



AUSTRIA'S LERNDISIGNER NETWORK: THE DYNAMICS OF VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN INTERSCHOOL NETWORKS

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Context and Background

New Middle School Reform

In this chapter, the authors tell the story of how a nation-wide professional learning network emerged during Austria's most significant school reform in recent decades, the "New Middle School." In an effort to improve equity and excellence, a reform pilot in lower secondary began in 2008 and a new role was initiated in the Austrian school system. Initially "Lerndesigners" were seen as turnkeys or change agents. Furthermore, schools were not expected to download a model (via the reform) and implement it, but rather to create their own site-specific concepts and innovate. Networking schools was therefore a key strategy. As Muijs et al. (2010) note, the advantage of collaborative networks over externally led school improvement programs is that they enable schools "to co-construct" improvement around individual school needs.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher Leadership, Spontaneous Orders, Professional Learning

Taking on a teacher leadership role, teachers "break ranks" and become visible to colleagues as leaders. In the flat hierarchy typically found in Austrian schools where teacher leadership is new, this "making oneself visible" can cause irritation. This phenomenon was identified by Lortie (1974) as the "autonomy-parity pattern" in his sociological study of the schoolteacher. According to this one of the chapter's theoretical reference based on Berg and Zoellick's (2017) recently proposed framework of teacher leadership dimensions:

- Berg and Zoellick defined four dimensions of teacher leadership, which we met in the work with Lerndesigners as well.
- Legitimacy (On what grounds might a teacher be able or allowed to influence others?) (p. 4)
 - Support (Is there someone or some agency motivating and supporting the teacher's influence?) (p. 5)
 - Objective (What is the objective of teachers' influence?) (p.5)
 - Method (How does the teacher influence others?) (p. 5)

Secondly the authors used Polanyi's (1948) notions of "corporate order" and "dynamic order" to explore how top-down strategies responsively supported eye-level network development in the interest of system development and how these efforts led to a network with a life of its own – from the profession for the profession itself.

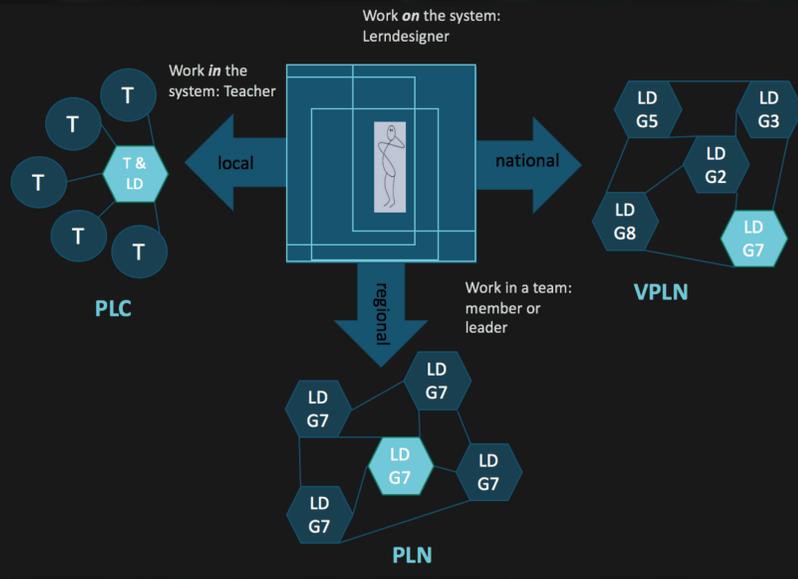
Finally the author's understanding of professional learning is any learning activity driven by and for professionals, oriented to problems or questions that emerge in their practice. This growing tendency to put learning into the hands of the professionals themselves has been referred to by some as "flipped professional development", because external programmes with more or less prescription for practice are being replaced by activities that create space for professionals to learn from one another.

Data

Data for this chapter are based on conversations analysis and informal surveys at learning ateliers as well as the documentation of user access data on the platform.

New Roles and Networks

To foster leadership for learning, the NMS-EB (NMS-Entwicklungsbegleitung) conducted a parallel programme for school principals, who were brought together for national network meetings each semester to address their own leadership issues, change strategies and shared leadership with the new *Lerndesigners*. Lerndesigner had to face several challenges: the role was largely undefined and the new role was not necessarily embraced by all stakeholders. Each Lerndesigner created his or her own role through processes of context-specific role-taking and role-making (Westfall-Greiter & Hofbauer, 2015), which was for some difficult and even painful at times. Learning to "switch hats" from classroom teacher to team leader to Lerndesigner proved to be challenging. Not only did Lerndesigners find themselves in multiple roles, they were also members of several local networks.



Virtual Professional Learning Network

To understand the dynamics and genesis of the Lerndesigner network, it is essential to see the new role as an intervention that led to the emergence of teacher leadership in the Austrian system. Liebermann (2000) notes that teachers are often positioned in top-down structures, where they are expected to download centralized policies, treated "as passive receivers of prescriptive programs, given little time or incentive to integrate these new programs into their classroom practice." (p. 226). "Networks, in contrast, involve their members in a variety of activities that reflect the purposes and changing needs of their participants" (p. 226). The NMS-EB approached the Lerndesigners as a network from the very beginning

"This is all well and good and I get it that we're supposed to do our own development work, but what am I supposed to say to my colleagues when I get back home? They're expecting recipes and instructions from me!"
Lerndesigner G2

▲ NMS-EB launched face-to-face *learning ateliers*, a large-group format developed by the consultancy team to engage Lerndesigners in dialogue, reflection and exchange.

A national network of this new professional role was key to establishing awareness for teacher leadership and build on the notion of "shared leadership".

▲ In cooperation with NMS-eLearning it was possible to quickly implement and develop an eduMoodle platform that served as an online library and archive as well as *virtual location* for community building. The Lerndesigners were the first group to be networked on the platform in 2009 and continue to be the most dominant group.

"The Lerndesigner prepares the soil in which the seeds of the new learning culture and assessment can be sown."
Lerndesigner G2

▲ During the pilot, each generation had its own *closed forum*, a virtual space for communicating with one another. Additionally they had the opportunity to up- and downloading resources specific to their learning. The first generations found the adjustment to virtual communication difficult - as CLS figured out, they had often a lack of digital competency.

▲ After the Pilot the *Online Learning Atelier for all Lerndesigners (OLLD)* was created – it is the key virtual space for the Lerndesigner network to communicate and co-create and for CLS to engage with the network.

"Listen, if colleagues come with problems. Try to find solutions. Don't give up or get tired. Follow up!"
Lerndesigner G3

▲ Factors related to the success of the Lerndesigner network:

- The online platform for *Lerndesigners* enables easy communication and exchange of ideas and innovations across the country
- Regular networking events in which qualification is embedded build identity, professionalism and confidence
- Personal support and easy access to expertise build trust

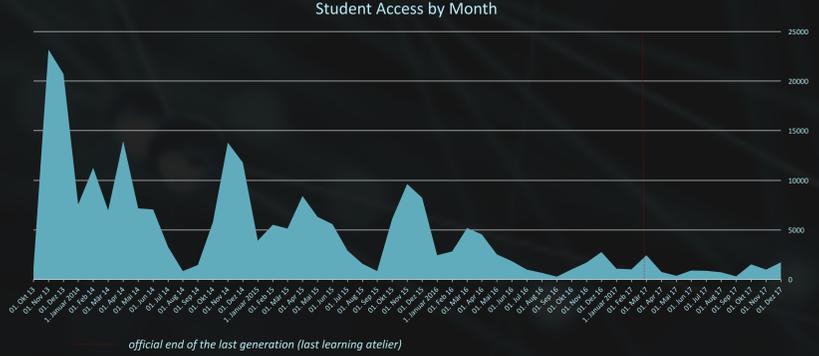
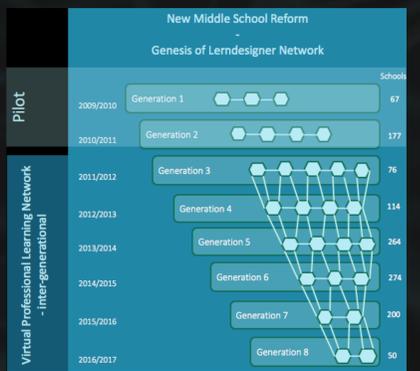
"I am the knower delivering knowledge to non-knowers."
Lerndesigner G3

Key facts

Each school year new pilot schools began a two-year national programme:

Generation	Year(s)	Schools
Generation 1	2008/2009	67
Generation 2	2009/2010	177
Generation 3	2010/2011	76
Generation 4	2011/2012	114
Generation 5	2012/2013	264
Generation 6	2013/2014	274
Generation 7	2014/2015	Ca. 200
Generation 8	2015/2016	Ca. 50

Hits Homepage: 1,7 Mio. (2016)
Accounts: 9347 (2017)
Follow-up Abos OLLD: 1347 (2017)



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