

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

An Interview with Gerard Majoor



Gerard Majoor, PhD, is presently Chairman of the Network, but he has been in a variety of Network positions before that. He is a well-known figure at the Network conferences, which he co-hosts with his usual wit and charm. If you do not recognise his photograph you probably have never attended a Network conference. Gerard works at the Office of International Relations of the Institute of Medical Education at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. The interview was conducted in Dutch in July 2002, and subsequently translated in English and reviewed.

Jan van Dalen
Associate Editor
Education for Health

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed, Gerard. You have been involved in the Network for almost as long as I can remember. What prompted your involvement?

I have been working at the medical school at Maastricht since March 1974, even before the first group of students arrived. Together with Henk Schmidt I repeatedly coordinated the first block in the first year, a crucial block, in which the students were introduced to the problem-based teaching and learning format. Later I became member of the Faculty Board, responsible for Education. ‘Internationalisation’ became a recognised and acknowledged issue on the Board’s agenda in the 1980’s. The Network planned its conference in 1989 to take place at Kerkrade, the Netherlands, close to Maastricht. Henk Schmidt and the chairman of the Network at that time, Prof. Zohair Nooman approached Pauline Vluggen and me to organise that conference.

I have remained an operational member of the Network since that time, without a formal status. Frankly, I don't really care about these formal issues, I just appreciated the atmosphere at the conference and I valued the issues that were at stake enough to enjoy them. I have always enjoyed being a moderator and participating in the organisation.

After Henk Schmidt had finished his second and final term as the Network's Associate Secretary General, a successor had to be found in Maastricht. I gladly accepted when I was approached, and I became a member of the Executive Committee. In 2001 I was elected Chairman of the Network, so my position of Associate Secretary General ended after six years, before my second full term was completed.

In the years that you have been involved in the Network conferences, what developments have you witnessed?

In the early conferences the format was quite traditional: parallel presentations with short time for discussion. Henk Schmidt initiated a number of innovations here, starting with the Thematic Poster Sessions at the 1990 conference in Yogyakarta. These created a much more dynamic, lively atmosphere, in which participants were challenged to participate actively. The conferences became more 'student-centred': participants had much influence on whether their issues were going to be addressed. Incidentally, the fact that other educational conferences have copied this format indicates that its value is being recognised! It would have been even nicer if they also acknowledged the origin.

Moreover, the conferences have become more professional, both in organisation and in content. Because we have a 'travelling circus', our learning curve for organising conferences under diverse circumstances has been steep, very steep indeed! But also the types of contributions to the conferences have professionalised. We will always be a forum for exchanging experiences that individuals, or individual institutions want to share, and we must cherish that function. Sharing the successes and frustrations allows mutual learning, and that is what our conferences are about. However, the presentations have become much more professional. Nowadays it does not happen anymore that a participant asks the conference secretariat for a large piece of paper and some markers, to instantly create his/her poster. The feedback that we receive from the participants of the conferences, and that we faithfully reproduce in the Network Newsletter, almost always support this increase in professionalism and the pleasant atmosphere of mutual learning.

Next to your role at the Network conferences, you have been involved in the Journal, first the Annals of Community-Oriented Education and later Education for Health, as well as in the Network Newsletter. What have your experiences in those fields been? First I assisted Charles Engel, who had helped the *Annals of Community-Oriented Education* on their feet and facilitated their development into the peer-reviewed

journal *Education for Health*. Then Hilliard Jason succeeded Charles as Editor. At that period, the recognition of the journal necessitated that more reviewers were involved. Jane Westberg and I became Associate Editors of the Journal, doing initial reviews of all manuscripts that were submitted.

The Newsletter has also become more professional over the years. For example: in the latest issue much attention is devoted to Towards Unity for Health. This was indicated, because of TUFH wanting to join the Network organisation. I value any opportunity to further develop our position, to swipe the slate clean and improve.

This striving for dynamics and improvement seems to be a recurring theme in your involvement with the Network, however modest you are about your influence. Is that desire sufficiently satisfied?

Moderately. Take for example the issue of Towards Unity For Health joining the Network organisation. Because we are a large organisation this is a process that needs time. Democracy must be the guiding principle, and we must make all voices and opinions heard. But we do need to progress, we cannot remain talking forever about what might happen.

Now you are the Network's Chairman. When you introduced yourself in the Newsletter, one of the missions you mentioned was: to seek collaboration with like-minded organisations. Why?

There is an increasing number of organisations with goals similar to the Network's. It is helpful to explore opportunities for collaboration, if only to avoid that we are each other's competitors, to say nothing about the synergy that might occur in such collaboration. But it is easier said than done. Art Kaufman has drawn the analogy with airlines' alliances, except that we do not have the frequent flyer miles. Any new effort has its cost. We can organise joined conferences, as we will do with CCPH in 2004, but even that effort does have financial consequences.

In his interview in *Education for Health* 14(2), Henk Schmidt expressed his concern about many organisations 'fishing in the same pond'. In my view that is not so bad, and it would be worse if that would still only be one organisation. For a long time, the Network has been the only organisation on Problem-Based and Community-Oriented Education, and it is good to notice that this has caught on!

The other mission you mentioned for your chairmanship was: to expand the number of Network members. Why do you think that is needed?

Of the 1500 or so medical schools in the world, fewer than 150 are a member of the Network. Of other programmes for health care professions much less than this 10% is represented. Many more could benefit. But not only the numerical representation, also the global representation could be improved. Large parts of Asia are not represented in the Network, we do not have Chinese Network

members, central Europe is underrepresented. These are huge areas, with their own health care issues and solutions of problems from which we could learn a lot!

Next to these personal missions as a Chairman, how do you see the future of the Network?

At the 1999 Network conference at Linköping, Sweden, the full name of the Network was changed, in order to do justice to those members who occupy themselves with health care services. I see the Network providing a home to institutions and individuals who work anywhere in the triangle between education, services and research in health care. As an example of this I bear very good memories of a keynote address given by the Nigerian Minister of Health, Ransome Kuti, in 1991. He challenged the role of doctors in health care in Nigeria, and postulated that we should devote much more attention to educating medical officers, because what they did and could do had much more direct influence on the health of the population. It is by giving a voice to provoking statements like these that we can influence consciousness of health care and education of health care professionals in the world. The conferences, the Newsletter and *Education for Health* can play an important part in this.

Now, what do you see as the major challenges for the Network in the future?

In the collaboration at the Network secretariat in Maastricht, I have been assigned the task of 'fundraiser'. As we all know, the financial position of the Network is weak. Until now we have approached possible funding agencies with proposals, and asked for their support. We will now take a more pro-active approach, in which we can ask possible donors where they could see the contributions of the Network. The Maastricht office is directly and almost entirely dependent on support of the Medical School of Maastricht University. That makes it very vulnerable. We have seen that with TUFH. When WHO ended their organisational involvement it was necessary for TUFH to find another organisational framework that could assist in its further development. This dependence on the University of Maastricht makes the Network also vulnerable in another way: suppose that the Network members choose a course that is not of interest to Maastricht. In that case there is no way we can expect Maastricht to continue its support. Until now we have been fortunate.

Another challenge is, as Henk Schmidt mentioned in the interview that I have already referred to, that we should continuously aim to seek for evidence that Community-Based Education actually leads to improved health care.

And finally: how did you make a difference?

Thanks for a dirty question! After some thought I think that I have had a unique experience by being able to assist in the development of the University of Maastricht. I hope I have been, and will be, of help to other institutions in a similar process, in the industrialised parts of the world, but even more so in the

developing countries. When I became Associate Secretary General I mentioned in the Newsletter the necessity of Relevance. I insist that we focus on: what is necessary, what can help us further. Educational institutions, services as well as research can count on my support provided that we can answer that question.

Thank you for sharing those thoughts with us, and I hope you can realise them during your position as Chairman.