) Need for professional exchange:

The need for exchange of experience with other adult educators and experts was expressed and speaks in favour of setting up a networking structure and initiating communities of practice that are characterised by joint learning. Especially, an exchange beyond one's own institution as well as beyond one's own field of expertise is considered rather important [3].

Against this background, the following chapters give a brief insight in the developed online portal (chapter 2) and highlight especially two questions:

1. Are there any established "how to"-concepts that give application-orientated information on creating professional exchange, networking and meaningful conversation in a community of practice? (chapter 3.1)
2. How can this application-orientated information be used to refine the developed online portal? (chapter 3.2)

## **2. Online portal for the professional development of adult educators**

Based on the requirement analysis, we developed the online portal *wb-web* (<https://www.wb-web.de>) that specifically deals with pedagogical challenges, questions and networking possibilities for people engaging as adult educators. Launched in December 2015 as information and networking portal, it is now a registered trademark by the German Institute for Adult Education (<https://www.die-bonn.de>). The first two years focussed on informational materials on pedagogical topics with opportunities for networking. In parallel, we started developing the learning area for competence development that will be joining *wb-web* in early 2019 (see also the paper of Klante, Steber, and Biel in this proceeding). From the very beginning, we had the concept of communities of practice in mind, because it combines all three essential aspects (information, network and learning) of our portal idea. We are using the definition of Wenger, McDermott and Synder (2002) who said, "Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis." [4, p. 4]. The portal reaches currently up to 40,000 unique visitors on average per month and has 700 registered community members. The last evaluation cycle ( $N=110$ ) completed in autumn 2017, shows that our target group is very satisfied with the portal itself and the provided content. Likewise, an initial intervention study ( $N=159$ ) with materials developed for the emerging learning area showed significant learning effects, therefore we are confident to be able to strengthen the professionalization of adult educators.

Despite the positive feedback, users so far mainly focused on accessing and downloading content from *wb-web*. Only a few users engage in regular discussions or publish their own materials on *wb-web* without being explicitly prompted to do so. This is also reflected in the last evaluation circle, as our users recommended optimization of exchange and networking possibilities.

## **3. Exchange and networking in an online portal – how to enhance community capabilities?**

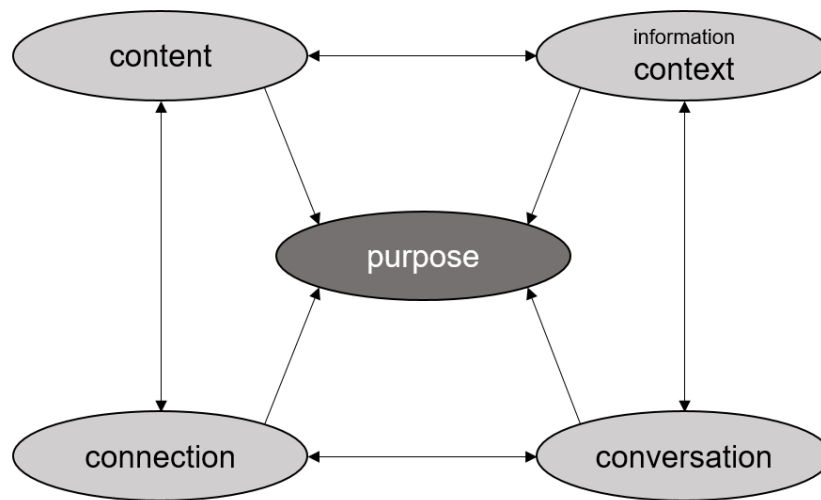
In order to expand engagement, collaboration and learning among and between users in terms of a community of practice [4], we were in the process of identifying established concepts that we can adapt for the specific conditions of adult education in Germany. As a result, we became aware of the



C4P framework by Hoadley and Kilner (2005) [5] that suits our needs quite well because it describes knowledge-building and learning processes in a community of practice.

### 3.1. Joint learning in Communities of Practice: The C4P framework

C4P stands for content, conversation, connections, (information) context, and purpose. The framework proposes that knowledge generation and transfer capabilities of a community will increase the greater each element is [5]. All five elements are equally important, whereas *purpose* builds the meta-connection between all other elements. If one is missing, successful networking and learning in communities are likely to be more difficult.



own representation based on [5]

Fig. 1. The C4P model framework for Communities of Practice

*Content* describes all static knowledge elements like information material but also statements a user posts in a forum. It meta-connects to four purposes: providing immediate value for users, communicating available topics and behavioural rules, motivating users when more content is jointly created, and building a basis for *conversation*.

As mentioned, *content* provides a basis for *conversation*, when e.g. someone else answers a statement in the forum (a content element). The biggest challenge here is to generate meaningful *conversation* and not aimless chatter. This is best prevented when *conversation* is based on quality *content* (e.g. related to the current community's purpose), clear *purpose*, and personal *connections* [5]. *Connections* are the interpersonal contact between community members that is e.g. initiated by email contact and do not just occur in an online community as people do not necessarily know each other when becoming a member. An online space without *connections* is just a repository or chat room. Like all other elements, the other ones can facilitate *connections*. Community members are more likely to *connect* if they e.g. share at least a common *purpose*.

*Information context* can essentially be described as meta-information about *content*. Who wrote it under what conditions for which target group, what other content it refers to, and so on.

Finally, *purpose* is why people join a community. Although Communities of Practice have a *purpose* by definition, the real *purpose* will shape through its *content*, *connections*, *context*, and *conversations* [5].

### 3.2. How do we do? Applying C4P to our portal

By considering this framework, we quickly identified the reasons for optimization. So far, we offered a basic forum. Users were not able to connect to others and received rarely any context information about other users. Although the first c (content) was addressed properly through static knowledge elements like documents and videos, this was not enough to get users engaged in meaningful conversations based on these topics and content elements in the forum.

Due to the importance of clarity of purpose, we have made first changes to foster more aimed user interaction between community members and between community members and editorial staff.

Apart from the static knowledge elements on the portal, we now engage more in forum discussions and act as conversation starters. Furthermore, the community area was redesigned with new software and has now a public and a private area, where users can directly connect to each other. Shared



interest groups are possible, topics of common interest can be filtered, one can see who is currently online to engage in direct conversation and we regularly hold webinars on specific topics that are requested by the community, which will be discussed further in the forum later on.

In addition, we are currently trying to establish times when editorial staff or other experts are online and can directly be involved as facilitators into ongoing discussions and be addressed concerning specific details of practice.

#### 4. Conclusion

The current developments regarding our changing community give reason to believe that we will be able to form a common purpose in the future, thus contributing to the exchange and professional development of adult educators in the long term. Although we see an improvement in engagement by users, we are very curious how our new approach will be received by the majority in our next evaluation cycle. Nevertheless, we are also aware that there is still a lot of work to do and that we can still strengthen all elements of C4P at various points.

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