Creating an online community of action researchers

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Foreword

The voices calling on education as a reaction and a possible remedy to the world's most pressing problems multiply. Sustainable environment and sustainable economy, living together in democracy based on respect for human rights and dignity; global citizenship, respect for diversity, countering hate speech and violent extremism, preventing discrimination, violence and violent radicalisation … the list is long and the calls for an educational reaction come from all sides. Very recently, in spring 2016, the Ministers of Education of the 47 Council of Europe Member States adopted a framework for the development of competences for democracy in education. UNESCO published a teachers' guide to the prevention of violent extremism in summer 2016, and in early 2016 the EU voted a resolution on promoting socio-economic development and inclusiveness in the EU through education. These are just some of the many calls for increased action in education to ensure that we will be able to meet those challenges we are already facing and those we will face in the near future.

And they are right to call for education. Medium- and long-term solutions to these issues can only be found in and through education, be it formal education in school and higher education settings, be it in non-formal education or through informal education.

However, for the desirable change to happen we cannot resign ourselves to making statements and developing policy orientations and guidelines while in the process making abstraction of the practitioners, of those who will make the change happen eventually … or not happen, as is often the case.

While vision is important, so is action. "Vision without action is a daydream, action without vision is a nightmare" as the famous Japanese proverb says. And I would add that to be successful the action needs to be imbued by the values the vision transports. Our action needs to model the values and principles of democracy, participation, co-operation, respect, diversity, etc.

For action to happen those who will carry out the action need to be on board, we need "shared ownership" as the current saying goes. Sharing ownership cannot be imposed and decided from above, it necessarily passes through the phase of participation in the decision making and in the elaboration of the responses that need to be implemented.

When the desired change does not take place, or when change goes into an undesired direction, we can of course blame practitioners and their resistance to change. However, this would be like saying that "if only we had the right participants/teachers/school heads/children/ …" then everything would be ok. We need to accept that we have the people we have and we need to work together with these to make the desirable and desired change happen. Perhaps this implies not only to include practitioners in the design and elaboration of the direction of change and its practicalities but to actually put them at the centre of the process and in the driving seat.

This book is about how to support practitioners in this process. It is the outcome of a process of learning together initiated and carried out and coordinated within the Community of Practice of the Pestalozzi Programme – the Council of Europe training programme for education professionals – by members of this community who shared the wish to develop and to develop together and who were ready to pool their resources and embark on a learning journey that lasted over a year and consisted of intensive work in their professional context and within the online group.

It is a book about putting values first and then check if and how we reflect these values in our actions. It is a book about learning and as such a very welcome and crucial contribution to the debate which too often is only concerned with teaching (Didactica v. Matetica, the art of teaching v. the art of learning, Comenius).

And it is also about risk -taking since true learning is also always a danger to our self-esteem because it includes the probability of having to accept that we were wrong before and this is not always easy to accept. Thomas Szasz, an American psychiatrist, says that this is the reason why learning becomes difficult for adults while it is easy for children. A thought to be kept in mind when reflecting about lifelong learning.

The book also shows very clearly that true learning is a social process and does not happen in isolation this is why communities of practice are so important to successful learning. And last but not least the action research accounts and the reflected learning processes in this publication show how learning oriented to change does not happen through the implementation of ready-made solutions designed somewhere by some expert. Instead, creative solutions devised by practitioners seem to be the most appropriate and effective solutions for the specific contexts in which the practitioners act.

Last but not least this book is also about reinforcing the hope that changes which may seem too little to count actually make a big difference.

Josef Huber

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Part One

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Branko Bognar and Pascale Mompoint-Gaillard

Introduction

In recent decades, the increasing interest in action research has resulted in a plethora of resources in this field. There are many action research resources, which make it easy to learn how to go about it. However, examples of efforts to help people become action researchers are scarce. It is presumed that anyone can become an action researcher by reading books and then conducting his or her own action research project. Our experience shows that this is not likely to happen.

Although action research represents research design, intended for practitioners, it is not as simple as it seems. There are several levels to the process, and novices in particular may find it challenging. To conduct action research it is necessary to be a philosopher, a researcher, a change agent and even, to a certain degree, a psychotherapist. All of this is easier to achieve within a learning community, with the help of more experienced action researchers.

The education professionals who participated in this project have almost all previously been involved in professional development projects within the Pestalozzi Programme. This is the context in which they have been engaged over a period of time, including experiential learning, co-operative learning, immersion in reflective practice, and critical feedback loops with peers and coaches. In this context, this action research project was envisioned as taking a step forward to develop further the comprehensive structure of the Pestalozzi Programme, the approach of which is rooted firmly in the realm of social constructivism and social constructionism: working together to create new practices; creating through social interactions; situated learning in context; and enriching individual learning through the negotiation of meaning and interaction in a group.

This book represents an example of such a project in which several practitioners from different parts of Europe, gathered in the Pestalozzi Community of Practice, set out to learn how to become action researchers. In contrast to numerous books about action research in which the authors attempt to explain how to conduct action research, this book is action research about becoming an action researcher. An additional feature is the collaboration and learning of participants on an international level through online social platforms and affordable web applications.

It is our wish to continue to improve our approaches to supporting teachers as agents of change for social good, based on a sound and explicit value system. This project in action research and this publication aim at helping the Pestalozzi Programme's growth in this respect.

Philosophical and value backgrounds

Although in scientific publications, particularly those drawing on a positivistic paradigm,[1] philosophical and value backgrounds are sometimes neglected or concealed, they are always present, at least implicitly. In action research values play an important role since they serve as starting points for carrying out change as well as establishing criteria for their assessment. Halstead defines values as:

> principles, fundamental convictions, ideals, standards or life stances which act as general guides to behaviour or as points of reference in decision-making or the evaluation of beliefs or action and which are closely connected to personal integrity and personal identity. (Halstead 1996: 4)

Each of the authors who participated in the writing of this book has included in it a part of their own personal identity and value system. For all of us, freedom was the most prominent value. This is based on the assumption "that man, as man, is free: that it is the freedom of Spirit which constitutes its essence" (Hegel 1892/2001: 32). This means that modern democratic societies were and still are being built and that we are also eager to contribute to the development of democracy in our countries, in Europe and in the world. We consider that freedom cannot be reduced to:

> its formal, subjective sense, abstracted from its essential objects and aims; thus a constraint put upon impulse, desire, passion – pertaining to the particular individual as such – a limitation of caprice and self-will is regarded as a fettering of Freedom. We should on the contrary look upon such limitation as the indispensable proviso of emancipation. (Hegel 1892/2001: 56)

Freedom, as opposed to some natural state in which a human being acts compulsively and thoughtlessly, is constituted of the purposeful and responsible social action of educated and creative people who, in the process of their emancipation, strive to liberate themselves from personal limitations that restrain their development and attempt to free themselves from ideological constraints and obedience to authorities. This represents a negative aspect of freedom, while positive freedom may imply the development and creative expression of personal capabilities and the establishment of a communication community where we can find interlocutors and participants in the process of communicating our values and creating a shared vision. In other words, in positive freedom "the individual exists as an independent self and yet is not isolated but united with the world, with other men, and nature" (Fromm 1950: 222) in an active and creative way.

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1. In the positivistic paradigm "the investigator and the investigated 'object' are assumed to be independent entities, and the investigator to be capable of studying the object without influencing it or being influenced by it. When influence in either direction (threats to validity) is recognized, or even suspected, various strategies are followed to reduce or eliminate it. Inquiry takes place as through a one-way mirror. Values and biases are prevented from influencing outcomes, so long as the prescribed procedures are rigorously followed" (Lincoln and Guba 1994: 110).

Creativity represents a crucial aspect of positive freedom and it contributes to the quality of life of creative individuals and the whole of society. At the same time, it is a precondition of our survival and overall cultural and social development. Although essential for human beings, it is not easy to define creativity. It is very often connected with something new, and different in relation to what already exists. However, to be different does not mean being relevant and effective in creating ideas, performances and products. Cropley notes that "creativity is nowadays widely defined as the production of relevant and effective novelty" (2011: 359). However, it would be mistaken to consider that predefined criteria for assessing the relevance of creativity exist. Those criteria are always redefined through a dialogue between those who participate in the creative process and then through communication with a wider professional community and the public.

Sometimes, creative ideas need some time and favourable social conditions to become widely recognised and accepted. Some ideas may not have wider social merit. Therefore, Boden distinguishes historical creativity and psychological creativity (H-creativity and P-creativity):

> P-creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new to the person who comes up with it. It doesn't matter how many people have had that idea before. But if a new idea is H-creative, that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history. (Boden 2004: 2)

Historical creativity is rarely achieved. Psychological creativity occurs more often which means that all people can be creative, although not in the same way and at the same level. We consider that each human has a creative capacity that needs to be actualised. If they are prevented from attaining this capacity or give up, it could reflect on their general systemic health (Maslow 1971).

Creativity has its downside. In a situation in which the alienating power of capital rules the world, creativity could be used for the control and limitation of freedom, and even, in the case of technology, for the mass destruction of people. "Value-neutral" scientific research could play a particularly important role, since scientists do not as a rule critically reflect on the possible impacts of their work on wider social processes that may be undemocratically oriented. Kurt Lewin was aware of this threat:

> It seems to be crucial for the progress of social science that the practitioner will understand that through social sciences and only through them he can hope to gain the power necessary to do a good job. Unfortunately there is nothing in social laws and social research which will force the practitioner toward the good. Science gives more freedom and power to both the doctor and the murdered, to democracy and fascism. The social scientist should recognize his responsibility also in respect to this. (Lewin 1946: 44)

To avoid the negative consequences of scientific research it is important to reject:

> the notion of the "objectivity" of the researcher in favour of a very active and proactive notion of critical self-reflection – individual and collective self-reflection that actively interrogates the conduct and consequences of participants' practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice, in order to discover whether their practices are, in fact, irrational, unsustainable or unjust. (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014: 6)

Creativity has a positive meaning only if it is connected with freedom and critical reflection. Brookfield points out that in order for reflection to be critical it should have two distinctive purposes: identification and understanding of power relationships in the wider social context and the specific conditions of our practice, and recognition

of hegemonic assumptions "that we think are in our own best interest but that have actually been designed by more powerful others to work against us in the long term" (Brookfield 1995: 15). By the critical questioning of our social situation we are able to conduct activities that lead to significant changes in our practice.

It is not necessary that each improvement produce significant change particularly if practitioners employ existing solutions. However, Kangrga considers that the modern concept of practice implies a discontinuity with natural social being, thus with practice as an ordinary, well-established way of work. This is made possible only by the creative surpassing of existing borders, following daring visions:

> that yet is not, but could and should be. And that what still is not, does not appear from a dimension of mere closed present, but it is very future in present. Otherwise, a practice as change of the world would be impossible. (Kangrga 1989a: 92)

The modern concept of practice may be defined as a creative activity, that is history[2] which:

> is nothing else then process of human becoming human and his/her world [becoming] own world by means of his/her own activity as self-activity or freedom. (Kangrga 1989b: 61)

In that sense practice, or creativity, cannot be reduced to work which is always connected with necessity, or the need for survival. Practice released from any physical need ceases to be mere activity oriented to material production, but "poetry, music, sculpting, painting etc., as well as theory, are also a highest form of practice" (Kangrga 1984: 90). In such a definition of practice, science also becomes a constitutive part of human creative activity. The modern concept of practice, as defined by Kangrga, implies an integration of theory and practice. Carr and Kemmis considers:

> this requires an integration of theory and practice as reflective and practical moments in a dialectical process of reflection, enlightenment and political struggle carried out by groups for the purpose of their own emancipation. (1986: 144)

This leads to a redefinition of theory that traditionally implies "a set of interrelated constructs and propositions that presents an explanation of phenomena and makes predictions about relationships among variables relevant to the phenomena" (Ary et al. 2010: 14). Such an understanding of theory is particularly common to a positivistic approach to science. However, theory does not need to be oriented merely towards explaining how reality works, but could also focus on how to change it. In that sense, theory could represent a set of coherent understandings that helps us create our world(s) in meaningful ways. This kind of theory cannot be tested by comparing it with an existing situation; it can be tested only by changing the reality, by creating the world in accordance with our aims. Changing practice means changing the theory and vice versa.

As a constitutive part of the creative process, theory has a critical dimension. Therefore, it is not "a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of some aspect of the world" (Brookfield 2005: 3). Rather, it points to the possibility of changing an actual situation; as such, it represents a radical critique. Such a critique beyond the level of a negative-pessimistic relation to reality "can contribute to building a

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2. Hegel was the originator of idea that "The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom" (1892/2001: 34); a progress that human beings freely make according to their understanding of the requirements of the time, "their needs, their passions, their characters and talents" (1892/2001: 34).

different society organised according to democratic values of fairness, justice, and compassion" (2005: 7-8) Thereby, "a theory can offer us a form of radical hope that helps us stand against the danger of energy-sapping, radical pessimism" (2005: 8).

It is possible to conclude that the human world is always open to changes. By changing our world we change ourselves as human beings. This means that our nature is "the system of human activities" (Cassirer 1944: 68), or culture that is always redesigned by new generations of people. In this process of creating our world we permanently learn how to become human beings.

Figure 1: Different theoretical approaches to learning oriented to change

Humanistic theories of learning	– has a quality of personal involvement – is self-initiated – is pervasive (it makes a difference in the behaviour, the attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner). – is evaluated by the learner – has meaning as its essence (Rogers 1969)
Transformative learning	– ta disorienting dilemma – self-examination – a critical assessment of assumptions – recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation – exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action – planning a course of action – acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan – provisional trying of new roles – building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships – a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (Mezirow and Taylor 2009: 19)
Action learning	– building action learning around a problem the resolution of which is of high importance to an individual, team and/or organisation – as a core entity, the action learning group – starting with questions (what one does not know) rather than focusing on the right answers (what one does know) – action, without with there is no real learning – learning, which is as important as the action – the Facilitator, who is very important in helping participants reflect both on what they are learning and on how they are solving problems (Marquardt 2003)
Reflective practice	The practitioner conducts an experiment in reframing the **unique problematic situation**. In this experiment the practitioner "makes his hypothesis come true. He acts as though his hypothesis were in the imperative mood" (Schön 1983: 149). "The practitioner has an interest in transforming the situation from what it is to something he likes better. He also has an interest in understanding the situation, but it is in the service of his interest in change" (Schön 1990: 72).

Learning could be defined as "an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience" (Schunk 2012: 3). Although change has a crucial place in the definition of learning, its understanding depends on a theory of learning. An attitude to change makes for a shift from shaping the learner's behaviour (behaviourism) or knowledge (cognitivism) to changing our thoughts (constructivism) and the world (activism). We consider that learning which occurs from active participation in creating the world (activism) is tightly connected with the values we previously mentioned: freedom and creativity. An activist approach to learning includes key ideas from different theories of learning (Figure 1). The main features of this type of learning are described below.

Learning occurs in a learning community/ community of practice

Traditional school systems often create a fabricated conception of learning as a lonely process which occurs in the heads of individual students immersed in school books, listening to their teachers' lectures. McDermott considers that:

> learning is not in heads, but in the relations between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is no learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. (McDermott 1999: 16)

Significant learning does not occur only in conversations learners are a part of, but in shared activities, which they conduct with the aim of achieving significant changes in the field of their interest and in the frame of learning communities they belong to. A community of practice can be defined as a voluntarily united group of persons who communicate their values over a long period of time (several months to several years), create a common vision, work together in order to improve their practice and personal learning, and reflect critically on their actions and their conditions. A community of practice aims to support practitioners in their efforts to improve their professional practice and to create conditions for the free exchange of ideas and feelings.

Communities of practice have the following components that distinguish them from traditional organisations and learning situations:

▶ different levels of expertise that are simultaneously present in the community of practice;

▶ fluid peripheral-to-centre movement that symbolises the progression from a novice to an expert;

▶ completely authentic tasks and communication. (Johnson 2001)

Learning starts with existential issues that are unique and important for the specific social context in which people live and act

Activities are launched primarily to fulfil the intentions of practitioners to live their values. It is particularly significant when those values are neglected, or negated in a given situation. Whitehead points out that practitioners could notice in their practice:

> two mutually exclusive opposites, the experience of holding educational values and the experience of their negation … When you view yourself on video you can see and experience your "I" containing content in itself. By this I mean that you see yourself as a living contradiction, holding educational values whilst at the same time negating them. (Whitehead 1989)

Detecting living contradictions or problems in a practice could be one reason to initiate a process of change and, thereby, a process of learning. But we do not need to start our project from the negative aspects of our practice. It is possible to choose something we do well but still want to improve upon. This approach is close to the approach of continuous improvement ("kaizen"):

> This philosophy assumes that our everyday life should focus on constant improvement efforts … Improvements made through kaizen are generally small and subtle; however, their results over time can be large and long lasting … The success of kaizen comes from its people and their actions, not from new pieces of equipment and machinery. (Ortiz 2006: 7)

Whichever way we choose, it is important to focus on significant issues that won't reduce us to dealing with superficial improvements of existing situations. We learn the best when we are oriented towards creating something important in our lives.

Learning and action are mutually connected

Learning is always connected with our own activity, but the activity we have in mind is based "on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers" (Mezirow 2000: 8). In action learning (Revans 2011), learning is built around real problems that require fresh, creative solutions, and implies taking action in a group that is "composed of four to eight individuals who examine an organizational problem that has no easily identifiable solution. Ideally, the makeup of the group is diverse, so as to maximize various perspectives and obtain fresh viewpoints" (Marquardt 2003: 6).

Learning oriented to change does not mean implementation of ready-made solutions. Instead, creative solutions devised by practitioners could be most appropriate for the specific contexts in which they act. Finding creative ideas is not always easy. It requires releasing and developing creative characteristics, which Treffinger et al. (2002) divided into four categories: generating ideas; openness and courage to explore ideas; digging deeper into ideas; and listening to one's "inner voice".

Johnson (2010) posed the question of how to push ourselves to create good ideas, suggesting that "[t]o make your mind more innovative, you have to place it inside environments that share that same network signature: networks of ideas or people that mimic the neural networks of a mind exploring the boundaries of the adjacent

possible" (2010: 47). Therefore, if we want to devise something new, it is not enough to sit and think in isolation about the problem, it is important to make connections with people who may have different professional backgrounds. However, they have to be willing to communicate with us about ideas of shared interest.

Becoming critically reflective

This is crucial for activist theories of learning. Critical reflection is oriented towards questioning the social circumstances in which changes occur as a result of personal action, through double-loop learning. The world we live in is created by human activity, but it is not finished and perfect; it is open to new creativity. Critical reflection allows us to understand the complexity of social conditions and to recognise and distinguish those that could be beneficial from those that could limit our creative attempts. Therefore, critical reflection does not relate only to noticing negative aspects, but implies a deeper understanding of potentials as well as threats in social circumstances. Without critical reflection, theory would be reduced to hollow descriptions of a current state, and action would become thoughtless activism (Freire 2000: 30). Brookfield (1995) considers that critical reflection can help in different ways:

- ▶ it helps us take informed actions: "An informed action is one that has a good chance of achieving the consequences intended" (1995: 22);
- ▶ it helps us develop a rationale for practice: "We know why we believe that we believe" (1995: 23) and we know why we do what we do, why we think what we think;
- ▶ it helps us avoid self-laceration. We learn to stop blaming ourselves for the things we are not responsible for since we are aware of the cultural and political limits of our current situations;
- ▶ taking a more realistic stance according to our ability to change a situation makes us emotionally stable;
- ▶ it enlivens our practice: "By openly questioning our own ideas and assumptions – even as we explain why we believe in them so passionately – we create an emotional climate in which accepting change and risking failure are valued" (1995: 25).

Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith distinguished two kinds of theories of action: "Espoused theories are those that an individual claims to follow. Theories-in-use are those that can be inferred from action" (1985: 81-82). Most of us can hardly distinguish between espoused theory and theory-in-use. Pointing out this discrepancy, after all, could lead to unpleasantness. If we are oriented to defining and achieving individual goals without discussion or coming to agreement with other participants, if we intend to maximise winning and minimise losing, if we minimise generating or expressing negative feelings or feelings at all (being rational) (Schön 1990), then:

- ▶ there is a gap between what we think we believe, and the values implied by our behaviour;
- ▶ we are blind to this gap;
- ▶ though others may perceive it, they are reluctant to admit that they have, let alone bring it to our attention;

▶ if they do, we are likely to react most defensively. (Dick and Dalmau 2000)

Instead of persisting with such a model of learning, we could accept the values of Model II (double-loop learning), which:

▶ maximises valid information;

▶ makes a free and informed choice;

▶ is internally committed to decisions made. (Argyris and Schön 1975)

In single-loop learning only strategies of action are changed, while governing values are not questioned (Figure 2). In Model II, activities as well as values are questioned and changed. Such learning should replace a competitive culture in which low levels of trust and lack of risk readiness is common, with co-operative relations that:

> involve sharing power with anyone who has competence and who is relevant to deciding or implementing the action. The definition of the task and the control over the environment are now shared with all the relevant actors
> …
> Under these conditions individuals will not tend to compete to make decisions for others, to one-up others, or to outshine others for the purposes of self-gratification. Individuals in a Model II world seek to find the most competent people for the decision to be made. They seek to build viable decision-making networks in which the major function of the group is to maximise the contributions of each member so that when a synthesis is developed, the widest possible exploration of views has occurred. (Argyris and Schön 1978: 138)

Figure 2: Single and double-loop learning (Anderson 1994)
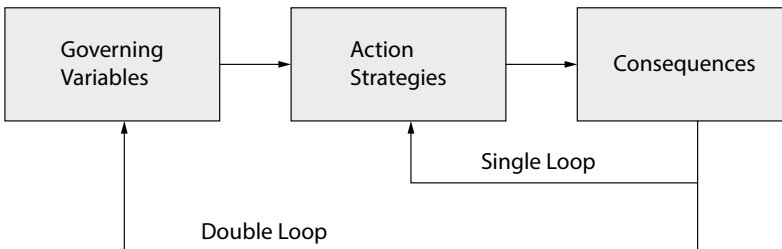
Activist learning often results in significant changes in a practice and significant learning. However, change is always a "problematic" process since it implies doing something new or different. This requires additional efforts to find new solutions that do not necessarily guarantee success. On the contrary, whatever we do for the first time results in various shortages in performance that could be improved. But this often requires time. To overcome this situation it is important to face problems. For those who are ready to grapple with problems it is helpful to be aware of the process of change, which is not linear, but curved (Parker and Lewis 1981). With the help of experienced people, it is possible to reduce the negative impact of this process. However, it is not possible or even desirable to avoid all problems since it could hinder our learning, which implies coping with serious and meaningful problems. By coping with existential problems and creating something meaningful it is possible to experience significant learning that makes:

> a difference – in the individual's behaviour, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and in his personality. It is pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence. (Rogers 1959: 232)

At the end of this introductory discussion, it is important to mention our considera-tion for the internal cohesion of our value background. Our values as aims "for the sake of which we struggle to give our lives their particular form" (Whitehead 1985: 99) should be mutually coherent within a particular value system since only in this way can they contribute to the harmonious creation of life (Vuk-Pavlović 2007). It would be wrong to expect that this accordance could happen only through action. It is important to consider the coherence of our values from the very beginning, and thus the philosophical backgrounds that we intend to fulfil in our practice.

Action research context, launch and challenges

The Council of Europe today stands for frameworks for policy and practice throughout Europe, ensuring respect for its fundamental values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law, within different arenas, such as the political, social and educational arenas. Under the umbrella of the Council of Europe, the Pestalozzi Programme was developed as a training and capacity-building programme for education profession-als. Its aim is to carry the message of the Council of Europe and its values into the practice of education (formal, non-formal and informal) and to support member states in moving from education policy to education practice in line with these values.

The Pestalozzi Programme's main aim is to promote change in the practices of teachers and educators in the formal and non-formal sectors, and to widen the focus and vision of schools and higher education institutions as regards the purposes of education. Education systems tend to focus on the maintenance of a broad knowledge base and the preparation of young people for the labour market, but neglect investment in the personal development of the individual and in preparing young people to become active citizens in our societies. The development of reflective practices among teachers and educators is thus crucial to making change possible.

Using a range of approaches, the Pestalozzi Programme conducts dozens of training events, involving around 1 000 educators in its projects each year. It targets education practitioners because they are the ones who make a difference in day-to-day practice in the classrooms and all other spaces of learning. In each member country, the ministries of education provide a contact person, a National Liaison Officer (NLO), whose role is to liaise between the programme and the national teacher training organisations and networks. NLOs advertise the programme and nominate participants for training events. They also propose local Pestalozzi workshops, which gather local and international participants, and organise national dissemination events. Teachers and educators who participate in training are invited to continue to be part of an online social network, referred to as the Pestalozzi Community of Practice.

The Pestalozzi Programme:

> acknowledges the vital and crucial role of education professionals in this process of change and builds on the convergence of competences: specialist and subject-specific competences need to be complemented by transversal knowledge, skills and attitudes if we want them to bear fruit for politically, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable, democratic societies in the Europe of today, and above all, tomorrow. (Huber and Mompoint-Gaillard 2011: 11)

The virtual Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice is a private social network, hosted on www.ning.com, that one can join by invitation only: when participants (e.g. teachers, teacher educators, school heads, ministry of education staff and NLOs, higher education staff and faculty members, staff of non-governmental organisations) enrol for a Pestalozzi training, they are invited to join. Currently, there are 1 700 members.

What allows us to call the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice, or virtual community of practice, a community? It is a particular type of community in that it is "distributed": members work in different settings in different countries, making this a pan-European community of practice. Fellow members have different roles and status within the community. All members, at some point, have been participants in face-to-face Pestalozzi Programme training events. As a first step, they are invited to join the online platform and prepare for the course they have enrolled in. During their seminars, workshops or courses, they co-operate for their mutual professional development in the online space. Upon completion of the course, they are encouraged to continue to collaborate in follow-up activities in the short term and to continue developing on a longer-term basis, from a lifelong learning perspective. Members share, through the daily workings of the platform, stories of what happens in their seminars or classrooms when they try out new methods, thus "transforming the training into informed and competent actions through their practice" (Mompoint-Gaillard and Rajić 2014: 460). In the process of sharing their stories, the participants, the members of the community, start developing a common body of knowledge and "lore".

By sharing stories of their workplaces, members negotiate meanings about what their "joint enterprise" (Lave and Wenger 1991) is. A common "language" develops that involves a shared "lexicon" that, beyond jargon, constitutes a "repertoire" (Wenger 1998). This helps the evolution and the negotiation of meaning across languages and understandings, and co-develops answers and workable solutions to issues of educational practice with practitioners and other partners. Thus "[p]ractice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life" (Wenger 1998: 52). One participant described her experience of participation in the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice in the following way:

> I would describe it as a very strong and rich experience that empowers the linguistic and cultural competencies. It provides opportunities to learn from different people, and is based on the same principles which I personally support and try to live and work by in my daily life. (Z., teacher and PhD student from Croatia, personal communication, September 2013)

The pan-European Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice occupies and is also shaped by the online environment it uses: we observe a double phenomenon in which the community members' actions shape the online space, but community interaction is also shaped by the design of the online platform. The platform includes both the main activities that are designed, and the spaces that need to be created so that these activities can take place. There is therefore a double movement of needs and spaces: community members have to work within the parameters of the design imposed by the technical features of the platform; at the same time, the design of the space (platform) is oriented by the actions of the members, as translated into technological features. Further online tools are integrated into the work as needed

– Google Docs, Dropbox, Padlet, Pinterest, Facebook, YouTube, etc. – and are commonly used by members to share their experiences, reflections and work products.

Metaphorically speaking, the platform is organised as a "building", along with the usual functionalities of a social media platform, such as a profile page, private messaging, chat and blogs. The community benefits from specialised subgroups linked to the projects of the Pestalozzi Programme: each group has a "room". Some rooms are accessible to all members and some are "reserved" for participants in a particular activity. Each participant in an activity of the Pestalozzi Programme is invited to become a member of a private group space (their "room") to pursue activities with others involved in the same activity, but is also invited to join the open rooms with all members of the community. Thus the Pestalozzi community is composed of several smaller communities of practice, and an open space for all members constituting the overall community of practice. In the "private", self-moderated rooms, members deal with a specific set of concepts and guided action in order to successfully conclude ongoing projects, whereas "open" rooms operate for the benefit of the community at large on issues pertaining to professional development.

The activities covered in this action research project are realised within such "private rooms". Within these smaller communities of practice, members are engaged in longer-term programmes such as the modules for teacher trainers and the summer schools that provide 6 to 18 months of training and online coaching on particular themes (e.g. intercultural education, education for democratic citizenship, sexuality education and media literacy). They produce materials for trainers and teachers, and plan training events or lesson plans in their own workplaces between sessions.

Pursuing the metaphor of the "building", the open rooms are accessible to every member:

▸ coffee shop: for informal discussions and exchanges beyond the purely professional, including announcements and updating members on recent developments;

▸ professional development: for moderated discussion on topics of professional interest;

▸ cascading: for a structured exchange of information and mutual support regarding the dissemination of the Pestalozzi Programme and cascading at local, regional and national levels.

Participation in the Pestalozzi Programme Community of Practice is invitational. Invitations are made by the Secretariat except in the case of local groups for which either a moderator or another active member of the virtual community of practice is designated as group administrator. Each person responsible for a group of members supports their activities and actions. When signing in for the first time each member is asked to provide information which will be displayed on their page ("My Page"), and which is also the basis for the member search function. This will include information about a member's professional background, involvement in the Pestalozzi Programme, languages spoken and areas of interest (Mompoint-Gaillard and Rajić 2014).

Another metaphor for the Pestalozzi Community of Practice could be that of an "alumni hangout". Because this community of practice is invitational, all its members have