

JOINTLY BUILDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE: A WORKSHOP METHODOLOGY FOR A EUROPEAN PROJECT IN THE FIELD OF ADULT EDUCATION

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***Abstract.** This paper presents a reflection on the role of cooperative research in addressing the topic of evaluation within the field of adult education. To this end, the authors outline a specific cooperation initiative that involved academics and practitioners from the field of adult education in different European countries. The project presented here is based on the hypothesis that in order to enhance evaluation at the European level, it is necessary to build a European culture of evaluation, which may be developed by creating a concrete space for collaboration among practitioners and researchers from a range of European adult education contexts.*

Specifically, the project was designed to promote an exchange of experiences, expertise and practices among academic researchers and “practitioners” (Schön, 1983) involved in the evaluation of adult education. A key role was played by a Mobility Workshop: viewed as the core of the collaborative approach proposed, the Workshop provided a concrete opportunity for collaboration among evaluators and researchers from different countries within Europe.

***Keywords:** adult education, evaluation, Europe, cooperative research.*

Introduction

Evaluation is a complex task that touches on multiple dimensions at the organizational, individual and sociocultural levels. It has to do with questions of values, ethics and professional skills, which in turn need to be transformed into assessment procedures. Furthermore, constructing an evaluation strategy at a European level means having to address differences in terms of the divergent economic, social and cultural frameworks within which different countries' adult education systems resituated. Given this background, the project presented here is based on the hypothesis that, in order to address the need for evaluation at a European level, it is necessary to build a European evaluation culture. The research partners wish to develop such a culture by creating a concrete space for collaboration among practitioners and researchers from the field of adult education in several different European countries.

To this end, the EduEval project¹ has been designed to enable the exchange of experience, expertise and practices among academic researchers and “practitioners” (Schön, 1983) involved in the evaluation of adult education. This objective was pursued by holding a Mobility Workshop, viewed by the partners as the core element of the collaborative approach underpinning the research design. Specifically, the Workshop provided a unique and concrete opportunity for co-operation among professionals and researchers from different country backgrounds.

The Mobility Workshop comprised a series of different steps, which we describe and discuss in this presentation, based on different group work strategies, from the more traditional – such as brainstorming and focus groups – to the more informal – such as adoption of a “speed dating” format.

In sum, this paper presents the methodology developed by the research partners with the aim of creating a space for thinking about a common European evaluation culture.

Towards a European Evaluation Culture within the Adult Education System

The evaluation of educational and training systems has long represented a focus of attention for researchers and practitioners working in the area. The interest in the quality of adult education staff is also reflected in a growing demand for training, to which, over the years, the national and international debate (Research voorBeleid, 2010; Panteia, 2013) has attempted to respond, producing a multitude of perspectives and proposals that are difficult to summarize.

Moreover, in Europe the evaluation of adult education staff is underpinned by specific evaluation models: numerous studies and articles point up the presence of different evaluation systems for different professional profiles: trainers, teachers, health professionals, social workers, educators and so on. The skills and competences required by adult education staff have been identified and investigated by a series of EU-funded research projects (Carlsen & Irons, 2003; Jäägar & Irons, 2006; Research voorBeleid, 2005; Research voorBeleid, 2010; Research voorBeleid & Plato, 2008).

According to I.F. Shaw (1999), evaluation is focused on the professional effectiveness of training, facilitating enhanced awareness of one’s educational/training interventions. It thus becomes a tool for generating knowledge and developing new ways of working that are conducive to empowerment and social

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change. Furthermore, public and private health, social and educational services with the role of promoting processes of change and growth, need to introduce new ways of evaluating and monitoring the work of their staff given the ongoing significant change impacting on both welfare policies and their own organizations. Said organizations also need to guarantee their staff the opportunity to reflect on the hidden meanings driving their daily work.

If we consider that in the social and educational services, staff skills and actions influence both the quality of the specific professional services provided and overall organizational quality, an exchange of views at a European level seems to be both a useful and necessary step towards creating a practical tool suitable for application to different kinds of institutions. This may arguably be achieved via comparison of the different evaluation systems implemented with adult education staff in the research partners' countries, conducted with academic researchers and "practitioners" (Schön, 1983) involved in the evaluation of social and educational service providers.

The aim of the EduEval project – *Evaluation for the professional development of adult education staff* – is to provide a better understanding of policies, practices, and professional competences associated with evaluation. Project partners are six organizations representing five countries: TEI of Crete - School of Health & Social Welfare Department of Nursing and Department of Social Work (Greece); University of Milan-Bicocca (Italy); University of Bari (Italy); Rēzeknes Augstskola - Rezekne Higher Education Institution (RHEI) (Latvia); Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna - Pedagogic University, Warsaw (Poland); Universitat Jaume I (UJI) (Spain) (Kritsotakis *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the partnership is representative of the different European cultures and social systems as they impact on adult education and its evaluation.

The project (still ongoing) involves a number of different phases, from a preliminary investigation of the different national systems of adult education and the evaluation of adult education staff, to the development of guidelines for evaluators (both formally and informally recognised) in adult education centres, to the design and implementation of a pilot training course aimed at fully equipping evaluators of adult education staff with the required professional knowledge and skills.

Halfway through the project, a key role was played by the Mobility Workshop. The partners, indeed, were aware of having cultural differences, in relation to the project topic – the evaluation of adult education staff – not only with respect to the theories and reference frameworks drawn on from an academic point of view, but also to the concrete practices and procedures through which the evaluation of adult education staff is implemented within the adult education systems of their different countries. Moreover, in order to develop an evaluator training course, it was necessary for the partners to identify the key aspects of an evaluator's professional profile, such as training needs, skills required and so on. To this end, sharing knowledge and expertise among

researchers and practitioners (both formally and informally recognised as evaluators, such as managers, counsellors and supervisors at adult education centres) from the partner countries was considered a necessary first step.

The Mobility Workshop

As stated above, a key role was played by the Mobility Workshop, which lasted three days and was attended by around 50 delegates (researchers and practitioners) from the five countries represented in the project consortium. Viewed as the core of the Consortium's chosen collaborative approach, the workshop saw the participation of several kinds of adult education provider, from five European countries. For this reason, the Mobility Workshop was designed to maximise the opportunity for the exchange of good practices among the participating countries, and for sharing knowledge, strategies and meanings of evaluation among practitioners and researchers, so as to build a new awareness of evaluation and evaluation practices (Schon, 1987; Mortari, 2003; Fook & Gardner, 2007). In pursuit of these goals, the Mobility Workshop adopted a case study strategy. Working on case studies is an extremely powerful and efficient means of connecting with concrete situations, and it may be viewed as a research strategy (Yin, 1994; 2006). Thus, the workshop itself was viewed as a space for cooperative research on a shared topic, among practitioners and researchers from the five participating countries, who thus became in a certain sense, a community of practices (Wenger, 1999).

With regard to how the cooperative work was structured, before presenting the core activities of the Mobility Workshop, it is appropriate to describe two preliminary stages. First, on the opening day of the Mobility Workshop a transnational plenary session was held, with the aim of presenting the first results of the investigation carried out by the partners over the previous months². This first step was fundamental in order to share the state of the art in adult education systems and evaluation of adult education staff across the countries involved in the partnership. At the same time, it was also necessary to facilitate the participants in viewing themselves as a "working group" for the duration of the Mobility Workshop. To this end, the second day opened with an informal mutual presentation activity, based on a "speed-dating" format. This procedure, while seemingly inappropriate, helped to create a concrete meeting space, in which each of the participants had the opportunity to share a few minutes face to face with each of the other participants. Indeed in order to create a common European culture, mobility is viewed by the European Union itself as a key generator of connection and interaction, as is borne out by the funds invested in the Erasmus Plus exchange programme. The research consortium believes that the construction of a common European evaluation culture requires the creation of concrete spaces of encounter among people, where ideas and theories about

²The research report is available on the project web site (www.edueval.eu).

evaluation and its impact on the adult education system may be embodied in concrete experiences drawn from participants' working lives.

Given this background, the core part of the Mobility Workshop was conducted in two stages:

1. presentation of the preliminary work carried out by each partner in its own country, with a view to identifying the evaluation "practitioners" from the adult education sector and the researchers who would participate at the second stage of the workshop. In order to target the practitioners, a brochure presenting the workshop had been produced and disseminated in each of the research partners' countries.
2. a Mobility Workshop, with the participation of both the research teams and the practitioners, and focused on the exchange of practices and ideas, in order to build shared knowledge about the evaluation of adult education staff.

Specifically, in preparation for the Workshop, each of the research teams had written up a specific case of evaluation of adult education staff exemplifying the evaluation of adult education staff in their own country. The writing practice became a reflective process (Biffi, 2014) enabling participants to reconstruct their "lived experience" through analyzing the selected situation. In presenting their chosen case, each partner was required to identify given aspects of the situation described: where (the context of the case); when (the time of the case); why (the situation/problem which the evaluation was conducted to address); who (the participants: evaluators, those evaluated and other actors); what (the actions: what happened during the evaluation process). These basic elements were sufficient to identify the situation and give the audience an adequate level of understanding of it.

During the Mobility Workshop, each country presented its evaluation case at a plenary session of the delegates (in English). Subsequently, the same case was discussed within transnational groups, composed by practitioners and researchers from all the countries involved. This was a crucial aspect of the method, as it created concrete space for a face-to-face encounter among different points of view on the same situation/topic. The discussion in the transnational groups allowed the participants to advance their understanding not only of practices and procedures used to evaluate adult education staff, but also of the hidden cultural meanings underpinning them. During the transnational group sessions, the discussion was based on the following topics:

- evaluation methodologies and instruments;
- evaluation criteria;
- representations of evaluation;
- emotional and relational dynamics (on the part of both evaluators and staff).

After the discussion within the transnational groups, the debate continued at the reconvened plenary session, at which each transnational group shared with the others, its achievements with regard to a set of key topics:

- how may the evaluation of adult education staff be defined;
- what were the main features of the particular country case presented;
- what were some of the differences/similarities between the country case studies presented.

Finally, the Mobility Workshop itself was evaluated by the participants.

Conclusion

The Mobility Workshop highlighted the similarities and differences in evaluation assessment processes among the country systems analysed. Specifically, two main positions were observed: on the one hand, some case studies upheld the value of formal evaluation; on the other hand, other case studies advocated more informal forms of evaluation. This aspect is connected with differences in how the service providers in the various countries are organized and administered, as well as in their theories and methodologies of evaluation per se. It should be pointed out here that the evaluation of adult education staff is a topic that may be approached from different perspectives, some closer to educational aspects, others closer to a quality assessment approach, still others closer to a focus on organizational dynamics. The particular perspective adopted is directly related to different perceptions of the role of evaluator and to the issue of which competences and skills he/she requires. In some countries, this role is very clear and defined, while in other contexts the role of evaluator overlaps with other roles such as manager, supervisor, head of department and so on. Within the complexity just described, the Mobility Workshop allowed some elements that are transversal to all the analysed situations to be identified, providing valuable insights on which to build a training programme for evaluators.

With regard to the evaluation methodology used during the Mobility Workshop itself, all the participants completed relevant evaluation questionnaires during the afternoon of the last day. The questionnaire was designed to assess: the organization and contents of the workshop and the materials distributed; the knowledge and information gained from Mobility Workshop; delegates' general awareness of the challenge of evaluation in adult education, via a self-assessment process (comparing themselves before and after the Workshop). The responses collected showed that the Mobility Workshop had mostly fulfilled participants' expectations with regard to the knowledge and information shared during the event, and that this knowledge and information was considered to be mostly applicable to the participants' daily work. Moreover, the self-assessment items showed that participants' ratings of their knowledge, skills and confidence with respect to the European adult education

evaluation scene improved from being defined as “fair-good” to “good-excellent”, as did ratings of knowledge, skills and confidence with respect to the evaluation of adult education staff.

In general, the workshop provided an opportunity for increasing personal awareness with regard to the challenging nature of evaluating adult education staff. Indeed, the main outcome of the Mobility Workshop was enhanced awareness and understanding that within the adult education system the evaluation of the staff can play a crucial role in terms of assuring the quality of the education provided, and in terms of the quality and wellbeing of professionals within the institutions providing adult education services. In this sense, it may be concluded that the professional profile of an evaluator of adult education staff needs to include different skills, covering organizational and managerial competences and effective leadership.

Given all of the above, the next step for the EduEval Project will be the design and implementation of a pilot training course for evaluators of adult education staff (planned for 2015) that can provide them with the main transversal competences as identified during the Mobility Workshop. At the same time, the challenge will be to train practitioners capable of adapting their own profiles to fit the specific needs and features of the particular adult education system within which they operate. This is the main challenge: to be a European professional, while remaining closely connected to one’s own national scene and its peculiarities.

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