

FRANCE

*Note on learning and innovative professional communities
in the French Education System, developed through the social network
RESPIRE (BREATHE)*

Prepared by

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1. Aims



The aim of the website is to create the best conditions for educators to share their knowledge and practice, their problems and resources, and to strengthen their professionalism. It enhances also collegiality and

solidarity between distant schools at national level. How to articulate social and professional experiences which are often loose-coupled in the French education system because of a disarticulation between disciplines and of innovation not sufficiently disseminated? Three factors gave life to something which was yet invisible:

1) Distributed social practices and digital uses of social networks: since 5 years, teachers have created networks according to school subjects, professional interests, primary or secondary education. A lot of interactions have been relayed by twitter and they include sometimes students. The exchange of knowledge is not codified and this type of resource provides a great flexibility whereas freedom, interactivity, free access and open source are the constituents of new digital technology.

While a software infrastructure already existed, it was too heavy and not sufficiently adjusted to professional needs. RESPIRE combines a design and management by the Ministry's department of R&D and a technological support by a knowledge center (Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique, Versailles). It is taking over the **“ego-network” approach** in the organization of the information and social public networks. “My information”, “My documents”, “My discussions and share”, “My working groups”, “My contacts” are the components by which each professional can work on the website (after a registration with a professional e-mail address like @ac-academie.fr ou @education.gouv.fr). Each one can complete a profile and create his/her own groups, to define their extent and criteria of inclusion, and share with other people and invite them.

2) A strategy for change: In a context of school restructuring and education reforms, of evolutions of curricula and the teaching profession, it is important to provide professionals with a supportive environment and a new sense of professionalism. The RESPIRE national network has been designed to support the fluidity of professional relationships without too much control. It includes a building capacity to enrich the information and to facilitate exchanges of problems and solutions among peers. The consensus is replacing formal rules and procedures while the professional group is homogeneous: people exchange on the same issue and they share knowledge and practices in a climate of trust. RESPIRE, as a social network of innovation belongs to the national strategy of innovation and it completes the knowledge bank of innovation: *Expérithèque* (more than 2500 innovations already compiled and updated. (<http://eduscol.education.fr/experitheque>)). It is supported by a national network of school development partners who are sustaining the initiatives, supporting teaching teams, and implementing a national program of professional development based on self-evaluation.

3) To participate to a “community of practices”: RESPIRE facilitates the development of ‘community of practices’ and “professional learning communities” through the provision of a new social mediation of knowledge between practitioners through which knowledge and experiences, experiments and initiatives, projects and best practices are shared and disseminated. It gives to professional groups a sense of ownership and helps them to structure their social and cultural capital for innovation and to improve the effectiveness of the school organization at local level.

2. Leadership and Partners

RESPIRE is a concept designed by the DRDIE (Département Direction Recherche Innovation Expérimentation) of the DGESCO (Directorate of Schools, head of the project: François Muller), with a technological support and development by the team of the Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique (Knowledge center: developer, Marc Février) which already had an exchange and work platform for the executives of this regional district. RESPIRE was opened on the 5th of January 2012.

The DRDIE was able to enhance its strategy and its concepts about innovative networks through a sustainable collaboration with Romuald Normand, Associate Professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon (French Institute of Education). Through this cooperation, we were able to participate to the European network on School Leadership (EPNoSL) led by the FORTH Foundation (Greece) and we have created a professional group on the website RESPIRE after the first national conference on school leadership organized in Lyon with EPNoSL and our National College of School Administration (Ecole Supérieure de l'Education Nationale) in 2012.

3. Strategies and activities

RESPIRE can be described through 4 principles embedded in the interface, exchanges and contributions involving 5000 interconnected persons:

- **Informality:** the expression is free and explicit, without any level of validation required; different supports as forum, blog, pages allow people to interact quickly and effectively, and to propose sustainable and relevant contents. The capitalization is essential, everyone can find guidelines and FAQs, references and papers on the website. The communication is direct and fluid: it is functional and serves to support more institutional and formal initiatives.
- **Personalization:** each contributor is identified and navigates according to his/her own interests and questions. Interactions are focused and shared at the same time.
- **Open source:** knowledge is easily shared, or delimited according to the desired level of publicity. It can feed different and separated groups (according to their background, belonging, geography). The technological development is free.
- **Cooperation:** each group whether it is focused on project, exchange, training, or management can share questions and answers, resources and documents; the rationale is transversal and collaborative and not top-down. The group is self-enhancing its capital and acquire a new legitimacy and professionalism.

4. Context

In the world of education and training in France, networks are not new. There are already networks of friends, networks of institutions (partnerships between education, police and justice), networks of resources (editorial network SCEREN, Education Action Zones' networks led by the centre Alain Savary), networks of experts, etc. These networks are more or less functional, more or less supported by digital technologies.

The initiative came from a particular context: since the 2005 School Act, the Ministry wanted to implement a "right to experiment" for local teams, to lead to the school improvement needed by the implementation of reforms (for example, the Basic Skills Framework, the fight against drop-outs, etc.). Some local services were designed to support innovation and to develop networks in regional districts with different features and effectiveness (the CARDIE or Regional Centers for Research, Development, Innovations and Experiments). The successive reports written by the General Inspectorate or the High Council of Education insisted on the relative value of these innovations and the lack of relevant data.

The RESPIRE network is born from these statements: it is inspired by several types of networks and cannot be reduced to one: it comes to serve as a social network in education with a strong institutional support. RESPIRE is "a network for professional exchanges in innovation, research, and experiment" (<http://respire-education.fr>) and it allows to make visible and accessible an emergent national and professional learning community and knowledge about the main challenges of the French education system.

5. Resources

The design, development and maintenance of the social network RESPIRE is made by the technical team of the CRDP (Regional Knowledge Centre) in Versailles: a grant is allowed by the DGESCO (Directorate of Schools) for an amount of 40 000 Euros.

6. Development over Time

RESPIRE was interesting for teams who did not sometimes participate into the innovative programs proposed by the CARDIE (Knowledge Centers for Research, Development and Innovations). It fitted to their needs. Teaching teams were using the network to exchange on diverse topics as guidance, road security, special needs education, ICTs, etc. So, they were able to make their projects more knowledgeable and propose to other professional groups to meet and to join in a different way. Other professionals groups were designed by people who wanted to develop cooperation in their schools on drop-outs and guidance, classrooms without marks, etc. They wanted to exchange about their reflections, practices, different tricks on pedagogy. Each group belongs to a professional learning community or community of practices, open or close, in order to work beyond the borders of the schools and regional districts. RESPIRE is evolving and shows more and more co-buildings of projects and partnerships. The challenge is to implement them effectively in schools and particularly to manage them as sustainable projects. If there is no management

and local governance of these projects, they do not provide any gain in the achievement of students. The development of intermediary functions (or leadership functions) is particularly at stake in the French education context as the way to develop more effective professional development programs to sustain collective cooperation and share of knowledge between professional groups.

7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

National extent: the second national conference on innovation in March 2012 at the UNESCO was devoted to the multiple dimensions of the learning organization in schools and it serves to mobilize people and to disseminate information about the network. The call to attend the conference was launched from the platform RESPIRE to facilitate inscriptions and interactions among people. In 4 weeks, more than 450 proposals (from innovative projects) were submitted, and the call was relayed by other active networks (institutional networks, mailing lists, but also Facebook and Twitter). It was 4 times more than the previous year. The operation has been repeated in October 2012 and February 2013 and a similar score was reached, with a progression in the quality of proposals. In a few months, teams learnt to communicate the value of their action.

Evidence from the tracking of networking activities. In 18 months of development, a professional life has emerged from multi-functional space: contributions through resources, interactions from published pieces of work, shared tools, exchanges on learning. Some data proved the extent of the activity: 43% of people come regularly back after a first access. The average time of visits on the website is beyond 7 minutes. The behavior of users demonstrates a strong interest while other websites face a more limited surfing (less than 2 minutes). The activity can also be daily measured: more than 50% of the activity is recorded between 4 PM and 1 AM the next day. Professional learning on the website is continuous.

Practitioners have discovered a friendly and social environment as they have never known before in the institutional context. Currently, more than 5000 registrations have been made. More than 450 professional groups are working according to different ways of learning and a great variety in topics. Their differences can be explained by the level of involvement and expectations of people according to their learning needs and organizational constraints. In allowing professionals to share their knowledge and skills, their experiences and projects, the website gives them the opportunity to build individually or collectively their professional development, to develop peer learning activities, and to extend their information to better regulate their actions at local level.

Openness, configuration of the group, level of support, there are various arrangements and choices according to the optimal size chosen by leaders to develop these activities. The analysis of uses shows several trends:

- **Groups to share resources:** they search for the extent of their knowledge and a « critical mass » of readers and potential contributors to develop their group. They are open at national level. Digital resources (video, examples of best practices) are created to be sustainable and they constitute an appreciated bank of data for some topics (for example: personalized learning in the high school)
- **Groups to exchange practices:** they develop dialogue, professional debate, proposals and share their experiences and practices

- **Groups to train at distance:** they are more limited in size and provide “private” spaces to share knowledge and skills for professional development
- **Groups to manage local or national projects:** they are more limited in their extent but the commitment of people is stronger. Their aim is to transform schools or networks of schools (groups around the basic skills framework in Toulon, groups of Regional Centers of Research, Development and Innovations)

8. Success Factors

It is quite easy, with a professional e-mail, to go on the website and to create an account (with login and password). Each one can create a professional profile according to his/her interests. We know that, with social networks, it is important to build some links and collaboration with peers in order to increase personal knowledge and skills. Each teacher can search for colleagues in the same school subject or for some specific professional groups to join. The choice had been made to display the professional identity of members in order to reinforce the professional dimension of the network and to serve the needs of a large professional and national learning community.

The website allows gathering the contents of professional groups, their materials for learning, the videos, conferences, round-tables. The production of knowledge is facilitated by its circulation and mediation among other groups of users. The different internal functions of the network (chat, blog, homepages, etc.) create opportunities to share knowledge among contributors but also with external networks through Facebook, Twitter and Google+.

The management of the network is at stake: the only technological medium cannot be sufficient by itself: it is necessary to support and to sustain the activities, to initiate flows of exchanges and contributions and, at the same time, to disseminate knowledge towards other professional groups, networks and communities. The supervision and provision of the network is a daily activity. The originality of contents, the up-to-date information and the convergence of initiatives are some important gains to reinforce the development of professional learning communities.

9. Tensions and impediments

The website RESPIRE is inspired by the model of “ego-networks” developed by other public networks but a collaborative dimension had been added which is not in Facebook where exchanges are only based on information. RESPIRE is a mix between different plat-forms: collaborative work plat-forms on one side, social networks on the other side. With the development of social networks, what appeared at first odd for the educators became better accepted and welcome. Trust and autonomy is important in the process and to guarantee that professionals will not be judged by their hierarchy.

The support of the website by the Department of R&D, its technological softness and the functional simplicity of its interface has been other factors of success. In a very bureaucratic and hierarchical context,

the other institutional websites remain relatively closed, top-down and purely informative with several levels of validation. A contrary, RESPIRE allows more transversal relationships and does not need a previous agreement to participate, to share and disseminate knowledge. While a policy of ICTS is developed by the Ministry of education, according to the new 2013 School Act, RESPIRE would be able to move from a controlled experiment to the development of professional learning communities to sustain innovations and professional development at national level.

10. Sources

On-line resources

The website: <http://respire-education.fr>

The national data bank on innovations: <http://eduscol.education.fr/experitheque>

National conference on School Leadership : <http://triangle.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article2318>

National conference on School innovation (2012): <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid59784/retour-sur-les-journees-innovation-29-mars-2012.html>

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