

OPEN LEARNING – EXPERIENCES AND PARADOX

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There will always be aspects of our way of life that is unusual to disagree with. For instance, few people will oppose the idea that good weather during holidays is nice, or that it is a good thing to grant more money to public libraries. Likewise, people seldom disagree with the idea that learning and education is important. Even if somebody should feel that education or learning is not so important for themselves, most people probably will agree that it is a good thing in general, and that learning may lead to prosperity and progress. This unquestionable status makes education a field “blessed” with a rhetoric that is characterized by buzzwords and positive attitudes.

In particular this phenomenon is observed within the field of lifelong learning. “Lifelong learning” is both a basic concept and an ideology for the future knowledge-society. As an ideology, emphasis is on elucidative traits in the future society as well as on the necessity for a holistic and universal perspective on learning. Learning is in other words seen as a necessary condition for development. The ideal notion of learning as an overall valuable activity, underpins the idea of the “learning organization” and “the learning society”.

In higher education, lifelong learning is first and foremost brought to our attention through alternative educational programs, where the focus is on adults who combine education, work and family life. Despite past year’s emphasis on the full-time student, adults doing part time studies are a fast growing group within Scandinavian higher education (Roos & Grepperud 2007). Recent developments and research also suggest that adult students will be even more important in the years to come. Some smaller, Scandinavian university colleges already seem to rely heavily on recruiting adult students, in order to keep up their activity to an acceptable level. Part-time studies are characterized in various ways and goes by different names, and it is quite difficult to follow and get a complete view over the situation. Amongst the terms used to describe the activity within this field we find: distant education, decentralized education, part-time education, flexible learning, flexible education, web-based education, technology supported education, as well as further and continuing education. Despite the fact that the field appears fragmented, this part of the higher education activity is based on a common understanding that openness is advantageous. In Denmark the field is officially termed as “Open education”.

The reasoning and underpinning ideology of openness is both related to access and facilitating. Access is first and foremost about reaching out to adults in terms of recruiting new student groups, or giving non-traditional students “a new chance”. In the Norwegian political context this goal is expressed as: “more knowledge to more citizens”. In addition, this is also about making it possible for adults to complete an education combined with full time work.

Besides access, openness is also about facilitation and teaching. Students are, within this perspective, able to start a desired education whenever, in what way and where they like. Within the most idealistic (and extreme) forms of open learning, all kinds of regulations, control, and structure is seen as an undesirable intervention. Maximum openness and flexibility (or freedom) in the learning process is related to a view on students as being more or less fully autonomous and self regulated. In this perspective, the educational institution plays a less active role in facilitating the learning process.

The open learning rhetoric appears to put forth both a reasonable and an enchanting argument about how higher education should accommodate adult students’ special needs, all inspired by democratic values of social equality. The rhetoric is also under strong influence by the humanistic adult-education tradition, and are partly built on the belief that adults are able to control and regulate their own learning and study behaviour. Different educational theories, models and methods have grown out of the open-learning tradition as a framework. Distant educational institutions (correspondence schools like NKI and NKS in Norway) have always based their pedagogy on the notion of students as self regulated learners. In a context of technological development and increasing importance of open learning, traditional higher education institutions in Norway and the other Scandinavian countries, have developed and tested different models for teaching and learning online. What then, are the results of this open-learning movement in practical education? When it comes to access it is well documented that alternative educational models have contributed significantly to the realization of life-long learning both in ordinary education and in further and continuing education. When adult students are asked why they choose flexible education, their answer is unanimous: this is their only possibility, given the constraints of work

and family life. Consequently, flexible and open-learning models recruit new student groups into higher education. In a survey of adult, flexible students, 45% was first timers in higher education (Grepperud, Rønning & Støkken 2006). Many Norwegian Higher Education Colleges have open and flexible courses as part of their portfolio. In a Swedish study, Roos (2002) interestingly documents that the recruitment-profile to flexible courses managed by local study-centres are different compared to the recruitment-profile in traditional full-time campus courses.

When it comes to openness concerning pedagogical facilitation, the experiences are more ambiguous. A large degree of openness and freedom seems to benefit students with long and relatively recent experiences from higher education. On the other hand, most other groups demand a well organized and structured course-design with a close relation to the teacher/tutor. For the latter group, a high degree of flexibility, implying being left to themselves in their learning process, is an undesirable situation. Research on adult learners in higher education in Scandinavia shows that students especially appreciate and acknowledge the significance of face – to face meetings. Being allowed to get away from home and demanding domestic responsibilities, to meet fellow students and immerse in studies, seem to represent the optimal degree of flexibility for most adult students.

However, this insight is in direct opposition to the open-learning ideology. The less experienced the students are, the more they need and wish for structure and control. The ideology of open learning is confronted by a paradox - openness in access may contradict an open learning process- and no immediate solution seems to be offered.

On the other hand, the fact that adult students need

relatively “firm guidance” is not surprising. This is clearly related to their learning context. When studies are tightly interwoven with other activities in a complex everyday life, the situation will often be experienced as overloaded. This may lead to drop-out. Among factors leading to dropout, three stand out: study-overload, family and work (Grepperud & Rønning 2007). The fact that a course is open or flexible, offers no comfort under such overall conditions.

When study activities challenge the priorities of everyday life, students will be facing dilemmas all the time like: Shall I read or help my children with their homework? Shall I write my assignment or do the dishes? Adult students are dependent on structure, control and discipline in order to keep them on track in their studies. Deadlines and clearly defined tasks help adults to prioritize learning activities, and they are less easily distracted.

One male adult student put it like this: “You know, some time it’s so hard to get going with the reading – that even doing the dishes seems like a joy”.

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