

My Personal ProLea Story

The Beginning

In August 2013 I was able to attend the annual ATEE (Association for Teacher Education in Europe) conference “Education for the Future” in Halden, Norway.

For me it was the first time experiencing a conference that worked in a specific thematic frame. As it is standard practice, the conference included keynotes, talks, speeches, workshops and poster sessions. But in addition there was one format in particular that I wasn't familiar with and therefore stood out to me: the so called *RDC (research and development community)*. Each participant was asked to pick one RDC to cooperate with in a middle or long-term thematically specified work group. I was asked to join a group that operated under the heading “in service learning”.

I was happy to see that prior to the conference there already was a high number of successful projects coming out of this particular RDC (see: Jaap van Lagerfeld's report on the ProLea project website), so I was able to learn a lot about their established project outcomes and their networking strategies. Hence I was asked to apply my newly attained knowledge to find some support in Germany in order to start a new project together.

Later that year I visited the city Bonn to attend another conference, this time to learn about the new Erasmus+ guidelines. There I was given the necessary information about what is required to launch a successful transnational project.

- a strong and reliable partnership between participants
- clear common goals
- a precisely defined target group

I began to realize the amount of work a project like this would entail.

Finally our first meeting for project development was held on a hot summer day in June 2014. We met in Berlin's Kreuzberg district to discuss the meaning of our guiding operational term “inclusion”. Early on we were able to see, that each of us had varying views on the word's exact definition. In the end we decided on the term “complex settings” as a starting point of our project.

Looking back, I can say that we ourselves formed a complex group and therefore agreed to focus on complex settings in schools and that our target group should be facilitators.

Our group included seven partners from four different countries and a mix of different institutions such as universities, in-service institutes, an institute for the second phase of teacher education and administration/ policymakers.

At the Annual Conference of ATEE in Braga Portugal in 2014 we discussed the topics and title of our project. We eventually found common ground on the necessity of deep reflection phases for all development processes and their constant role as an engine of development.

To amend reflection processes we needed some kind of tool or instrument and we saw an opportunity in portfolios combined with the idea of reinventing this format (story telling methods, learning diaries, frame structures,...).

We created the title:

Professional learning in complex settings thru reflection and portfolio.

Thus ProLea was born.



Networking across Europe - Learning events and reflecting with the help of “diaries” and other tools



From my point of view I could see great impact in our exchange at partner meetings and especially regarding the job shadowings (learning events) that each partner organized for the rest of the participants. We often sent members of our target group to our partners and had interesting talks and deep reflection phases when they came back from their journey to our steering group to present their travel diaries (stories).

The networking between the partners of our project was the backbone structure for the experience of our travelers, who invariably took part in the learning events with another colleague.

They were sent out by our steering group with the following main tasks:

- to create a diary or another form of documentation medium (like a padlet etc.) of their journey
- to reflect on their journey by presenting their experience and what they had learned to the steering group
- to keep on being a critical friend in the ProLea project

The impact of their experience and what they learned was always integrated in our working process within the ProLea project.

They took this experience as a chance to reflect about

- the critical situation of Europe and their own responsibility
- the aspects of different culture of the visited country
- the challenges others actually have in schools
- their own work opportunities and challenges at home
- what they took home to their own work place

The project was driven by many relationships between the participants of the different partner countries and institutions.



How to make networking relevant

It is about the exchange of knowledge and experience and about working on specific problems with a common goal in mind. All participants should see themselves as learners. The learning community approach is based on the sociological system theory that communities are social systems whose members interact in emotional, reciprocal relationships.

The general conditions (Nina Kolley, 2017, ppt) include:

- common goal
- identification with main idea
- transparency (goals, fields of action, offers)
- willingness and ability to change
- building trust between cooperation partners
- successful structure and committee formation
- cooperation culture
- human, financial and temporal resources
- orientation to needs and needs
- „backbone organization“

Stumbling blocks can be:

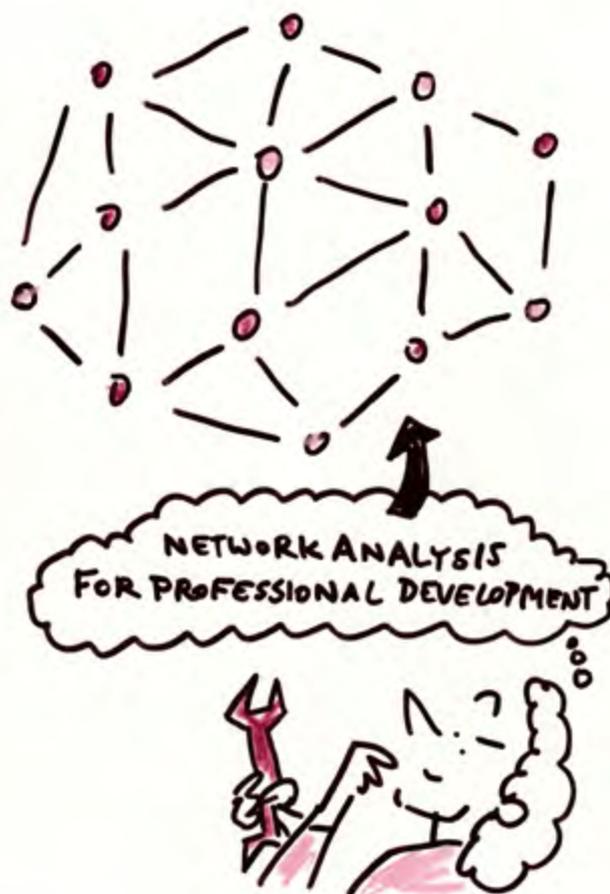
- different goals and leading cultures
- low motivation / willingness to change
- lack of trust
- missing resources (human, financial, temporal)
- decision law
- projectitis
- lack of a backbone organization
- cooperation ban (federal / state)
- Resource separation => sometimes prevents equality of decision-making

Studies on Learning Organizations (Smith Milway / Saxton, 2011) show that the realization that collaboration between organizations / systems promotes learning is not yet self-evident. The results of this study suggests that „nonprofit-leaders“ are very attentive to gathering and sharing knowledge about their programmes and field competences and deriving their success in development from there.

However, they have identified three significant obstacles to organizational learning:

- A lack of clear and measurable goals on how to use knowledge to develop the organization's performance.
- Lack of incentives for individuals or teams to participate in the learning and development of the organization.
- Uncertainty about effective processes to increase learning and share knowledge.

I find it remarkable that the European Agency provides professionals with a platform for working on relevant issues with other European professionals. This surprisingly and amazingly results in friendships and even in becoming critical friends all over Europe who reflect with each other on the ongoing process of complex challenges in their own workplace.



Conclusion

- There is a chance to make Europe a vibrant idea by professional networking
- Professional reflection needs a critical professional dialogue
- Complexity needs to be seen and to be handled with a strong focus
- Theory can and has to help reflection practice (see my personal portfolio-work)
- Be bold, our children deserve it!



Literature

- Kolleck, Nina(2017): Die Macht sozialer Beziehungen – Wie Netzwerke Bildungsprozesse beeinflussen und was bei der Gestaltung von Bildungsnetzwerken zu berücksichtigen ist. Ppt Impulsvortrag. Berlin
- Smith Milway/Saxton (2011) Stanford Social Innovation Review Summer 2011