

# Bridging Barriers - Competence development at the cutting edge for educators in Adult Basic Education in Europe



Background input 1 for the pilot courses

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Günter Hefler & Eva Steinheimer

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<https://www.bridgingbarriers.eu/>

# Input 1

What do participants in adult basic education need to achieve individual progress in their learning journey?

An approach for focussing on resources available for overcoming barriers to learning

Günter Hefler & Eva Steinheimer



Hello, welcome to our short presentation.

We are going to speak about our novel approach to an essential question within Adult Basic Education.

What do participants need to achieve individual progress in their learning journey?

We are going to present you the approach taken by the Bridging Barriers project to answer to this important question.

# Presenters

**Eva Steinheimer**

Researcher and project manager at 3s - Vienna

Research topics include LLL (focus on VET and work based learning), evaluation studies; policy analysis; competence development; formal and non-formal adult education

**Role Bridging Barriers:** Project coordination, researcher

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**Günter Hefler**

Researcher and project manager at 3s - Vienna

Cross-country comparative research on LLL, formal and non-formal adult education, firm-provided training and workplace learning, competence development; educational statistics

**Role Bridging Barriers:** Senior researcher



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## Background – Experiences made in the Austrian Case Studies for the Horizon 2020 ENLIVEN Project

- How do Adult Basic Education practitioners describe their day-to-day work and how have they learnt to support the learning of their participants?
- We have reviewed the relevant literature, studied two organisations and interviewed eight practitioners
- One of the emerging questions:  
How can the learning needs of participants be captured and how can related support provided by practitioners be made visible?

<https://h2020enliven.org/>



Let us quickly introduce the background of our approach.

With the three year Horizon 2020 ENLIVEN project, a project focussing on adult learning and the learning of younger adults in particular, we have done case studies on the evolving Adult Basic Education Sector in Austria.

Within one line of work, we ask practitioners in adult basic education what they do in day-to-day work and how they have actually learnt to support the learning of their participants. We have interviewed eight practitioners and studied two organisations providing adult basic education in Austria. Moreover, we have extensively consulted the literature and have reached out to various stake holders in the field of adult basic education.

Within our work, it become clear that participants in adult basic education have rather different needs and face different challenges in making progress in their learning. In consequence, practitioners need to apply a broad set of strategies and tools for helping students to overcome their learning barriers. We found that neither the variated needs of participants nor the required competences of practitioners relevant for providing tailored support are well captured in the literature. This is certainly unfortunate, as the key competences of teachers in adult basic education remain therefore mainly invisible. This finding has been one of the sources of inspiration for the current Bridging Barriers

project.

## Needs of participants

### Conclusion from the literature review

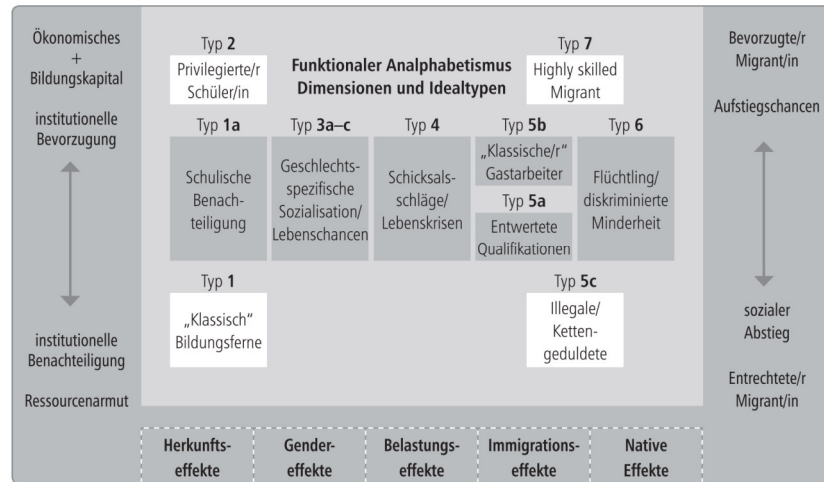
- In general, the various needs – speaking of their learning aims and difficulties to achieve them – had been not systematically observed
- Typologies developed in the field typically differentiate the participants according to some of their features, however, to lesser extent (or in mediated way only) their learning needs



Starting with the learning needs and the related challenges faced by the participants, our literature review has shown a scarcity of approaches to classify the learning needs and the related challenges in any detail.

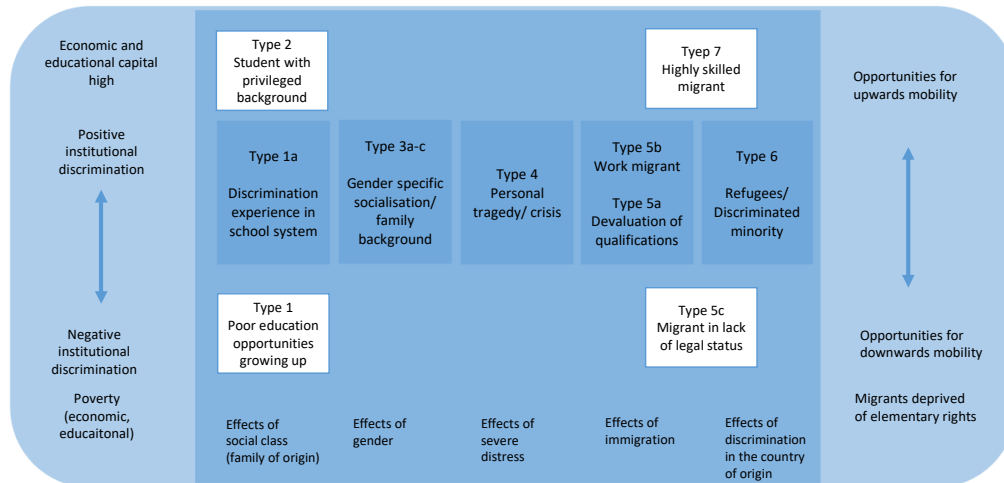
Available typologies often not focus on the learning needs as such – and therefore not on the practitioners' approaches required to support them – but on selected socio-economic characteristics of the learners themselves. Here the assumption is that groups of learners with some similar features have also somewhat more similar learning needs to be addressed by the programmes.

# One example for a Typology – The German Case



Drucks, Stephan : Bauer, Ullrich und Hastaoglu, Tuba (2011). Wer ist bildungsarm? Zu einer Idealtypologie des funktionalen Analphabetismus. *Report - Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, Vol. 34, No 3 (Partizipation und Alphabetisierung/Grundbildung), S. 48-58., p52

## One example for a Typology – The German Case – 7 Main Types



Drucks, Stephan ; Bauer, Ullrich und Hastaoglu, Tuba (2011). Wer ist bildungsarm? Zu einer Idealtypologie des funktionalen Analphabetismus. *Report - Zeitschrift für Weiterbildungsforschung*, Vol. 34, No 3 (Partizipation und Alphabetisierung/Grundbildung), S. 48-58., p52

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We would like to demonstrate our point by the example of an otherwise quite helpful typology of participants in Adult Literacy Classes in Germany, proposing seven main types of participants supported by seven subtypes.

The typology uses two key dimensions.

The first dimension refers to the group-specific quantity of economic, educational but also symbolic capital, in particular with regard to citizenship rights. Groups differ in their relative wealth and poverty, with some groups characterised by marked levels of poverty.

The second dimension refers to the various “Whys”, explaining why adults have not achieved higher levels of literacy – or a much better command of German as a Second Language – at an early stage of their life course.

The reasons for that include

- the effects of the social class of the family of origin
- Effects of gender, bringing about disadvantage for either women (for example, within some groups of migrants) or men (e.g. for young men stemming from economically deprived families).
- Effects of various forms of severe stress of traumatic events, including the untimely



death of close family members, illness, the illness in particular mental illness, of a family member, dysfunctional families, violence, experience of foster care and many more).

- The effects of immigration and related forms of institutional discrimination within Germany for members of discriminated groups of migrants; a particular form of symbolic violence stems from the denial of a permanent permission of residence, which can lead to a life in absence of practically any right given that leaving the country is not an option.
- The effects of discrimination and the experience of violence in the countries of origin

The types of participants achieved can be positioned within the matrix.

For example, Type 1 refers to participants stemming from deprived households to the majority group of the society who could not complete an education during their youth, however, who might have been considerably successful in adult life, although their low level literacy remains a matter of individual concern. On the contrary, Type 2 refers to adults who are the offspring of well-off families from the majority group of the society, however, who become estranged from schooling, have done badly in school and thereby disappointed the high-flying expectations of their parents, who have done their best to delay the drop out of their children as long as possible.

To take another opposition, while one group of participants comprises of highly skilled migrants (Type 7) with a non-disputed right for residence, who are mainly struggling with learning German as a second language (being thereby no particular target group of adult basic education), another important subgroup (Type 5c) comprises of displayed persons, however, who are denied the refugee status, although their life histories are characterised by a series of traumatic experiences or their former lives by severe forms of repression, which has hampered all educational projects.

We are not going in all subtypes here, however, we would like to raise the point that the typology might capture well why a participant in need of adult basic education, however, it tells usurpingly little about the learning required, the learning difficulties encountered and the type of support required.

# Olympia's story: Italiensk for begyndere

(Italian for Beginners) (Denmark, 2000)



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For taking a fresh starting point, we suggest to fall back to an example from fiction, or more specifically, from the highly recommended tragic comedy *Italian for beginners*, a Danish movie first screened in the year 2000, directed by Lone Scherfig.

In the movie, we meet Olympia, in her late 30s, one of the story's main protagonists, taking part in an *Italian for Beginners* class.

# Olympia's story: Italiensk for begyndere

(Italian for Beginners) (Denmark, 2000)



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So what has Olympia brought into the quite empty class room of the local adult education center, as one of six participants?

No worries, we will spoiler too much. But let me recall some of the main reasons for Olympia's showing up in the class room at an early stage of the story.

Let's start with the trigger. Olympia lives with her father, depends economically on him, but also has taken care of him for some years already, as he is suffering from dementia. Moreover, he abuses his care giver and tries to control every aspect of her life. One day, she decides to take a leap of faith and leaves the house in the evening (so not for work). For her, this is a major act of self-empowerment. She selected the Italian course as the only social activity accessible to her.

Her choices were restricted for various reasons. She has heard that the "For beginners" lesson does not include any writing, as she could not write due to a learning disability and a handicap not addressed well, so that she would not be able to write down any notes. She can read, however, not write more than single words. Living as a functional analphabet her whole adult life, however, she relies on her memory and typically does not forget anything.

# Olympia's story

	Starting Point	Developmental tasks	Duration
Olympia's story 35+	Due to very low literacy skills and a mild disability (alcohol embryopathy ), Olympia (mid-30s) has only been able to take short-term jobs, works (alternately) in sales, suffers from her total social isolation and emotional abuse from her demented, dependent father who sustains her financially; longs for a love relationship but faces insurmountable obstacles	Gaining autonomy from her father, expanding her own social network; finding ways of acquiring skills that are not prohibited by the lack of written language competences.	Several months to several years
If Olympia was a participant in an adult basic education programme	Can only read single words, cannot take notes (has to memorise everything; training has led to a good memory); can only accept a learning framework in which she does not feel exposed because of her limited written language competences	Expanding strategies to deal with low literacy and lack of writing skills (including IT use); use of electronic media/internet via smartphone; use of a printer (to be able to send written messages); having something read aloud on the screen; building the ability to read simple texts; long-term and continuous participation in a further education programme.	Several levels of basic education (three or four levels – six months each)



To come back to our topic, it is clear that Olympia's needs and challenges are multifaceted.

- First of all, participating in a social group forms for the most valuable asset available in any type of adult learning not excluding her due to her low level of literacy. She does quite well within the group despite the fact that she is anxious of the reactions by others with regard to her disability.
- Second, she is not motivated by the distant opportunity of progressing on the educational ladder, but by the very outcome of each lesson, given their ,practical value for her day-to-day work.“
- Third, she has quite a specific profile of strengths and handicaps – for making progress in writing, she would need a tailored training and access to ,life hacks‘, so that she could communicate in written even prior to an improvement of her motoric abilities, which can be at best a long term development project. She would drop out certainly from any course not taking into account her needs, thereby repeating the situation in initial education, where she was found ,too impaired‘ for being worth the efforts of extensive support..



In reality, in the basic education classrooms, with large differences between locations and times – in Austria, for example, the year 2015 had changed the composition of adult basic education classes in many places in a significant way – include individuals with highly different reasons for being in class and challenges ahead, speaking of their individuals goals and the key barriers potentially undercutting significant progress.

# Content versus 'learning challenges' and-solution centred approaches

*Content centred  
perspective*

How to deliver – for the 'common participant'

e.g. the curriculum of lower secondary education  
adjusted to the needs of adult learners

Role (and competences) of the ABE  
teacher /professional

'learning challenges'  
and solution-centred approaches

How to allow participants to learn by responding to  
challenge/specific learning barriers

- Cognitive
- Psycho-social
- Situated/motivational



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So what are our conclusions drawn for the Bridging barriers projects.

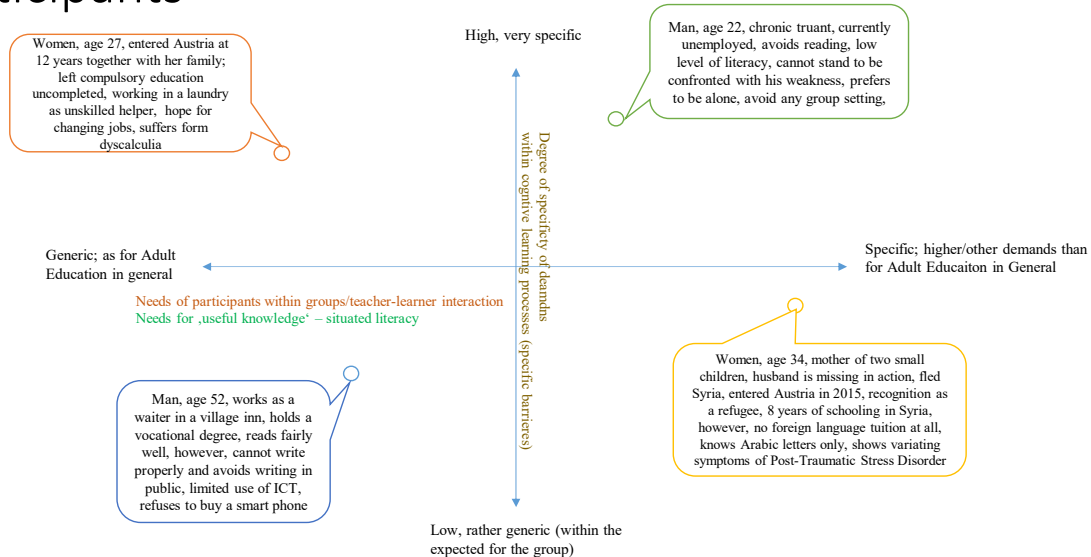
While the field of adult basic education can be approached by referencing to a 'common participant' who will receive educational support following a standard curriculum, for example, equivalent to parts of the curriculum of lower secondary education, although adapted to the needs and interests of adults, this might not capture the essence of Adult Basic Education in a fully satisfactory way.

Therefore, we focus on a 'close up' of specific learning challenges presented by the participants, and on the solutions imagined and applied by their teachers for bringing up change, so that over time learning can take place despite difficulties, which might have looked impenetrable at first sight.

It is also important to emphasize that learning needs and related challenges are not on a cognitive level alone, but can be equally present on a psycho-social level. Moreover, it is of key importance to secure the relevance of the learning achieved for the participants' current life and not to rely on at best vague significance of today's learning for a distant future.



# Mapping needs and learning demands of participants

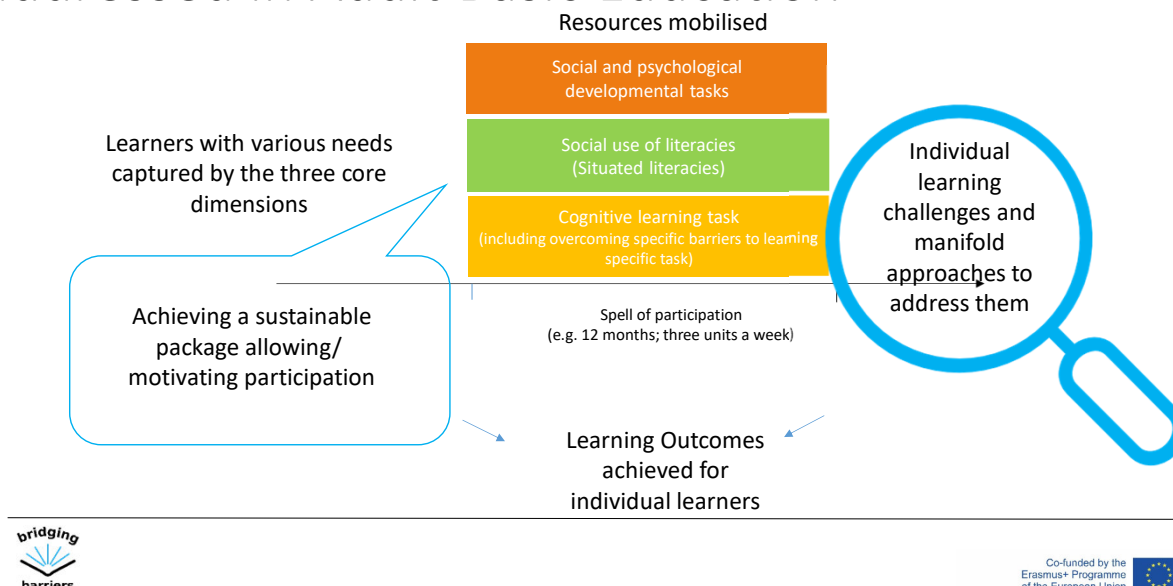


Participants in adult basic education can certainly be mapped according to their key learning needs and their key tasks and challenges, stemming from their current life situations.

Their needs can be roughly in line with what is anticipated for practically any participant in adult learning. However, in many cases, their requirements for participating in a course might be more specific and requiring a more tailored approach for allowing them successful participation.

Speaking of their learning needs in the content domains like literacy or numeracy, participants also differ with some participants profiting from a broad set of teaching provided, while others are in need of one-to-one highly tailored provision, so that they can hope to overcome learning barriers which have been blocking much of progress in the past.

# Typologies of challenges/tasks addressed in Adult Basic Education



We summarise our view on adult basic education in the following overview.

Learners enter Adult Basic Education courses, which may last considerably long and can have quite a high number of teaching units, with quite different needs and they might face quite different challenges or barriers in making progress.

For allowing them to stay with the course, the course needs on the one hand to guarantee a sustainable package, out of

- a framework responding to psycho-social needs of the participants, allowing them to stay with the course and to evolve by their participation, if required
- An appropriate way to make the learning of immediate use for the participants, so that their motivation can be sustained in in phases where they run into difficulties
- a framework providing appropriate tasks, sensitive to the fact, that even rather elementary tasks can include difficulties which cannot be overcome by participants without rather specific support.

Providing this package is already a demanding task, calling for a high level of professional competence on the side of the practitioners. However, for Adult Basic Education, even more is required.



Given that many participants face rather specific barriers potentially blocking their progress, adult educators need to be able to detect the difficulties, make up their mind what type of intervention might be helpful, suggest appropriate exercises to overcome the difficulties and see together with the participants whether the way of working around the difficulties has been successful. We suggest to understand this core element of professional practice within Adult Basic Education by the help of the concept of 'Deliberate Practice'. We will explain this concept in detail in a further short presentation.

Thank you very much for your interest. We hope that our presentation is useful. Good by.

## Further Reading

- Hefler, Günter, Steinheimer, Eva & Wulz, Janine (2018). Die Aufgaben der Basisbildung und die Kompetenzen der BasisbildnerInnen. In Silvia Göhring (Ed.): Die vergessene Hälfte - Erwachsenenbildung für Bildungsbenachteiligte in der Zusammenschau von Wissenschaft und Praxis - Isotopia 2018/96 (pp. 13-24). Graz: Isop Graz. - [Isotopia Bildungsbenachteiligung 2018 INNENTEIL\\_bearbeitet.indd \(isop.at\)](#)

Thank you for your attention!

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