PARTNERSHIPS FOR WORK PLACE LEARNING IN WORK INTEGRATING SOCIAL ENTERPRIZES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the case of a multi-sector partnership with the aim of improving work place learning in Work Integration Social Enterprises is presented. Work Place Learning (WPL) is a concept that connects institutions of education with work places in the surrounding society. Typical examples are when students during their formal education do periods of internships or vocational training in an organization of relevance to their future profession, or when teachers perform curricular activities at work sites in the community. The two examples illustrate that the "learners" in work place learning could be both students in the educational system and employees at the work sites. Typical and common characteristics for different initiatives related to WPL is that; 1) it is built upon an ambition to combine theoretical knowledge with practice, 2) work-places are seen as important arenas for learning and 3) it is performed in partnerships between heterogeneous actors, often representing different sectors in society.

This paper specifically focuses upon the partnership dimension of workplace learning.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, policies promoting collaborations between the formal educational system and the industry has been developed in order to assist workforce development (Saunders & Machell, 2000). In Sweden the so called third task stipulates that universities, besides research and teaching, should engage in outreach activities. In a review of outreach activities at Swedish universities, Benner and Sörlin (2015) conclude that Swedish universities have a long and strong history of collaboration with the surrounding society. They also recognize an increasing interest from policy makers in this area.

Outreach activities and collaborative research have been described as a different mode of research, built upon practical problem solving, shared responsibilities in multi-disciplinary teams, closeness and engagement, and a focus on usefulness and application alongside the traditional focus on theoretical development (Gibbons, 1994). The focus of this approach is to research "for" or "with" people, rather than researching "on" a subject (Ibid). In brief, the researcher needs to handle the collaborative process and the social aspects that follows. This includes building trust and negotiating differences when it comes to values, practices, objectives and opinions between actors from different organizations.

In this paper we describe a case of multi-sector partnership aiming at developing methods for WPL in a network of WISEs in the south of Sweden. Work integrating social enterprises (WISEs) can be defined as "autonomous economic entities whose main objective is the professional integration – within the WISE itself or in mainstream enterprises – of people experiencing serious difficulties in the labour market" (Defourny et.al, 2004, p. 3). A national support organization for cooperatives helped the WISEs write an application for funding to the Swedish European Social Fund (ESF). One folk high school joined the project, together with an association working with popular education and finally representatives from the university. From the perspective of the university, the case is an example of the so called third task. This means that the representatives from the university did not primarily

conduct research on people in order to develop theoretical knowledge. The focus was rather on practical problem solving and application of knowledge with or for people. In this paper we describe how the partnership evolved over time. Based upon the authors own experiences of participating in the collaboration, the aim of this paper is to discuss why and how the partnership dimension is important in WPL.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We continue by discussing Work Integrating Social Enterprises (WISEs) in order to give an understanding of the specific context of the empirical project. Thereafter we discuss the concept of WPL, putting specific attention to how this calls for building multi-stakeholder partnerships. We then describe the case and its development. Finally we discuss the importance of having a partnership approach when planning and implementing work-place learning in multi-stakeholder networks. Based upon the authors own experiences of taking part as a university representative in work place learning, the argument of the paper is that the partnership dimension is what makes WPL differ from other and more traditional forms of university based curricular activities.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

WORK INTEGRATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISES (WISE)

In Sweden representatives from the public sector has together with organizations in the third sector agreed on a definition of a WISE (Tillväxtverket, n.d). It is a type of social enterprise with the aim to improve the employment prospects and wellbeing of those groups that are furthest from the labour market. Examples of such groups are people with physical or mental handicaps, immigrants or individuals that have been long term unemployed. Additionally, a WISE creates inclusion for its employees through ownership or in other documented ways. It mainly reinvests its profit in the own or in similar operations and it is independent from the public sector (Ibid). In this way a WISE operates in the third or civic sector, that is in the intersection between the profit-oriented private sector and the public sector.

As pointed out by Spear and Bidet (2005) the development of WISEs can be understood in relation to societal trends that affects the division of responsibilities between sectors in society. The development in Sweden could be characterized as one where the public sector has decreased its responsibility for welfare services, letting private actors enter "markets" that was previously the sole responsibility of the public sector. In this transition, there has been an increase in the type of organizations that are called WISEs (Hedin et.al., 2015).

The WISE receive incomes from public agencies such as the employment office or the agency for social services, to offer a placement in their organization for work training and rehabilitation. Additionally, they receive income streams from selling goods and services in the private market. In this way, the organizational logic as well as the objectives of a WISE stand out as a hybrid between the profit orientation of the private sector and the social orientation of the public sector (Quelin, Kivleniece, Lazzarini, 2017).

Another characteristic of WISEs is that their operation is closely connected to workplace learning. The raison d'être of a WISE is that it stimulates and promotes learning and personal development at work for its members and employees. In the next section we discuss the concept of workplace learning more in detail.

WORKPLACE LEARNING

Workplace learning (WPL) is a concept that includes different theoretical perspectives. In addition it has been studied in different contexts and from different perspectives. WPL can be discussed from an academic perspective (see for example Higgs et.al. 2012) where the challenge is to balance the more theoretical academic learning approach with opportunities for students to learn in practice. This could be done by various means, for example through internships, vocational training or apprenticeships. Important discussions in this perspective relate to how WPL can be included in curricula and how the learning can be measured and given credits in the formal educational system (Higgs, 2012). In this article we are primarily interested in WPL from the perspective of the workplace and learners who are already employees in organizations. In this case the discussion is rather how life-long learning could be promoted for people and how organizations could be designed in such a way that learning between employees is promoted and stimulated (se for example Manuti et.al. 2017).

In both perspectives, the work place is regarded not only as an arena where specific tasks are performed. Instead the practices that take place within work places are seen as arenas for learning in a number of ways. As pointed out by for example in Theliander et.al. (2004) an individual learns not only the language and technologies of a specific trade. Additionally, the individual learns about the relationship between his or her profession and other stakeholders in society and norms and values related to an organization and a specific trade or practice. This kind of social learning takes place when the individual becomes part of a community of people who need to adjust and relate to each other in order to perform specific tasks.

It is in this way that working life can be seen not only to contribute to an individual in economic sense, i.e. by providing a salary. As well, having an occupation can also be seen to contribute to social values related to the ability to take part in the development of society and training virtues related to democracy and citizenship (Hermansson, 2004). Important theoretical underpinnings of WPL are the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the concept of Communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The

argument is that learning is stimulated by being connected to a specific time and place and the activities taking place there. In this way learning is situated. The specific people that are active in the location are important as well. They form a community of practice that gives flesh and blood to the situated learning.

After this brief review of the concept of WPL we now turn to one important aspect of the concept. Initiatives related to WPL are often performed in partnerships between actors from different sectors in society. Many organizations and kinds of competencies need to team up in order to respond to the local needs for learning and competence development at work sites. This is particularly so in the case of a WISE who work with work integration through work-place learning. As stated by Scaratti et al (2017, p. 4) the operation of a WISE is "based mostly on the cooperative work of different stakeholders who have various competencies and knowledge and who create continuous dynamics of cooperation, interaction and sharing of information and knowledge". Below we turn to this partnership dimension of WPL.

MULTI SECTORAL PARTNERSHIPS IN WPL

Choy, Kemmis & Green (2016) stress that a partnership between actors involved in WPL need to be more collaborative than a client-vendor relationship. They discuss site based education development (SBED) and proposes a definition of a partnership based upon this specific context (p. 342):

"Partnerships are a system of formalised co-operation, legally binding and/or supplemented with informal understandings, to mutually adopt objectives, plans and strategies for successful site based education development by sharing responsibilities, resources, benefits and risks over sustained periods of time."

They propose an Action Research methodology to develop site based education throughout their article. They also identify 6 dimensions that underpin successful outcomes (Ibid):

- The development of a shared understanding between partners concerning each other's context and each other's distinct practices.
- A work place within a site that is recognized for being not only a good workplace, but also a good learning environment.
- Transparency around what each partner expects and wants from the collaboration as well as acknowledgement and recognition of contributions from each partner.
- A balance between the needs of industry and the long term needs of the learners
- A focus upon mentors or supervisors at the sites and securing that their leadership role is developed in the process.
- Collaborative development of a platform that secures long term monitoring of the partnership.

Foskett (2005) in a similar vein identifies commonalities in the benefits and problems associated with partnership work in relation to workforce development. Based upon a literature review she stresses the need for a shared conception among participants that the benefits of the collaboration outweigh the costs. She also stress the need for a clear articulation of the aims of each stakeholder and an awareness of the unstated aims, that is the "*emergent* aims that are slowly revealed as the project develops and the trust between the partners grows, but which are not stated at the start" (Ibid, p. 255).

Felce (2010) summarize five key lessons learned from a case study of a collaboration to develop workplace learning. 1) Agreeing on and stating the aims of the collaboration from the start. 2) Identify boundaries "to know where trade-offs can, and can not, be made in seeking a compromise or reaching a consensus" (Ibid, p. 74). 3) Allow time for personal relations to grow, but set time for deadlines. 4) Acknowledge the evolutionary nature of partnerships and 5) acknowledge that experiences create cultural capital that will not be lost when the partnership changes or terminates.

When comparing key learning points like the ones described above they stand out as social. They revolve around building trust and commitment, nurturing personal relationships and mediating between differences between actors in order to create a shared understanding. This implies that participants in collaborations and partnerships need to balance their professional expertise and technical knowledge with an understanding of and preparation for the collaborative process in itself (Rosenlund et.al., 2015). Managing muli-partner relationships and developing commitment and trust takes time and is worked out in a process. In the literature the process of developing partnerships are often discussed in phases. In the specific area of partnerships for workplace learning (or site based education development) five such phases have been identified by Harris et.al. (2005):

1) Recognizing and accepting the need for a partnership 2) clarifying the terms of the partnership as well as establishing realistic aims and outcomes 3) establishing a structure for the arrangement of the partnership and how each partner can contribute 4) formulate strategies for each partners contribution and delivery within the partnership and responsibilities for each partner and 5) establish ways to evaluate and learn from the partner-ship to be able to change, improve or terminate it.

Roloff (2008) discusses partnerships in terms of multi-stakeholder networks. She also presents a model over phases in the development of such networks. The model defines four important overall phases, starting with the initiation phase and continuing with a phase of deliber-ation. After deliberation follows a phase where actions are performed and eventually the network is institutionalized or extinct. The phases include different steps as shown in the figure below.
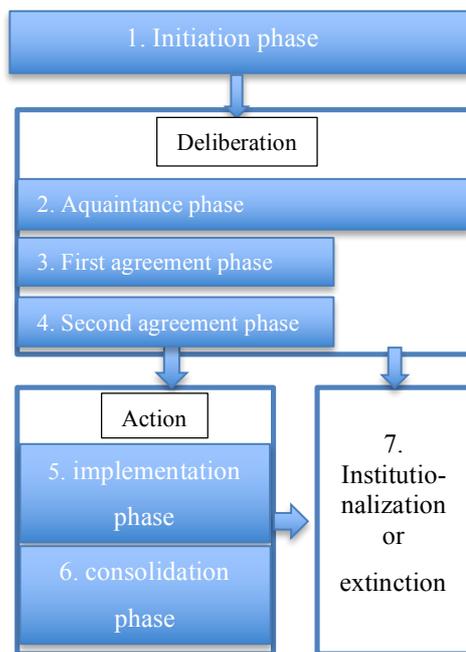
Figure 1. Life cycle model of multi-stakeholder networks (Roloff, 2008, p. 242)

In the next section, the model presented by Roloff (2008) will be used to describe a partnership formed around the issue of developing methods for WPL in WISEs.

CASE DESCRIPTION

In this section we describe a case where a local multi-stakeholder network is developed around the issue of creating methods for WPL in WISEs. The development of the network is described using the model over the life-cycle of multi-stakeholder networks by Roloff (2008).

INITIATION PHASE

In a region in the south of Sweden, the issue of competence development among WISEs had been discussed on meetings between local social enterprises and supporting organizations and agencies. Some initial work had been done by the local WISES on investigating the potentials for collaborating around the issue.

In late august 2015 one of the authors was invited to a meeting where an application to the European Social Fund (ESF) was to be discussed. The meeting was organized by a national support organization for cooperatives. Invited actors included representatives from six local WISEs and representatives from three different educational organizations. In this case it was the university, a local folk highschool and the local entity of the oldest and largest national adult educational association in Sweden. On the meeting the actors did agree to take part in the application process. The support organization contracted a consultant to write the application and organize the necessary paperwork. The

project was planned for one year and had a budget of 1,5 Msek. In the application, the formulated purpose and objectives of the project was to 1) identify the need for workplace learning as well as forms and teaching methods for promoting workplace learning among women and men who are far from the labor market and 2) to promote collaboration between educational organizations and WISEs.

In the application the participating organizations was described as well as the background to the project idea. As well, challenges on a regional level when it comes to work integration as well as how the project responded to the regional development strategy were described. As in most cases, the project plan did not in a detailed way describe the project logic and how the actors was about to collaborate and divide the responsibilities and work tasks between them. When the project half a year later was granted funding from ESF, a lot of questions concerning the project logic and the collaboration between the actors still had to be worked out.

AQUAINTANCE PHASE

In a first step a project leader was recruited to the project. The project leader started by interviewing the business managers at each WISE about the methods for workplace learning used and in which areas they saw the need for increased competence development.

One of the first activities in the project that included all the participants in the project was a so called future conference (a kind of search conference organized by a professional consultant). For 2 days those involved in the project gathered and worked collaboratively to identify their visions on how to approach workplace learning.

The future conference was important in several ways. Firstly, the joint group work during the two intense days gave many opportunities to get to know new people on a personal level. This was important for the representatives from the three educational organizations, as these were new to the network of WISEs. For them, the conference provided important background information about the particular type of company that the project was targeting. Additionally, during the two days a number of concrete proposals were generated on how to organize the continuing work within the project. In particular, meeting times and reconciliation points were determined, where parts of the work would be completed. It was also concluded that the initial survey of the managers in the WISEs should be complemented by systematically investigating the needs and desires for work place learning among the staff. Finally, it was concluded that the WISEs wanted to collaborate more around the issue of workplace learning and that a local network organization could be formed around this issue.

Still, however, there were uncertainties about exactly what the educational organizations in the collaboration would do and how they would divide the work between themselves.

FIRST AGREEMENT PHASE

After the future conference, a more focused work began to develop concrete competence development efforts together with a method for performing them on site in the two selected WISEs. A smaller "method group" was established. This group consisted of the project leader, three representative from the educational organizations and four representatives from the two WISEs that was selected to be sites for WPL in the project.

For two months, the group met regularly. The meetings were deliberately placed at the various representatives' organizations in order to have an opportunity to visit each other and understand each other's operations. During the two months, representatives from the educational organizations also made study visits to the social enterprises, in purpose to learn more about the specific activities and understand the target groups for the competence development effort. In the project plan, the target group of "learners" was defined as 20 employees/participants from the two WISEs.

The meetings that followed the "future conference" can in retrospect be regarded as relatively fruitless in relation to the project's goals and objectives. Few steps forward were taken in the process. After the two months, the group was still in discussions about how the educational actors should contribute collaboratively in the project. Nevertheless, the meetings filled an important function in the sense that the participants in the smaller group got to know each other on a personal level. As well, different alternative arrangements for division of work could be discussed. Finally, the group could deliberate upon what the objective of "developing a method for workplace learning" as stated in the project plan could actually mean.

SECOND AGREEMENT PHASE AND IMPLEMENTATION

As described by Roloff (2008, p. 241) "the aim of the second agreement phase is to compare different approaches available and to select one or more for implementation". Two circumstances resulted in the method group being forced to make decisions about division of work tasks within their collaboration. First, the summer holidays were approaching and second, the project plan contained fixed dates when different phases of the project was to be conducted. Due to this time-pressure on the group, the following activities were decided and conducted before the holiday:

The two WISEs carried out a survey investigating the needs and aspirations for work place learning among their staff and members. Based upon this information, the educators made proposals for areas of competence development that matched their expertise and educational approaches.

A tentative method of how to organize workplace learning was jointly discussed in the group based on the material described above. The method was thus developed in a way where the group discussed their own competence and educational approaches and related this to the needs and aspirations expressed by managers and staff in the WISEs. The project leader documented and compiled the discussions in a working document.

The end result was that a number of concrete areas for competence development were identified. These were related to specific professional skills (such as learning how to work with different types of wood in manufacturing furniture), to important aspects of the organization of the WISEs (for example how to understand and interact with customers), or to more social aspects of being part of a community of practice (for example how to approach each other in workgroups on the job). Guidelines for how the teacher/ instructor would organize the workplace learning was documented on the basis of the knowledge that the business managers had provided and on the educational approaches normally used by the representatives from the educational organizations. One important decision was to use self-managed study circles among the staff in order to secure that the learning from specific sessions with instructors/ trainers was communicated among everyone in the workplace. The importance of mentors in the WISEs was stressed. They could in turn function as role models or instructors in the everyday work taking place in the WISEs.

After the holidays, competence development efforts were carried out on the two companies. Ongoing during the work, the method group met to discuss and follow up the effort.

CONSOLIDATION PHASE

After the implementation the pre-defined method for how to organize workplace learning in WISEs, the method was revised based on experiences from participants in the project. The final result was a handbook containing advices and recommendations based on the learnings from the project. As illustrated above the "local knowledge" produced in the handbook was built up in discussions involving representatives from WISEs as well as educational organizations. A film was also recorded to communicate experiences from the project.

The project went on for a short period of time (1 year). The phases described by Roloff (2008) did not follow each other. Rather, they were running simultaneously, but at different levels of the project. Already at the initial future conference it was decided that cooperation between local WISEs in the area of work place learning should be developed. More concretely the creation of a network consisting of competence and development leaders from various local WISEs was proposed. Following the future conference, the project's steering group continued the work of creating and formalizing such a network. During the project period a number of meetings were conducted with this network and a draft of statutes for the network were worked out. In this way, the phase of consolidation started almost immediately and continued to run parallel with other phases during

the time of the project. The network was active during the project period but did not have the power to continue its work after the end of the project, as funding for necessary coordination was no longer available. The network was also not formalized in any kind of association.

INSTITUTIONALISATION PHASE/ EXTINCTION

One important reason to why the project was not institutionalized was the project logic with its time-limited resources for activities. When the stipulated project time was over, it was problematic to continue the activities without funding. However, the project resulted in cultural capital in the form of a dormant infrastructure around the project's issue (WPL and competence development). It resulted in a set of actors from different sectors that now had experience of working with WISEs and the specific target group. There is as well a dormant network of representatives from WISEs who have met and started discussions on collaboration on the issue. Currently, efforts are taken to find continuous support for funding so that the work can continue. One conclusion is that the project was neither institutionalized nor extinct. Rather, it is in a stand-by mode. However, there is a danger in this since the risk that valuable commitment and learnings from the project deteriorates increases with the time it takes for the dormant network to be re-activated.

DISCUSSION

The case presented in this article confirms many of the learning points extracted from previous case studies on partnerships for workplace learning. In particular, the case illustrate that much time is spent on developing a shared understanding between partners concerning each other's context and each other's distinct practices (c.f. Choy, Kemmis & Green,2016).

The case also illustrates how the formulation of concrete aims and objectives can be *emergent* and slowly revealed as the process evolves and partners get to know each other (c.f. Folett, 2005). In line with Felce (2010) our experience from participating in a partnership for WPL indicate that the evolutionary nature of partnerships need to be acknowledged, and that time has to be reserved for personal relations to grow. We also see that a positive effect from participating in partnerships is that cultural capital is created during the process. Finally, as proposed by Choy, Kemmis & Green (2016) we find Action Research as a suitable guiding methodological approach when forming partnerships in WPL.

All these aspects of partnership formations seem to have in common that they develop as a result of *deliberation* between participants in partnerships. The case described in this article illustrates a situation where much time is spent on deliberation and getting to know each other on a personal as well as organizational level. The second step of acquaintance and agreement in the model by Roloff (2008) consumed a lot of time in the project. One

explanation to this could be that the initiation phase of the collaboration was performed during time pressure since an application needed to be submitted in order to secure funding for the collaboration. One possible interpretation is thus that little time in the initiation phase needed to be compensated with more time spent on deliberation in the acquaintance and agreement phase.

As noted by Foskett (2005, p. 262) "*collaboration is easier where there is a greater degree of similarity in the organizational structures, purpose and philosophies between the partners*". The partnership described in this paper included organizations and individual actors that was"new" to each other. The participating organizations as well displayed diversity in terms of structure, purpose and philosophy. They had much to learn from each other in order to make sense of how they could collaborate on WPL. For example, the pedagogical approach to teaching differs between universities and associations for professional learning and education. For the academic participants, the specific target group of learners was new as well. Acting in a new context with new partners and new group of learners called for learning and finding out new ways to interact and communicate in an educational setting. For the participants from the folk high school and the adult training association, the context of WISEs was new. For them, the experience and knowledge of the managers in the WISEs became important in order to understand the context for WPL. An alternative explanation is thus that partnerships between heterogeneous actors may require more time for deliberation in the phases of acquaintance and agreement.

Even if our discussion is based upon a single case, we believe that some of our interpretations could be of more general interest to academic staff engaged in workplace learning. Since workplace learning implies creating bridges between the system of formal education and the practice taking place in workplaces, the need of understanding the context for learning and adapting educational approaches to the practices taking place need to be stressed. As noted by Billett (1994), aids to learning that are not embedded in a culture of practice are less valued by learners at work sites. This means that partnership arrangements need to extend beyond that of a vendor-client (c.f. Choy, Kemmis & Green, 2016). Not only can the target group for workplace learning expected to develop new knowledge and competencies. As the case presented in this paper illustrates, the facilitators in the partnership formed to organize and plan for making WPL possible in the same way need to be prepared to learn about, from and with each other.

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