



“Developing competencies of Nordic adult educators: reaching and involving vulnerable groups into non-formal adult education(MEDIATE)”  
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# Inventory on developing competences of adult educators via Nordic learning circles of professionals

Insights on organising professional circle work within MEDIATE project

## *Authors*

Gígja Baldursdóttir, Hringsjá Educational and Vocational Rehabilitation Center, Iceland  
Elizabeth Gregersen, FO-Aarhus, Denmark  
Denis Riabov, Studieförbundet Uppsala Västmanland, Sweden



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## INTRODUCTION

The current inventory is produced within the project “Developing competences of Nordic adult educators: reaching and involving vulnerable groups into nonformal adult education (MEDIATE)”, funded by Nordplus Adult programme.

The project has been carried out within a Nordic learning circle of partners in accordance with the competence development model from a predecessor project, “Kompetenceudvikling af ansatte indenfor feltet voksenl ring”. Continuing working together gave the partners opportunity to further develop the model, reflecting and elaborating on their own work of their professional learning circle with regards to the competences developed by the partners during the new project.

This inventory briefly presents the main theoretical findings about the project’s professional learning circle’s work, serving the purpose of inspiring, educating, and professionalizing more Nordic adult educators to develop their competences through own learning circles with their colleagues.

The present document contains the project insights of general interest, covering 3 key aspects of the professional circle work: group dynamics between the professional partners, experiential learning via the project activities, and increased dialogue competence during the project.

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The MEDIATE project was a visionary initiative that aimed to elevate adult educators' competencies by focusing on three core objectives:

Exploring study circles as a cornerstone for professional development.

Mapping diverse adult education methods and tools.

Actively exchanging insights and experiences among participating professionals.

Inspired by collaborative learning, this initiative sought to innovate within the Nordic adult education landscape. Underpinned by Susan Wheelan's Integrated Model of Group Development (IMGD), the project embraced transformative experiences to enhance the quality circle's dynamics and foster shared learning.

Aligned with the principles of experiential learning by Dewey and Kolb, the project recognized the power of hands-on experiences and reflective analysis in catalyzing professional growth. By establishing professional study circles, the project didn't only refine teaching methodologies but also fostered changes in dialogue competence, networking, and professional development.

The initiative's focus is on networking beyond institutional and national limits. This approach fostered collaborative learning, experiential insights, and extensive networking, cultivating an environment of open and enriching professional dialogue among Nordic adult educators.

## BACKGROUND INITIATIVE

The precursor project "Kompetenceudvikling af ansatte indenfor feltet voksenlæring" started in 2019 and ended in 2021. Participants were 22 professionals within the adult education sectors from the Nordic countries and two researchers from Århus University, Denmark. Two participants in the current project took part in the precursor project.

The project was a thematic network, which was aimed to:

- a) explore study circles as a method for developing the competencies of adult educators themselves.
- b) map different adult education methods and tools.
- c) actively exchange ideas and experiences.

## I. CIRCLE PROCESSES & GROUP DYNAMICS

The group dynamics under the Quality Circle, which is the centerpiece of the MEDIATE project's activities, was inspired by Susan Wheelan's<sup>[1]</sup> theory who developed the Integrated Model of Group Development (IMGD).

The model has five (5) stages:

- Belonging and security, wherein the leader provides structure and security;
- Opposition and conflict, where the group develops a group culture and members express their own opinions;
- Trust and structure, participants adapt tasks and goals and the group learns to be more task-oriented;
- Work and productivity, where the group has found its rhythm, and cooperates more effectively; and
- Resolution, where the group learns to reflect on and evaluate their work. -

The MEDIATE Circle group, indeed, went through these stages of development. It utilized various forms of "circle": online meetings and face-to-face meetings. The partnership also used an online to reflect, record their thoughts, and document the work done so far.

Learning is best and results can be produced even if people are new to each other if they have established trust between each other. After relationship-oriented transactions among circle members, the relationship changed to a more task-oriented one.

### A Study circle with six participants

The MEDIATE Team created a study circle consisting of two professionals from each partner institution. This type of circle can be defined as a condensed and collaborative group of individuals who unite to engage in structured and focused learning activities. Within the circle, the partners discussed every aspect of the project work and collected methods and tools on how to reach and involve vulnerable groups in non-formal adult education.

The partners expressed overall satisfaction in working in a study circle. They agreed that the study circle concept could provide valuable inspiration for a diverse implementation within their institutions:

“Our professional study circle (comprising project partners) has enabled us to examine the operational landscape from vantage points, comprehensively and holistically.” – Denis Riabov, Studieförbundet Uppsala Västmanland, Sweden

“The concept of the study circle can be used as an inspiration in other activities of the organization, not only limited to the teaching of vulnerable groups.” – Lone Svith, FO-Aarhus, Denmark

Some participants pointed out the need for clear goals and active engagement of participants:

“To be meaningful, the study circle must have concrete goals and actions”. – Gígja Baldursdóttir, Hringsjá Educational and Vocational Rehabilitation Center, Iceland

“...it is quite inclusive: no matter what one contributes, one is on equal footing with others in the circle. And that's why I feel I have a lot to contribute.” – Susanne Lassen, FO-Aarhus, Denmark

Partner 3: “The study circle format promoted a good platform to engage in meaningful discussions where everyone was equal ... and to practice active listening.” Guðrún Helga Sigurðardóttir, Hringsjá Educational and Vocational Rehabilitation Center, Iceland

For some, it was a new experience to work in a study circle while others had prior experience.

Partner 3: “Participating in a study circle was a new experience for me, opening up a fresh outlook on collaborative learning and the exchange of knowledge.” - Guðrún Helga Sigurðardóttir, Hringsjá, Iceland

The MEDiate Circle Group participants were guided by Wheelan’s IMDG theory. This enabled the group to progress well. This happened thanks to our active interaction via different channels: the circle, online and offline meetings, pallet, exchanged methods, and developed the guide. Wheelan said that “groups can get stuck in their development for long periods, which leads to long-term ineffectiveness and low production”. Using the IMDG theory helped the group to progress.

The MEDIATE project recommends the following for effective group dynamics:

- A group of 3-6 people works best; which group of 8 or more people to work is much more difficult. In the project “Kompetenceudvikling af ansatte indenfor feltet voksenlæring”, which was the basis for MEDIATE, it was found that many people were participating passively, partly because of the large number of participants in a group. This was improved upon by the MEDIATE project to improve the competence development model of the precursor project.
- The group is stronger than individuals. The quality of the guide has significantly increased thanks to all of its contents having been discussed and reflected on within the MEDIATE learning circle. This ensured the guide produced is a common solution transferable to the adult education context of all of the Nordic countries. The ‘learning circle’ format of the development work has facilitated more innovative, coherent, and integrated ideas during the development of the guide.

## II. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is a learning approach that is often linked to the work of two educational theorists, John Dewey and David A. Kolb. It emphasizes the importance of hands-on, practical experiences as the main way of acquiring knowledge and skills. The process involves actively engaging in direct experiences, reflecting on them, and then applying the lessons learned to new situations. Experiential learning can for example include experiments, fieldwork, group projects, and real-world problem-solving.


The theory highlights that individuals learn best when they directly engage with, reflect on, and think about their experiences. The key elements of experiential learning are experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Kolb believes that for a new experience to result in learning, it must go through all of these stages. One must actively engage with it, reflect on it, extract insights, and then use those insights to shape future actions or behaviors.

In this project, all of these stages were utilized, which allowed for an experiential learning process. Collaborating with others can significantly impact an individual's thinking and behavior. When people work together, they encounter diverse perspectives, ideas, and approaches to tasks. This interaction can lead to various changes such as new viewpoints, broader perspectives, improved problem-solving skills, and enhanced communication abilities. Ultimately, learning from experiences and interactions with others has a profound impact on personal growth and development.

Throughout the study circle, focus groups, padlet, and pilot activities, participants were actively engaged and encouraged to reflect on their experiences, analyze their findings, and apply the insights gained to further their growth and development. This cyclical learning process facilitated deep and meaningful learning, ensuring that experiences were translated into knowledge and actionable insights. Active learner involvement was critical in utilizing this method effectively. Collaborative problem-solving was an effective approach, and providing direct feedback to each other significantly enhanced the learning process.

Padlet was utilized to track and document progress, with constant evaluations of the circle's productivity. Partners were required to answer specific questions, present their methods, and share their thoughts and ideas. The Padlet provided a platform for discussing ideas, findings,





and thoughts. Directly giving feedback to each other about actions significantly enhanced the process of learning. All members of the circle actively monitored and recorded their work during the project, and overall, they were satisfied with this aspect. According to Kolb's theory, conscious reflection on experiences is crucial for learning. This involves perceiving the meaningfulness of a situation and reflecting on it to gain insights.

During the project, the organizations involved experienced improved collaboration and teamwork. The study circle work created new pathways for innovative ideas and solutions, resulting in better adaptiveness and resilience. Partners were confident that their participation in the project provided valuable learning experiences for personal and professional growth.

"I believe the project has provided the foundation for the partner organizations to work more inclusively on integrating individuals with mental disabilities into our education, employing a more informed, methodical, and systematic approach. – Lone Svith, FO-Aarhus, Denmark

"The Nordic exchange increased the motivation of our staff and personally enriched thanks to cultural exchange as well." Denis Riabov, Studieförbundet Uppsala Västmanland, Sweden

### III. DIALOGUE COMPETENCE INCREASED

Apart from learning and developing with regard to the actual project topic (that is engaging people with mental disabilities in adult education), the participating partners have evolved also in another domain: they increased their **professional dialogue competence**. This happened naturally during the project's professional circle work. However, during the circle evaluation, the partnership drew important conclusions concerning the dialogue competence that can be deliberately applied and are relevant to any Nordic adult education professional; they are as follows.

#### Networking lays the foundation for a professional dialogue

Networking facilitates connections, knowledge exchange, opportunities, support, access to resources, and importantly, the development of trust and credibility. If partners plan to cooperate long-term based on trust, they are more perceptive to each other, and collaboration between them goes in a strategic direction, establishing a basis for a genuine professional dialogue. It's a dynamic process that can contribute to a vibrant and informed professional community of Nordic adult educators.

The MEDIATE project in itself was a networking opportunity for its partners. The project evolved from a previous cooperation between Swedish and Icelandic partners within an initiative of the Nordic Network for Adult Learning (NVL). It was NVL who helped find a Danish partner, suitable for the project. That's why the trust among the partners was already established, along with the mutual desire to continue working on common issues and grow the partners' network.

The project evaluation shows that the partners specifically highlighted the value of building a professional network beyond their institution or country, also mentioning that this network can open doors for potential collaborative projects.

*"Finding good partners is extremely valuable: you can start new projects together for continuing cooperation. To find someone you can trust and who you know is a good partner - is an extra bonus", - says Gígja Baldursdóttir from Hringsjá, Iceland.*

### Professional dialogue means allowing multiple perspectives to speak

A real dialogue is difficult to have if the parties are unequal or one party is dependent on the other, (for example a student and a teacher or a co-worker and a manager situation), as there is a risk that one party adapts and says what the other party wants to hear. Therefore, a genuine professional dialogue is easier to initiate between equals. The parties will not be getting stuck on a “polite” surface of just confirming each other: the dialogue is about allowing multiple perspectives to speak, learning from each other’s perspectives, and coming to a common picture in the end.

Professionals from different countries have different perspectives that are based on different national contexts and priorities, different experiences, and an academic knowledge base. From a certain perspective, certain aspects of reality can appear magnified in relation to other aspects, which may be clearer from other national/professional perspectives. To be able to contribute to conversations having a dialogical quality requires the parties to have a dialogical ability, that is, dialogic competence (Wilhelmson, 1998; Wilhelmson & Döös, 2016).

In MEDiate, the partners had an opportunity to participate in a professional dialogue within the project’s professional study circle, with a duration of more than a year. The study circle format ensured the participants assumed equal roles while practicing their dialogue competence. The synergy of different perspectives enabled mutual learning at its best, thanks to the project partners all coming from different Nordic countries, having similar and yet different fields of expertise and even target groups. The circle evaluation showed that increasing own dialogue competence was among the most appreciated things learned.

### Professional dialogue focuses on common challenges

To achieve a shared understanding, a professional study circle should have a common focus and purpose, rather than just a topic for discussion. A genuine professional dialogue goes beyond conversation and centers around shared challenges, aiming for an outcome that benefits the group as a whole, rather than individual interests.

In the debate or negotiation, the parties persuade each other and make compromises, but in the dialogue, the goal is to understand each other and come to a common picture exchanging their perspectives, participants can collaboratively reach solutions beyond their capabilities.

It's about a positive synergy effect where 1+1 becomes 3; such synergy allows us to effectively learn and produce a better result.


At the beginning of the project, the partners involved in the MEDiate professional learning circle identified common challenges faced by the target group and established common goals to pursue during both the project and the circle. At the project kick-off meeting, a workshop on the study circle goals and content took place, where the partners planned and agreed on the future circle work. Right after, the partners ran focus groups with the target groups to identify common challenges, which were further discussed and agreed on within the circle. It is worth noting that the project's professional dialogue was multi-faced in terms of the format of the study circle itself: while it most mostly held monthly online via Teams, it also took place offline during the transnational meetings in Uppsala and Reykjavik; also the exchange among participants were facilitated differently: from 2-2 discussions to the discussions in the whole group, with some participants also being different at times.

#### [Nordic dialogue highlights local peculiarities](#)

While coming to a common Nordic picture within a dialogue in a professional learning circle, it is natural to discover differences between the professional landscape in the participating countries, better understand their national context, its pros, and cons, and appreciate national peculiarities that can be shared with other Nordic countries. In this sense, a Nordic professional learning circle enriches participants both in terms of the Nordic and local picture.

MEDIATE partners learned how different the adult education is even among Nordic countries, how the work with people with mental disabilities varies between the countries, which problems are local/national and which are common.”

Thus, the MEDiate project has not only succeeded in its mission to engage people with mental disabilities in adult education but has also notably enriched the participating partners' professional dialogue competence. Through this initiative, the importance of networking as a foundation for professional dialogue has been underscored, emphasizing the value of trust, collaboration, and the potential for future projects. Additionally, the project has demonstrated that a genuine professional dialogue thrives when multiple perspectives are allowed to speak and learn from one another, contributing to a common understanding. By



focusing on common challenges and shared goals, the project exemplifies how a positive synergy effect can lead to enhanced learning and better outcomes. Furthermore, the Nordic context of the dialogue has shed light on local peculiarities, enriching participants with a broader perspective while emphasizing the importance of appreciating both Nordic and local nuances in the professional landscape. MEDIATE has not only addressed a specific issue but has also nurtured a culture of open, enriching, and mutually beneficial professional dialogue among Nordic adult educators. Something the MEDIATE partners recommend adapting to one's Nordic adult education organization is engaging yourselves in a true professional dialogue through applying a professional study circle format to cooperation and common projects.

## CONCLUSIONS

The document outlines the outcomes and insights gleaned from the MEDIATE project, funded under the Nordplus Adult programme, aimed at enhancing Nordic adult educators' competencies. It encapsulates the project's journey, emphasizing three pivotal facets: group dynamics within professional circles, experiential learning, and increasing the dialogue competence.


Underpinned by Susan Wheelan's Integrated Model of Group Development (IMGD), the MEDIATE project thrived through the professional circle - a circle that evolved through various stages—spanning from establishing trust to achieving task orientation and productive collaboration. The study circle format proved effective, fostering meaningful discussions, knowledge sharing, and equal participation, enhancing the guide produced within the project.

The initiative embraced experiential learning principles described by Dewey and Kolb, integrating hands-on experiences, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving. Active engagement, Padlet utilization for progress tracking, and collaborative feedback significantly bolstered the learning process, yielding enhanced teamwork, adaptiveness, and personal growth among participants.

An integral outcome was the amplification of dialogue competence among professionals participating in the circle. The project not only addressed specific educational issues but also facilitated professional networking, fostering trust, credibility, and extensive knowledge exchange beyond institutional and national boundaries. A true dialogue flourished, accommodating multiple perspectives, emphasizing common Nordic challenges, and promoting mutual learning between Nordic adult educators.

The project's success underscores the value of a vibrant professional network, equal dialogue, and the synergy of diverse perspectives in achieving a comprehensive understanding. Furthermore, it spotlighted the importance of recognizing local nuances within the Nordic context, enriching participants with broader perspectives while nurturing an enriching culture of professional dialogue among Nordic adult educators.

Thus, the MEDIATE project's journey of collaborative learning, experiential growth, and amplified dialogue competence presents a compelling model for Nordic adult educators to



adopt—a step to the transformative power of professional study circles in driving collective progress and innovation.

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