

Seminar „Making Lifelong Learning a reality“

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Abstract

Sowing the winds of change

Supporting local development through networking

The Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning, CFL, is a national authority under the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science. The main objective for CFL is to enhance access to lifelong learning for adults through flexible learning. One way of doing this is by supporting development within local educational organisations in adult education and non-formal education.

In Sweden, education in practice is a municipal concern. At the same time strategies on lifelong learning, and adaptation of EU-strategies in the same field is a national concern. A crucial question is how to implement national strategies on a local and municipal level. Over the years there have been a number of governmental initiatives within the fields of lifelong learning and flexible learning in Sweden. Experience shows clearly that top-down implementation of strategies tends not to survive, unless they are adopted in legislation or accompanied by large sums of money.

For an institution like CFL, with the objective of supporting development in local and regional organisations there are three main areas to focus on:

- Knowledge development
- Dissemination and implementation of knowledge
- Bring about change within these organisations

A very common way of working when trying to achieve these goals is to use the following tools:

- Funding of local projects to develop new knowledge
- Dissemination of knowledge through reports, seminars and web-publishing
- Crossing your fingers and hope for change to come about as a result of solving the two above tasks

The main task of these three is without doubt the third and last task. If nothing happens despite of all efforts with projects and dissemination, the authority has failed. Alas, experience shows that the above-described way to work is not very efficient. In short the main reasons for this are:

- Published reports and web information are not sufficient methods of dissemination
- Results from local projects are hard to disseminate as generally applicable
- Organisations are not keen on reading about and learning from other projects

The main problem with the above-mentioned way of working is that vital experiences from local activities takes a detour over the authority, gets transformed in to a rather abstract form, and is conceived as a top-down activity.

In order to overcome this situation, CFL has introduced a new way of working. Instead of acting as the main distributor of information, CFL now works as a facilitator of a network of networks. A national network of experienced practitioners forms the basis of an “Expert Network” that develops new experienced-based knowledge. A grid of regional and local organisations forms the foundation for local and regional networks that support development in organisations in their area.

The co-operation between local and national networks of practitioners is an essential element in the strategy. The local and regional network provides a very good resource for supporting the change process in an inexperienced organisation. But when it comes to the supply of knowledge and experiences asked for in a developing organisation, the collective knowledge and resources of a national network is needed.

The main principle for networking as a development tool can be described in a number of ways:

From the inexperienced organisation’s viewpoint

The organisation facing the development and change process receives project funding from CFL. The economical support is not aimed at developing new knowledge, but to offer an economic base for the change process for one year.

The organisation is introduced to the actual local or regional network, and is provided with a mentor organisation and / or a physical mentor from a neighbouring organisation. The organisation is also offered access to the practitioners and organisations within the national expert network.

The organisation receives a number of support measures, e g in-house training, seminars and so on. These activities are planned and performed by network members, but funded by CFL.

After a while the organisation begins to get more experienced and implements the new strategies into the regular activities. After some time of practical use of the new ways of working, the organisations role in the network shifts from being a receiver of support and experience to a contributor.

When the organisation has reached a sufficient level of experience, resources from the organisation can be used in order to support new organisations in a more structured way. For this work the organisation receives funding from CFL.

From the viewpoint of the local / regional network

Apart from the function of acting as a vital support for the new developing organisations, the local / regional network also acts a platform for the continuing development of the participants within the network. The network also acts as a platform for continuing seminars, training and local / regional reference group in various activities.

The co-operation within the regional network is not only based in sharing of experience and knowledge. It very often embraces more practical efforts, e.g. learning centre facilities, sharing of course content and so on.

The regional network also works as an interpreter of experience and knowledge from the national network. Much of the input from the national network has to be put into the specific preconditions that apply for the actual region.

From the viewpoint of the national network

In a country like Sweden there is not resources enough to establish a basis for regional knowledge networks. Within the field of flexible learning there are a number of issues that have to be taken into consideration. In order to cover all of these issues, resources have to be gathered on a national level.

The main issue in the national network is that it still is a network of practitioners that define their identity on a local and regional level. This is very important in order to prevent the effect of a top-down perspective. The experience and knowledge presented from and within the network stems from “the field”.

For the participants, the national expert network provides an excellent platform for an ongoing discussion and development on spearhead topics within the field of flexible learning. The contact with regional networks and the developing organisations also provides a direct contact with actual needs and questions in different regions of Sweden.

The national network also has a direct influence on areas of priority for the work of CFL. The national network can also suggest and implement development projects, which then are funded by CFL.

Networking as a development tool has a lot of advantages; it provides a more direct way of disseminating and implementing knowledge, the resources provided answers directly to the needs of the field organisations, it is not conceived of as a top-down way of working, and it also provides a more modern way of co-operation between a national authority and its target groups.

For CFL, the role has changed into being more of a facilitator and co-ordinator. The authority still has a responsibility for quality assurance, and also sees to that the national strategies are fulfilled. But networks of practitioners, who are the ones that in the end have to do the work, design the way in which these strategies are to be fulfilled.