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The Role of Professional Culture in Adult Education: Profession as an Open and Dynamic Concept

Abstract: First-hand experience shows that the groups of adult educators and continuing educators are highly heterogeneous. Professionalisation is very hard to achieve in this context. This paper presents a new, dynamic and open concept of profession, based on some thoughts about professional cultures of adult education and continuing education. It is argued that the heterogeneous structure of adult education can be described adequately by understanding it as a system of various social worlds within the profession. These social worlds are based on professional cultures in terms of patterns of perception, values, attitudes, self-image, image of others, etc. Describing diverse professional cultures allows exploring the converging and diverging lines of these patterns. Understanding professional cultures facilitates addressing the specific needs of adult educators in their various settings in terms of continuing education and the development of competences.

Key words: adult education, professional cultures, adult learning professionals, adult learning profession.

Impulse from practical work

Working for the *Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (Weiterbildungsakademie Österreichwba - wba)* – a system for the validation and recognition of adult educators' and continuing educators' competences² – I count counselling, verifying competences, and professionalising adult educators as part of my daily tasks. Working with this professional group, I experience a broad range of communication styles, self-images, aims, values, attitudes, and occupational settings. These

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² In this text adult educator and continuing educator as well as adult education and continuing education are used synonymously. Further information about the wba can be found under: www.wba.or.at.

differences cannot be explained by the four fields of activity as addressed by the wba: training, education management, counselling and librarianship. Differences are less explicit and must be understood at a deeper layer. Concerning this fact, one may ask if professional cultures within the field of adult education can be identified. Professional cultures are conceptualised as sets of implicit rules and values, shared by a professional group.

When it comes to the recognition and professionalisation of adult educators as a *professional group*, questions concerning the commonalities and differences in every-day work are important, especially with reference to defined tasks and competences. Such tasks and competences are of more than just instrumental significance. Moreover, they are important symbols of expressing professional affiliation and identity. Concerning the accreditation of competences, qualification, and continuing training of adult educators, it is very helpful to know the diversity of this group and the expressive meaning that their competences have in the context of their work.

This article offers some insight into my dissertation project on 'Professional Cultures in Austrian Adult Education'. First, I will discuss some contemporary concepts of professionalisation in adult education. With reference to the theory of professionalisation, I advocate a dynamic and open concept of profession which is an innovation within professionalisation research. I want to argue that professional cultures are a constitutive element of the profession of adult education. The concept of *professional cultures in adult education* enables the description of the heterogeneous structure of the field of (Austrian) adult education. Professional cultures complement established conceptualisations of profession, which focus on competences, tasks and qualifications. They offer a different and maybe less normative perspective on adult educators as members of a professional group.

The group of adult educators is broadly understood, which is, for some part, caused by the broad range of activities and tasks subsumed under this profession. It encompasses, for example, working profiles like training, counselling, and educational management. Adult educators work in various organisational settings (non-profit institutions, internal further education and human resources development, academic training, etc.). The definition of adult educator as used in this paper follows the definition of 'adult educational practice' given by the wba (n.d., p. 28), which reflects the diversity and variety of working patterns in adult education:

Practice in adult education that is recognised by the wba refers to activities like teaching, training, group leading, counselling and professional training, as well as activities in the fields of

education management and librarianship as far as they concern educational work. These activities are conducted either in the adult education institution of the Austrian Conference of Adult Education or by institutions and departments whose guidelines or tasks are clearly related to a context of adult education, or by business firms, institutions of public interest, which are engaged in adult education. [...] Educational services offered are, for the most part, directed towards adults. Participants share the facts that they learn outside of compulsory schooling and primary education, that they specialise in their professional context or qualify themselves in a general sense, or that they make use of counselling. Participation is based on autonomy and self-responsibility.³

Profession, professionalisation, professionalism – approaches of professionalisation research and adult education research

Contemporary research on professionalisation in adult education focuses, to some extent, on the diverse tasks and activities that are to be carried out within it. *Working profiles* are defined for comparative reasons; competences which adult educators must have at their disposal are elaborated, and necessary qualifications are standardised on an international level (Peters, 2004; Nuissl, 2005; Research voor Beleid, 2010; Sgier & Lattke, 2012; Gruber & Wiesner, 2012). ‘Internationalisation’ of the profession of adult education faces the challenge of bringing together different cultures by processes of exchange. Fejes and Salling Olesen (2010) argue that ‘[m]uch of the recent discussion in adult education seems to be stuck in a contradiction between different educational cultures, which refer to particular historical experiences’ (p. 7). Taking cultural factors into account is also recognized as a necessity by the European Union: convergence of standards cannot be accomplished without taking cultural factors into account. Moreover, in order to promote professionalisation successfully it is of particular importance to address local and professional cultures.

Professionalisation research in adult education has pointed out a diversity of approaches and a high degree of heterogeneity in adult education practice (Bron & Jarvis, 2008; Nuissl, 2009; Seitter, 2009; Fejes & Salling Olesen, 2010; Kraft, 2010; Lassnigg, 2011). This fact and the still open question of a useful definition and demarcation of the professional field – based, for example, on the

³ If not indicated otherwise, all translations from German quotes are made by the author.

organisations which offer education programmes *or* based on the members of the profession themselves – are the focus of current research and debate. Closely related to these problems is the question of how *to define professionalism in adult education*. It is asked if this type of work fits the criteria of profession and if so, to what extent. One result of this research is that adult education in the current state of its development is only partially professionalised: professionalisation is only in its beginnings. ‘At no time in history a profession of continuing education has been established’, points out Nuissl (2005: 51). Many causes explain this fact. Nittel (2000), for example, emphasises a ‘twofold and divided knowledge basis’ (p. 209) which weakens the professional status. He refers to a large number of adult educators who work in part-time or non-profit settings in which teaching is not the scope of their expertise, but just a minor task. ‘Loose institutionalisation’ is, according to Nittel (*ibid.*), a further impediment on the road to professionalisation.

However, there is some implicit as well as explicit consent about the fact that professionalism and professional action in adult education exist (Kraus, 2012: 8).⁴ In the recent frameworks of competence orientation, professionalism and professionalisation are put centre stage, and so is, to a lesser degree, the profession of adult education (Seitter, 2009), because achieving this status does not seem to be possible.

Moreover, there are some signs indicating that concepts like profession and professionalisation change and become ‘softer’ in terms of scope and applicability. There is a rising awareness that there might be a new understanding of profession alongside the classical concept. In the following section I want to highlight some examples taken from research on adult education and continuing education, which directly or indirectly indicate the development of a new and open understanding of the concept of profession.

Jütte, Nicoll and Salling Olesen (2011) state that adult education cannot be classified by using standards of the classical professions: ‘[...] it is easy to see that adult education is not a profession in any clear way when compared with the usual criteria based on the classical professions’ (p. 9).

In her innovative work on organisations in the context of professionalism, Schicke (2012: 11) concludes that the classical concept loses relevance in the wake of structural changes of professionalisation. She holds that pedagogical professionalism is a form of occupational culture that keeps in time with the late modern situation and its dynamic, reflexive, and highly individualised

⁴ A more extensive discussion of the concepts of professionalism, professionalisation and profession can be found in Nittel (2000: 15).

conditions. (Schicke, however, does not think that these changes indicate de-professionalisation.)

Hartig (2008) analyses 'cultural self descriptions of adult educators' in her dissertation, and compares the dominant programmatic approach to professionalism with an empirical and reconstructive approach. She emphasises the necessity of a less normative approach to profession and professionalism:

A programmatic-conceptual approach to the question of professional image and to the professionalisation of adult education and continuing education may be related to the clarification and clear communication of specific responsibilities and competences of adult education, but it may also be accompanied by problems of legitimation, demarcation and consensus-building. An empirical approach, however, tries to elucidate the factual structure of the professional field, its roles and self-images.

These tendencies in adult education and continuing education are couched in more general insights in sociology of work and profession. With this perspective and with reference to the contemporary understanding of professionalism, concerns are raised against the applicability of the classical approach based on theoretically founded characteristics and indicators (Pfadenhauer & Sander, 2010: 362). Pfadenhauer and Sander (2010) argue that in general 'there is a shift from a static conceptualisation of professions towards a dynamic concept of professionalisation and professionalism' (p. 373). Sociologist Kurtz (2003: 102) points out that there will be no increase of new professions in the classical sense, because such developments are obstructed by contemporary social conditions. The possible 'characteristics' of a profession are becoming fewer, and there is no way to attribute them with precision. Kurtz (2003: 97), for example, thinks that contemporary professions can be characterised by two features: (1) partial autonomy, restricted by state influence, and (2) academic and scientific education. Meuser (2005) also highlights two remaining characteristics of professions: *scientific orientation* and *social orientation* (p. 258). Sociologist Michaela Pfadenhauer (2010) focuses in her work not so much on the characteristics of professions, but rather on the aspect of dramatisation, revealing the seemingly objective elements of professions (like achievement and competences) to be a way of presentation. Felix Rauner (1997) developed the concept of the *open and dynamic professional image* (p. 130). With reference to professional images, Rauner finds increasingly accelerated change and a blurring of borders in some professions. According to Rauner, *dynamic and open professional images* refer to three areas: the first area is the core area, the second area is in-depth specialisation in terms of practical needs

and applicability, while the third area, finally, addresses the nexus between work, business firms, and organisation, and is called the integration area. Rauner's concept shows how a monolithic concept of work and profession might be transformed into a differentiated and pluralistic concept.

These findings which concern a new conceptualisation of work and profession might be inspiring in the context of adult education as well. It is probably viable to conceptualise adult education as a new profession which is composed of several professional profiles. According to Pfadenhauer (2003), such a profession cannot do without 'representation': its survival is dependent on its dramatisation (p. 87). In any case, such a dynamic and open profession must have a scientific fundament. It can rely on (official) recognition and on objective criteria of measuring its competences (certificates) and, at least partially, on its autonomy.

The concept as developed in this paper intends to supplement the more programmatic approaches which involve competences, qualifications, professional profiles, competence profiles, etc. with an approach based on the analysis of cultural patterns. The question behind this may be formulated as follows: can *several and different professional cultures be integrated* in the framework of a dynamic and open profession, even if they do not form a well-integrated cultural pattern and tend to coexist alongside each other?

At the current stage of development, the *concept of professional cultures* can be understood as a common ground shared by the subgroups within the group of adult educators, which is not expressed explicitly, but rather implicitly in terms of shared values, attitudes, self-image, public image, etc. The question is then raised if, with regard to cultural patterns, there is a common element which is shared by all subgroups.

Professional cultures – towards a new concept

Professional culture and *professional cultures* are frequently used concepts in andragogical literature (Nittel, 2000; Peters, 2004; Hartig, 2008; Niedermair, 2008). Professional culture is a loosely used concept, signifying the professional community of all persons who are active in adult education; rarely do we find a precise definition. It seems to have some function as a preliminary concept which points towards a definitive concept of all those who are working in the field of adult and continuing education, because 'profession' is perceived as an inadequate concept. Profession seems to be inadequate, because its definition is based on normative characteristics and indicators which do not fit the context of adult education.

In her work on cultural self-descriptions of adult educators, Hartig (2008: 20) is concerned with cultural aspects of their occupational self conceptions. In an online-article, Niedermair (2008) finds a well-established professional culture of human resource developers, because they cannot be understood in terms of a profession. In andragogical literature, however, professional culture refers to an integrating common ground within the community of adult educators. Peters (2004) expects higher levels of community from a professional culture: 'The diversification of professional fields of action in adult education, without the co-evolution of a significant professional culture and the politics between members, has obviously obstructed and not fostered a mutual understanding of tasks and responsibilities' (p. 54).

Nittel (2000) gives a *definition* of the concept of professional culture. With reference to Strauss (1978), he defines professional culture as 'the community of adult educators and continuing educators who practice actively in the field' (Nittel, 2000: 245). He derives the concept of professional culture from disciplinary culture:

The concept of professional culture is derived from the concept of disciplinary culture. A disciplinary culture refers to a scientific discipline; a professional culture refers to a professional context. The professional culture of adult education and continuing education refers to the community of those practitioners who are active in the field of adult education and continuing education. It is a social world (see Strauss, 1978), a social unity which is not structured in terms of organisation, but in terms of a more or less loosely organised social network. The professional culture of adult education and continuing education can be conceptualised as a social world in the sense of Anselm Strauss, because it can be understood as a nexus of communication, deriving its orientations and relevancies from specific sources of meaning, without presupposing criteria like formal membership. The actors of the social world of a professional culture strive for power and pursue core activities, whereby the activities can be classified according to whether they take place in internal or external arenas.

Speaking about professional culture(s), Nittel, then, refers to a 'social world' in the interactionist sense of the term. Some of the common grounds are emphasised and explored thereby. The assumption of a 'community' of adult

educators in terms of professionalisation is presupposed. This community may represent their interests as a political actor.

Empirical research in continuing education has addressed the broad field of professional cultures ever since professionalisation got on the agenda of research in adult education and continuing education, and since the 1960s in the German-speaking world. The meanings of 'culture', 'organisational culture', 'professional culture' and of similar concepts vary to some extent. The findings of this research converge on the assumption that factors like attitudes, values, self-image, and formation of habitus must be addressed.

Gieseke (1989) analyses the 'habitus' of adult educators by distinguishing between typical modes of appropriation of pedagogical staff working in adult education centres (folk high schools). She finds, among other modes, the 'mode of difference cum stabilisation' (Gieseke, 1989: 696). This type or mode of activity differentiates between given aims, desires, and requirements with reference to professional experience, and stabilises them by balancing aims and opportunities of realisation. Another type, the 'reduction mode' increases success in developing routines with reference to the existing educational service offered. New initiatives are not interpreted as successful achievement, but rather they are stuck at the level of wants and desires (Gieseke, 1989: 699).

Zech et al. (2010) take the perspective of organisational cultures and distinguish between the following types of organisations: family-oriented, serving, narcissistic, functional, and sovereign organisations.

A decidedly reconstructive perspective on the professional group and professionalism of adult educators is taken by Hartig (2008), who investigates self-descriptions of professional culture by adult educators. Hartig (*ibid.*) finds, among other results, two frames: adult education as amateurism and adult education as a specialised professional service (p. 185).

Nittel and Völzke (2002) use a more journalistic approach towards professional cultures: Under the title 'Jugglers of The Knowledge Society' they published some self-presentations of diverse adult educators. These self-portraits include a broad range of social contexts like, for example, 'non-profit counselling and human resources development – from voluntary work to a profession in an innovative field of work' (p. 142).

Most of the empirical studies address professional cultures by focusing either on professionals/individuals or on organisations. Given the heterogeneous structure of adult education and continuing education, and of those working in the field, comprehensive research which incorporates all factors concerning professional culture to a sufficient degree, hardly seems to be possible. Comparative to this, research on occupational cultures of teachers has a much clearer concept

of the profession, and of the school as a specific type of organisation. Terhart (1996: 452) defines professional cultures of teachers as follows:

The concept of professional cultures [...] signifies ways of perception, forms of communication and long-term formations of personality of those working in the field and which are typical for a certain profession.

Adult educators and continuing educators are a highly inhomogeneous group in terms of their professional socialisation, their disciplines of origin, their forms of employment, the types of organisational settings, and their social milieu.

Concerning the situation of adult education in Austria, a brief glance at the Austrian Conference of Adult Education Institutions (an important association of 10 major institutions in Austria that was founded in 1973) reveals extreme diversity in terms of ideological heterogeneity. Adult education centres, religious institutions, interest groups of employees and entrepreneurs all participate in this network. Moreover, the highly relevant factor of the Austrian Labour Market Service (AMS) must not be neglected. The AMS finances a large number of adult education programmes and subjects them to their own standards of personnel policy. Internal company training and many small continuing education providers further complicate the picture (see Lassnigg, 2011: 40).

This brief overview of the Austrian landscape of adult education – and according to Lassnigg (2011: 37), this is a good example of the situation of adult education in many European countries in general – exemplifies the diversity of adult educators in terms of organisational, ideological and cultural backgrounds. In order to describe this diversity adequately without neglecting the unity of subgroups in adult education, the concept of ‘social worlds’ or ‘professional worlds’ was introduced. This concept implies that every social world within the profession of adult education can be characterised by a typical professional culture. The concept of the social world was developed in the context of grounded theory: ‘Social worlds are actor-defined, permitting identification and analysis of collectivities construed as meaningful by the actors themselves’ (Clarke, 2005: 110). The totality of these social worlds of adult education constitutes, according to this concept, a dynamic and open profession of adult education and continuing education in Austria. The following table shall give a first and rough outline of the open and dynamic concept of profession, which is based on the idea of social worlds, as opposed to the classical concept:

Table 1

	Classical concept of profession	Open and dynamic concept of profession
Conceptual framework	Static, unifocal: based on competences and status.	Dynamic, multifocal: based on competences and successful practices of gaining recognition.
Scope of work and origin of the social world	Academic world connected with professional associations recognised by the state.	Academic and (more dynamic) near-academic worlds connected with a variety of professional social worlds, with or without professional associations recognised by the state.
Structure of interaction	Client-centred system of interaction based on trust and influence (legitimised by a specific, well defined scientific knowledge and the state) in which the client achieves a general status (e.g. recovery from illness) with the support of the professional.	Client-centred system of interaction based on trust and influence (legitimised by a variety of certificates and scientific knowledge and successfully staged success) in which the client achieves general or specific statuses (e.g. certification in the legal framework of a company) with the support of the professional.

In order to understand the cultural factors which constitute the social worlds from the actors' points of view, one must consider *diverse cultural origins of the professional culture* in terms of the different forms of socialisation, different organisational contexts, and different milieus of origin. Professional cultures, then, are products of various other 'cultures'; they are a kind of a 'melting pot' in which different cultures are integrated within one professional culture.⁵

Which cultures, then, are integrated in the various professional cultures in the overarching context of the profession of adult education? In the following paragraphs some ideas concerning this problem will be presented without analysing the components of these professional cultures at a more detailed level.

Disciplinary culture and professional culture of origin will be components of the new professional cultures, but so will organisational culture and the culture of society in general or personal milieus in particular. According to my knowledge, the relationship between ideological and political milieus and the professional cultures of adult educators and continuing educators is rather neglected. This relationship, however, can be very useful in order to understand what they

⁵ This analytical perspective is inspired by Hong (2001), who explored the 'Front-Line Care Providers' Professional Worlds' in the USA. Hong tries to understand 'professional worlds' of caregivers as an interface between different cultures. In Hong's case study of a care provider, a series of cultures intersect, like disciplinary cultures of nursing and medicine, organisational cultures, and private cultures of the providers and the clients.

have in common and what seem to be insurmountable discrepancies. Professional cultures are represented at the individual level in terms of professional self-images, didactical approaches, images of learners, ways of communication, and values.

Further work has to clarify how these professional cultures can be analysed. Professional cultures and professional social worlds are of great importance in understanding the constitution of adult education as a profession. Alongside normative elements of the profession of adult education (e.g. competences), professional cultures allow conceptualising of the profession in its openness and plurality, thereby taking the heterogeneous origins of adult educators into account. Institutions which professionalise adult educators can benefit from information about typical cultures within the profession, in order to accord their work with specific groups.

Conclusions

I want to conclude by quoting Dieter Nittel (2000). Nittel appreciates the plurality within adult and continuing education as an opportunity to professionalise adult education, and to solve some of the problems of a highly differentiated and pluralised society: 'Not unity, but diversity of groups within a professional culture increases the probability of the voice of such a profession as adult education being perceived by society, and of complex and partially opposing problems being solved' (p. 242).

Nittel expresses a hope which is congruent with the concept of a dynamic and open profession as outlined in this article. It is yet to be proven that pluralisation does in fact offer a chance for the profession of adult education. This certainly is, however, a task for those responsible for future developments in the years ahead.

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Uloga profesionalne kulture u obrazovanju odraslih: profesija kao otvoren i dinamičan koncept

Apstrakt: Iskustvo pokazuje da je grupa edukatora u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih i celoživotnog obrazovanja veoma heterogena, što kreira kontekst u kome je teško postići profesionalizaciju. Ovaj članak nudi novi, dinamičan i otvoren koncept profesije koji se zasniva na razmišljanjima o profesionalnoj kulturi u obrazovanju odraslih i celoživotnom obrazovanju. Smatra se da se heterogena struktura obrazovanja odraslih može adekvatno opisati ako je razumemo kao sistem različitih društvenih svetova u okviru profesije. Ovi društveni svetovi se zasnivaju na profesionalnoj kulturi koju čine obrasci percepcija, vrednosti, stavova, slike o sebi, slike o drugima itd. Opisivanje različitih profesionalnih kultura dozvoljava nam da istražimo konvergentne i divergentne granice ovih obrazaca, dok njihovo razumevanje profesionalne kulture omogućava bavljenje specifičnim potrebama edukatora u obrazovanju odraslih u različitim sredinama.

Ključne reči: obrazovanje odraslih, profesionalna kultura, profesionalci u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih, profesija u oblasti obrazovanja odraslih.

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