



Educational Organizations' Innovation Activity

Eeva Kuoppala

Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences (Finland)

eeva.kuoppala@mamk.fi

Abstract

Worldwide economic and social changes challenge educational and business organizations to re-design their activity. Innovations are seen as important factors relating to the success in working life. Partly because of strong societal emphasis on innovation activity, also educational organizations have become strongly interested in the topic. The objective of the presentation is to scrutinize the concept of innovation in educational context. What do we actually talk about when we talk about innovations in educational organizations? How we could promote innovation activity in the context of education? The case study is on-going ESF -funded project KINOS (Developing Innovation Competences of Educational Organizations) in Mikkeli, Finland. Its aim is to develop educational institutions' innovation competences and create operations model to promote innovation activity between the different educational organizations and companies at the area. The project is led by Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences. Partner organizations are Mikkeli University Consortium, South- Savo Vocational College and Otavan Opisto vocational school. The goal of the project is to develop multiprofessional and multiorganisational innovation communities and operations model to implement innovation activity in the future. As a conclusion can be presented that the innovation activity requires new forms of collaboration and learning between different kinds of organizations. These new forms of collaboration can be found from the partnerships and co-configuration between working-life partners and educational organizations. Shared objects can promote motivation for collaboration and learning. In the context of education the learning aspect of innovation activity is emphasized. There are several different educational models in Finland relating to so called work-based learning. Although some differences, there are also several similarities, such as communal nature of learning, authentic cases, dialogue, knowledge creation and developmental aspect of activity. These similarities could be kept as key aspects of innovation pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Innovation and innovativeness has become "the mantras" of our time. Everybody and everything should be innovative. They are the words which are used in strategies, national politics and in discourse of business life and employees. Innovation is a word which is loaded with heavy expectations about the future success; without it the business, society or people can't success as well as innovative ones.

But what do we actually talk about when we talk about innovations? Innovation is often defined as an idea, practice or object which is considered to be something new. Innovations can also be seen as solutions which bring economical benefits. Finland's national innovation strategy [1] describes innovation as competitive advantage based on knowledge. In a pedagogical context the process of innovation is important. Innovation is in that sense understood as a process of constantly improving knowledge, which leads to new ideas, further knowledge or practices which are applicable in working life. [2] In other words; innovation is about finding workable solutions and new approaches [3].

Apparently innovations and innovativeness are important from the point of view of society and individual. The purpose of education is to support both. This leads us to the question how we could promote innovativeness in the context of education? ESF -funded project KINOS (Developing educational organizations' innovation competences) in Mikkeli Finland is a one attempt to rise this challenge. In this paper I will first open up some pedagogical perspectives to innovations. Second part focuses on presenting the KINOS -project and conclusions.

2. Innovations in educational context

In an educational context, innovativeness inevitably concerns learning. This leads us to the pedagogical aspects of innovation. The overall aim of innovation pedagogy has been defined as "to contribute to students' innovation competencies". These competencies refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for innovation activities. [4] But what are these competences and how we can



teach them? The desirable characteristics for a productive person in the modern working place include a high level of technical skill and the ability to be independent, to improve one's competences and to develop new methods for coping with challenges [5]. This list could be continued with good social and communicative skills, creativity and the ability to learn [6].

Especially the perspective to learning becomes more interesting in the context of innovations. Most European strategies are still based on the requirements of the knowledge society while, for example, Chinese people are already talking about a learning society [7]. Learning has been seen as the next "hype" after innovation [8]. Besides the students also teachers and working-life partners are seen as learners. And together they are forming learning communities which purpose is to co-create new products and services. The role of community in learning is emphasized in several studies [9]. Hakkarainen & al. [10] define learning "as a process of inquiry where the aim is to progressively expand one's knowledge and skills by relying on previous experiences and knowledge." They continue that it is characteristic of this kind of knowledge advancement that it takes place within innovative knowledge communities rather than within individuals.

Can innovation skills be learned simply by sitting in the classroom? Apparently not. Bereiter & Scardamalia [11] claim that the most promising way to teach this kind of skill is *immersion*. They continue that if we want students to learn the skills needed to work in knowledge-based, innovation-driven organizations, we should place them in an environment where those skills are required. Such a way of teaching naturally puts great emphasis on guidance; students must get support to handle and reflect on the situations they are dealing with.

In the field of Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland there are several pedagogical approaches which attempt to rise to this challenge of education. There are pedagogical solutions based on theoretical roots such as the pragmatism of Dewey [12]; learning from experience [13]; the activity theory [14] and inquiry learning [15].

Regardless of differences there are some similarities between these theoretical insights. The communal nature of activity, authentic learning cases, dialog between students, teachers and working-life partners, knowledge creation and development can be considered as these kind of shared elements.

In sum, if we want to offer to our students more competences to work in today's and future's society, as an educators we should be able to offer them networks in which they are working with authentic cases in heterogeneous groups by applying and creating knowledge, not repeating it.

3. KINOS –project develops educational organizations' innovation competences

Innovation activity is, at its best, systematic collaboration between different organizations where multidisciplinary groups develop new products, services and operational models. The students and staff at educational organizations can be seen as having significant innovation potential. However, it hasn't been utilized properly. Models for collaboration between different educational organizations concerning innovation activity must be developed. These are the challenges that the research and development project, KINOS, attempts to address.

The project is funded by the European Social Fund. It started in autumn 2011 and will continue until the spring 2014. The goal of the project is to develop multi-professional and multi-organisational innovation communities and operational models for implementing innovation activity in the future. Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences, Mikkeli University Consortium (MUC), South-Savo Vocational College and Otavan Opisto are involved in the project. Representatives of each organization participate in the coaching process and piloting cases relating to study modules. [16]

The KINOS project is conducted through five activities: *Surveying the present situation of innovation activity, Coaching and benchmarking, Developmental assignments, Piloting and Publishing the results*. At the first stage, the staff of MUAS, MUC and South-Savo Vocational College responded to a questionnaire designed to assess the present situation of innovation activity. According to the results it was quite obvious that the challenges of the organizations' concerning innovation activity are shared. In brief, the innovation climate was seen as mostly positive. A "good atmosphere" and trust could be identified among the answers. Challenges were seen in the openness of the innovation climate. Respondents felt that more encouragement was needed for innovation activities. Also, it was mentioned that the potential of staff and students wasn't recognized and utilized properly. [17]



Scenarios for the future have been worked on using the eDelfoi method developed by Otavan Opisto. In the spring 2012, future scenarios for four themes were gathered by eDelfoi: driving forces, competences, guiding ideas and the future. The results revealed some guidelines and shared interests for local educational collaboration concerning the area of Mikkeli.

The second activity is about coaching and benchmarking. At the beginning of the project, volunteers from all of these educational organizations were asked to participate in a coaching process. In total, 27 staff members took part in the coaching, which included training concerning innovation activity in the context of education. Participants were divided into six multidisciplinary groups. The coaching enabled the groups to develop innovative learning cases (developmental assignments) which were piloted in spring 2013 (piloting). The information got from the experiences of piloting will be used to develop a model for innovation activity (Publishing the results). The coaching process includes also thematic workshops. The themes are selected so that they support the goal of creating partly shared models for innovation activity. One of themes is structures, meaning curriculums and schedules. Quite often they are used as a reasons why we can't collaborate. It was quite surprising that when the participants were asked in the workshop that what would you change most in the structures the answer was very clear and united: attitudes. More important than structures is the willingness to co-operate.

In addition to these five piloting cases developed in coaching process, there are also six other piloting cases. The contents of these multiprofessional and multiorganisations pilots varies from creating learning oases connected between organizations by using information technology to creating studymodule shared to all of these participating orgnazations. The project includes also benchmarking trips for staff and students at organizations in which innovation activity can be considered advanced, seminars, blogs and website to share experiences. Also INNO24 –h camp, which is based on the concept of Young Entrepreneurship camp, is an interesting concept to develop innovation competences. In Mikkeli this camp is conducted differently; students takes the leading role with the help of consulting company and teachers and staff are participants.

4. Conclusions

As a conclusion can be presented that the innovation activity requires new forms of collaboration and learning between different kinds of organizations. These new forms of collaboration can be found from the partnerships and co-configuration between working-life partners and educational organizations. Shared objects can promote motivation for collaboration and learning. In the context of education the learning aspect of innovation activity is emphasized. There are several different educational models in Finland relating to so called work-based learning. Although some differences, there are also several similarities, such as communal nature of learning, authentic cases, dialogue, knowledge creation and developmental aspect of activity. These similarities could be kept as key aspects of innovation pedagogy. By creating possibilities to people to meet and work together towards shared goal we can promote the innovation activity and learning.

References

- [1] Finland's National Innovation Strategy (2008) Available at: http://www.tem.fi/files/19704/Kansallinen_innovaatiostrategia_12062008.pdf [cited 4 December 2012]
- [2] Kairisto-Mertanen, L., Räsänen, M., Lehtonen, J. & Lappalainen, H. (2012) Innovation pedagogy – learning through active multidisciplinary methods. *Revista de Docencia Universitaria* 10(1), pp. 67 – 86.
- [3] Rehn, A. (2010) Innovating old age – thought paper. Available at: www.alfrehn.com [cited 20 November 2012]
- [4] Kairisto-Mertanen, L., Penttilä, T. & Putkonen, A. (2011) Embedding innovation skills in learning – developing cooperation between working life and Universities of Applied Sciences. In Lehto, A., Kairisto-Mertanen, L. & Penttilä, T. *Towards innovation pedagogy. A new approach to teaching and learning for universities of applied sciences. Reports 100.* Turku University of Applied Sciences.
- [5] Hakkarainen, K., Palonen, T., Paavola, S. & Lehtinen, E. (2004) *Communities of network expertise.* Helsinki: Sitra publication no. 257.
- [6] Kuoppala, E. (2013) "Making sense" – work-based pedagogy in education of Cultural Managers at Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences (in press). In Tuononen (Eds.) *Developing Best Practices in Event Management.* Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences, Promoting event management training



- programme as a resource for development of cultural industries and tourism in the North-West Russia. Project publication.
- [7] Belpaire, P. (2012) Could mapping L&D innovations support the creation of L&D competences in the field? Key note speech at EAPRIL conference Jyväskylä, 30 November 2012. Not printed.
 - [8] Berg, P. (2012) Lecture for the KINOS project 12.9.2012. Not printed.
 - [9] Toiviainen, H. (2003) Learning across levels. Challenges of Collaboration in a Small-Firm Network. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, Department of Education.
 - [10] Hakkarainen, K., Palonen, T., Paavola, S. & Lehtinen, E. (2004) Communities of network expertise. Helsinki: Sitra publication no. 257.
 - [11] Bereiter, C. & Scardamalia, M. (2003) Learning to work creatively with knowledge. In E. De Corte, L. Verschaffel, N. Entwistle, & J. van Merriënboer (Eds.), *Unravelling basic components and dimensions of powerful learning environments*. EARLI Advances in Learning and Instruction Series.
 - [12] Dewey, J. (1925) Experience and nature. La Salle. IL: Open Court.
 - [13] Dreyfus, H.L. & Dreyfus, S.E. (1986) Mind over machine: The power of human intuition and expertise in the age of computer. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
 - [14] Engeström, Y. (1987). Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research. Helsinki: Orienta-konsultit Oy.
 - [15] Hakkarainen, K., Lonka, K. & Lipponen, L. (1999) Tutkiva oppiminen. Älykkään toiminnan rajat ja niiden ylittäminen. Porvoo: WSOY.
 - [16] KINOS project plan, 2011. Available at: EURA 2007.
 - [17] Juvonen, J. (2012) Innovaatiotoiminnan nykytilan kartoittaminen case: Mikkelin ammattikorkeakoulu. Lappeenrannan teknillinen yliopisto. Available at: <https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/84753>