Models for hybrid higher education: Lifelong learning initiatives in the postdigital era

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Introduction

Initiating lifelong learning has been a task higher education has worked with for many years (e.g., Biesta, 2011; Knapper & Cropley, 2000). Politically, lifelong learning is emphasised as an tool to develop and nurture human capital and foster social development. The purpose behind many of these initiatives is to make people employable. However, higher education also works with lifelong learning initiatives to offer people democratic and humanistic values. Since the second half of the 20th century, higher education institutions apply these two perspectives (Jaldemark, 2021). In this symposium, the focus is on initiatives closely linked to the needs of the working market. Democratic and humanistic initiatives and perspectives are important but are here deemphasised. Whatever perspective is chosen, lifelong learning as an idea and task for higher education is still an emerging phenomenon.

The ongoing digitalisation of society impacts lifelong learning initiatives in at least two different ways. First, the digitalisation of society impacts human practises in many areas of life (e.g., Billet, 2021, Goodyear, 2021; Poquet & de Laat, 2021). For example, peoples' performance of everyday tasks such as communicating with friends and families or paying bills. In line with the focus of this symposium, the digitalisation of society impact work-related practices and tasks hugely. Some practices and tasks met slightly digitised changes; some disappear in the process. Some professions have disappeared, new ones have turned up in the footsteps of the increasing digitalisation of working life. These changes have led to an increased need for lifelong learning opportunities. Higher education institutions are seen as important providers to meet up these needs.

Second, digitalisation impacts the deliverance of education (e.g., Lock, Lakhal, Cleveland-Innes, Arancibia, Dell & De Silva, 2021; Sannino, Engeström, & Jokinen, 2021). Lifelong learning initiatives adopt digital practices to deliver highly accessible quality learning opportunities. Nevertheless, the link between higher education, application of educational technologies and lifelong learning is established long before the strong impact of the current digital technologies. Since its inception, distance educational settings have been a vehicle to enable higher education lifelong learning for adults. In effect, such settings predate the digitalisation of society while nurturing lifelong learning is a reason behind the introduction of these distance educational settings. Multi-functional digital technologies replace analogue technologies.

Until recently, Swedish lifelong learning initiatives were a voluntary task for higher education institutions. In 2021, Swedish legislators added to The Swedish Higher Education Act (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021:317/1992:1434) that "in their operations, higher education institutions must promote lifelong learning". In other words, the promotion of lifelong learning is nowadays mandatory for Swedish higher education institutions. This symposium includes six papers that discuss lifelong learning initiatives from one Swedish higher education institution, Mid Sweden University. It presents preliminary results from ongoing work at five development projects. These projects link to a university-wide development called BLAD (Jaldemark & Bång, 2020). In common for these projects, they all aim to develop networked and hybrid lifelong learning models suitable for higher educations alignment with the postdigital era.

The projects and studies

The first project called IPROF focuses on developing courses for professionals within the field of computer and electrical engineering. The author presents a model for creating customised and flexible courses at the advanced level. The work departs from a teacher perspective that includes building on the needs of working professionals with a flipped classroom and micro-learning pedagogy. Preliminary, the courses create win-win possibilities for the working professionals and their companies. Finally, experiences of and lessons learnt from participating in the courses link to future development.

The second project, called HÄLSOKOLL, is represented by two papers that focus on the health care sector. This project builds opportunities for lifelong learning for health care staff. The authors analyse and discuss the developed model from two perspectives: students and teachers. The first paper focuses on teachers' experiences of creating and distributing short, flexible and networked higher education courses to support health care workers' lifelong learning. The paper emphasises challenges in course design. The second paper of the project

focuses on the participants; in effect nurses and their experiences of participating in flexible networked courses. It describes and explores the nurses' experiences before and after participating in a higher education lifelong learning initiative.

The third project is a long-term university-wide project called HEaD that explores networked learning as a vehicle to develop a tentative model for sustainable pedagogical competence development for higher education teachers. The model aims at developing teachers' capacities to apply lifelong learning and technology-enhanced learning in higher education courses. The paper focuses on identifying key components of an educational development project for technology-enhanced learning. Moreover, it discusses how such organisation of the project may lead to sustainability in the regular university operations. The paper also discusses how a project for educational development can create over-time durable infrastructures, organization, policy and motivation for maintaining a continual educational development.

The fourth project DIGIFLEX works within the field of communication science. It aims to develop a model for flexible courses. The paper describes and discusses the design process consisting of three stages and two iterative feedback loops. The design process includes try-outs with a pilot course and feedback from students, teachers and a networked learning reference group. Through this process, the design evolved. The study guides the reader through the process and discusses implications of earlier stages for future development.

The fifth project works with designs for networked learning in environmental impact assessment (IA). The paper explores and analyses current teaching in IA in Sweden to develop this field through influence from other disciplines, in this case, networked learning. The study embraces two analyses of the empirical data. The first analysis includes environmental assessment courses for working lifelong learners; i.e., environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment in Sweden. The second analysis links the International Association for Impact Assessment best practice principles and design dimensions for networked learning.

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