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The Role that Adult Education can Play in Supporting Young Adults with Vulnerabilities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents research findings on the communicative practices of adult education (AE) providers and young learners in situations of vulnerability, from 40 AE cases in 20 countries. The research was undertaken as part of the EduMAP project (Horizon 2020, 2016-2019) and serves to highlight the importance of communication practices in activating the potential of adult education to cultivate active citizenship amongst young people at risk of social exclusion. We introduce the Communicative Ecologies and Assemblages (CEA) framework (Tacchi et al. 2019) which is designed to help analyse the role of communication in AE and identify matches and mismatches with the communication practices of young adults.

Built upon the two related concepts of communicative ecologies and communicative assemblages, the CEA framework can help to map current conditions and processes, to gather knowledge for an educational intervention, or to map progress and effects of a programme or intervention. We explore communication in two cases to illustrate some of our research findings, and to demonstrate the variety of communicative ecologies and assemblages that can be crafted by those experiencing vulnerability and precarity. Attending AE often leads to developing and pursuing goals and aspirations and engaging actively in society (e.g., Holford & Mleczko 2013; Jarvis 2012; Kersh et al 2021). Attention to information and communication helps identify both challenges and opportunities to improve outreach of adult education and engagement in AE for young people at risk of social exclusion.

KEYWORDS OR KEYWORD PHRASES

Active citizenship, adult education in Europe, communicative ecologies, EduMAP, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), special needs education (SNE).

1 Introduction

The connections between active citizenship, social inclusion and adult education are debated in the discourses of life-long learning (e.g., Jarvis 2008). Active citizenship and social inclusion are reciprocally interconnected; the link between social exclusion and lack of means for social, political and economic engagement is well-documented (Duffy 1995). Young adults often lack the multifaceted competencies associated with active citizenship and may therefore remain weakly tied to their communities (Brooks & Holford 2009; Henn et al 2005; Vromen 2003; de Weerd et al 2005). Living at risk of social exclusion is known to complicate young people's capacity building for active citizenship and participation in multiple ways (Kersh et al 2021). Less is known about their resources and capacities to access adult education while living in vulnerable situations under different societal conditions throughout Europe. Vulnerability has been defined as multidimensional concept employed alongside a range of connected, sometimes interchangeable, concepts, such as exclusion, discrimination and marginalisation – with conceptual boundaries not always being clear or explicit (Pitkänen 2017).

Understanding how people construct links between learning and societal action and how this is enhanced by adult education systems was the starting point of the EduMAP project - 'Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship' (2016-2019). EduMAP, drawing on the tenets of lifelong learning, acknowledged that the contexts where citizenship can be learned cover formal as well as informal learning processes at local, national and international levels and in all areas of social life: civil society, work, and people's private life spheres (Kalekin-Fishman et al 2007; Pitkänen 2017, 2). These meanings of AE apply to all age groups; however, the need to address cohort-specific potential of lifelong learning is obvious (in later life, Findsen & Formosa 2011), and understanding the role of AE in young adults' lives is still partial. The EduMAP research targeted AE and active citizenship from three perspectives – those of young learners and potential learners, AE providers, and people involved in AE related policy – asking, what policies and practices are needed in the field of AE to include young adults at risk of social exclusion in active participatory citizenship in Europe. To answer this question, it was important to consider information provision and access, as well as communication practices and flows of AE providers and learners. The main question of this chapter is therefore:

What are the communicative dimensions of adult education across its design, recruitment, delivery and follow up activities, and how well do the communicative practices of AE providers match the communicative practices of young adults as learners and potential learners?

The theoretical contribution to this volume is the Communicative Ecologies and Assemblages (CEA) framework as an analytical tool for the investigation of the communication practices and processes of AE providers and of young adults (Tacchi et al 2019). This approach sits within the field of research called communication for social change, which highlights aspects of citizenship, inclusion, dialogue, and social justice (Tacchi & Tufte 2020; Tufte 2017) in line with the understanding of the task of adult education in society (e.g., Clancy 2019).

We first present the CEA framework and describe how it combines two approaches to understanding communication – communicative ecologies and communicative assemblages. We show how the CEA framework was developed as an analytical tool to understand and compare the information and communication practices of AE providers and AE learners. We then detail the research design to illustrate the size and scope of the study and data collected. We share findings from two of our 20 countries to give a sense of the level of detail covered as well as to demonstrate the need for contextualising the findings. Finally, we discuss the key findings and conclude by considering how the CEA framework might be used to help AE to include young adults at risk of social exclusion in active participatory citizenship.

2. The CEA Framework

The CEA framework is rooted in the 'communicative ecologies' conceptual and methodological approach that we began our EduMAP research with (Slater et al 2002; Lennie & Tacchi 2013; Tacchi 2015). This approach was chosen since it demands that we pay attention to information and communication technology, structures, processes and practices *in context*. It is an approach that goes beyond narrow or simplistic conceptions of communication, to incorporate relationships, contexts and complexities through a holistic lens. A communicative ecology approach pays attention to "[T]he whole structure of communication and information flows in the people's ways of life, and the complete ensemble of (symbolic and material) resources for communication in a locality, and the social networks which organize and mediate them" (Slater 2013, p. 42).

We understand the communicative ecologies of young adults in situations of vulnerability to be made up of information and communication resources, media, networks, and content, which are consumed, produced and circulated for and/or by young adults to fulfil their information and communication needs towards social goals. The communicative ecologies of AE programmes, correspondingly, are made up of information and communication resources, media, networks, and content produced and circulated in order to engage with young learners and potential learners to achieve educational goals. A key reason for using the communicative ecology approach is to allow comparison of how AE providers understand and use communication and how well this relates to the communicative ecologies of the learners and potential learners, particularly those most marginalised, whose lives they want to change. The communicative practices of AE providers and learners were investigated across four phases of AE provision – programme design, student recruitment, programme delivery, and post course follow up.

The idea of 'ecology' implies a complex and interrelated array of processes, practices and resources. The communicative ecology approach also implies a shifting rather than fixed structure of communicative opportunities, barriers and practices. Mapping communicative ecologies from the perspectives of individuals, groups and organisations provides valuable insights into actors' ways of managing relationships and information flows, their access to media and communication technologies, media platforms, and information from a range of sources. The approach moves beyond simply noting what devices and platforms are used by these groups to obtain and circulate information, to look at how they are used and for what purposes. It seeks to understand which platforms and sources are trusted for various kinds of information. In effect, it seeks to understand how communication works within

complex lifeworlds that are quite different to our own and avoids any assumptions of universalities in how communication works across a range of different contexts.

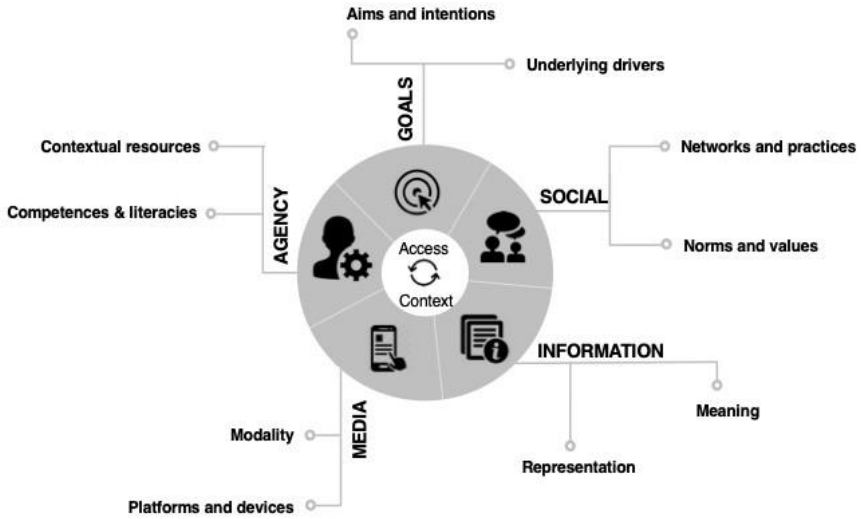
The methodological approach of mapping communicative ecologies incorporates socio-cultural and personal practices, processes, and everyday activities that embed information and communication processes. As our examples will demonstrate, it can encompass community/surrounding social context, suggest power relations, and indicate limitations and opportunities such as those implied by languages, diversity (gender, ethnicity etc.), literacy and so on. It points to wider contexts, for example, social structures and processes that affect the users/communities, government policies, infrastructures and institutions. Key data collection techniques typically include participant observation and field notes, in-depth interviews, group interviews or focus groups, and participatory techniques (see Tacchi 2015; Tacchi, Slater & Lewis 2003; Lennie & Tacchi 2013). Key questions to map and understand a local communicative ecology include:

- What kinds of communication and information activities do people carry out or wish to carry out?
- What communications resources are available to them - media content, technologies, and skills?
- How do they understand the way these resources can be used?
- Who do they communicate with, and why?
- How does a particular medium - like radio or Internet - fit into existing social networks? Does it expand those networks? How can a new project or initiative connect to its users' social networks? (Tacchi et al 2003.)

Our analysis was influenced by Slater's (2013) notion of communicative *assemblages* which is rooted in the Assemblage Theory developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988), and more recently by Manuel DeLanda (2006; 2016). Assemblages are the building blocks of natural and social life and are both a process and a product. They are composed by the interaction between component parts to form assemblages whose formation is fluid and contingent and often opportunistic. Assemblages are formed to perform particular purposes and in the case of social assemblages will be goal-driven. For the purposes of EduMAP, *communicative* assemblages describe the ways in which young adults (and AE providers) may pull together resources, networks and media differently for different goals and communication contexts. In time, these practices are embedded in routines, become established and often taken for granted as the usual ways of achieving particular communication goals. Diverse assemblages may then be created for specific communication goals, scenarios, or contexts of communication. For example, a young person may use the same resource such as social media very differently for different scenarios. It is important for AE providers to understand how information flows for various groups and which communication channels are most appropriate for different uses. Rather than assuming how social media is used, paying attention to communicative ecologies and assemblages provides contextualised understanding that can help AE providers reach learners more effectively.

Communicative ecologies and assemblages are interrelated. We can think of communicative ecologies as including communicative assemblages. Communicative ecologies make up a complex, dynamic, often messy repertoire of information and communication resources, agents and the networks, flows and processes that connect them. They encompass manifold established communication assemblages, each with their own goal and typical use contexts. Communicative assemblages are goal-driven, they stand for the way the same resources, networks and media are mobilised from within a communicative ecology, towards a specific objective, from professional communication goals (young person looking for a job) to ones embedded in one's daily routine (stopping to chat with a neighbour on the way home). In a nutshell, when mapping communicative ecologies, we speak about the availability of resources such as a mobile phone, Internet connectivity, or freedom to speak, and typical scenarios or contexts in which these are used. When, on the other hand, we describe communication assemblages, we look at these resources in use for a specific purpose: a young person using his mobile phone to call a friend, social media to publish a blog, and their freedom to speak (a resource in itself) in a peaceful protest.

Combining these approaches, we developed the Communicative Ecologies and Assemblages (CEA) analytical framework (Figure 1) to serve in the first instance as a framework for organising the analysis of a very large qualitative data set, and ultimately as a tool for adult education to connect more effectively with young adults in situations of vulnerability. It focuses on five key components that come into play when constructing communicative assemblages: Goals, Social, Information, Media and Agency. Cutting across these five components are access and context, drawing attention to the need, across each of the five components, to consider access and availability of communication resources as well as how use is framed according to different communication and social contexts.

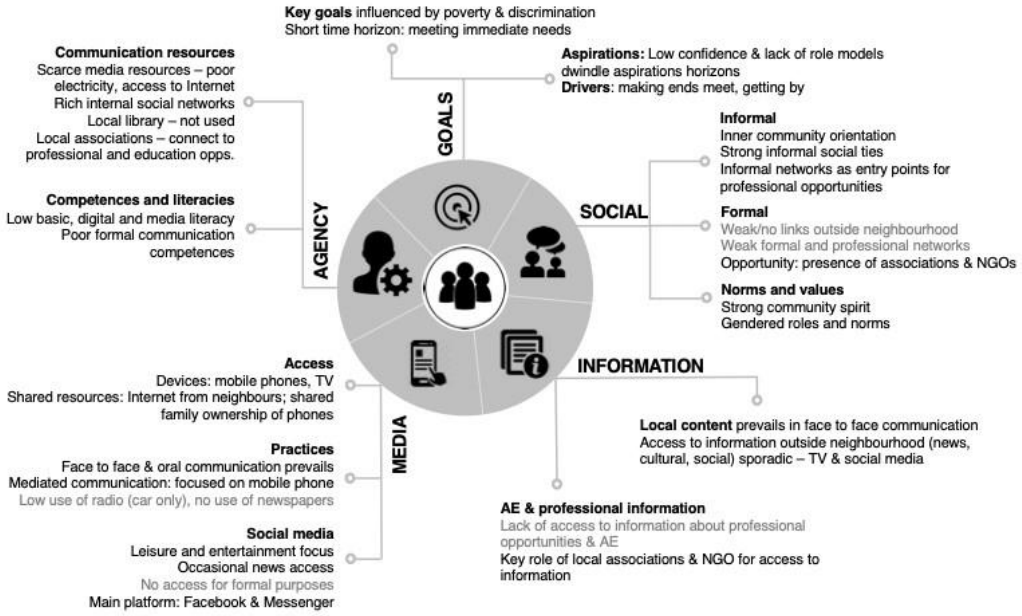


[Figure 1. Communicative Ecologies and Assemblages Analytical Framework]

Our research found that the five components in the framework capture key learnings for AE organisations about how to think about, analyse and develop effective communication with young people in situations of vulnerability (Tacchi et al 2019, 51-70):

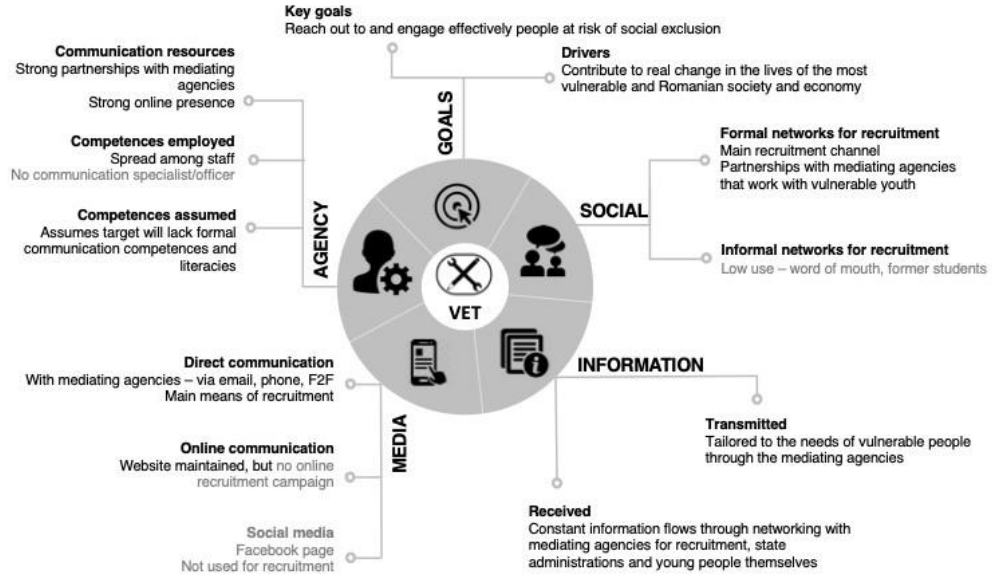
1. *The capacity to aspire and construct goals* refers to young people's capacity to formulate goals and act towards them by mobilising resources. Our data shows that young people in situations of risk and vulnerability are often unable to formulate and/or mobilise towards goals that may bring positive change.
2. *Social networks and hubs* play a crucial role in young people's lives and are sources of trusted information which can lead to the take up of professional and education opportunities. Our research shows that the social networks that hold value as information and communication hubs depend on familiarity and trust.
3. *Relevant content and information* are tied particularly to goals, the media used, and the social networks accessed. Our research shows how different goals involve accessing different types of information through diverse media, from face-to-face and oral communication to digital social media and that the networks accessed to facilitate certain communication flows and associated content.
4. *Media: Modalities and platforms* refers to the availability of various platforms for analogue and digital communication, ranging from face-to-face interactions, written media, radio and television receivers to computers and mobile phones and a reliable Internet connection. Our research examined both the media platforms and channels young adults accessed and how they mobilised media resources for formal and informal interactions.
5. *Agency*: *Contextual resources and literacies* is about connectivity and interactions distributed across a range of interrelated actors, from human agents to material tools. Our research shows the importance of considering both contextual resources (including material resources) and personal resources in the form of competences and literacies for young people to understand, access, produce and interpret information.

Figure 2 demonstrates how we might illustrate the communicative ecology of a particular group. This diagram draws on data from our Romanian research site (Sabiescu 2018).



[Figure 2. Communicative ecologies of young Roma in a disadvantaged Bucharest neighbourhood]

While the five components and the cross-cutting dimensions have been presented above in relation to young adults, Figure 3 illustrates their application to an AE programme demonstrating how communication is used in relation to recruiting learners. Since this programme is particularly interested in recruiting Roma students, we can usefully compare the programme's communicative assemblages mobilised for recruitment to the communicative ecology of young Roma in Figure 2.



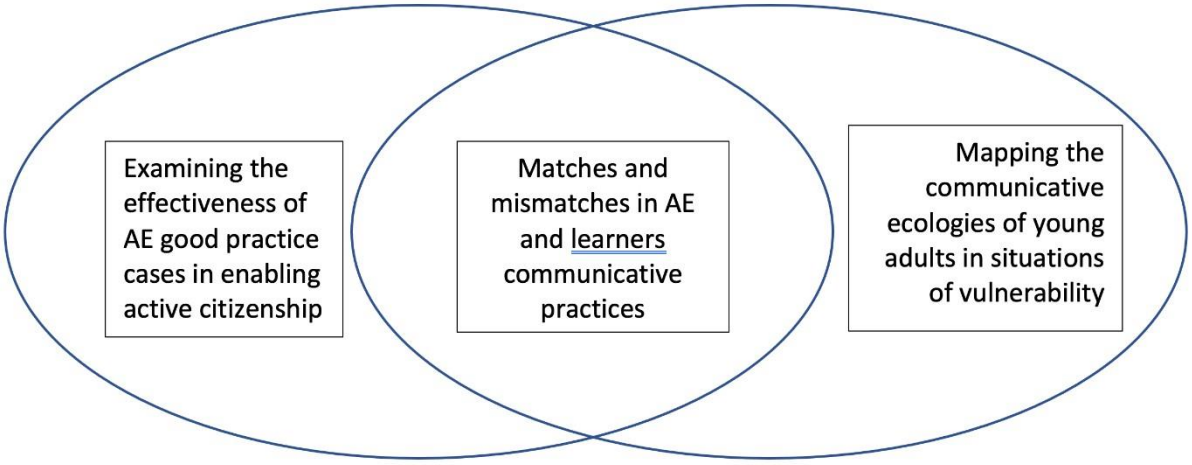
[Figure 3. Communicative assemblages mobilised by an AE organisation (VET programme for integration in the labour market, Romania) to recruit young people at risk of social exclusion]

3. Research Design

The EduMAP research covered all (pre-Brexit) 28 European Union countries and Turkey. The research team consisted of specialists in adult education, information and communication technologies, communication studies and other social sciences from seven partner countries. The EduMAP partners were Tampere University, Finland, Foredata LLC, Finland, Tallinn University, Estonia, DVV International, Germany, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, University of Szeged, Hungary, Loughborough University, UK, Social Sciences University of Ankara, Turkey, and University College London, UK. The project began with a literature review to compile an inventory of the effectiveness of adult education policies and practices in preventing social exclusion, particularly among young adults aged 16-30 years (Kersh & Toiviainen 2017). The review gave us objective perspective on the AE's role in tackling problems of social exclusion across societies and helped in formulating the selection criteria of case studies.

We selected our sample for empirical research, first, by deepening our understanding of the AE contexts of 20 countries through interviewing professionals involved in designing and running AE and social inclusion programmes and understanding what they considered constituted elements of good practice in AE programmes, and, secondly, by developing our criteria for and then selecting 40 AE 'good practice' cases. Other criteria for selecting our cases included: Type of programme (variety in terms of for example, second chance, basic skills, vocational and educational training); scale of programme (local, regional and national scale programmes); timing (some programmes were completed, some ongoing); and either explicit or implicit focus on one or more of the dimensions of active citizenship (Brooks & Holford 2008; Kalekin-Fishman & Pitkänen 2007). We also looked to include cases that covered a range of 'types' of vulnerability. Rather than a fixed property of an individual, we defined vulnerability as a situational limitation on people's choices and capabilities, which can be analysed in terms of limiting factors and conditions and is "complex, dynamic and context-dependent" (Pitkänen 2017, 3-4).

The empirical research was designed to address two overlapping (see figure 4) research objectives. One was to examine the effectiveness, achievements, and shortcomings of the AE initiatives identified as good practices, assessed according to their effectiveness in enabling vulnerable learners to participate in social, political and economic life. The other was to map and examine the varied communicative ecologies that exist in the field of adult education among the good practice cases and vulnerable groups in order to shed light on interconnections and mismatches between the supply side and use side of adult education and to offer an in-depth view of the information and communication contexts of vulnerable groups (https://projects.tuni.fi/edumap/category/publications/).



[Figure 4: Overlapping research objectives of the empirical research]

Our 40 cases were from Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the UK. Individual or focus group interviews were conducted with 482 young learners and 332 educational professionals (policy makers, tutors and mentors working with vulnerable young adults). Collecting data across 40 cases allowed us to draw conclusions about the role of AE in promoting active citizenship, and how we might usefully think about and use information and communication. In countries we had the best access to (Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Spain, UK and Turkey) we could undertake in-depth *communicative ecologies mapping* studies. The criteria of selective sampling were designed to cover groups of vulnerable young adults who may or may not have ever accessed AE, for whom AE programmes might be particularly beneficial (91 students). Data collection had a focus on young people's communicative practices in formal and informal networks, and their personal, educational and professional aspirations. We present some of the overarching findings related to communication below, but first it is important to give a sense of the particular by providing a greater level of detail on two of the cases. The details of all 40 Good Practice cases are accessible through EduMAP website (EduMAP).

From the UK we explore an English as second language (ESOL) programme for migrants along with the communicative ecology mapping which was undertaken with 20 migrant women learning English through this programme (Huegler et al 2018). In Finland, we explore the communicative ecologies of 8 young adults with special needs who were engaging with a vocational special college belonging to the state-funded vocational special needs education and training (SNE; Hyytiä et al 2018). Participation of the informants from each study group was voluntary.

4. UK: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

The ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programme in an Adult Education College in London (England) provides English-language skills for non-native speakers, specifically targeting those newly arrived in the UK, such as refugees and migrants. A set of strategies to reach out to those who would benefit from undertaking ESOL classes, have been developed and continuously refined.

It has been recognised by the various stakeholders (e.g., college practitioners) that young adults belonging to this target group may have very limited language/communication skills, and therefore, written and verbal information in English may fail to reach them. In addition, adults, newly arrived in the UK, such as refugees and migrants, may live in segregated and often isolated, environments, and therefore, there is very little communication outside of their immediate settings. These challenges have been specifically cited in relation to reaching out to young females who often stay at home to look after their children or elderly members of their communities/families.

For this specific target group, ensuring effective communication with potential learners, not only during their courses (design and delivery) but also before they start their courses (recruitment) has been associated with specific approaches such as including translated information leaflets into the native languages of the target groups; collaborating with local institutions/centres (e.g. health centres, kindergartens) and reaching out through more informal community spaces, such as playgrounds, local shops, cafes. In addition, current learners have been encouraged to communicate relevant information about available courses within their communities and families (which has been referred to as word of mouth**).** The flow of communication prior to the course is, therefore, taking place through a range of channels including both formal and informal. A further flow of communication takes place in the college through various information and career orientation events – such as open days, assessments, interviews, or social events.

The approach to both course design and delivery, aims to ensure that the development of the patterns of communication between AE practitioners and young adults is a co-constructive process that involves the joint effort and initiative of various stakeholders both within and beyond the college. This pattern of communication from 'contact with tutors' to 'contact with wider college structures' co-exists with another pattern that involves communication and networking between the learners.

4.1. Communicative ecologies: resources and networks

Our interviews with ESOL learners have indicated that the resources and networks they are drawing on are linked with their key needs, requirements and goals. Navigating day to day life, getting familiar with some local customs and traditions (way of life), as well language learning have all been cited as important personal goals.

4.1.1. Information and news

Digital media was referred to as one way to learn about 'what happens around – news'. Our respondents have noted that access to news happens through digital and social **media**, for example through news apps on smartphones, or by following friends on social media who share news that might be particularly interesting or relevant to the women. In addition, global news programmes in various languages through satellite or digital TV have also been cited as **information** sources. Some of the women have emphasised that watching the news can support both English language learning and acculturation processes in the UK, as well as providing an important ongoing link to language, culture and news from their countries of origin:

> *Student 1: I have TV. Because I have two TV. I put TV in English and TV in Arabic in the room, our programme.*
> *Student 2: The same. English for my children and another one for my family, and we watch what's happening in Arabic.*

Using subtitles on television is mentioned as a useful feature in this context. In addition, listening (not just watching) has been mentioned as another way to learn about their communities, society and the world. Some of our respondents referred to radio as a source of information and news, especially 'listening while doing their housework' or undertaking caring responsibilities. Some use the audio part of the TV as a form of radio, while carrying out a number of duties around their households. In addition, watching (or listening to) children's programmes with their children can also provide opportunities for the women to improve their language skills.

Newspapers were cited as another information source '*about things of the world'*. The availability and convenience of 'getting hold of newspapers' was considered an important factor or motivation to read them. Specifically, the free papers available at public transport stations were mentioned. For some respondents, who are still developing their language skills, reading headlines was referred to as a starting point. Written information (newspapers, local noticeboards etc.) was further noted as relevant at the local level – for example, finding out about community news and events, offers, notices about repairs being done in communal buildings, secondhand goods, job offers, etc.

4.1.2. Social networks and interaction

Using social media was discussed as related to both accessing information in day-to-day life and communicating with friends and family (in the UK, but even more so, abroad). Most common social media applications were used as a means of communication on a day-to-day basis. It was noted that using social media is helpful to both find new friends and to stay in touch with existing contacts and family members abroad. Our interviews indicated some personal differences and preferences in terms of how these media are used. Some respondents, for example, expressed some concerns about the privacy of platforms.

> *I don't use the [social media platform] for say for example if I fight with my husband [that] I need to leave a message for all people (Student 3).*

Digital chat spaces were considered by some as a more private way of communication, used via smart phones, for both **networking** and information sharing. Platforms also provide cheaper alternatives to long-distance calls abroad than the use of a phone.

Some respondents expressed their strong preference for face-to-face, 'real life' contacts and networking. Our interviews indicated, that in day-to-day communication at the local level, many women prefer face to face interactions over other communication channels:

> *For me always I try to be social with people, contact directly. Because I don't like social media. I contact directly. I'm a sociable woman. (Student 1)*

Some stressed that they enjoy communicating with a variety of people, including those with different accents (both from within and outside of the UK), with the aim of improving their communicative abilities and social networks in their new environments. In this sense, informal communication contexts provide good opportunities for developing their networks and contacts.

4.2. Communicative assemblages: mobilising resources

4.2.1. Exercising agency through improved language and communication skills

Our data suggest that mobilising and drawing on various resources and networks contributes to young adults' confidence and improves their life chances. With this particular target group (migrants and refugees), a common theme is that the women's increasing fluency and confidence in English language generates a sense of empowerment and confidence, thus allowing them to exercise their **agency** within various contexts and settings.

For example, their engagement with digital media, such as watching or listening to the news in English was considered not just as a means to accessing information, but also as a way to achieve their learning **goals** associated with acquiring and/or improving their language skills and broadening their vocabulary. In this context, our respondents have commented on some overlaps and blurred boundaries between their adult education **goals** and needs and their day-to-day information practices.

With regards to communication experiences in formal contexts, one respondent contrasts the experience of trying to communicate with a doctor through an interpreter, with eventually trying to speak with the doctor directly, employing her developing language skills. This contributes to both the development of their communication skills and confidence and capacity to interact:

> *Because one day someone in the [doctor's surgery reception] desk called for translator, and then when it was my time for my appointment we go in there and she ask questions, if I go to translator of course I can't speak myself, yes, but when I say to him for say things I needed, no, to the doctor, he couldn't. […] And then when he [the translator] left she [the doctor] told me 'don't bring more translator because you can, you can talk by yourself' [so] she's pushed me and then give me courage for started to improve my English. (Student 4)*

Other women provide similar narratives, explaining how they used to depend on others (e.g., relatives and sometimes children) to be able to communicate, for example, with doctors, teachers or shop assistants. This has been often associated with feelings of shame and frustration related to not being able to express themselves, to make themselves understandable. Being able to communicate has been described as an extremely motivating and exciting experience. This was often considered a first step in developing communicative practices, including making new friends and engaging in new social networks.

4.2.2. Impact of increased digital literacy

Our data highlight interrelations between improved language and communication skills and digital literacy. Being able to read and understand information on the internet was cited as an important

developmental opportunity, contributing to their social inclusion. Some respondents have further reflected on the ways their information access practices have been positively influenced by increased digital literacy, which, for some of them have also been associated with a sense of belonging and acculturation within their new country contexts:

> *….when we come to England we start to learn, we start to use it, even our debit card, banks, all the things, it's really developed. And we start to go in. And now, what we said, [Arabic phrase] We are fine, we feel that we are more English people than Arabic. (Student 1)*

Overall, for seeking information (including about learning/adult education opportunities), the internet has been noted as an important tool for many. This is accessed, above all, through smart phones and can provide quick access to key information in some contexts:

> *…my son was sick last week and I wanted to go to the doctor […] and was high temperature, but I check on my phone [for the symptoms] […] and then they explained what they are going to do with him, what they are happy. And they do help us, OK, I send for the doctor. It's good for using phone […] In England, in this country, when you understand it's easy, life is easy. (Student 5)*

Employing digital skills and using social media have been noted as one way to develop and enhance interaction and communication. Our respondents have noted that engaging with groups of social media has also contributed to perceiving themselves as socially included into various communities. Most women have described these groups as platforms they would use mostly for personal networks and sharing information, rather than for job opportunities:

> *…it's mainly for friends I think, it's not just a bit… sometimes she knows something, she knows and she puts it on her Facebook. And I see that and if I think 'oh this is interesting' I watch it.*

Some women also talked about the benefits of using written communication through digital media in formal contexts. For example, sending emails or text messages to reach professionals who are less accessible on the phone, such as doctors.

4.2.3. Accessing information about adult education

The personal **goals** that our respondents referred to were most commonly related to enhancing life chance through adult education. The role of information and communication has often been cited as important in terms of finding out about adult education opportunities. Our data suggest that a range of methods and media they use to access information about adult education is similar to how they access information in both formal and informal contexts more generally.

Overall, information access patterns depend on various factors: social networks, English language communication skills and levels of digital literacy. These aspects are something the respondents described as having been enhanced through their participation in ESOL classes in the context of adult education.

5. Finland: Vocational special needs education and training (SNE)

Vocational special needs education and training (SNE) is aimed at students who need special support with their studies and subsequent placement due to learning difficulties, injuries, illnesses, or other reasons. Students receive individual guidance with their studies and daily living. (Ameo website; Ryökkynen et al 2021.) Finnish SNE is organised in six vocational special education institutions, general VET institutions, folk high schools, adult education and training institutions throughout the country, and as apprenticeship training. SNE colleges offer programmes for upper secondary vocational qualifications and preparatory education for upper secondary vocational studies, preparatory education for work and independent living and as well vocational adult education and training and pre-vocational preparatory education for immigrants. The programme in question is arranged by a non-profit organisation in collaboration with a special education institution.

The students interviewed were Finnish by nationality or had a dual citizenship, they had completed comprehensive school, two of them had also completed vocational studies. The respondents differed in age, civil status and professional background. All required special support in education, which was the reason for joining this college. Many of them shared a history of dropping out of school and generally having not managed well in traditional school settings. The vocational special college often seemed to work as a last resort for the students, implying that the motivation was not necessarily a desire or interest to aim for the particular education or vocation selected.

A teacher explained that the programme has application periods throughout the year and the college advertises actively on social media, yet the youth either did not find the information or were incapable of handling the application process. As a student summed up, *"it's difficult to find some kind of school when you can't attend a normal school"*, which reflected the challenges many of the students with special needs encounter compared to those proceeding along a regular educational path (Hyytiä et al 2018).

5.1. Communicative ecologies: resources and networks

Eight Finnish students, six male and two female students (age 20-28 years) with special support needs in vocational education were accessed through two group interviews. They studied in a vocational special education institution aiming at a vocational upper secondary qualification in property maintenance and in the hotel, restaurant and catering sectors. One of the teachers provided complementary information.

5.1.1. Information and news

All students were well equipped with smart phones, computers, laptops and iPads. The phones were primarily used for keeping in touch with family and friends through phone calls and communicating

over various platforms of social **media**, as well as reading newspapers and magazines and searching for **information**. The majority of the students used media services and platforms to watch TV, listen to music and for watching videos on interesting topics. The use of email was not emphasized.

The students reported that they read news online but overall, they did not find following the news very interesting. News were occasionally heard while in a car or using social media. *"I hardly ever watch the news. Only if I see something on [social media platform] or people are talking about it a lot, then maybe I hear about it. I don't say 'I'm going to watch the news'. I don't watch them."*

5.1.2. Social networks and interaction

Students did not keep much contact with their co-students in their spare time. Most of the student groups in the college had free messaging applications in use, but the intensity of use varied both by teachers and students.

On several occasions the students referred to the internet stating that *"everything is there"* but for the most part the important information, be it formal or informal, was gained from a person, a family member, teacher, or a friend in their trusted **social networks**. This indicates that we need to pay attention not just to young adults' communicative ecologies and the devices and communicative resources available to them, but also to the communicative assemblages they form in practice to achieve particular communicative **goals**. .

5.2. Communicative assemblages: mobilising resources

5.2.1. Accessing information about adult education

The most common path to the vocational special education college was the job centre guiding the young adult to a work trial. This work period is aimed at persons who want to clarify their vocational and career options or wish to use it as a means of returning to the labour market. The vocational college is well-presented on the internet and social media including blogs, website, and most common applications. However, this was not brought up by the respondents; some of the students were unsure whether the college even had a website. The teacher listed the instances that generally guide the students to the college: job centre, social and health services for the youth, rehabilitative work experience, other colleges and outreach youth work. Information on adult education flows through word-of-mouth and face-to-face-communication, emphasising the importance of mediating agencies and social networks rather than searching for information online.

5.2.2. Information and communication in formal or professional contexts

The students had varied experiences of interacting with service providers such as the job centre and the Social Insurance Institution and they mostly used web services to handle formal matters. While smartphone was the primary tool, some respondents preferred filling in applications on the computer screen. Regarding job seeking and career prospects, some of the informants referred to the offering of job possibilities "on the internet" but did not further describe their experiences in job seeking. Personal connections and proving oneself on the job during practical trainings were seen as effective way of finding jobs. The interviewees' descriptions of communication channels used in work life and

the needed ICT skills were quite disconnected; they seemed to have some difficulties applying these skills to reach the goals of general professional competences.

Almost all youth preferred virtual interaction with officials. However, many of them had experienced technical or accessibility difficulties, and obstacles stemming from the lack of communication among service providers. The teacher pointed out that work experience increases feelings of inclusion and **agency**. Many students have difficulties in understanding the correct language usage in different formal situations. According to the teacher the practical work experience increases the students' understanding of the importance of communications skills and needs. Again, the meaning of work is crucial for the agency of the young students having special educational needs.

5.2.3. Narrow usage of information and communication resources

While the students of the vocational special education owned multiple devices and knew how to use different digital media channels, their ways of gathering information still seemed random – often they were uncertain of where to even begin to search for information. Many of them leaned on friends, relatives, educators or other service providers for necessary information when needed.

The students' limited agency and their narrow use of information sources and lack of information retrieval skills restricts the independent mobilization of communication resources. Even when the participants expressed knowledge of different information sources and channels ("everything is on the internet") in practice they were dependent on their social relations with friends, relatives, teachers or service providers.

> *Interviewer: If you wanted to go study somewhere else, where would you begin to look for or who would you ask?*
> *Student 1: Teacher.*
> *Student 2: Google.*
> *Interviewer: Google, teachers. What about you?*
> *Student 3: I don't know.*
> *Student 4: [Social Insurance Institution], I don't know. Someone who knows.*
> *Student 1: Mom. [general laughter]*

Many of the students in the vocational special education institution opposed the use of ICT-based media in teaching. These students need special help with their studies, which requires face-to-face communication for most of the time. The students reported that social interaction and communication with the school was sufficient and that the teachers and other staff were easy to reach. The teachers sent messages to the students regarding their attendance: *"Are you coming to school?"*

6. Overarching findings and conclusions

The five components of the CEA framework capture the overall findings of the communicative aspects of EduMAP. Those five components are goals, social networks, information, media and agency. We can start by considering the goals that cause young adults to mobilise communication assemblages. These goals determine different assemblages young adults craft from the resources at hand.

In some cases, we can see clear long-term aspirations, interests and ambitions but often, goals can be seen in terms of immediate communication intentions and objectives. The young adults from Finland, like many of the young people involved in EduMAP found it difficult to articulate their aspirations, ambitions and concrete plans for the future, especially in their professional lives. This absence of long-term aspirations and professional plans suggest they are less likely to know what education track they could pursue and where to go to get relevant information. We found that often it was a lack of confidence that held young adults back from setting goals, and as in the UK case above, it is often initial and practical goals such as language learning or digital skills, that provide a sense of confidence to move on to another and perhaps more aspirational goal.

Social networks are incredibly important in the lives of young adults, especially if they are trying to achieve personal or professional goals. Social networks can be thought about as information gateways that are trusted. The Finnish example shows how young adults consider that the internet is full of information, but when asked where they would go to find specific information regarding their future, they trust their family or people they already know such as teachers. Social networks might be made up of friends and family but might also consist of trustworthy acquaintances from community organisations or centres. Across our research cases, some young adults experienced rich social networks, while others depended on just a few contacts. The value of social networks as support structures becomes most apparent when they are missing. The UK migrant women, like other migrant groups we talked to in Germany and Turkey, experience feelings of loss and isolation which can cut them off from important information or social opportunities. However, even in exile, a cohesive community or group can be formed, which is important since informal everyday communication can be where information sourced through other means is shared. Many of the UK migrant women use personal contacts as sources for information, including when it comes to finding out about education and job opportunities.

When it comes to accessing information, the use of digital and social media for personal browsing and entertainment is not an indication that these are also used for accessing information about AE or job opportunities. We found different patterns of media use for informal vs formal (including AE) information access. Some migrant women in UK report using social media regularly, yet they do not typically use it for accessing information about AE, or at least not unless they are following a lead received from a trusted contact. As we saw with the Finnish example, a drawback with the Internet is that young people do not know where to look, so they first need to talk to someone they know. There are however exceptions, many of the Syrian refugees interviewed in Turkey for example use social media for professional and education purposes. We conclude that the best way for AE information to reach out to young people is through blended channels that merge direct information provided through contacts, organisational intermediaries and social networks, with information provided through a variety of digital and social media channels depending on the communicative ecologies at play.

While we can identify some common features in media use, for example, the popularity of mobile phones and social media across our cases, very different patterns of access and use were identified. The most well-connected young adults were in Finland, where all the young people with special needs interviewed have access to digital media – personal smart phone, computer, laptop, iPad- in accordance with the high connectivity rates of the Finnish population. The least well connected were a group

of homeless people in Thessaloniki, who could not afford their own phones, and Romanian Roma, who tend to share mobile devices with their families. Our case from the UK stood out in terms of the range of the media platforms used. Television, radio, and free print media were all consumed, as discussed above. The media assemblages of the migrant women included appropriating traditional media features for their own purposes in creative ways: for example, using the audio part of TV as a form of radio. Much of their consumption of broadcast media was to improve their English skills. When it comes to social media, WhatsApp is the most used and preferred application across our complete sample, followed by Facebook and YouTube and, to a lesser extent, Instagram. These apps are mainly used for informal social communication and leisure and entertainment, and formal communication rarely occurs through social media.

In terms of agency, the extent to which young people mobilise communication and information resources depends on individual resources - basic, digital and information competences and literacies- and contextual resources - such as availability of media devices, connectivity, infrastructures and material conditions in which communication takes place. Thus, interviewees' agency to communicate and access information can be understood as being distributed among the various devices, platforms, channels and other human and non-human actors involved in a given communicative process. This was illustrated above in the UK and Finnish cases. We saw very different examples of agency. Our research suggests a distributed view of agency is appropriate when considering young adults in vulnerable situations. This means that we consider the individual or group agency of young adults not only in relation to their immediate access to resources, but also how these are distributed and nestled in other processes and social and support networks. One of the most important findings in this study is the distinction between everyday life and formal or professional communication and whether young adults have competences to assemble different information and communication practices for both.

The design and delivery of relevant AE programmes to meet the needs of young adults at risk of social exclusion relies on the use of information and communication that is accessible, representative, relevant, and regularly updated. The EduMAP cases offer diverse strategies to this end, but overall and given the nature of shifting communicative ecologies and emergent communicative assemblages, a key learning is that there is a need to pay attention to social and communicative contexts. The CEA framework offers an analytical tool that draws attention to the five main components that are important to consider when looking to match the communicative practices of AE provision across programme design, recruitment, delivery and post-delivery follow up, with the communicative practices of young adults.

Cross-References

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Changing Concepts and Tools for Realizing Lifelong Learning Strategies (Olesen, H.)
Lifelong Learning: A Perspective on EU Policy (Holford, J., Milana, M.)
Community-based Lifelong Learning and Adult Education (Kim, J., Lee, R.)

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