

Can distance education support rural development?

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1 Introduction

For as long I can remember I have heard politicians promising all kinds of schemes and programs to strengthen rural communities. But in the same time data shows that during the last years there has been a steady exodus from rural areas (Wikipedia contributors, 2013a). This summer I drove through the fjord where my mother went to school, my grandmother was born and raised and my great grandfather was a priest for most of his working life, a beautiful, fruitful area. 80 years ago around 3000 people lived in this fjord, now they are maybe 50. Thousands can recount similar stories. In the Faroes today, about one half of each cohort leave the islands to make a life on the mainland.

If we have an inkling of historical knowledge we know this has been the case through most of civilisation. Cities have generally through history had incredible attraction. Reasons for moving from rural to urban areas are many and well documented: Changes in work and job opportunities and wishes for the benefits of an urban lifestyle are on the top of the list. New research indicates also that living in thriving cities can be a more ecological way for modern people to populate the earth than living in small distributed rural communities. Cities generally can be incubators of creativity, and generally bigger cities tend to create more wealth for more people in proportion to their size (Glaeser, 2011) In spite of this most societies try to "fight back", and keep their rural areas populated. And one of the measures often used is to increase the offerings of education in rural areas.

In this paper I will reflect on data gathered by a Nordic network on the use of information technology to enhance adult learning: DISTANS, which works under the auspices of NVL, Nordic network for adult learning.

DISTANS initiated a series of six symposia in six remote places in the Nordic countries during 2011 and 2012, inviting experts and players in the field of distance education, active in rural areas in the Nordic countries. The symposia were held in Rudköbing, southern Denmark, Torshavn in the Faroes, Mikkele in eastern Finland, Kiruna in northern Sweden, Húsavík in northern Iceland and Kautokeino in northern Norway. This paper is my reflection on what we learned through our interactions during the symposia.

2 Effect of Education

It is nothing new that people believe education can make society better. Let it suffice to recall Johann Amos **Comenius** (1991) who during the 30 year war (1618–1648) hoped his efforts at reforming schools and education could lead to peace. Major players in age of **Enlightenment** also hoped to reform society through scientific method and education (Wikipedia contributors, 2013b). Garry **Becker** (1962) had great influence on modern policy with his theory that Investment in Human Capital brings greater economic growth. This idea has been carried further through the **Lifelong Learning** ideology which has dominated discourse on Adult Learning,

at least in Europe the last half century. **Marianne Solberg** summarized this in her presentation in Kautokeino, claiming that flexible higher education in rural areas can:

- supply qualified workers
- slow down emigration
- increase innovation
- even out social and geographic inequality
- support democratic participation and
- spur personal development

Marianne Solberg (2012)*

Such ideas have led to universities, adult education centres and other players, through the last century at least, offering education ranging from visiting teachers, correspondence education, distance and flexible education of various forms supported by various online media.

3 Our data

During the last 15 years there has been a dramatic rise in offerings for distance learning, many of which were offered as methods to support the development of rural areas. To us in the DISTANS network it seemed useful and interesting to study what is being done in this area and to what effect. At DISTANS' series of six symposia we gathered together local players who presented various examples of local use of technology to offer flexible learning opportunities in rural areas, local scholars who reflected on various aspects of education in rural areas and a foreign guest who offered new ideas about how technology can support adult learning or academics who offered an insight into their research and experience in this field of study. The symposia thus offered an interesting glimpse and overview of what is going on in remote areas in six Nordic countries.

4 What did we learn?

4.1 Challenges

The places we visited were all dealing with a variety of challenges, ranging from: changes in the industry, jobs being lost due to new technologies reducing the need for human labour, natural resources moving; for example less fish in the sea or changes in climate and rationalisations to the opposite: a lack of people to take on all the jobs or a lack of skilled people to take on specialized jobs.

A well-known phenomenon is that in face of these challenges many move to the city, and for most of these areas they experience the challenge of an exodus of young people especially young women and "brain drain" where educated people leave for better jobs in the city. In the Faroe Islands for example, approximately half each year's cohort who leave to study abroad does not return. It seems many feel compelled to move to the city due to a lack of opportunities for work, for education or in order to grow and develop themselves further in their sport or in their interests and finally in order to enjoy a certain "quality of life"; services which for many people make a big difference in daily life, such as coffee houses, restaurants, cinemas, museums and theatres.

Moreover educational institutions find it difficult to offer and run courses for the population because there are too few people to participate, and when they have enough people, their skills and educational background can be so varied that it becomes difficult to have them in the same groups.

Living in rural areas means that there can be long distances between people. In Húsavík, for example, the Lifelong Learning Centre serves a population of about 5000 which is spread over an area which is equivalent to ca. 22% of Iceland's surface or about 22000 Km². This makes it difficult for inhabitants to come regularly to courses in the towns.

Other challenges have to do with attitudes, in areas where primary processing of raw materials has been the main occupation of the inhabitants people get used to not needing to learn specific skills to get well-paying jobs. And through learning on the job people could work their way up within the company or the industry. With increased complexity, this is no longer the case. But attitudes can often take long to change. So we heard of people who, although their situation was not optimal, did not think learning was a method to deal with it. But others could not find subjects to learn which suited them in local educational organisations.

Problems with distance learning mentioned by our presenters can be feelings of isolation, especially where the student is a single learner in his/her course, and no co-learners are to be found nearby. Learning Centres do offer support to these individuals, but they do not necessarily suit all learners. Another interesting, but alarming point made by at least two presenters: Mariann Solberg and Anna Guðrún Edvardsdóttir, is that in their data distance learners did well in learning the curriculum, but did not connect it as well to their own life and surroundings as did students on campus. There do exist studies which show other findings (e.g. Þuríður Jóna Jóhannsdóttir, 2010)

4.2 Opportunities

As mentioned earlier, many see education and learning as one way to tackle challenges such as the ones mentioned above. See for example Mariann Solberg's list above of what flexible education can offer rural areas. We saw various examples of how education supported with online technology seemed to have some of the effects Mariann mentioned:

At our symposia we saw examples of education **supplying skilled labour for local industries**. In Kiruna, for example, local government, industry and educational providers cooperated to create and offer courses aimed at people who work in steel mines at Kiruna.

Some initiatives were aimed at **updating skills** where jobs are getting more complicated and the general level of education was seen to be too low. In Iceland this is the main thrust of state financed adult education. There Learning centres play a central role, but only in a few instances where they use technology to increase their footprint.

Educational initiatives also aim at helping **young adults stay longer at home** during their studies, instead of moving to the city. This is a major issue in the Faroes, where still a lot needs to be done. In spite of a few initiatives of this nature, official support is still lacking to make distance learning a viable possibility for Faroese students.

Many of the presentations, and the discussions as well, confirmed what is common knowledge today: The Internet can **increase access** to learning materials, access to co learners and to teachers and tutors, thus increasing opportunities for institutions and learners:

Moreover we learned of instances where technology has the role of **reducing barriers to learning**, such as distances, access, time constraints and cost. Moreover it was made quite clear both through Creelman's (2011)* and Arnason's (2011)* presentations as well as through the seminar on gaming in Finland (2011)*, that new developments in social media greatly increases possibilities for people to connect;

connect to other learners, to teachers, to new ideas and to learning content. However it is unclear how well these possibilities are known, developed and utilized in educational offerings in these rural areas. Moreover individual's fluency in using these technologies seems to be lacking in many of the rural areas, especially among adult learners.

Another interesting aspect of using learning to support rural development was even more encouraging, where natural resources, local specialities and knowledge were being used for the good of others. Local knowledge, expertise and specialities are fostered, developed and exported: We learned of various projects where local players in cooperation with universities built up research and knowledge centres and educational courses around local specialities in nature, habitat, culture and localized knowledge and skills. Some of these research centres utilize technology to support their learners but most still rely on the students coming and staying on location.

Rögnvaldur Ólafsson(2011)* for example talked about university research and educational centres located around Iceland where local specialities were used to anchor research in environments where the subject being studied is close by and inhabitants have a lot of local and tacit knowledge about the subject area which can support scientist's research, likewise such research centres offer international students access to learning opportunities in close contact to the sources of knowledge in the specific areas. In Iceland, research centres on the western peninsular of Snæfellsnes focus on birds and marine biology offering facilities for doctoral students from abroad, likewise in Husavik there is a centre for whale research, and in the east a centre for the research of glaciers. In Kautokeino the Sami University serves not only the local Sami population but has contacts to and influence on Sami people in Russia and Alaska. However in some of these places there seem still to be problems of connecting these activities to the local community in such a way that the knowledge created there also comes to use in local businesses (Hedin, 2009 pp. 29).

4.3 What has worked?

Some success factors we observed in the presentations at the symposia are:

Networking and cooperation: Many projects and educational offerings were created through close cooperation of various networks of local stakeholders. This is especially true when new innovative interventions were created.

One common aspect is when general education is made available to learners in rural areas. This is for example done when educational institutions offer general courses through distance education in various configurations. In some instances the institutions address individual learners thus making the studies open to anyone who applies. These offerings are then offered to the students who on the one hand communicated with the educational institution at a specific time, for example when lessons in a classroom were streamed in real-time to the learner's computer at home or on the other hand communicated "asynchronously", where they could communicate with teachers and other learners whenever it suited them.

Other instances the institutions also offered standard courses offered in their locales but also addressed cohorts or local groups of learners in rural areas who met regularly at learning-centres usually to participate in lessons streamed at specific times, with groups in at least two distinct locations participating at the same time. This can create close connections between these people who meet as a cohort in the learning centre thus creating a helpful learning atmosphere for the students.

In Iceland, Norway and Sweden - at least - Learning Centres (Símenntunarmiðstöð, Studiesentre, Lärcentrum) have played an important role in supporting distance learning in the rural areas. Learning centres offer a

learning space, libraries, video conferencing, tutors and counsellors. This creates the possibility for students come regularly to a place where they meet other students, to communicate with other learners and get support from them even though they might not be studying the same subjects. Some learning centres even contracted with universities to offer or create courses for a cohort of students who met at the specific learning centre. Studies have shown that in some instances the learning centres are a vital element in students success at furthering their education (Roos & Grepperud, 2010)

Some of the examples presented at our symposia were special short term projects funded with Nordic or European funding – in contrast to the standard offerings mentioned above. Many of them built on close cooperation between different players and local educational providers offering innovative ways to help adults learn. These were often tailored to specific local needs, and their success connected to the fact that they were addressing real local needs. This is definitely a known success factor for educational projects which needs to be stressed (c.f. Manninen, Hróbjartur Árnason;, Liveng, & Green, 2012)

4.4 Areas for further development

After these symposia there are at least three issues which seem to me deserve further discussion and development. As mentioned briefly above; According to Anna Guðrún Edvardsdóttir's findings education is not enough to stall rural exodus, it is necessary to increase general "quality of life" or be aware of how a rural society can allow people to live "the good life". Moreover, in many cases distance students seem to transfer their learning to a lesser degree into their life and environment than on campus students. (However it must be noted here that this transfer is often mentioned as a problem in other educational programmes.) Finally, intelligent use of social media *can* to some degree alleviate the sense of isolation some people taking distance courses and living in rural areas.

Anna Guðrún points to research which reveals that it is very common when people want to create "the good life" in rural settings focus has often been on strengthening economic growth (Anna Guðrún Edvardsdóttir, n.d.). Similar focus can be seen in a large portion of the literature on „Lifelong Learning”, which also seems biased towards skills for work. The discourse has recently been criticized for leaving out aspects of life other than work. (Lerch, 2010) Anna Guðrún's point at our symposium was that although it is easier for people to stay in their rural home and pursue further education, and many have done so with good effect during the last 15 years, the quality of life does not always seem to have followed. It can be argued that someone who has a good education should be having the possibility of being more creative and responsible in his/her local environment. During our symposia, we met – for example – an architect who opened a gallery with his and other local artists work, thus adding to the flora of places to visit in his town. He also creates work for himself and helps restore the historical buildings in his area by helping owners of historically valuable structures to apply for grants and supports them in restructuring them when the grants have been allocated. By doing this he helps local people realize the value in historical structures, he renovates some of these structures and makes life more viable for himself financially and culturally for his fellow citizens. His education as an architect has opened his eyes for these aspects of life, and is active in making his local community more viable, increasing the quality of life for himself and others. However both Anna Guðrún and Mariann Solberg mentioned in their presentations that distance learners do not seem to make this connection when learning online. This is a question of planning for transfer when designing and teaching a course (cf. Wahlgren & Aarkrog, 2012). It seems to me that, although it is the plight of all teachers, teachers who have distance learners living in rural areas would do well in formulating questions, and offering projects as part of their courses which help their rural students to see a use for their newly acquired knowledge and skills in their local surroundings. The literature seems to indicate that with these students it is an especially important issue.

As isolation is a feeling many distance learners have to deal with, AND people in rural areas often live far from each other and finally modern people have been through the current philosophical climate been encouraged to cherish their individuality, an aspect of feeling isolated in a rural area might be because one cannot find others of “like-mind”. Intelligent use of social media *can* help such people to feel more at ease at home, if they can regularly communicate with people who have similar interests. Teachers in distance courses could incorporate social media into their courses, and help their students use this media to feel less isolated in their studies by increasing the number, the different kinds and the quality of contact points between students and teachers. They could also incorporate learning projects where the students learn by-the-way to use various social media to find contacts in other places who are dealing with similar issues as they are in their rural environment, thus forming skills which can influence many other aspects of life than school.

5 Conclusion

Through our symposia we saw that distance education and other methods of education supported with technology can greatly increase the possibilities of people living in rural areas to develop their life, react to changes but also create new possibilities. There are many interesting examples to be shared. However it is quite evident that education is not a panacea, but one piece in a large puzzle. My suggestions built on the input we received in the six symposia organised and held by the DISTANS network is to encourage teachers who have distance students to emphasize teaching for transfer, and creating learning projects where students adapt what they learn into their local environment, and that they also incorporate social media in such a way that students feel less isolated, and learn methods to use online to create meaningful connections to people both in their local environment, but also with “like-minded” people elsewhere in the world.

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References to the six symposia

- [Website for all the six symposia](#)
- [Distans's report on the symposia](#)

Alastair Creelman (2011) [Off-Piste Learning: Social learning – challenges and opportunities](#)

Hróbjartur Árnason (2011) [The possibilities new social media offer for learning offerings in rural areas](#)

Mariann Solberg (2012) [Hvordan tilby høyere utdanning av god kvalitet til voksne i et tynt befolket område?](#)

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