Cogenerative Learning and Reflective Leadership

This is a paper in progress. We are completing a major project and will have important concluding seminars just before the conference in Durban. It will probably mean that we will be able to develop and deepen our contribution to the conference. We apologize that the figures are not quit in order in this paper...

Abstract: Researchers from University West in Trollhättan, Sweden, are currently participating in an ESF-funded project on work-integrated learning and reflective leadership. The project, Learning in the working life (Swedish acronym LiA), includes 10 local municipalities and involve over 600 managers and 10 000 employees. The LiA project support the development of reflective teams, organizing learning and the development of learning organizations.

The purpose of the paper is to describe and reflect on some of the complexity and its inherent challenges for cogenerative learning and community based research and the balance between adaptative and development-oriented strategies. Collective and cogenerative learning processes requires the participating individuals to critically reflect on their own conceptualisation and to appreciate contradicting perspectives in order to cogenerate a mutual understanding (i.e. Freire, 1996; Bateson, 1999; Schön, 1995; Engeström, 2001; Ellström, 2005). Cogenerative learning can thus be described as occurring on two levels: on a collective level where a mutual overall understanding is generated by a variety of perspectives, and on an individual level where a context specific conceptualisation is renegotiated in the light of a new abstracted representation.

Throughout the project and by interacting with different stakeholders, researchers from University West are conducting action research. The main research perspectives are concerning the aspects of durable learning structures, participation, empowerment and leadership.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the context of the labour market, education and competence development has a long history of being a part of external knowledge sharing. Learning in and for the working life is often seen as a parallel activity to the actual working activity, and has a tradition of being placed in a context outside the work place - often in the form of a course or a lecture administrated by external consultants. In recent times, the notion of work place learning has begun to shift from focusing the individuals’ learning and competence development to specific needs of the work place. This means to focus more on the existing knowledge among the employees and how to develop an organization to enable learning according to a collective need. The latter is what Senge (1990) refers to as a learning organization. It focuses an approach to situated and action based learning theories (i.e. Lave & Wenger 1991; Reason & Bradury, 2006) and strengthens the motivation and the ability to reflect, both individually and collectively.

…cogenerative learning produces local theory as a basis for collective action. We believe this model to be more generally relevant where people with different expertise and frames of reference collaborate in creating a common field that makes possible collective action. The key is overcoming the expert’s monopoly in defining what is possible for others. Cogenerating local theory opens up new possibilities for the possible. (Elden & Levin, 1991, p. 140-141)

This approach to cogenerative learning connects to the notion of work-integrated learning (WIL), developed in higher education. In Sweden, WIL is often regarded as a phenomenon emancipated from a collaborative approach, emphasizing several stakeholders, where learning is defined as a collective endeavour. The editors of a recent published anthology from University West argue that the most important starting point for the learning that is captured in and through the term work-integrated learning is that no actor is interconnected with others
unaffected. All encounters and relations can thus be regarded as a kind of event that makes something with the contradictors, an encounter with the potential of change. (Lagrosen, Lund Snis & Nehls, 2010).

Here, WIL is not regarded as just an ideology for effective learning, by integrating theory and practice. The editors emphasize the possibilities of societal change and development and argue that WIL enables processes of cogenerative learning through inter-professional and inter-institutional communication (Perneman, 2010). With initiative by the Swedish government, University West is commissioned to develop forms for work-integrated learning as part of the work with pedagogical renewal of higher education. WIL is therefore an important field of research in this university, engaging about 50 researchers from different disciplines, forming a research centre called Learning In and For the New Working Life (Swedish acronym LINA).

LINA is currently engaged in an EU-funded project named *Learning in the Working Life* (Swedish acronym LiA). The aim of the project is to support the development of learning organizations and reflective leadership within ten regional municipalities in western Sweden. The project is greatly influenced by a prior project, *Mötesplats Ljungskile*. The main idea of the project was to enable small companies to gain new knowledge and support participatory networks to strengthen their abilities of development and learning (Perneman, 2011).

**The LiA Project**

The notion and ambition of supporting processes of cogenerative learning, by enabling the development of learning spaces within the context of the work place, instead of seeking inspiration and knowledge from external consultants, led to the idea of the LiA project. One
of the central values of the LiA project is that learning should be situated within the organization, where the need for knowledge is collectively formulated and identified. Further, the learning processes need to be facilitated reflectively, to endorse empowerment and participation among the participants of the organisation. One of the premises of the LiA project is therefore to regard organisational development and learning as a dynamic interaction between organisational structures and its inherent processes. A reflective leadership is suggested to signify an important role to enable and negotiate this dynamic interaction.

The focus in the LiA-project is to support middle managers to develop understanding and tools for how to learn in an ever changing working context. This means to support the development of what we will call learning spaces in many different ways within the work place, where managers and co-workers could have the possibilities to reflect and to problematize their understanding and actions of the working context.

Most of the municipalities are strongly committed to peripheral projects working on improving, for them, significant issues or long term visions. For these participating municipalities, the LiA project serves as a catalyst for change, integrating the LiA activities into the on-going overall projects as a complement and to generate effects of synergy. For some participating municipalities the LiA activities serve as a starting point for cogenerative learning and future collaboration within and between surrounding municipalities.

As mentioned, the participating municipalities and managers, accordingly, have different incentives underlying their involvement in the LiA project. Some are occupied in long term projects, and integrates the activities derived from LiA as catalysts for change, focusing on
parts of their overall activities (i.e. reflective meetings and networking activities). While some municipalities participate with the ambition of strengthening their organizational culture, regarding reflective learning and communication. However the ambition or motive of participation, the municipalities and their managers are carrying out the process of learning and reflection by, quite simply, acting and reflecting on their actions (i.e. Schön, 1995).

**METHODOLOGY**

Throughout the project and by interacting with different stakeholders, researchers from University West are conducting research in planning, in conducting and in the follow up. The LiA project can, in this sense, be regarded as a project using an *action based approach* in designing and realizing the different activities derived from the participating administrations’ needs and interests (Tiller, 2009). Therefore the LiA activities may differ in emphasising different focal points and approaches regarding how to generate the most significant support in relation to the overall needs and objectives of the participating municipalities and the administrations. To enable this process of learning and development, the LiA project supports the participants by collaborative activities within a network of lecturers and researchers from several Universities and via LiA affirmed consultants, specialised in organisational development.

The main research questions are concerning the aspects of participation, learning and leadership, and how these aspects are shaped in the various activities and sub projects in LiA. The research questions are:

- How are durable learning structures established?
- How is participation and co-creation encouraged? (empowerment)
- How is leadership shaped and developed?
The organisation of the research activity is based on a notion of significant events and dialogue seminars with key stakeholders to approach the complexity of the various cultures, structures and processes constantly developing within and between the participating municipalities and administrations. A main challenge is to design and develop ways to grasp these most significant events and manage to reflect and analyse the empirical data gathered (Svensson et al., 2002). The overall design of the research process is therefore based on interaction and integration with the majority of activities constituting LiA.

**Figure 1.** Phase 1 consisted of analysing sub projects, phase 2 consisted of an overall analyse in different research seminars and phase 3 consists of meta analysis. This will be some of the material for an overall meeting with participants from the significant events/projects in late May 2013.

This interactive approach calls for complex administration and commitment due to differing motives and competencies among the key participants. The cogenerative aspect of the research methodology applied, rests on the notion of inclusion and reliance as prerequisites for co-creation and participation. This implies that dialogue becomes an important function in the daily activity of the research process. The documented events and conversations are, moreover, reflected on collectively during regular research seminars (focus groups), where
committed participants and researchers meet with the intention to abstract context specific conclusions to a more expansive understanding (Engeström, 2001).

THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

WiL, in a professional context, emphasizes the integration of learning in everyday work, i.e. the dialectical relationship between adaptive patterns of behaviour/learning and the potential of development. Ellström (2005) describes workplace learning as a balance between two different logics in which development-oriented learning occurs as a result of a critical approach towards custom and routinized skills and actions at work, and where adaptive-oriented learning can be seen as a necessary process to deal with a changing context and to enable action in relation to necessary work related tasks (Ibid). These different processes occur in relation to each other. As Lave and Wenger argues: “learning is never simply a process of transfer or assimilation: Learning, transformation, and change are always implicated in one another, and the status quo needs as much explanation as change.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). The development-oriented learning process often leads to knowledge that eventually form the basis for new but "prospective" routinized actions. When these actions meet contradictions of any kind they can be re-reflected upon in a new perspective, which, in turn, may enable a new action and new patterns of thought. The learning that is enabled by this dialectical process is what Engeström (2001) conceptualises as expansive learning. It contains a constant interpretation of the surrounding structures as well as a restructuring of attitude towards them.
One way to understand the prerequisites for organizational development is by trying to grasp how this dynamic takes place. To try to identify the variance of individual actions within a given context and its generated structures; and to study how the context evolves, or organizes itself, around this dynamic. Engeström (2001) uses the concept of contradictions as an object of study. He argues that a contradiction is not to be understood as a problem, rather as a tension between (for example) a structure and an individual motive which calls for either a development of structures or an adaption of actions in regard to these structures (ibid). These negotiations and reorganizations may be more or less vibrant, but they form a basis for learning: adaptative- and/or development-oriented (Engeström, 2001; Ellström, 2005). Further, this reorganisation within a given context is what Lave and Wenger conceptualises as the processes of legitimate peripheral participation, the learning processes of the participants within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2006).

In networks of interacting communities of practice, different perspectives and accumulated rules and artefacts may serve as a source of complexity, as well as a possibility of innovation. It creates a need of translation (or meta-reflection) and negotiation between the interacting activities - which may serve as a potential resource for collaborative and generative aspects of
learning and development (Engeström, 2001). Collective and cogenerative learning processes imply the negotiation of a set of understandings to a specific phenomenon, and the way a new collective understanding enables a united approach to act. It requires the participating individuals to critically reflect on their own conceptualisation and to appreciate contradicting perspectives in order to cogenerate a mutual understanding (Freire, 1996; Elden & Levin, 1991). Cogenerative learning can thus be described as occurring on two levels: on a collective level where a mutual over all understanding is generated by a variety of perspectives; and on an individual level, where a context specific conceptualisation is renegotiated in the light of a new abstracted representation.

Experiences and the practice aspects are fundamental for work-integrated learning. The dynamic nature of the process is affected by how and to what degree a context-specific and a practice emanated knowledge is integrated with theories. The meeting of different perspectives contribute to an ability to critically relate to habitual actions and patterns of thought, and this process can be further enhanced by an environment that enables development. An environment with sustainable structures for learning and development (on both an individual- and on an organizational level) is fostered by a collective and common vision and goal orientation in order to identify and conceptualise the organization's most significant potential for change and development. To enable these learning and development processes in the context where they are present is therefore regarded as a prerequisite for experiential- and work integrated learning.

This gives us a figure where we see the connection and tension between practice and reflection.
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Even though the research activity is currently on-going, initiating its final phase of analysis, some reflections concerning the conditions for cogenerative learning may be interesting to explicate. Although the LiA project is complex to grasp, as a whole, some indications of cogenerative learning is starting to appear in varying forms of communities of practice within different sub projects. The varying forms are indicating distinct dimensions, or phases, of participation and cogenerative learning.
During the current state of analysis there are three different dimensions of cogenerative learning appearing among the sub projects of LiA: Developing a mutual culture; Developing collaborative networks; and Developing logical structures. These dimensions are corresponding to what Svensson (2002) expresses as the:

“three central processes or activities that are characteristic for communities of practice: (1) Mutual Engagement, where members in various manners pays attention and give interest to whatever is in common in the community. (2) The Negotiation of Joint Enterprise stresses the fact that available resources and boundaries must not be perceived as static, but rather as objects of constantly ongoing debates, interpretations, and change. Finally, a community is characterised by its (3) Shared Repertoire, where the mutual history constitutes the foundation for knowledge of shared norms, tools, language genres etc. that distinguishes the insider from someone outside or in the periphery of the community. (Svensson, 2002, p. 36)

**Developing a Mutual Culture and Mutual Engagement as Cogenerative Learning**

The first dimension concerns the development of a mutual and collectively shared culture regarding learning and development. This dimension holds the cogeneration of an organisational vision and the identification of central values and purposes for collaborative development. One of the challenges is to summon the heterogeneity of the organisation and develop a leadership that enable conflicting understandings to approach a mutual area of interest.

One of the sub projects in LiA, a social service administration, is based on the notion that every participant, from executive director to branch head, need to share a common understanding of the administrations overall purpose to be able to develop a sustainable and
cogenerative learning organisation. The entire management of the administration, 70
managers, entered the LiA project by collectively reflecting on, and defining their current
working situation and how they would like the situation to be in the future.

Without any overall project affecting their participation in LiA, the administrations’ ambition
is to generate a collective culture and approach do developmental learning and
communication. With great emphasis on participation the LiA activity preceded with a
general focus on dialogue and communication, to approach a mutual understanding and a
mutual objective of interest within the administration. From being presented with ideas and
theories of communication and learning, the participants shortly began stating questions
concerning their own activities at work, defining needs and developmental topics in which
they were interested to research. The heterogeneity in the administrative group, the mix of
every level of management, enabled a large variation of experiences and perspectives to meet
and challenge different proposals and conceptions.

**Developing Networks and Negotiating a Joint Enterprise as Cogenerative Learning**

The third dimension can partly be viewed as a dimension containing processes of
cogenerative learning as acting within the existing structures, and partly as containing
processes of challenging the organisational structures by collaboration with peripheral
activities and organisations. The latter view somewhat enables a new phase of developing a
mutual and collectively shared culture concerning the networking activities.

One sub project has emancipated as collaboration between two participating (entire)
municipalities with mutual learning objectives, to enable a unified professional approach. The
activities supported by LiA, has therefore, been based on the need of collaborative venues for
reflective practice. The two municipalities has developed a central management group to facilitate participation and learning activities amongst the participating administrations between the two municipalities as well as to grasp the learning processes occurring during the LiA activities. The sub project’s premises are that key concepts and values need to be based on a mutual understanding in order to encourage empowerment for sustainable action and collaboration. By enabling learning spaces where different administrations can meet and reflect on mutual topics, different experiences and perspectives are apparent which are regarded as significant prerequisites for developmental learning.

Developing Logical Structures and a Shared Repertoire as Cogenerative Learning

The second dimension holds the cogeneration of strategies and structures to act according to the overall vision. Contradictions within this dimension imply, for example, necessary strategies in relation to knowledge gaps or the generation of sub cultures in contrast to the overall culture. Heterogeneity can in this dimension be regarded as undesirable, affecting strategies to challenge the collective and overall organisational purpose. The leadership can be viewed as enabling logic between purpose and adapted strategies.

When the LiA project was launched, one sub project had already participated in a collaborative partnership for more than ten years. The purpose of the partnership is intra professional learning and consists of the administration of education from eight local municipalities. The activities derived from LiA are therefore to be seen as a continuation of the development of the partnership, and as a catalyst to the collaborative activities based on earlier identified needs.
After developing a network based on the eight executive directors with regular activities for sharing experiences and ideas, such as formal meetings and seminars, the participants developed a mutual interest regarding the question: how to engage the co-workers (teachers and pre-school teachers) in the activity of developing actions based on best practice. This led to a review of peripheral projects working with similar questions, and found one project of special interest. The method used in this project was adapted with a focus on educating the co-workers in the field of observation. The collaborative partnership among the eight administrations of education soon developed a method of their own, based on cross-communal observations and peer reviewing actions. The need for an enabling organisation around this method of observation and peer reviewing led to the current participation in the LiA project.

The activities directed from LiA consists of, partly, to support the development of learning spaces where the approximately 100 principals can generate the structures needed to support the learning processes derived from their co-workers peer review activities, and partly to integrate the activities to the proceeding overall project of a sustainable collaborative network. In short, the LiA activities in this context, consists of supporting the cogeneration of learning spaces by implementing an organisational structure based on two logics – an administrative logic and an developmental logic. By creating one space for each logic the main idea is that issues concerning development and work place learning are to be handled in a space without any concerns about administrative issues or resolutions and vice versa. This is to enable a systematically focused process of developmental concerns.

Addressing the organisation of the eight collaborating administrations, there are some perspectives which are more apparent, namely, the division of labour and the relations of
interpretive power. Throughout their collaborative activities there is an overarching best-practice based ambition affecting heterogeneity, to pragmatically form a united concept of possible strategies. From a participative perspective this suggests that the power of interpretation is located within the group of executive directors who defines the potential next steps in order to generate a learning organisation. Accordingly, this means that the co-workers are set to adjust to a formed concept or model and direct their learning to be able to handle the different activities and actions embedded in the model.

**CONCLUSIONS on Cogenerative Learning and Reflective Leadership**

In the context of the LiA project, cogenerative learning has been conceptualised as a participative and co-creative learning and development process, described through three dimensions. If these preliminary reflections are somewhat correct, the main suggestion regarding organisational development towards a learning organisation would be to cogenerate a mutual understanding of the central values, emphasising the collective activity, and to constantly reflect on the everyday actions in relation to the cogenerated structures. Nevertheless, it would be to over simplify the actual complexity of the dialectic relationship between the three dimensions and the leadership embedded in the balancing of adaptive- and development oriented actions. The three dimensions of cogenerative learning are more likely to be regarded as parallel dimensions, with an action affecting every dimension at the same time. The complexity strengthens with the notion of collaboration with peripheral activities, since, new processes of collaboration demands new cogenerative learning processes to form a basis for mutual understandings, and further, to develop strategies accordingly. The ability and possibility to reflect on this interconnectedness and the effect on developed strategies, in relation to the main activity and its central values, can be considered a part of the challenge of reflective leadership (Ghaye, 2005; 2010). However, reflective leadership should, in this
view, be considered both as an individual as well as a collective endeavour for cogenerative learning.
REFERENCES


