

Developing a hybrid and networked educational approach to lifelong learning for organisations and employees

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Abstract

Developing work-related competencies suitable to the ongoing changes in surrounding society could be discussed in terms of lifelong learning. In such a context, the role of higher education has been identified as a key to develop advanced competencies applicable in a networked society. The current project includes scholars from three Swedish universities, representatives and employees from six Swedish bank and insurance companies, and a related governmental agency, all belonging to an established network. The project focuses on highly specialized professionals and their organisations, and the paper aims to answer the following research question: How can a hybrid and networked educational approach to lifelong learning for organisations and employees at the advanced level of higher education be designed? The investigation applies design-based research, and preliminary findings indicate that a hybrid and networked educational approach for lifelong learning for organisations and employees could be viewed from various perspectives. However, an overall observation is that several boundaries dissolve – for example, the ones between universities and participating and collaborative organisations – when a hybrid and networked educational approach for lifelong learning is designed. For one thing, universities should not be reduced to suppliers of education, and organisations should not be reduced to receivers of knowledge. Of particular interest is that participants working with data from their organisations can devote time to organisational challenges and/or utilize a deeper understanding of such challenges in a university course module approach. While the project still is in progress (the implementation phase is ongoing, and the phase intended to evaluate completed course modules has not started yet), the preliminary hybrid and networked approach for lifelong learning needs further development before it can be established. Nevertheless, early trials highlighting the idea of flexible courses that consist of various short modules developed in collaboration between universities and participating organisations indicate a promising venue for creating long-term relationships that could include deeper university-organisation and/or university-industry collaborations. Dialogues with course module participants and representatives of the collaborative organisation reinforced this preliminary conclusion.

Keywords

Higher education, hybrid university, lifelong learning, networked university, professional development.

Research Context

Societal development has had an impact on competencies needed in working life. Such development includes emerging hybrid and networked organisations. Moreover, emerging digitalisation changes the conditions for performing tasks that earlier were built on analogue technologies. Digitalisation also introduces new tasks into working life (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). From these changes in the conditions for performing work, the need to develop suitable competencies emerges. In working life, the learning and development of suitable competencies could include professional development in informal situations while performing work-related tasks. Professional development could also include formal training organised within the organisation or by studying at an accredited educational institution. Another aspect of professional development is that it occurs at both an individual and a collective level (Jaldemark, Håkansson Lindqvist, & Mozelius, 2019). Developing competencies suitable for the changes in the surrounding society could indeed be discussed in terms of lifelong learning. However, the concept of lifelong learning is complex, including private and public aspects (Jarvis,

2007). The private sphere embraces the lifetime combination of a person's integration of experiences of situations and perception of content. While the private sphere relates to individual processes, the public sphere relates to processes of and opportunities for learning that are available in the surrounding society.

During the 20th century, global initiatives linked professional development to the concept of lifelong learning. Two of the key players were the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). They formed policies (e.g., Faure et al., 1972; OECD, 1996) that emphasised global competition and social inclusion. These policies have subsequently diffused into national initiatives. In Sweden, such initiatives have indicated the role of higher education as a key to develop advanced competencies applicable in a digitalised and networked society (e.g., Swedish National Audit Office, 2016). This paper discusses a project that follows from one such national initiative funded by Vinnova (Sweden's innovation agency). It focuses on the development of a hybrid and networked educational approach for lifelong learning that includes flexible courses.

As indicated, the project builds on the trend and importance of hybrid and networked organisations, which has also grown within universities in their relationships with the surrounding society (Nørgård et al., 2019). In this way, universities and society have become closely linked, and higher education emerges as a phenomenon in the interplay of both parties' needs. Hybrid and networked universities are characterised by weak boundaries between the universities and collaborating organisations. However, the theorisation of networked learning as a hybrid phenomenon is still in its infancy. Therefore, development and research of hybrid and networked educational approaches for lifelong learning are important to understand how such approaches impact the relationship between higher education and the needs in the surrounding society. It could also lead to the development of a theoretical understanding of lifelong learning in the digital era and how such learning could be enhanced (Jaldemark, in press).

The project, called BUFFL (a Swedish acronym translated to industry development at banks and insurance companies through flexible lifelong learning), aims to strengthen professional competencies in a specific labour market area (banking and insurance) while stimulating lifelong learning. The project initiates further development of the ongoing efforts using flexible methods for technology-enhanced learning in working life. In this project, researchers from the fields of business administration, education, and informatics from three universities are working together with six Swedish national and international bank and insurance companies and one governmental agency within insurance. The universities and the participating and collaborative organisations operate within three regions scattered across Sweden. The ambition of the parties involved in the BUFFL project is to develop and conduct short university courses to develop a hybrid and networked educational approach to lifelong learning for organisations and employees. Notably, the collaborating organisations belong to an established network including joint working groups, physical meetings, and common research and educational projects. While the target group for the initiative is highly specialised professionals, the development applies to the advanced level of higher education.

The project runs over two years and contains three phases, partially intersected and repeated on several occasions. The pre-project phase is based on disciplinary competence of the participating universities and the needs identified by the organisations involved. Three main themes for the flexible courses (change management, company valuation, and customer relationship) were identified in a lunch-to-lunch session where all collaborating organisations participated. In the intersection of disciplinary competencies and organisational needs, short and flexible courses (including course modules) at the advanced level were developed. In the latter part of this phase, university experts within the field of technology-enhanced learning created a model of a preliminary educational approach embracing appropriate educational methods and technologies. During the ongoing implementation phase, course modules are tested together with selected employees of the organisations as course participants. The evaluation phase will analyse ongoing and completed courses to contribute to the further development of the courses and the preliminary educational approach.

Aims and Research Question

The paper aims at reporting the design of the preliminary educational approach of the BUFFL project. It answers the following research question:

How can a hybrid and networked educational approach to lifelong learning for organisations and employees at the advanced level of higher education be designed?

Methods

The project discussed in this paper applies design-based research (e.g., Barab & Squire, 2004). This means that the research outcomes should result in a theory on learning and teaching (here defined as the hybrid and networked educational approach to lifelong learning). Moreover, interventions in terms of design principles should be implemented in the developed courses and course modules run by the project. The project is set in naturalistic contexts, including strong links between practices of organisations and the content and assessment in the courses and course modules. The project also applies an iterative approach to course development, while course modules will run repeatedly.

Preliminary Findings

Based on preliminary findings from the pre-project phase and the implementation phase of the first course modules, it could be suggested that the preliminary educational approach should be built on close collaboration between universities and organisations. It is also suggested that such forms of lifelong learning could be discussed from various perspectives:

- From a network perspective, collaboration should benefit the development of both the universities and the participating and collaborative organisations. The universities should not be reduced to suppliers of education, and the organisations should not be reduced to receivers of knowledge. Moreover, long-term relationships must be developed and maintained. This could include university-organisation collaboration, university-industry collaboration, and/or crossover industry collaboration with the universities.
- From a university perspective, the boundary between education and consulting for organisational development dissolves. Moreover, the boundary between previous theoretical knowledge and previous practically acquired knowledge dissolves.
- From a participating and collaborative organisation perspective, the boundary between professional development and organisational development dissolves. Therefore, the lifelong learning process should include the development of both employees and organisations.
- From an educational perspective, formal and informal learning are linked through bring-your-own-data practices, and this could afford a strong link between practice and theory. Bring-your-own-data includes the idea that course participants work with challenges related to their working life context. This means that participants should work with authentic and real challenges situated in their organisations. The inclusion of own data facilitates the solving of organisational challenges and/or a deeper understanding of such challenges.

From the bullet points above follows an overall observation that boundaries between universities and organisations in society dissolve and should be characterised by a hybrid and networked perspective on work-related lifelong learning.

The approach includes the idea of flexible courses that consist of short course modules. These modules deal with sub-themes that can be studied alone or in a package together with other modules in the same course. The participating and collaborative organisations and their employees are free to apply the modules that fit the needs of the respective employee. The short flexible course modules could preferably include a workload between one and three weeks of full-time studies. Each module starts and ends at fixed dates to assist in the planning of the universities and collaborative organisations. The fixed dates also allow for creating networking and possibilities to create study groups of individuals from various organisations. The flexibility in terms of study tempo (between 10 and 50 per cent of full time) allows the participants to adapt their studies to their professional and daily workload. A preliminary finding is that around 20 per cent of full time seems appropriate for most participants. Besides working full time, an academic workload that is too heavy jeopardises the employees' conditions to complete the course modules. This illustrates the importance of how public organisational conditions are related to the private conditions of the employees. Preliminary results further emphasise the importance of organisational support. For one of the participating organisations, the throughput is 100 per cent, while another participating organisation has a throughput of around one of three. Moreover, sole participants from an organisation have a particularly high dropout rate.

A cornerstone in the development of the hybrid and networked educational approach for lifelong learning is that each course module will be repeated several times. Such a repeating pattern facilitates the long-term development of organisations. The participating employees can continue to work with an organisation's own data after the end of a specific course module, and the following time the course module is given, new

participants from this organisation can continue to work with challenges identified and initiated by their fellow employees. The repeating evaluation pattern also allows for improvement of the modules and a stronger adaption to the needs of the collaborative organisations.

Regarding educational aspects, each course module should include pre-recorded lectures, thematic online seminars, online question-and-answer seminars, asynchronous online communication, and methods including bring-your-own-data. Web-based resources should expand the content beyond the mandatory literature. Dialogues between course participants should continuously be emphasised to enhance networked learning.

Regarding technological aspects, each course module should include participants working with their own or their organisation's devices. It lowers the threshold of the participants' deployment of technologies in their studies. A learning management system should be used to host a virtual space for assessment, teaching activities, and dialogues. Each module also should include video-based technologies to support dialogue. Moreover, support from technicians and experts within the field of technology-enhanced learning should be formalised.

Regarding assessment aspects, each course module should include at least two assignments, one related to the content discussed in the course literature and one related to the organisation's own data. Regarding the content discussed in the course literature, various types of assessments are tested, such as short written assignments, essays, and oral seminars. Moreover, the assignments include written and oral features as well as individual and group-based work. This will help the participating employees to develop competence also in written and oral communication and increase their ability to work independently and with others. This will, in turn, develop participating organisations.

Discussion

While the project could still be considered a work in progress, the preliminary hybrid and networked approach to lifelong learning will be developed throughout the project. It needs further iterations of course development before it can be established as a valid approach. Nevertheless, early trials and responses from dialogues with the course module participants and representatives of the collaborative organisation indicate its preliminary value.

The impact of ideas of a networked approach on lifelong learning initiatives needs to be further investigated by scholars. Although some studies have been published recently (e.g., Littlejohn, Jaldemark, Vrieling-Teunter & Nijland, 2019), the conceptualisation and research of lifelong learning as a hybrid and networked phenomenon is still in its infancy. Further design-based research is encouraged to guide continued development in the field.

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