

# Social Dynamics in Adult and Community Education Networks: insights from a case study

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## **Abstract**

*Implementing network type structures has become a widely appreciated strategy to promote actor-relationships in the field of adult and community education and to coordinate them purposefully. However, there is still a lack of knowledge on how a “successful” coordination of actor-relationships can actually be achieved. This paper offers some clues to answering the question by outlining basic characteristics of social networks with reference to a recent case study from Germany.*

## **Introduction**

According to a widely known definition by Mitchell (1969, 2), a social network is “a specific set of linkages among a defined set of actors, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the actors involved.”

Since the 2000s, the EU’s education policy has made efforts to promote network type structures that facilitate partnerships between institutions or corporate actors (Scharpf, 1997) engaged in the field of lifelong learning (EU Commission, 2000). The idea behind this initiative is that promoting lifelong learning requires not only the efforts of single actors, but coordinated action (Field, 2000). Defining and implementing networks enhancing multilateral relationships between the relevant actors has been identified as an appropriate strategy. Networks are therefore assumed as “manageable” in the sense that the relationships between the actors involved can be coordinated purposefully – this, for example, with a view to objectives such as widening access and developing innovative education and learning opportunities.

Networks have also gained attention from practitioners in adult and community education on an on-going basis during the last decade, although the focus of attention has been somewhat different. While in education policy discourse, networks and partnerships are often linked to the expectation of engaging key actors in the delivery of lifelong learning policy goals (Field, 2008, 41), practitioners in the field of adult and community education appreciate networks more in relation to their actual development needs. Here, networks are often seen as “vehicles” to improve mutual recognition and support and lobbying issues related to adult education and community education, especially in relation to decreasing levels of public funding. The Irish Community Education Network (AONTAS, 2011) may serve as an illustrative example in this context.

The expectations associated with adult education networks are all qualified, as they refer to research findings which provide evidence on the role of networks in the context of educational governance and co-ordination of relevant actors in lifelong learning (Field, 2005). On the other hand, there is evidence that networks do not operate automatically in a desirable way, as they represent complex social relationships with a high potential for conflict. Lyn Tett, Jim Crowther, and Paul O’Hara (2003, 40), for example, point out a number of pitfalls emerging in adult education networks, including diverging motives for participating, diverging conceptions of work and collaboration, fears regarding possible restrictions on participants’ autonomy, necessary concessions regarding the collaboration with non-preferred partners, opportunistic attitudes among actors, and so on. Last but not least, the education policy focus on networks and the public funding that goes with it involves the risk of actors making the creation and development of networks a business in itself, in order to be able to secure public funding (Field, 2008, 43).

All of this suggests that successful networks in terms of enabling actors to collaborate effectively are more of a positive exception than the rule. This leads us to the question in relation to which social dynamics in networks should be taken into account, and how relationships in adult and community education can be managed in order to avoid the typical pitfalls mentioned above. In this article we are going to outline some clues from theoretical reflection on social networks and an empirical case study, which may help to clarify factors and conditions relevant to successful adult and community education networks.

Building on Mitchell’s aforementioned definition, we begin by focusing on research findings on the basic characteristics of social networks. We will high-

light the specific challenges for successfully coordinating actor-relationships in networks. Later, we will draw on the question of how network relations may be coordinated successfully in practice. It will become obvious that creating a multidimensional frame of interpretation, allowing participants to both stabilise and vary their roles and positions within the network, is critically important in this regard. To illustrate this point, we will draw on the results of a qualitative empirical case study conducted in a network of 45 member organisations that has existed in Germany for more than thirty years.

### **Basic Characteristics of Networks**

If we want to find out how to successfully enable and manage relationships in adult education networks, we need an understanding of the basic characteristics of networks and their effects on the individual and collective actions of those involved. For an overview of these characteristics and effects, we refer to readings and reinterpretations of the current state of research, including the work by Borgatti and Foster (2003) and that of Jansen and Wald (2007).

#### *Networks as social capital*

A major part of network research is dedicated to exploring how networks impact on the individual and collective actions of those involved. Many researchers agree that the impacts of networks are based essentially on actors' social embedding in a multilateral context of relationships. Building on the basic theoretical work of Bourdieu (1983), this social embedding is often interpreted as "social capital". According to Bourdieu's theory of the three forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural capital), social capital is conceived as a resource in the sense of providing easy access to information and knowledge. On the one hand, social capital can be used as a collective good to stimulate creative and/or entrepreneurial action, achieve results together, improve competitiveness, and build trust for developing group solidarity. On the other hand, social capital can also be used as an individual and collective resource for obtaining power, positions of leadership, upward social mobility, employment opportunities, and so on (Coleman 1996). This latter use of social capital, however, involves the disadvantage of causing strong rivalries and a loss of value as soon as multiple actors occupy the same position. However, both aspects are important in order to understand how actions are coordinated in networks.

#### *Strong and weak ties*

Researchers have often referred to how relationships are treated within networks, and which functions are ascribed to those relationships. Building on

Granovetter (1973), a basic distinction is made between “strong” and “weak” ties. In practice, strong ties may take the form of close friendships and (quasi) family-like clique structures. Weak ties, by contrast, are characterised by a lower degree of commitment but also a higher degree of flexibility. Typically, so-called middleman or mediator positions tend to be rather weakly connected to other positions in the network. Strong or close ties in networks form the basis for group-specific forms of solidarity, promoting the emergence of homogeneous social communities that tend to maintain normative boundaries and separating them from other actors and new entrants to the network. On the other hand, weak or loose ties in networks often form the basis for expanding the set of relationships and thus the range of possibilities for accessing information, the accumulation of social capital, and the enhancement of market opportunities and competitive advantages.

#### *Selection and group processes*

The emergence of a network as a “defined set of actors” (Mitchell, 1969, 2) is tied to selection processes as well as the rejection of existing and prospective members. In this regard, networks may be distinguished in terms of how these processes take place. Whether or not a tie will be formed is always up to the actors to decide. At the same time, group processes always play a role as well. A “new” actor’s other social ties, and the other networks he or she is involved with, are important in relation to the future development of a network and the selection of actors. This may be a key factor either for intensifying that relationship or for rejecting and terminating it.

#### *Adjustment and contagion*

For the actors networks are, on the one hand, relevant environments they need to respond to; on the other hand, they are dynamic entities created and sustained through actors’ mutual exchanges. By their involvement in networks, actors are placed in a situation where they have to respond to the same network environment together with other network actors. This, in turn, favours the emergence of similar practices among the actors and – in a long-term perspective – makes them resemble one another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Furthermore, the fact that actors are involved in an on-going process of mutual exchange causes their characteristics to change over time. Such changes may concern their knowledge, norms, and attitudes regarding certain values – as a result, network actors become increasingly alike in their behaviour. The advantage of this development is that it can help intensify and deepen the transfer of information and knowledge between actors. The main disadvantage is that

declining diversity among the actors diminishes the potential for creative and innovative responses.

#### *Resource access*

The prospect of gaining better access to valuable resources (information, knowledge, practical know-how, funding, work materials, decision-making power, etc.) is a key factor for actors to form and develop networks in the first place. Getting involved in networks, therefore, is an appealing option if it involves new access to resources. However, even actors who already have a wealth of resources at their disposal may benefit from getting involved in networks, as this is often associated with a high level of prestige, reputation, and influence, as well as senior coordinating tasks. The combination of different actors in networks favours the development of asymmetrical relationships that may find their expression in varying levels of status and prestige among the actors involved. At the same time, networks enable processes of production and distribution among actors that may ultimately lead to one-sided dependencies and may thus threaten the stability of the internal exchange relationships.

This short overview of network characteristics has shown that the impact of networks on the individual and collective behaviour of the actors involved is complex and ambiguous, and that the actors in turn may themselves have an effect on the further development of network activities by demonstrating certain behaviour. It is hardly possible to give an objective assessment of the behavioural patterns provoked inside and through the network. The meaning and the function that these patterns acquire in and for the network rather depend on the respective network context. We may assume that individual and collective behaviour patterns emerging in a network are most likely to acquire functional meaning and value if they help mitigate hazardous developments in actors' social ties (such as tendencies towards low-level commitment or tendencies towards social closure). These behaviour patterns re-balance the interior dynamics of the network or create a "dynamic equilibrium".

Against this background, one can imagine the challenging task of managing network activities "successfully". It becomes clear, for example, that familiar concepts of organisational management aiming at structural transparency and hierarchical regulation of actor-relationships fail to do justice to the complexity and the actual social dynamics released within networks. At the same time, we are also faced with the question of what managing network activities successfully may look like. In order to get some clues to answer this question we are

going to outline findings from empirical data collected by Matthias Alke in 2011 and 2012. The data collected are part of an extensive case study, which refers to a German community and adult education network.

### **Case description**

The network was founded in 1982 and currently consists of 45 adult education providers. The reasons why this specific network offers a good opportunity to investigate the issue of coordinating actions within networks are the following: First, the network is based on a clear pedagogical mission since its foundation in 1982, championing a kind of adult learning, which is marked by pluralism, openness, and programmes designed to address the needs of adult learners. Over the years, the network has succeeded in continuously reinvigorating that mission, thereby keeping it attractive both for the actors involved and for the relevant environment (participants, grant makers, and other stakeholders). Secondly, the apparent life cycle of the network is evidence of the fact that it succeeded in involving actors on a long-term basis but also in creating the openness required for engaging new actors and enabling others to leave the network. Third, the actors in this network are mostly small public institutions (1 to 3 employees) with limited resources, restricted developmental opportunities, and – as single actors – with marginal political influence. Their participation in the network proves that the network is obviously able to provide its members with benefits in terms of accumulating social capital and accessing valuable resources. This, in turn, suggests that the actors and social ties in this network are coordinated in a manner experienced as attractive by both the weaker and the stronger actors. As a consequence, this network can be considered “successful” – and may hence serve as a model for deeper investigation of the ways in which actions are being coordinated here.

### **Findings from the case study**

In the following, we will refer to empirical data collected by means of participant observation. Observations were made during three one-day “regional meetings”. These meetings of network actors take place on a regular basis; each meeting is hosted by an actor from the region. The regional meetings serve to form sub-networks within the overall network. Despite the obvious differences between these sub-networks, they reveal typical modes of how relationships between actors are enhanced and moderated within the overall network. The observations took place in various sub-networks and were documented in detailed transcripts, partly taking the form of interaction recordings. The detailed nature of these transcripts allows us to reconstruct the interactions

in a way that satisfies the requirements set for critical discourse analysis (Van Leeuwen 2008). We can therefore show how the outcomes and effects of network coordination are both represented and reproduced in the interactions between actors. In particular, the transcripts tell us about implicit and explicit coordination, the schedule of interactions, special discursive elements, and the selection of additional actors as a key element for expanding network ties. In the interests of brevity, we will highlight just a few features of the network in question.

#### *Implicit and explicit coordination*

Each of the sub-network meetings is hosted by a membership institution of that sub-network. The sub-networks are free to decide where the meetings take place and which actor of a sub-network is responsible for organising and moderating the event. Despite their autonomy, the sub-networks remain linked to the overall network through the elected general manager. He is the only person allowed to attend all regional meetings, and he has a say in determining the agenda for each of the meetings. At the same time, he serves as a mediator and coordinator. This function comes into play when the general manager shares his knowledge about developments in the various sub-networks, for instance if there are significant deviations between the sub-networks. He will combine this communication with an appeal – more implicit than explicit – to the sub-networks to re-adjust their self-organisation in order to enable a more coordinated development of the network as a whole.

#### *Schedule of interactions*

When planning the meetings, actors choose different settings, which serve as a symbolic reinforcement of whether the interactions are open or closed in nature. Two of the observed meetings were held in a seminar room, for example. One meeting took place in an open space that could also be used by other members of the host institution while the meeting was in session. Except for a few minor variations, the schedule for these meetings is always the same:

- Arrival (e.g. shared breakfast)
- Opening (welcome, introduction, fine-tuning the agenda)
- Round of actor introductions and reports from the institutions
- Report about adult education policy trends

- Additional topics
- Wrap-up

What is interesting here is that the standardised schedule takes equal account of the actors' social embedding (e.g. shared breakfast), the mutual affirmation of each actor's characteristics (reports from the institutions) and thus of the valuable resources available within the sub-network, as well as the joint determination of the network's position of power and its possibilities for exerting political influence. This standardised schedule enables the actors both to experience and to reproduce the complex meaning of the network.

#### *Special discursive elements*

In our analysis, the term '*discursive elements*' refers to communicative patterns that gain a structuring function within the interaction processes observed at the sub-network meetings. In particular, we would like to highlight three such discursive elements that also seem to have a coordinating function within the network.

One relevant discursive element in this regard is *communicating about the absence of actors*. This is done, for example, by making the absence of individual actors an explicit topic of discussion. Usually, this does not involve any judgment in one way or another. However, the mere fact that the absence of individual actors is generally being noticed and commented on by those present seems to illustrate the normative importance of each actor's commitment to participating in the network. This is also signalled, somewhat more explicitly, by the greetings, requests, and other expressions of interest from absent network actors, which are – in case of occurrence – read aloud to those present by the moderators or other participants at the beginning of a meeting. At the same time, this practice helps placing the current interactions in a broader virtual social network structure, encouraging those present not to regard themselves as a closed group, and to keep in mind the importance of the current interactions for the preservation and development of the network of relationships and communications.

Another recurring discursive element which was observed at all regional meetings is *commenting on what has been said*. Such comments may include assessments, evaluations, or criticism, for example. Through their comments, actors stimulate each other to engage in negotiations of individual and collective views



of reality, value-driven attitudes, and normative orientations. In particular, the “report on adult education policy trends” is often used as an opportunity to arrive at shared points of view regarding the network’s internal and external relations, and to develop shared strategic goals and possible actions regarding the implementation of the institutions’ shared pedagogic mission, in a context of educational governance and funding that tends to be seen as “restrictive”.

Last but not least, *highlighting actor-specific contributions* that are made available as a collective good for the whole network is another special discursive element. Speaking about such contributions (e.g. the collecting and sharing of relevant specialised information, or professional development initiatives by individual actors that are open to all network actors) makes up a significant part of the meetings. Participants recall past contributions in an appreciative way and emphasise current contributions by highlighting the names of the responsible actors. De facto, this means assigning asymmetrical network positions to “desirable” active actors on the one hand and less active actors on the other. When looking at individual interaction sequences in the transcripts, we can observe the factual coordinating effect of this discursive element – for instance when actors discuss the network activities to be carried out in the future, and determine which actors might take the lead in those activities. In this process, we see individual actors coming into the focus of the other actors because of their real or claimed expertise. At the same time, this creates expectations regarding the implementation of actor-specific contributions, which may become a delicate issue for the actors in question, especially if they decline to accept a task. After all, if an actor declines to accept a task, the others will immediately begin to question him: Does he act opportunistically, that is, only in his own interest? Does he really have the expertise he claims to have? Does he live up to the respect the others have for him? In other words, declining to accept a task for the network always involves the risk of losing respect among its members.

#### *Assessment of aspirant actors*

In the network we reviewed, actors are selected in an open social situation. This could be observed during a sub-network meeting to which a representative of an aspirant educational institution following Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy (which postulates the existence of an objective, intellectually comprehensible spiritual world accessible to direct experience through inner development) was invited. One item on the agenda was devoted to introducing this institution to the circle of network actors. One crucial aspect of this “admissions interview” was finding out whether this institution would be a good match for the existing

set of actors. The transcript of the interaction sequence shows that it was not so much factual aspects such as programming, leadership structure, quality assurance, or market success that were seen as relevant selection criteria but rather whether the institution's philosophical orientation would be a good match for the network's pedagogic mission, as well as whether the institution was already embedded in a network of other collaborative relationships. What is interesting here, on the one hand, is the open communication during the selection process, by means of which the network also communicates to the prospective member that it expects this kind of behaviour of actors who want to join. Furthermore, the selection criteria communicated to the prospective member provide evidence of the fact that admission to this network is restricted to actors whose orientation resembles the network's pedagogic mission and the values and normative orientations associated with it. A homogenous set of actors is thus preferred over diversity. This aspect is linked to another priority in this network, namely, the strategic interest in forming a powerful lobby. Obviously, the network is interested in recruiting actors who will help expand the recognition of the network's pedagogic mission and thus strengthen and expand the foundation from which the network can formulate its claims for political legitimacy and public funding.

### **Lessons learned**

What lessons can be learned from the above analysis? We now highlight some pointers for practice as well as for policy representatives in relation to the conditions conducive to managing and therefore coordinating actor-relationships in a network successfully.

It would appear that the coordination of actor-relationships within a network becomes easier when the number of actors is reduced. As outlined above, the network as a whole consists of a number of regional sub-networks, which are conducted by residential actors. This makes it easier for the actors to stay in touch with each other and to build strong ties, thus enhancing trustful relationships, mutual support as well as collaborative activities. Moreover, being involved in a smaller group seems to encourage the actors to show their commitment and responsibility. However, decentralisation implies the challenge of sustaining the linkage between the different sub-networks and between the sub-networks and the network as a whole.

Featuring a key position within networks is essential. As shown above, the network features one actor as "general manager" who is allowed to supervise the

regional sub-networks with a view to their integration into the whole of the network. This happens also by introducing a number of general organisational conditions in order to ensure and to facilitate regular and structured communication among the network actors.

Unlike organisations where managers enjoy a formal status as leaders, the role and work of the network manager is dependent on his (or her) acceptance by all actors involved. In our case, the manager appears rather as a moderator who acts in a non-directive form and on the basis of a collective consensus. Coordination therefore emerges implicitly – that is, by pointing out the relevance of certain situations and events, such as deviations, absences, valuable actor-specific contributions, and the like. Actually, coordination occurs when actors themselves respond individually or in concert to the network situations and events highlighted in the course of interaction.

A successful coordination of actor-relationships promotes the internal and external empowering function of a network. Our analysis has shown that the network is appreciated by the actors in two respects: On the one hand, the network provides the benefit of embedding the actors in a community of shared values, mutual respect and support (internal). On the other hand, it facilitates the strategic social formation of the actors with regard to the network's position of influence (external) in the wider context of educational governance. Both sides of coordination can be seen as an interconnected dynamic, which strengthens the empowering function of the network.

Involving new actors is therefore a challenging event. Though networks regenerate themselves over time by taking leave of actors and involving new actors, these events always affect the network as a community of values and strategic alliance as a whole. As shown in our example, the prospective member has to pass a demanding assessment carried out collectively by the actors of the sub-network – this with a focus on whether or not the values and orientations of the prospective member matches the values and strategic perspectives important to the network.

These – of course preliminary and case specific – findings from our analysis show that the coordination of social relationships in a network context is more likely to function or even succeed if the network management takes account of the complexity and ambiguity of relationships or, in short, the social dynamics in a network (Jütte 2002, p.307). More concretely, our analysis proves the

importance of developing forms and ways of managing actor-relationships, which stimulate the actors' response to each other and to the values and strategic perspectives shared in the network context. Such forms and ways of managing are apparently characterised by making discreet use of formal communication and by providing discursive elements to which actors can correspond to autonomously. It could therefore be worthwhile for practitioners in adult and community education, as well as educational policy makers, to bear in mind that initiating and developing networks successfully does not depend on structures and management systems, as in organisations. Success rather depends on the competence or even "art" of stimulating the actors' discourse and by promoting coordination in the course of interaction.

Finally our case study reveals also a critical point worth mentioning here. On the one hand the network can be seen as successful in terms of continuity and social stability, which is also a result of promoting the homogeneity of the actors involved in the network. On the other hand the network suffers from a certain lack of flexibility and innovativeness, in particular with regard to the take up of new ideas and themes in order to stimulate the actors' discourse and cooperation.

So, for practitioners as well as for policy makers interested in developing networks in the field of adult and community education it could be a rewarding task to consider the question of how much homogeneity and heterogeneity between actors is necessary to improve social stability and to provide a network with "other" impulses. For example, it could be a good idea to launch networks, staffed with actors from diverse educational sectors (e.g. schools, community centres, vocational training, universities) in order to promote joint planning of education provision as well as initiatives for professional development. Activities like this could contribute also to a better alignment of the different expectations of policy makers and practitioners concerning the role and function of networks in adult and community education. It will be a special task for further investigation and research to provide evidence in relation to this question.

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