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2004-11-21

NTG-Learn - a new initiative in research, development and knowledge dissemination about learning environments in Equal

During late spring of 2004, the Swedish ESF Council commissioned the Department for Human Work Sciences at the Luleå University of Technology to co-ordinate a national network on learning environments in Equal. A policy and reference group at the national level will be led by Governor Ingegerd Wärnersson, County of Blekinge. The network, consisting of around ten development partnerships in Equal, will work together under a project co-coordinator. Co-ordination will also take place with the research network on informal learning at work and in everyday life, Larena, see www.larena.se. The aim of this memo is to provide an introductory overview of the NTG project and its different tasks.

Equal - a Community Initiative

The Community Initiative Equal runs in all member states and represents an integrated measure to promote European employment policy. In Sweden these activities are co-ordinated by the Swedish ESF Council (www.esf.se) The task is to combat discrimination and counteract exclusion in working life. Each individual's competence and development potential shall be utilised irrespective of gender, age, ethnic affiliation, sexual orientation and possible functional disabilities. The goal is the attainment of working life, typified by diversity, without discrimination and gender inequality. Today in Equal, there are 46 development partnerships, which are described in the new report "46 development partnerships" to combat discrimination and exclusion in working life.

One element of ongoing work is a thematic initiative where representatives of development partnerships meet together with other development players, researchers et al in order to analyse their experiences and formulate these for "vertical influence" and dissemination. Such thematic network activities will be run at both European and national levels. The theme is determined by the Swedish ESF Council in consultation with the working committee of the Monitoring Committee. They will work on development and analytical areas identified in the Swedish Equal programme, as well as other relevant and current areas in discrimination and exclusion in working life in Sweden. Theme groups or networks will involve development partnerships working with similar issues in Equal, as well as develop contacts with researchers and other relevant players and organisations. Politicians and organisational representatives in the Monitoring committee are examples of the latter. One of the areas selected is Learning Environments.

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The theme is how - how can an individual's knowledge and skills, i.e. all that is acquired through studies, work and recreational activities be identified and taken advantage of? Other issues are: how can adult learning be stimulated and taken advantage of? How can validation be made a reality in lifelong learning? How can instruments be formulated for providing guidance for adult employees? What tools are needed for the individual to be able to determine their career paths and competence development? How can experience from Equal contribute to making use of the individual's overall knowledge and skills?

The start of four years of co-operation on learning between researchers and practitioners in working life

- Invisible learning at work and in everyday life needs to be made transparent, says Kenneth Abrahamsson, Visiting Professor at Luleå University of Technology and one of those with principal responsibility behind a major four year initiative in co-operation over learning at working life that is supported by the EU programme Equal.

- Researchers and practitioners will work on identifying and defining learning outside the frameworks, outside educational establishments, and develop concepts and methods to describe learning environments. We will disseminate experiences and build bridges between those at the work place and at research institutions.

The initiative takes place in the form of one of the national thematic groups (NTG) which was started by the development partnerships behind the Equal project, and which is being implemented in municipalities and companies. The aim is to both gather and disseminate experiences from the Equal project, and NTG-Learn, now being formed, and is the second initiative with others to follow.

A national policy and reference for NTG-Learn is being formed, with Governor and former Minister of Schools, Ingegerd Wärnersson, as chairperson.

The Equal project which together with researchers is starting NTG-Learn is active in Klippan, a number of other places in the County of Kalmar, Kista outside Stockholm, Leksand, Gnosjö, Lindesberg, Söderhamn and Piteå. The majority of these are finishing a three year programme during 2004, and this will be followed by new projects starting towards the end of the year.

Both dissemination and deeper reflection

Up to 2008, these different projects will co-operate with researchers in Larena, the research network. The researchers are active at the National Institute for Working Life, universities in Linköping and Örebro, Luleå University of Technology, Jönköping University and its national centre for adult learning (Encell). In total, the research institutions are investing together with the City of Stockholm SEK 6 million and Equal is providing funding of SEK 9 million. On an annual basis over the period 2004-2008, this amounts to SEK 3 million per year.

With these funds, the Equal project and the researchers will together carry out a number of joint activities:

- A joint network and a series of publications will disseminate knowledge and experiences in the area to all concerned.
- Network fora between the Equal project and researchers.
- External seminars, conferences, "learning festivals" around the country.
- Research and development projects to develop tools and methods.

Kenneth Abrahamsson explains that much of this involves developing new forms of dissemination, meeting fora and arenas, in order to give prominence to the importance of learning as a part of different activities, and also to the dissemination of knowledge and experiences. NTG-Lär will also deepen reflection and develop theory concerning what learning is in everyday and working life – and develop methods to make learning outside institutions transparent, through such means as validation.

NTG-Lär will also highlight the conditions to be fulfilled in order to promote learning environments at work, in everyday life and in what are referred to as "local communities".

Extract from the ESF Council's decision

"The Swedish ESF Council has determined to provide under the community initiative Equal, Phase III support to Luleå University of Technology for work in the National Theme Group Partnership for development work in Equal, a sum amounting to SEK 9 million during the period 2004-05-11 - 2007-06-30 on condition that the annual project plan is approved and that requisite joint financing is available. In addition to this amount, joint Swedish financing amounting to slightly more than SEK 6.5 shall be added. The Swedish ESF Council will make a decision annually on further allocation of support for the work of the national thematic groups.

The Swedish ESF Council has appointed Luleå University of Technology to be the secretariat for the thematic working group. As chairperson of the steering group that will lead the thematic work on learning environments, the ESF Council has appointed Ingegerd Wärnersson, Governor of the County of Blekinge. Finally, funding recipients/the secretariat organise and lead the work of the thematic group. The main task of the group is to assess the relevance of plans, results and dissemination measures. Fund recipients/the secretariat are responsible for the involvement of development partnerships wishing to participate in the group's work, as well as link where relevant other players and representatives in the thematic area to the work."

Representatives of the participating development partnerships have had their first planning meeting after the decision in Jonköping on 25 May. A national kick-off conference for the work of disseminating experiences, models and results concerning learning in informal environments took place in Örebro on 25 and 26 August. On 25 August there was an open house for all interested parties and the 26 August was devoted to planning work in the development partnerships making up NTG-Lär. Information on this and other activities during the autumn will be available on the joint web site of Larena and NTG-Learn.

Making the tasks and working forms of NTG-Lär concrete¹

NTG-Lär has six main central tasks in learning at work, in everyday life and in local communities. Which of these areas are closest to its own activity and where/how can we create a "win-win" situation? They are the following:

1. ***Make learning environments transparent***: NTG-Learn wishes to identify and define "Learning outside the academy" and develop concepts and methods describing learning environments. NTG-Learn will examine existing concepts such as learning centres and learning styles. Furthermore, there are reasons to deepen the analysis of the relationship between formal, non-formal and informal learning, as well as analyse the incentives and obstacles to informal learning. NTG-Learn will highlight how learning is developing new social environments and structures. What hidden and open learning exists at workplaces, in daily life and in local communities?
2. ***Deepen reflection and the development of theory concerning learning*** : NTG-Learn will work to deepen the meaning and interpretation of the concept of learning, i.a. by discussing different forms of learning, such as organised learning, spontaneous learning, voluntary/compulsory learning, and "wild-cat" learning. The task also involves clarifying the concept of learning and how it can be differentiated from education and teaching, and linked to the individual's own acquisition of knowledge, experiences and reflection. In what way is learning related to all-round development, does intuitive and hidden learning exist, or shall all learning be characterised by reflection and distance to the learning process?
3. ***Develop methods for documenting informal learning*** : NTG-Learn wishes to develop methods to make both non-formal and informal learning transparent, i.a. by validation, competence portfolios or other methods. NTG-Learn will discuss the criteria for how validation can and should be related to formal education or other, alternative knowledge concepts - and in this context will

build further on international research and praxis within the area, such as National Vocational Qualifications, NVQs in England, RPL (recognising prior learning) in the USA and Canada etc.

4. ***Expand the conditions and environments for learning***: NTG-Learn will also analyse the conditions to be fulfilled in order to promote learning environments and infrastructure for learning at work, in everyday life and in local communities. NTG-Learn will critically analyse and develop concepts such as learning environments, learning organisations and learning regions in order to expand learning in terms of volume, content and quality – and in particular highlight experiences from different Development Partnerships/Equal projects.
5. ***Develop new dissemination models, meeting fora and arenas***: An important part of the work of NTG-Learn is to create new arenas and meeting fora, not only to give prominence to the importance of individual and collective learning processes, but also develop models for disseminating knowledge and experiences. NTG-Learn will examine different dissemination models and discuss the extent to which “ situational” learning taking place in a certain context can be directly transferred to and interpreted in other contexts and other learning environments.
6. ***Influence policy, structures and the institutional conditions of learning***: Finally, NTG-Learn has the same aim as other thematic groups of identifying psychological, organisational and structural obstacles counteracting or making informal learning more difficult. This will take place in both the national policy and reference group, not only in the form of policy analysis and research of different types. Concerning the latter, the dual research area of NTG-Lär should play an important role, not only through its cooperation with learning in the research school at Luleå, but also through co-operation and follow-up tasks with participating research environments, especially Luleå University of Technology, The National Institute for Working Life, CMTO, Encell et al environments.

Listing of possible missions/”Work packages”.

1. Coordination missions/administration

- grant administration
- support to the steering group

2. Meetings -learning and competence support between development partnerships

3. Tools and activity development

- e.g. toolbox

4. External dissemination meetings

- a) Sweden
 - arenas, networks, learning festivals
- b) abroad
 - seminars, conferences

5. Monitoring external world, articles and communication

- site
- editorial office, written publications
- responsibility for sub-studies/reports

6. Research links of Equal

- follow-up projects
- support for doctoral candidates/research schools
- development of methods

Where you think you as partners come in? What can we cooperate over? What funds can your project/research/others contribute “in kind” or preferably in funds where we jointly plan activities and take advantage of joint results. For instance, we create quantity and higher quality if we work together compared with working individually.

Our starting point is that partnership must always be based on a “Win-Win” relationship!

Examples of areas where NTG-Learn wishes to develop its profile

In the application submitted in autumn 2003 to the ESF Council, emphasis was given to the following. There are now reasons to further develop the profile of NTG-Learn not only by focusing on certain areas of application or arenas for change, but also to give prominence to methodological and theoretical perspectives in informal learning. As regards areas of application, particular attention will be devoted to the dynamics in:

Focusing on application areas

- the interaction between work, learning and integration (diversity, anti-discrimination, cultural collisions, unexpected meetings etc)
- the interaction between education, work and learning, as well as (school-working life, but also working life-school)
- the interaction between work, family and learning (everyday learning–parental roles–gender equality–flexibility)

Giving priority to theoretical and methodological aspects

As regards theoretical and methodological aspects, particular attention will be devoted to:

- learning spirals and environments non-linear learning, diagonal learning or zig-zag learning, intensive learning/learning centres, learning in organisational contexts)
- driving force of learning and incentives (motivation to study, interest, curiosity, empowerment, flow)
- certification and documentation of learning (validation, competence portfolios, assessments, diplomas etc)

Taking as a starting point the area of application and theoretical/methodological inputs, focus should also be directed to developing tools and aids to support the processes above. When it comes to learning spirals and environments, methodology of life history could be an aid for giving prominence to the individual's learning routes or learning paths. In this context, there are also good reasons to focus on what the organisational context implies in terms of learning, not only that learning processes can "be injected into work and everyday life", but also that embedded and tacit everyday learning can be identified, stimulated and reinforced.

Incentives and driving forces for learning involve not only studying motivation in adult learning, but also identifying methods which can create greater curiosity, expand horizons or increase the individual's confidence in their own skills.

The certification and validation of learning to a large extent deals with developing methods of comparing knowledge, and describing informally acquired competencies. In this context opportunities for practical applications are plentiful and the preconditions for cooperation with research very good.

Contact persons for further questions:

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(Footnotes)

¹ The current text is a revised and abbreviated version of the application submitted by NTG-Learn in autumn 2003 to the ESF Council. This version contains some clarifications of the profile areas that NTG-Learn will work with.

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