

# RECIPROCAL KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE NETWORKS

## ORIGIN

The reciprocal knowledge exchange networks were initiated in the seventies. They were inspired by the experience of a primary school teacher that had realised that her pupils undergoing learning difficulties possessed knowledge unrecognised by the school. Her adhering to the idea that each and every one knows something, and can transmit his or her knowledge, brought to her awareness that the fact of teaching helps one's self-esteem. It develops both ones capabilities and learning will. This lead her to build an alternative to formal learning, whilst creating social links. She thus became the founder of an educational, social and cultural movement. This movement became a recognised institution in the sphere of education in 1987 with the creation of MRERS.

The movement became international in 1991. More than 700 networks are now operating in the world. They bring together more than 100 thousand people in Europe (France, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland...), in Africa, in Northern America (Quebec-Canada) and in Latin America. Though not all places that have knowledge exchange networks are attached to the movement.

The movement's theoretical foundations can be traced to the works of Célestin Freinet and inspired by Paulo Freire and Popular Education. It also builds upon Ivan Illich's concepts of a Learning Society, made up of multiple forms of learning webs. It is also based on his call for user-friendly learning materials. Later inspiration came from Edgar Morin's work on complex living systems. Theoretical work on MRERS practice has been conducted at the department of Educational Science of the University of Tours. A university diploma in learning management has been conducted there for the past six years. It is

based on network research training [DURF Réseaux de formation réciproque]. It is with the latter that MIRERS founded a research laboratory on reciprocity and educational and training networks.

## WHAT IS A RERS

A reciprocal knowledge exchange network is intended for reciprocal exchanges of all types of knowledge. It aims on getting people who wish to acquire knowledge in touch with people who offer to convey it. This must always be done in a reciprocal manner.

Knowledge is not restricted and may cater for the most diverse requests: talking a foreign language, learning computer skills, plumbing, gardening and listening to Schubert... All knowledge; may it be intellectual, manual skills, school related or skills acquired through experience, may be exchanged while aiming to contribute to individual well-being, but under the condition that ethic principles are upheld (respect for human beings). Individual development is to be experienced as a school for civil implication. The RERS movement's ethical reference is laid down in a charter.

The basic unit of RERS is a small group. Settings change depending on offer and demand and their linking. The underlying principle is that everyone in the network is player; at the same time provider and user. Exchanges may be bilateral, but are essentially multilateral. Workshops may be set up parallel to these exchanges in order to initiate group activity. These exchanges produce proficiency of both participants and of group organizers.

## RULES FOR RERS OPERATION

RERS are open to people of all age, social position, study level or cultural origin. Exchanges in the network are characteristically intercultural and intergenerational.

Exchange takes place in an open reciprocal manner. Offer is subject to demand and any request is expected to be complemented with an offer, on a more or less long-term basis. Independence of offer and demand are characteristic of this type of exchange. As such it recognizes the right for each one to be provider. Exchange takes place without the involvement of money on the basis of knowledge equivalence.

Exchange modalities are decided together amongst the group members that constitute the RERS. Choices are made in respect to premises, pace, duration, contents, knowledge transmission mode and means, plus assessment tools. Group members themselves develop learning modalities with the aid of some support situations and tools. These may include: knowledge pinpointing, tables and leaflets with offers and requests, linking, exchanges on the topic of exchanges, learning experience accounts, self-assessing and co-assessing. Furthermore, each network establishes its rules, its meeting calendar, its scheduled holidays and activities. The non-hierarchical organization produces an inventive and liberating relation to knowledge. Reciprocity favors self-learning. This creates, within the RERS, conditions for social and organizational dynamics for collective self-learning, anticipating a new form of civil implication in the era of the Information Society.

Linking is achieved by a team of organizers in charge of exchanges. In practice, a person interested contacts the team of organizers. When the exchange group first gets together, a team member of the organizers is present, in order to avoid misinterpretation. When a person registers, he or she fills in an identification form. The form mentions offer, requests and exchanges that have already been established. The organizers team role is to assist in formalizing offers and requests of knowledge, to link them and to make sure that goals assigned for the exchange have been attained. Mediation takes place within the group and not via a unique individual, even though someone is needed to regulate the network operation.

The condition for the network to continue operating and growing is laid-down by exchanges between networks on the subject of practices within each network. These are sustained through dynamic cooperative and collective organization of activities.

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