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Students as Co-Developers of Courses in Higher Education

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Abstract: At The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, there has been offered a series of courses for Health Managers. The courses were originally developed as a response to a demand from the Norwegian Directorate of Health to make Health Managers and municipalities across Norway able to handle a Health organisation reform called "Samhandlingsreformen" – the interaction reform of Health Care in Norway. The municipalities are paying customers, and were originally offered four different courses. However, after the agreed courses were held, the demand for more courses became apparent. At this time, it was important to seek to cooperate with the health managers in order to develop the next modules. In addition, the students from the previous modules suggested new areas where they felt they needed more input. From a service point of view, this can be compared to principles of value co-creation from the domain of Service Dominant Logic. Utilizing the input from the students, new modules were developed and executed. The research presented in this paper, show the results from survey and interviews with the students regarding how they perceived to be co-developers and how this has affected their learning outcome from the new modules (courses).

Keywords: value co-creation, service dominant logic, co-developing, learning outcome

1. Introduction

The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences offer courses/modules to Health Managers in several municipalities in Norway. The original assignment was to deliver four modules. Today there are ten courses offered to Health Managers. The courses get great feedback and the students are reporting on relevant courses that contributes substantially towards execution of their jobs.

It is also important to explain that the courses/modules are not provided at campus, but where students are; in their different municipalities and close to their work places. Unlike conventional studies where students travel to a campus, the lecturers travel out to where the students are. Also a very practice based study is offered expand more on this. One of the criteria that has been stressed was that it had to be relevant towards their work execution.

In order to deliver the education, it was decided to organize the work as a project with the delivery of education as a project goal and a given end (Andersen 2008). However, some of these projects enters a new phase when the delivery has been going on for a while, as the courses sometimes end up as study programs at The Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences.

The project group has consisted of lecturers, representatives from the University, and the two other cooperating organizations (Fagakademiet and RO – resource center for reorganizing of municipalities) and representatives from the municipalities – the latter were also students.

The development of the six new modules is the result of a rapid process. The courses were developed because of a detected demand with the student representatives. The approach of involving the students in the development not only ensures that they can suggest content, but also comment on and evaluate the course content.

It is increasingly important for us as an educational provider to serve the public with relevant and useful education. This will help our customers in their work life, and it will help us stay a contender in the market of education. The project group decided that the students were to utilize their own backgrounds and work places as a basis for their assignments. This would aid the process of providing the relevance that the students were seeking.

Adults in a work life will also have the best and closes relationship towards what the gaps are in their work place. They need to identify their competency gap and explain this to the educational provider. This is sometimes difficult to articulate, as it can be quite difficult to pinpoint the exact boundary of the problems.

Having students working on assignments from their own workplace, may have aided the process of this articulation. Their presentations and their assignments may also have aided their lecturers in understanding the competency gap. Therefore, even if they do well on their assignments in their courses, and they understand and make use of the theory and other input back in their work life, they may discover new areas that should be addressed.

The research for this paper has been to seek to unveil; how much have the students contributed towards co-developing the new courses/modules? Both from their point of view, and from the lecturers point of view.

2. Theoretical backdrop

In this part we will present the theory that has informed our study.

Linda Lai (2013) presented her Competence Mobilization Model which gives an overview of the possible competence gaps in an organization. The used competence is much smaller than the total competence in the organization. At the same time, the requirements may lay outside what is both the used competence and the total competence in the organization. Hence, there will be a gap of knowledge that needs to be filled. This learning need can be filled with either new recruited people with the right knowledge, or the members of the organization can be educated to fill the need (Filstad and Blåka 2007).

It also generally takes a while before new workers are socialized, and can contribute one hundred percent (Filstad and Blåka 2007, Irgens 2011).

When adults are to learn they are very often driven by a purpose. The learning has to directed towards a need, in order to perform in their work, for instance (Irgens 2011).

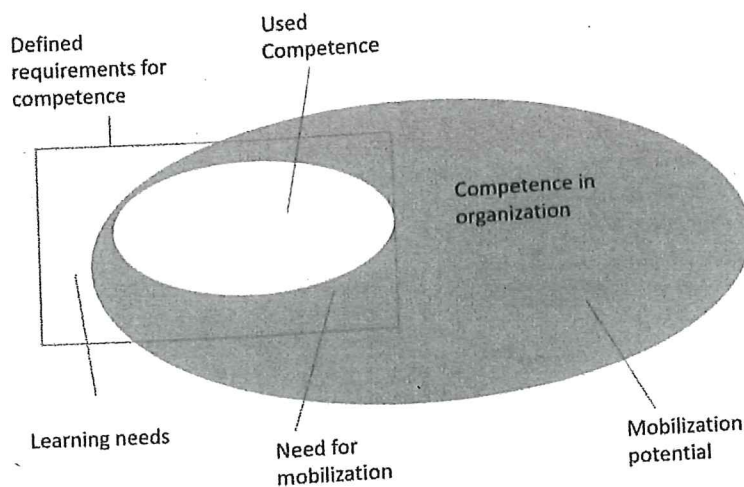


Figure 1: Competence Mobilization Model (Lai 2013)

Learning together with peers is described in social constructivism (Vygotsky 1978). Together with peers and with supervision from lecturer it is possible to reach ones "zone of proximal development".

Adults in a work life can use their backgrounds and own work experience in their learning process. To build on their own backgrounds and work life (Dewey 1938, Dewey 2005, McLelland and Dewey 2008) will support their learning process. David A. Kolb (1984) has described the experiential learning process.

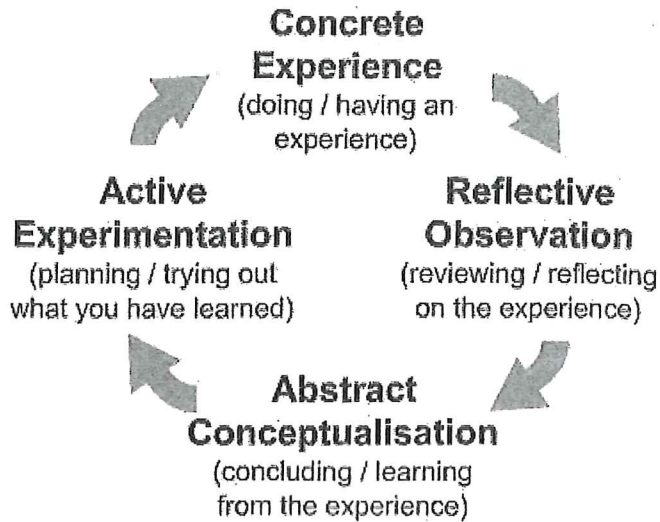
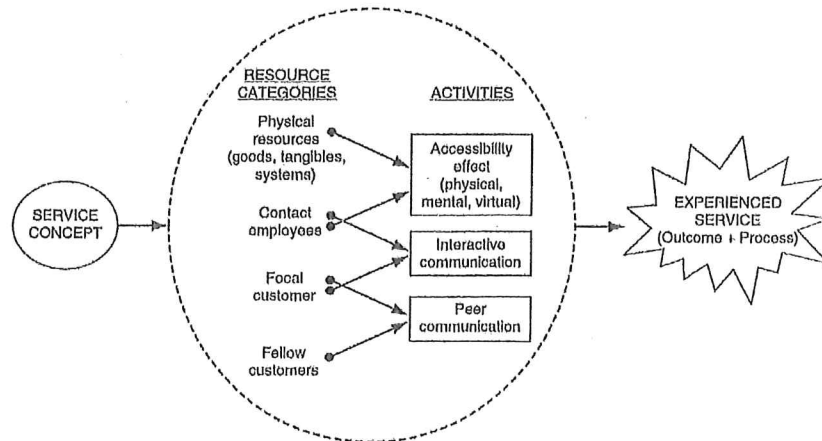


Figure 2: Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984)

Reflection is the bridge that support the learning process (Filstad and Blåka 2007). The reflection processes in Kolb's experiential learning cycle is similar to Donald Schön's descriptions of reflection in action and on action (Schön 1987, Schön 1991). The reflection is meant to understand what has happened and what it meant, and also how to make sense of the learning from the experience. Then you can test out how this can be used in a new experience (Boud et al. 1985).

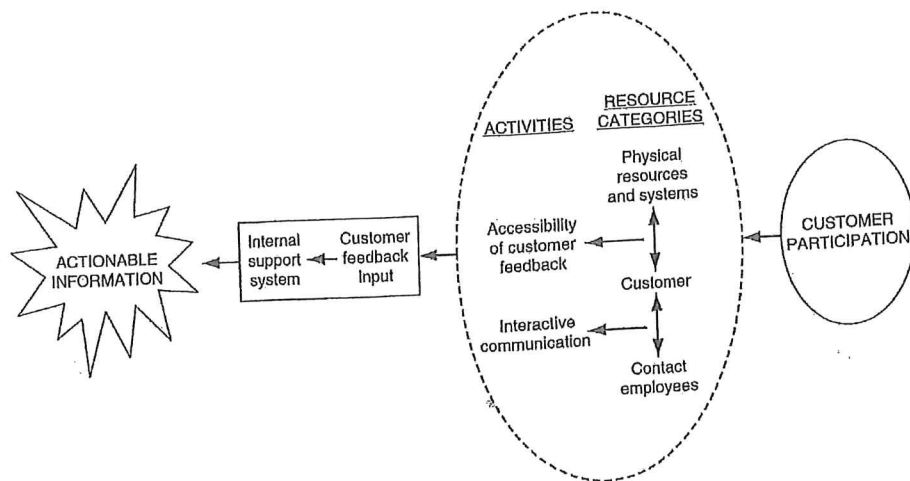
Adults learn best when they have a purpose, when they see a value from the education (Knowles 1970, Knowles 1984, Knowles 1990). For us as an educational institution, this means that we can view the education we deliver is a service. We provide a service (education) to customers. The "customer"-term can be twofold; the student is a customer, but also the company that the student is working at (or will be working in). It is important to serve the community and uphold the generic studies that will serve the public. But it is also important to offer relevant education to a work life. Assuming that the workers are a part of the work on finding the competency gap or the learning need, they are the closest to contribute towards the development of relevant courses that the work life demands. Since this will benefit, not only us as an educational provider, but also the work life, this process can be viewed as a value co-creation process (Grönroos 2012, Grönroos 2015). The figure below show the value co-creation process for the customer.



Note: The area inside the dotted circle denotes the value co-creation platform. Depending on how actively and successfully it is used by the parties, the co-created value effect differs.

Figure 3: Value co-creation: value for the customer (Grönroos 2015)(From original source: (Grönroos 2012)

The process also co-creates value for the service provider – here: the university as a provider of relevant courses.



Note: The area inside the dotted circle denotes the platform for value co-creation. The level of customer feedback input varies, depending on how effectively the firm manages to make use of it.

Figure 4: Value co-creation in service: value for the service provider (Grönroos 2015) From original source: (Grönroos 2012)

The education needs to be perceived as relevant. Simpson refer to two different views on what relevance is regarding education (Simpson 2013). One of the views are about education as “producing” “excellent human beings”. The second view is about “preparing the students of the task of work life and acquaint him with the responsibilities of civic life” (Simpson 2013). Simpson further points to a need of a general discussion of the meaning of “relevance” as it “defines the mission of higher education and shapes the relationship between the higher education and society” (Simpson 2013). This implies that it also need to be a connection between the environment and the knowledge supplier in order for the latter to offer knowledge that the environment need in order to solve the tasks it has and to stay competitive in a market.

Another issue is that some teachers have issues with too much “interference” from others. “Others” being peers or students as it may interfere with the teachers authority. As Rose and Shevlin claim: “Concerns about teacher authority may be closely related to the confidence of individual teachers” (2010). Teachers do need to maintain the respect of the students they teach. However, it is possible to empower the teachers in order to obtain the confidence needed.

Time constraints are also something that may prevent the teachers from changing their standard ways of working. New ways of approaching teaching will require time to plan, organize classes and approve curriculum (Rose and Shevlin 2010). Also any student involvement may be perceived as extra effort, rather than being an integral part of what they do. Another constraint may be the agility and awareness the teacher has to have towards confusion and possible tensions (Rose and Shevlin 2010). It is important to secure a correct perception of the curriculum and also to maintain *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) during activities in order to secure the learning outcome.

3. Method of Inquiry

To collect data we chose to interview students and faculty staff. The interviews were executed using a semi-structured interview guide with predetermined open-ended questions (Dicicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006, Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016). It was important to keep focus as well as opening for pursuing interesting comments made by the respondents as this might be contributing to enlighten our study. It was important to get as much feedback from the interviewees as possible.

Also our own observations have been important data material (Gummeson 1988, Mulhall 2003). The ones that are closest to the development process regarding courses are the ones lecturing at the courses. They receive the feedback directly and this feedback may have played an important role in their further process regarding suggesting new courses. Their observations have played an important role in development process. Our investigations are around how much this feedback from the students they include in their development of the new courses.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The students' feedback has been in several forms. The students were encouraged to write reflection notes from each lecture day. The faculty staff collected and evaluated these reflection notes. In some of these reflection notes, the students reflect not only of the learning outcome, but also the gap they sense between what they know and what they need to know (by e.g. learning). The students reported to a certain extent that they have uncovered areas that they lacked expertise on, and needed upgrading. This gap can be an indication of where the focus may be directed with regards to new courses or modules. Linda Lai's (2013) Competence Mobilization Model is a visualization that shows the learning need. The way the organization chooses to acquire this can be by educating the existing workforce.

Faculty staff and project group reported on revising the course descriptions once a year mostly based on feedback from students and lecturers. The lecturers report on this as "influence" rather than co-development. However, communicating the changes and that these changes are based on the feedback from the students, they do signal that they pay attention to their input. Having their "voice" heard and that their input was taken into consideration, was a form of acknowledgment. This acknowledgement was not as strong as involvement and being included (Filstad and Blåka 2007).

New courses may have to high expectations tied to them with regards to content and organization. This often results in dividing the courses into several courses (two or three). This is done after asking the students about input. One example that is mentioned is the course/module "Innovation and welfare technology". Here the faculty staff has developed a course, based on input, but covers a lot of curriculum. They may have to divide the course into several courses. The way they adapt the courses to what the learning need is, the lecturers' professional experience and the acuteness of the students' needs.

Most of the teachers in these courses have been eager to adopt different types of student input and student activity. However, some teachers have also only been lecturing with a minimal input from the students. The courses are still being developed using the student input as to what they need and see as beneficial for their work life.

5. Conclusion

The education for Health Managers has received a lot of positive feedback. From the order of four courses to the expansion of ten courses/modules (per 1.2.2018) is a co-development between the lecturers, the representatives of the cooperating offices and the university, AND the students. The way the co-operating organizations and the university has included the student input in the development of the courses/modules beyond the four original courses/modules.

Another issue about the uniqueness is that the education is where the students are. The lecturer travels to an area where the students are.

The way the students have been active and communicated their needs has inspired the development of new courses/modules. This has also contributed to maintaining the study relevant for the students.

5.1 Further research

Several studies have been developed to meet perceived needs in the market. However, it is not many studies at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences that have been developed like the education of the Health Managers (from an order of four to the current ten courses/modules). In order to establish the exactness of how extensive the influence from the students are, more studies are needed. Also the awareness of the influence of the students can be better recorded. If there should occur further needs, an extensive study should be undertaken with a focus on how the contributions from the different parties.

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