

Relevance of Higher Education for Adults in a Work-Life: A Case Study From Norway

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Abstract: This case study is conducted in the spring semester of the first year, testing out organizing the mandatory assignments allowing to coordinate the two courses offered: “Project Management” and “Digital work forms in organizations”, and facilitate for the students to utilize their own organization as a basis for the case in the assignment. The study programme of Bachelor in Organization and Management consists of a total of eight courses, each semester offering two courses parallel to each other. The students are adult employees and attend two-day seminars five times per semester. The research for this paper will be qualitative in conducting semi-structured interviews. The aim of the research will be to unveil if this has had an impact on the perception of relevance, and their learning outcome. The results will show how successful this “merger” regarding the assignment between the two different courses, based on how the students perceive the outcome to support the relevance regarding their job situation. Moreover, how they perceive the learning outcome from looking at the same case from the perspective of two different curricula will be interesting and may influence the way one organizes future training in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Relevance, Learning, Facilitation, Assignment From one’s own Organization

1. Introduction

At the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Rena, the adaption of study programmes has been an ongoing process. The adaption is mainly about meeting the needs of adult students, of whom many are in a worklife. This lifelong learning perspective, combined with providing the students with up-to-date course content, and contributing to the students’ perception of relevance of the courses, has been the primary focus from the lecturers’ point of view.

Both lifelong learning and the worklife relevance of education are promoted as guidelines for higher education by the Norwegian Government in the white papers (White Paper 16 (2019-2020), White Paper 14 (2019-2020)). To help facilitate this, a high degree of student involvement and engagement is suggested.

At the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Rena, the concepts of a “flipped classroom” and “student involvement” have been developed over several years (Vold, 2014, Nematollahi et al., 2015, Bishop and Verleger, 2013). Hence, there are already opportunities for the students to utilize their own workplaces in their mandatory assignments, which have been tested out and implemented as a standardized work form in the course delineation.

In this study, the student involvement was taken to another level, as some of the students preferred the approach to utilizing their own organization as a case to a degree, in which they suggested integrating and combining the mandatory assignments in two different courses. Even if the courses in the bachelor's degree are designed to complement and build on each other, a joint mandatory assignment has never been tested out. They are to write a thesis at the end of their BA, in which they are encouraged to utilize the courses they have been exposed to, although the courses leading up to this have never been a subject of being combined.

In the following, we will present the two different courses in which a joint mandatory assignment has been tested out, how this pilot was planned and the theoretical foundation that we build for our understanding of the reasoning behind this undertaking. We then present the methodological approach to our data collection, before we present and discuss our data. We conclude on the result of our pilot project, point towards improvement points and present our suggestions for other scholars who would like to test this at their own university.

1.1 The Case Study

The two courses (“Project management” and “Digital work forms in organizations”) are taught as seminar-based in the spring semester, with each seminar lasting two days with one course per day. Both courses have

mandatory assignments. In the course “Project management”, the assignment has been based on up-to-date cases from the news. In the course “Digital work forms in organizations”, the mandatory assignment has for several years offered a choice of either working on a case developed by the teacher – or utilizing their own organization as a basis for the case development.

Both lecturers are generally open to- and encourage student involvement and input. During this semester, the student representatives suggested merging the two assignments, and utilizing the learning from both courses into one assignment. The argument they presented was that they would profit from using one case to discuss the two different perspectives that the two courses offer.

Perceiving this as a novel idea and a possibility to develop the courses, the two mandatory assignments were merged, keeping the opportunity for students who wanted to write two assignments, or who only attended one of the courses, to write separate assignments. It was decided to form an assignment that would have the students tying the curriculum in both courses to one of the group members of their own organization.

The students were encouraged to work in groups of 3-5 students. The feedback would be given to the groups from the different lectures, which meant we had to make them hand in the assignments in both courses in the LMS system (Canvas).

Forty-three students chose to use this opportunity. Some students misunderstood, and chose a case developed by one of the teachers (hence, not writing about their own organization), and still write one assignment with the two perspectives.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The relevance of education is often tied to the perceived connection of curriculum to one’s own personal background. This was recognized by the American pragmatists Dewey (1938) and James (2020) as they, amongst others, have pointed out the importance of interest of an area and its connection to learning. Hidi and Renninger (Renninger and Hidi, 2011, Hidi and Renninger, 2006) have developed a four-phase model of interest development. For example, the first phase: “triggered situational interest” is about being triggered by- and gaining interest by being exposed to a case or text. This phase may evolve into the phase of “maintained situational interest”, which is about being continuously exposed to the area of interest by perceived meaningful tasks, instructional conditions and learning environments. In turn, this may develop into the “individual interest” phase, and then into a “well developed individual interest” phase. The “individual interest” is based on the individual’s emerging interest characterized by positive feelings and stored knowledge and is about reengaging and developing their own “curiosity” about a certain topic or content. The process has a resemblance to Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), which is about developing cognitive skills from merely remembering content to producing new and original work. However, this still requires some external support in the form of encouragement by peers or experts, e.g., teachers. Obtaining this level of individual interest will probably allow one to be able to pursue the work or questions they seek answers for, even if they face difficulties (Hidi and Renninger, 2006). The fourth phase of the model is about a “well-developed individual interest” (Hidi and Renninger, 2006). This enables a student to endeavour on larger tasks, as the individual interest promotes the perseverance of long-term work. However, the student may benefit from external support and a supportive learning environment.

Highly inspired by John Dewey, David A. Kolb (1984) developed the experiential learning cycle which describes how to prepare for, executing and gaining experience, and to reflect on and conceptualize as a preparation for new active experiencing. This is often referred to within the field of Organizational Theory (Filstad, 2022), and combining the theory with the students’ assignments, e.g., allowing them to reflect on actions that have taken place to better understand theory, which may also trigger the individual interest of the students, as it provides them with a link to their own experiences. The actions may be tied to the curriculum in the different courses. In Project Management, it may be about how to pinpoint milestones in a project, while in the course of Digital work forms in organizations, it may be about the introduction of a digital tool, and how this has affected the organization.

In many ways, this relates to Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) by introducing knowledge, supporting comprehension, encouraging application and a following analysis and synthesis, and lastly encouraging the students to evaluate. The knowledge is presented in the courses through lecturing, video recordings, podcasts and other available materials. The comprehension is about relating the curriculum (knowledge) to examples,

and then tying it to their own background by applying the acquired knowledge. Then, through the assignments, they are to analyse and synthesize the outcome, as well as evaluate this outcome.

Reflection is therefore a common theme within both organizational theory and learning theory (Boud et al., 1985). Reflecting in order to learn and understand is also important to help facilitate in a classroom setting. Assignments and groupwork may aid in the facilitation of reflection. Schön (1987) has contributed to understanding reflection, and how it supports in understanding and developing knowledge. His seminal work on developing reflective practitioners includes reflection in different versions. Reflection in an action obviously requires being in a situation or an action. Nevertheless, reflection on action may refer to reflecting on something that has taken place. Also, allowing the space of time between the reflection and the action may influence the outcome of the reflection and support critical thinking (Moon, 2004, Moon, 2008).

Making students work in groups may support theories of social learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning with and from others, and their experiences, may also contribute to a sense of connection and the development of friendships. To develop a mandatory assignment together with others may also encourage a sense of respect, a feeling of achievement and confidence (level 4 in Maslow's hierarchy of needs) (Maslow, 1981). Developing the inner potential (level 5), in addition to the use of "peak experiences" (Feigenbaum, 2024), may also connect to the development of the individual interest (Hidi and Renninger, 2006) of the learners.

Making students work in groups may also resemble the way they have to work within their organizations. In an organization, this may refer to Communities of Practices (CoP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoPs are often created to solve different problems, as the members are "pursuing shared enterprises" over time (Wenger, 1998). The members are engaging in social learning, as they seek meaning and identity within the social practice.

Learning in teams has also been described within the frames of Organizational Theory. Senge (1992) has explained that learning in teams is one of five disciplines that will support developing a learning organization. Team learning is about collaborating in a group to obtain a common goal. This requires interaction and coordination between the group members, something which in turn supports a learning process, both within the group and the individuals in the group.

3. Methodological Approach

Regarding case studies, Yin (2003) suggests to select a topic, identify research questions and clarify the boundaries of the case study. The data in this paper is collected using a qualitative approach (Patton, 2002) as a follow-up of an educational pilot project. We were three researchers conducting a group interview with four students, using a semi-structured interview guide. Our informants were chosen by use of purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), and were recruited among a group of adult students taking part in the project. The informants were two women and two men, of whom three had a longer work-life experience, with one being relatively newly educated. Of the four interviewees, two are students' representatives, and thus more interested in participation and commitment to their studies.

During the group interview, one of the researchers had the role as a moderator, while all three took notes of the informants' conversation and discussions. Posterior to the meeting, we reflected on what we thought had come out of the discussion. Later, we wrote out and shared our notes, the next step being to analyse the material by themes and categories, and discuss our findings against relevant theories.

4. Results and Discussion

The project is basically about trying out a particular educational scheme by combining the assignment in two courses and allowing cases from students' own worklife practices. The success of the project depends on how the students respond to the assignment. As a follow-up, we wanted to investigate the effects on the students perceived learning outcome, as well as the relevance of the study for their worklife.

4.1 Combined Assignment in two Courses

The students were positive about having the opportunity to choose between different tasks in the work requirement. "*It's nice to be able to choose*" as one of the respondents articulated. When it comes to how the assignments were communicated and presented, the students' opinion was that due to the short time for preparation and design, the assignments were somewhat unclear or imprecise. Nonetheless, this still mostly went well with the students. We found that a prerequisite was a very good dialogue between students'

representatives and the teachers, who take them seriously and meet the students' expectations and questions. The teachers do facilitate the students to obtain the optimum yield from their studies.

4.2 Cases from Students' own Worklife

To work with tasks from their worklife depends on the students having recognition and experience relevant to the knowledge. This in turn can lead to sharing experiences with other students in their group, *"How have you done this in your workplace? Oh, then I can do this in mine"*. Even the student with less work and project experience reports being able to gain insight and learn from other people's experiences – and this shows that even those with little work experience benefit from- and learn from others. They recognize the situation presented by theories in the studies and are able to obtain having their own knowledge confirmed. For example, they mentioned, *"How to structure the knowledge you have?"* and *"How to handle conflict processes?"* This suggests the direct connection to their work and thus background, as per Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984). These reflections (Boud et al., 1985, Moon, 2004, Moon, 2008, Schön, 1987) show that they are able to turn the learning into knowledge and start analysing, synthesizing, and even evaluating their learning (Bloom, 1956, Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001).

4.3 Work Forms: The Students own Informal Organization of the Learning Process

Another prerequisite we found is that the students are organized as a team and have developed their own informal studies. They meet regularly via Teams, with one meeting before the gathering and one after. They prepare themselves by going through the curriculum. They also work together during the assemblies, right after the lecture. This is about building relationships and has a great educational benefit. This resembles both CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991), as they are "joining forces" for a common goal, and Team Learning (Senge, 1992) as they collaborate and learn from each other.

4.4 Learning Outcomes

Regarding learning outcomes, we asked the students, *"What is your experience in terms of the learning outcomes, what types of tasks do you learn the most from?"* As the studies are organized as being seminar-based, our informants find that these intensive sessions work better because they provide the opportunity to go from theory to practice. They also find that group work offers significant learning opportunities, as they find it useful to join other fellow students to share experiences and discuss. They claim that groupwork supports an enhanced learning outcome. The applicable part of the study is of course also the individual. One student claimed that they started out as "unskilled" managers who want to bring in theory that can be used – and translated it into their own practice. By going through the learning processes, they develop as managers. This, again, shows a learning outcome of working in groups/teams learning with, and from each other (Vygotsky, 1978, Senge, 1992, Wenger, 1998, Lave and Wenger, 1991).

4.5 Relevance of the Study

In our opinion, our study shows that in the content of the case study (testing out a joint mandatory assignment in two courses and utilizing the same basis of the assignment) that the students use to obtain an enhanced learning outcome. This includes utilizing the students' own backgrounds, and according to our informants learning both from and with each other is a vital contribution to how they can utilize the knowledge, and draw relevance of the study. The students report that they can relate experiences from their own work practice to the theories of the studies and learn from them to become better managers. One of the students has worked with a digitalization development project in his own organization and recognizes the topic in both project management and digital working methods. One comment that confirms this is: *"Heuristically intuitive: I have done this at work, and this is how I can improve myself."* They are generally very positive regarding linking knowledge from the study to their own work. They recognize the situation, they get their knowledge confirmed, and they recognize oneself in the study.

5. Conclusion

The project is basically about seeing the effects of a particular educational scheme, and what the students get in return. Success depends on whether the students respond. The subject teachers organizing is the starting point, as they take up the idea of a joint task/practical case and implement it. The sample of informants is

significant, as these students seem to be more than average interested in participation and commitment to their studies.

The findings from the interviews show us that the students' individual starting points/experiences are of importance. The students own informal organization of the learning process is of great importance for their perceived learning outcome. Working in self-organized students' groups with the assignments enhances the learning outcome, and contributes to the relevance of the education.

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