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Does Using Real Cases when Educating Health Managers Enhance Relevance and Learning Outcome?

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Abstract: At The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, a set of courses have been developed to support health managers in their jobs. These courses are available and give 10 study points (equal European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System's european credit points (ECTS)). In these courses, different techniques and approaches have been used, like blended learning, flipped classroom and ordinary lectures. Some of the courses use case work as a part of the pedagogical approach. The cases the students use are developed by the students themselves and they use cases from their own work place. The paper presents the results from a round of interviews that were undertaken with the students. The reasoning for asking the students to choose a case from their own work place is twofold. First, it is to tie the curriculum to a work situation and thereby obtain a relevance for the course back to the work place. Second, it is to enhance the learning outcome from the courses as students are then able to use their own backgrounds to write and analyse the cases. The students are asked about the learning outcome in the courses with the real-life cases, compared to the courses where they have no case work. Our aim is to establish if there is a link between using real-life cases and enhanced relevance and achievement of learning outcomes.

Keywords: "Real life" cases, enhanced learning outcome, relevance, higher education

1. Introduction

A part of the business at The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, is to offer services to the community and to society in general. These services can either be in the form of projects or education. Since these are payed assignments, there is generally a competitive side to this business. Meaning; one wins an assignment in a competition with other providers.

The Health Management program started in 2012 as a national assignment from the Norwegian Directorate of Health after winning the bid. The purpose of the program is to strengthen the competence of existing and potentially new Health Managers in municipality health services. The program aims to enable health managers to lead and manage complex organizations and cooperate across sectors within and outside the municipality. The program is based on the practical work situation of health managers and contains ten different modules concerning personal and team management skills, law, economy and organizational knowledge. Eight of the ten modules are independent of each other.

The customers are municipalities, and the program has been taught in approximately 174 municipalities in Norway (about 50 % of all municipalities in Norway). Since 2012 there has been over 1900 students enrolled in the program. The students themselves do not pay a student fee, in all cases the municipalities cover all expenses together with funding possibilities at the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS).

The program is delivered by The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences together with "Fagakademiet" (offering education and training for employees in municipalities and public sector) and "Ressurssenter for omstilling i kommunene" (RO) (an office for offering advice to municipalities in different types of cases). The University is responsible for the academic content and Fagakademiet and RO has contact with the municipalities and ensures the connection between academia and work life in municipalities.

In this study we investigated the benefits of utilizing the students' own background from work in the form of cases studies. The mandatory assignment had the restriction that the case had to come from their own work life. Our research focused on exploring how students perceived using their own workplace as a basis for their assignment with regards to two factors; relevance and achievement of learning outcomes.

Relevance is here defined as "if students can use what they discover/develop during their assignment in their work life". The learning outcome is about if this has contributed towards an enhanced understanding and experienced learning.

In this paper we first present the theory we have based our research on, then we present and argue for our choice of methodological approach to collecting data. Our analysis and discussion is then based on the respondent's feedback before we conclude and present our suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical backdrop

Here we will present the theory we used to inform our study. The major themes are social constructivism and adult learning. We also focus on reflection and reflections' role in learning.

It is important to facilitate ways for students to learn from and with others (both lecturers and peers). We embrace cognitivist Lev Vygotsky's idea about learning (cognitive functions) originating in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Social interaction and the interpretation of external stimuli are what lays the ground for the learning process. Vygotsky also claimed that learning is a collaborative process. He also distinguished between the "actual" level and the "potential" level of development; the "actual" level being where the learner (student/pupil) can solve problems, and the "potential" is where he/she can reach in collaboration with lecturer/teacher and/or peers. The latter is called "the zone of proximal development".

To support collaborative learners, it is important that one facilitates an understanding of the individual learning related to the group learning. Learning from others also mean that some have to share their experiences. The American pragmatist John Dewey (1938) has advocated for utilizing the learner's own experiences (the learner here being the students). Building on one's own experiences and background means that not only can peers learn from each other, but they can relate the learning to their own experiences to also support the experienced learning outcome.

Supporting the learning processes by introducing activities in the classroom and not only relying on one way lectures, can be beneficiary. David A. Kolb (1984) presents the experiential learning cycle where experiences and reflecting upon the experiences play an important role.
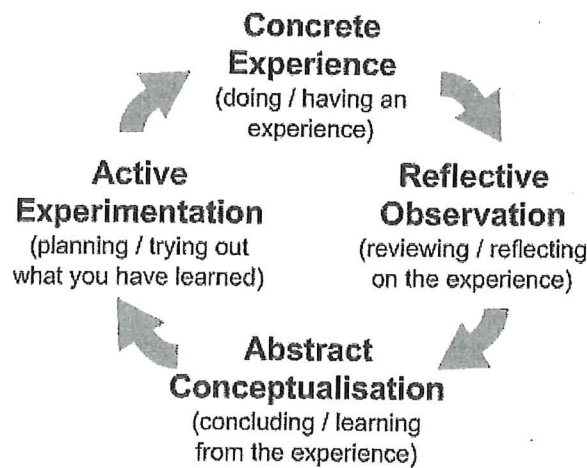

Concrete Experience
(doing / having an experience)

Active Experimentation
(planning / trying out what you have learned)

Reflective Observation
(reviewing / reflecting on the experience)

Abstract Conceptualisation
(concluding / learning from the experience)

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle (retrieved from: www.simplypsychology.com)

Having an experience can be followed by reflecting on the experience. The reflecting can end in a conceptualisation of what one learned from this experience. It is then possible to feed this into a new action where one can test out what one has learned. With each new experience, the student can enter the cycle again.

The reflection that Kolb refers to is also what Donald Schön is discussing when he describes the "reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1987, Schön, 1991) . Reflection is the key to learning and it transforms theory into knowledge (Filstad and Blåka, 2007). Reflection can be done in action, on action and on action in action. Reflection processes after an action, like in Kolb's experiential learning cycle above, is also an important key for

learning. The military often use so called After Action Reviews (AAR) (von der Oelsnitz and Busch, 2006) in order to learn and thus follow the steps in Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

Reflection processes can also start prior to an action. In Kolb, reflection upon how a new action can be formed, can be valuable with regards of the learning outcome from the new action or experience. Cowan (2006) also refer to reflection prior to an action as supporting the learning outcome.

Reflecting can be done in several ways, for instance, by writing. Jennifer Moon (2006) refer to learning journals as a way of reflecting by writing. How the reflections upon an experience evolve over time may be substantial (Vold, 2011, Moon, 2006). This reflecting can also – in collaboration with peers – support sense making (Weick, 1995, Marz and Kelchtermans, 2013) from the experiencing.

This collaboration in order to make sense of experiences is described within the field of adult learning. Adults learn by being involved and included (Knowles, 1984, Knowles, 1970, Knowles, 1990). Jarvis, Holford and Griffin claim that by this involvement one lays the ground for engagement and ownership (Jarvis et al., 2003). By letting students bring their cases and experiences from their own work life and discuss and make sense of them in collaboration with peers who may (or may not) have similar experiences (or secondary information about similar cases), one can discuss and reflect with peers to enhance an understanding and form solutions to problem areas.

Using experiences from one's own work life, discussing and reflecting with peers and lecturer, supports the learning process, would suggests that assignments from the students' own work life would be a support toward enhancing the learning outcome.

3. Method of Inquiry

Here we will argue for our choice of data collection method.

We had limited time to collect the data, hence, the choice of a mix of structured and semi-structured interviews. This means that we followed a structured interview guide(Dalen, 2011, Schensul et al., 1999) but allowed follow up questions where we got answers that needed elaborating. Structured interviews allowed us to quantify the answers and makes it easy to test for reliability (McLeod, 2014). However, structured interviews generally lack the details that is possible to unveil in a less structured interview. Hence, our approach of allowing follow up questions.

The study is based on data from structured interviews with 6 students. The students are 6 of 12 students that have passed and taken all 8 modules. The 6 students were randomly chosen with no attention to gender or age.

The interviews were conducted using a structured interview guide. However, there were made room for comments so that we would have the opportunity of comparing data.

Data were then collected, and the different student's answers were compared in order to see if we could find any coherence in their responses. The respondents were invited to review the transcripts from their interviews, but all declined. However, the interviewer briefly summarized her understanding of the responses, shared this summary with the participants, and all summaries were approved. This can be compared to a member check as described in Guba and Lincoln (1989).

4. Analysis and Discussion

The respondents were unanimous regarding the learning outcome from utilizing one's own workplace as a basis for the mandatory assignments. They claim to find it important for their learning outcome. Also 5 of 6 respondents found it easy to relate their worklife to the theory from the courses. This is supported in the theory of utilizing one's own background and experiences, advocated by John Dewey (Dewey, 1938, Dewey, 2005).

All of the respondents found it interesting to discuss their peer's assignments. This collaborative approach to making sense (Weick, 1995) will support the students' development (Vygotsky, 1978). The respondents all

reported on relevance, as they were all able to relate the theory to situations in their own organization. Examples of comments are: "I was a bit uneasy as I was confronted with my own leadership style" and "it made me safer". These reflections indicate that the learners have evolved and become more self-conscious.

Even if the study participants have different work places, they work within the same main area (health) and can thus draw on each other's experiences and expertise. Also, some experiences shared may be perceived as less relevant directly to one's work performance, but still seem interesting as they contribute toward an expansion of one's area of expertise. Some respondents reported on improving their understanding of known problems, and becoming aware of other problems and their significance. This may be problem area that needs to be solved and to also then have "tools" developed that are useful towards solving it, by discussing with lecturer and peers, are reported as invaluable.

Some students are from the same work place and report on this being an advantage for them as they easier can implement changes back in their organizations (Filstad and Blåka, 2007).

The students report on learning different ways of solving problems. "New input to complex situations" is a citation from one of the interviews. This support the sense making (Weick, 1995) and also the collaborative learning towards the learners "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

Students' responses also included steps towards securing competency development in their own workplace as a benefit from their study, that not only stems from the collaborative learning that came from discussion stimulated by the cases, but also from the meta-learning from the education itself (Filstad and Blåka, 2007).

5. Conclusion

The respondents differed in what each individual pointed toward as contributing to their learning. However, all participants were unanimous in concluding that it was invaluable to use their own work place and cases from their own worklife as basis for the mandatory assignment. Using these real-life cases was noted to contribute toward their development and enhanced learning outcome.

The respondents reported on enhanced understanding of their own work place, increased recognition of problems they should be addressing, and being better able to perform and contribute in their workplace. These positive outcomes participants claim came about not only from lectures, but also from the utilization of their own experiences from their own workplaces in their course.

The next step will be to increase the number of respondents, both with regards to participants who have completed more of the modules, but also an increased number of respondents from each of the modules. There is also planned a survey which may (or may not) discover if there is a statistical coherence and correlation between the use of own experiences and background on one side, and learning outcome and the different issues raised in the theoretical backdrop for this paper.

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