Learning and Teaching with E-Portfolios:

Experiences in and Challenges for Adult Education

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Abstract—**Based on short introduction into the e-portfolio method, this contribution focuses on experiences and challenges for adult education: For that, it describes best practice, current projects and initiatives in European adult and continuing education. Additionally, the results of interviews with experienced adult educators who have already worked with the e-portfolio method will be referred: The interviews focus on competencies that educators need, if they are working with the e-portfolio method. In a short outlook, requirements for a future professional development and training for e-portfolio trainers in adult education will be sketched.**

Index Terms—adult education, e-portfolio, professionalisation

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The e-portfolio work can be defined as a technology supported learning method for the development of competencies, whose entire developing process and results are demonstrated as well as illustrated and documented via digital information objectives [1]. Learners collect or rather save their self-contained and self-made products (artifacts) in a learning environment and reflect their achieved goals and results. In the course of time of a learning biography the results could be flexible compiled together and passed on for different purposes. The planning of an individual learning target as well as their results are accompanied and evaluated from tutors and peers.

This definition is far beyond the understanding of an e-portfolio as a "digital application folder", in which you find a collection of scanned certificates. From our point of view, e-portfolios offer and allow an overall prospect on competencies of individuals or groups of people. Besides the acquired and learned elements, e-portfolios document the learning process and therefore the developing process of competencies. All forms of expressions provided by current multimedia technologies are allowed.

The five most important processes in working with e-portfolios are [1]: to clarify the target and context of the digital portfolio work; to collect, select and connect artifacts with a learning target; to reflect and manage the learning process; to present the e-portfolio artifacts; and to assess and evaluate the learning processes / development of competencies.

II. PORTFOLIO-WORK IN ADULT EDUCATION

Adult education can be seen as an "all-inclusive term" [2]. It covers nearly all fields of education and training like basic and continuing education. Adult education includes formal learning, non-formal and informal learning. It covers nearly everything, except school education, university education and initial vocational education. In this paper we follow the terminology of the European Commission defining adult learning as "all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training, however far this process may have gone" [3]. Adult learning includes learning for personal, civic and social purposes as well as for employment-related purposes.

Adult learners have different educational, occupational and private backgrounds and experiences. Adult learning sets up on these experiences and can be seen as "connected learning" [4]. These differences encompass learning experiences, phases of life, and experiences in daily life and so on. When we talk about the principle to pick up learners where they stand we have to take into consideration these experiences and backgrounds.

The learning processes of adult learners are affected by "experienced based learning" [5]. To work with people, to accompany learners, to contribute to personal and competence development is one of the main tasks of adult educators.

Under these aspects the implementation of the work with (e-) portfolio in adult education is an important step forward to the realisation of self organised learning and a strengthening of the autonomous learning of adults. E-portfolio work in adult education contributes to the idea of life long and life wide learning, too. But whereas the e-portfolio method is relatively well discussed in research and practice in schools and higher education as in universities (see e.g. [6], [7]), its usage in adult education is rarely documented and discussed.

Nevertheless, in adult education, the work with the (paper based) portfolios is not new. There are, for example, the following projects and initiatives dealing with (e-) portfolios in adult education: the European Language Portfolio; a project with women after their family phase at the Open University UK [8]; the German ProfilPass initiative and instruments [9]; or the Austrian project "Du kannst was" [10].

The implementation of new methods requires a clearly defined strategy within the triangle of learners-institutions-teachers. The acceptance of new methods through teachers and educators plays an important role for the acceptance of the learners. The institution forms the learning culture considerably and gives the ground for the readiness to innovate and for implementation [11].

According to our own experiences, we know that new requirements of competencies of adult educators are not only a matter of knowledge about the method itself. The (e-) portfolio method requires adult educators, who are able to shift from a teacher-centred approach to a function of a tutor and learning coach and/or facilitator. In our next section, we focus on the question of needed competencies for adult educators from the point of view of practitioners.

III. NEEDED COMPETENCIES FOR TEACHERS IN ADULT EDUCATION: THE RESULTS OF EXPERT INTERVIEWS

According to Graham Attwell (1997) and in respect to the implementation of e-portfolios teachers in schools have to be able to "provide technical support, organize the contexts and communities of learning, formulate organisational objectives, facilitate the structure of portfolio contents, facilitate reflection, guide and monitor the students advancement through the integral cycle of investigative learning, help in the evidence of competences, support planning, interact an conduct conversation with the students, plan an assess the overall process" [12].

But what is about professional teachers and trainers in adult education? And what is the role of adult education providers?

Building on these questions, we interviewed four experienced teachers who had already learned and worked with the e-portfolio method and asked them to describe the needed competencies [13]. The interviews have been carried out with a semi-structured guideline which should give a plenty of room for additional positions. The named aspects and terms had been sorted into the following categories: knowledge, skills and attributes – following a concept of competencies used by the UK-FENTO standard [14], [15].

Figure 1. The FENTO-Standards [15]

This investigation is embedded in a permanent process of pedagogical innovation and is therefore based on the aim to get more knowledge of the needs of adult educators within this process of introducing the e-portfolio method in an adult education institution (*Volkshochschule*). We talk about an institution in an urban environment in Vienna which is technologically quite well equipped and in which adult educators can rely that they get the desired technology prepared. In contradiction to the above quotation they do not have to provide technical support.

A. Knowledge

Professional knowledge has to be excellent. Standards have to be guaranteed. But adult educators should also have a good knowledge in learners' types, learning styles and learning techniques. And they should be aware of the philosophy and the networks of the providing institution.

B. Skills

The named skills can be divided into three sorts: didactical and methodological skills, social skills and reflective skills.

Didactical and methodological skills: Professional teaching needs a "well equipped" teacher who shall be able to support learners in manifold ways and settings. Learners need and ask for guidance, learning goals have to be imparted; feedback has to be given in time and also online. Adult educators shall be able to evaluate the competencies of the learners and have to support other teachers, for example by classroom monitoring or by peer-mentoring.

Social skills: Social Skills get more and more important. The interviewees named communication, rhetoric, conflict management, moderation techniques, time management, team competence, coaching competencies and others. But also such important aspects like "being able to cope with emotions in a sensible way".

Reflection is seen in a very professional way as a method to improve the own performance. The interviewees see the necessity to reflect and to change, to reflect the own role, to be able to cope with differences, to be open and to be self critic.

C. Attributes

One interviewee mentioned that the work with the portfolio itself is an attitude; it means an appreciation of learners. Excellent adult educators have to like people in general and their participants in particular. What is to be taught, has to be lived authentically. People have to be treated respectfully and their self-esteem has to be encouraged. Adult educators have to be open for their self-development.

D. Technological competence

The interviews show clearly that the technological competence is not seen as the key for becoming a good e-portfolio trainer in adult education. All interviewees emphasize that the e-portfolio method is a didactical concept and challenges more the above mentioned skills and attributes than the requirements of the technique. From our perspective, the more or less short list and moderate requirements concerning IT is also a result of easy to use software tools.

The interviewees named: knowledge about office, hyperlinks, the concrete (e-portfolio) software, being able to find and upload documents, to be able to fill out Web formula, being able to use the Web.

E. Comment

Professional teaching in adult education is to a high extent connected with critical reflection and with the

readiness to work together and to discuss with other teachers. It is connected with a critical approach to the own teaching practice and carried by the disposition to change. Ideal adult educators have a high reflective competence. The pictures of teachers in adult education change in all sectors. Adult educators have more and more counselling and facilitating roles. The evaluation of knowledge and competencies and the classifying in different contexts require a high capability to reflect which needs to be trained permanently. Good or excellent adult educators have to have solid competencies which enable them to work with e-portfolios. Adults educators should have the possibility to learn how to use e-portfolios and they should possess and use their own e-portfolios.

IV. OUTLOOK: CHALLENGES FOR THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF TEACHERS IN ADULT EDUCATION AND FOR ADULT LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

This practice-based and development-oriented investigation shows that there is a need for a training of specific competencies for teachers in adult education when they should work with (e-) portfolios. The e-portfolio method is a concept which asks for specific competencies, not at least competencies for the method itself. These competencies require highly developed communicative and social as well as reflective skills. Adult education institutions have to contribute to these requirements as they need highly professionalized and very competent adult educators. Their training curricula have to be adopted and have to change from simple skills trainings to more reflection based forms of learning.

One concrete future realization of professionalisation of teachers is the introduction of e-portfolios in the Vienna adult education centres (*Volkshochschulen*). The concept for the introduction and implementation of e-portfolios foresees a double strategy: The bottom-up-strategy is the introduction of e-portfolios for teachers in adult education; the top-down-strategy means e-portfolios for the regularly occupied staff. In both cases it is intended to tie the e-portfolio to the internal training management system. The e-portfolio shall also be useable for private and leisure-time activities. An e-portfolio in an educational organisation has to be connected to learning processes. Besides this, additional research and observations have to monitor and reflect ongoing developments within this innovative use of ICT in lifelong learning.

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