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Studios as the driver of commitment and creativity in the region

An authentic learning environment full of meaningful 'pearls of
inspiration' for initiators, students and education experts

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relevance of studios as authentic learning environment to improve the professionalization of University students. The cooperation of students, external partners in the market, and experts in a triangle construction on specific projects enables a positive outcome in realizing competencies which match with the educational standards of professionalism in balance with academic content and realistic context. Two studios in nearby regions provide various projects for active learning as well as increased commitment and inner motivation of students. The dissemination of knowledge to external partners enables a regional focus of structural cooperation.

Key words: project oriented education, authentic learning, studios, regional approach.

Introduction

Much research has been conducted in relation to 'new learning', where students get to work on topical issues in learning situations in which an external organization fulfils a role. The aim of such education is to professionalize students on realistic topics by developing applied research in which a dedicated approach is designed resulting in an appropriated and practical solution. The effect of this learning is important in organizing optimal learning conditions for students, delivering a sound basis in education programmes to meet the professional expectations of the market and provide a clear result in an advice by with the external organization is satisfied. The regional scale of operation combined with the physical and spatial vicinity of those situations facilitate a genuine orientation on the context in which the initiator operates. This provides an insight into regional developments within structural relationships.

This essay discusses a new form of practical learning, aimed at providing an understanding of new forms of work experience in tertiary education in a context that stimulates regional initiatives and innovations.

Studios and authentic learning environments

In the education system developments are currently in progress that impact the way in which the education system is structured in relation to work form and tasks, described with the term 'new learning' (Simons, Van der Linden & Duffy, 2000).

Competence-based learning in the tertiary education system has surged in recent years. Central to competence-based learning is the interaction of characteristic knowledge, skills and attitude (content) in real life situations (context), requiring students to act as young professionals. Competence-based learning emphasizes on the tasks which the graduate will be required to perform competently, as well as on problem or practical situations in which graduates are expected to perform adequately. The idea of simulated (virtual) learning experiences in the education system via competence-based computer support learning environments has created high expectations. It was held that students would learn more actively, that they would develop a more in-depth understanding of the subject matter, and, as tasks are challenging and realistically presented, that this would result in increased commitment and a higher level of inner motivation (Reiser, 2001; Wolters, 1998).

However, more and more information suggesting that these high-strung expectations in many cases are not materializing, apparently because the authentic character of the learning situation is often not sufficiently realistic, while the uniqueness of the context in which learning goals must be achieved is not fully recognized. This in turn has a negative effect on students' motivation. Challenges involving 'real' entities and actors in relation to customer perception research have been seized eagerly in publications on the hospitality sector and show interesting parallels with the experiences of students placed in authentic work situations.

The region as home base

The region as home base for authentic learning offers organizational and technical advantages, as there are many authentic learning environments available, at a relatively close distance, relevant to the professional fields in which the students are trained. The regional scale of operation and physical and spatial vicinity of those situations facilitates a genuine orientation on the context in which the initiator operates. The ideal project is within cycling distance. Also, as many training programmes are embedded in regional networks, this affords an insight into regional developments within structural relationships. In terms of organization, this has important advantages, as it is especially these structural relationships that can contribute to creating a continuous project flow. Long-term agreements with partners on prospective projects make it possible to use those projects in the curriculum.

In addition to the organizational motive, there is a technical motive for encouraging a regional focus. In years past we have witnessed a growing emphasis on regional development both at the European, the national and the provincial level. There is no question that this renewed focus on regional culture and authenticity in the context of inter-regional competition is an important factor, and one that creates an attractive 'economy of scale' in relation to public administration and economic policy issues. To develop attractiveness to industry and organizations, residents, and tourists, regions must develop a 'powerful brand' (Hospers, 2003). The region is a spatial entity that can have a uniquely individual image, which is subjective, selective and coloured. This spatial cognition is important because it influences the choices people make in terms of where they would like to live, work, or relax. A regional image is positively influenced by the public perception of that region and the extent to which people relate to that region.

Projects with a focus on tourism contribute to the cultural identity of a destination and enhance local pride in terms of the significance of the cultural heritage, landscape and natural qualities, unique customs and regional identity (Northcote & Macbeth, 2005)

The technical and organizational motives, as outlined above, stimulate the connection of regional challenges in the vicinity of an institute of advanced education.

Structure and experience of studios in the curriculum of Saxion University

The knowledge centres of Saxion University focus on strategic and innovative research, in conjunction with regional partners. The strategic interest of the knowledge centres of the Hospitality Business School (HBS) and the Academy for Spatial Planning and Construction (ROB) is the development and provision of 'authentic learning environments' for students, teachers, professionals and researchers, focussing on challenges in the hospitality and leisure industry. Studio Countryside Salland Plus and Studio Veluwezoom have been set up in conjunction with various government bodies and organizations, to create authentic learning environments. Within the context of these studios, three-party relationships have been created in a triangle construction between the following parties:

- The market; organizations and businesses (the initiators) that wish to resolve a matter or situation that requires specific knowledge, skills and quality;
- Enthusiastic and committed students, whose training involves a research component in the context of their professional development;
- Experts from within (and sometimes from outside) Saxion University, who can match the educational standards of professionalism to the quality of the applied research, and can offer assurances in terms of committed outcomes.

The studio approach can be described as follows: developments in the education system which link real-life market issues to competencies and practical, professional, situations, and which link specific learning tasks to educationally sound assessment. The studios offer a platform for developing and disseminating new knowledge from within the knowledge centres. The (often) interdisciplinary character of these real-life learning opportunities invites multi-disciplinary involvement from within the educational institute to adequately anticipate on situations. To stimulate and facilitate the desired transition processes in urban and rural areas, there is active cooperation with regional initiators including local cooperative structures, businesses and government agencies. A brief description of two such studios is given below.

Veluwezoom

The municipalities of Rheden, Apeldoorn, Zevenaar, Brummen and Rozendaal are the learning arena for the Veluwezoom Studio. This studio is integrated in the RAAK MKB (small-medium enterprises) project "Veluwezoom, stringing pearls in the regions". Since February 2008, 24 students worked in and outside the Transferium Rheden on concrete projects, with a platform of entrepreneurs, regional authorities, country estate owners, governments and cultural institutions acting as principal in the tourism and leisure industry. This studio offers project-based support for defined projects by students and experts of Saxion University, and provides an inspirational platform for entrepreneurs and local government, by organizing workshops, creative workshop- and consultation-meetings, events in which current projects are presented. This creates and inspires cross-overs between Saxion University and the local leisure and tourism supply chain.

Salland

Salland is a rural region in transition. This transition involves a functional change, where the availability of production space for farmers is no longer leading; the rural dimension is being integrated into a consumer landscape serving both the farming community and the leisure and tourism industry (Janssen, 2006). This is a coordinated development, in which both public and private sectors play a role. Governments are offering incentives to private parties to undertake new activities both within and outside the existing sectors. Some of those initiatives have not as yet been completed or are not yet fully utilized. Studio Countryside Salland wants to get those initiatives moving, or develop their full potential, and to stimulate new ideas for similar initiatives (Flooren & Lier, 2006). The studio is an initiative of the province of Overijssel, the municipalities in the Salland region, the Water Board 'Groot Salland', the Foundation IJssellandschap, and Saxion University.

The studio offers project-based support for local initiatives by students and experts. It also provides an inspirational platform for residents in the Salland region, by organizing meetings and events in which current projects are presented, to inspire others and increase grass roots support for the initiatives. The studio is increasingly contributing thematic material, such as regional hospitality, sustainability and quality of life, with a growing number of entrepreneurs and local associations joining forces in a think-tank that develops innovative visions for the Salland region. The experiences of Studio Countryside Salland's first two years of existence are outlined below.

Table 1: Outcomes and Result Studio Countryside Salland

The partners of Studio Countryside Salland (the municipalities, the provincial authority, the Water Board and the Foundation) each provide an annual contribution, which totals an amount of between 50,000 and 60,000 Euro per year. The financial endorsements from this subsidy are used towards delivering an additional effort over and above the regular education programme. The extra time makes it possible to substantially increase the immediate social impact of Studio Countryside Salland. The fact that after an initial two-year project, a long term financial commitment has been entered into, commencing 1 January 2009 (until 31 December 2013) demonstrates that the partners are convinced of the social benefits of the project.

Support by Saxion University is provided through the Knowledge Centre 'Living Environment'. Each year some 100 to 150 research hours are related to the Countryside Studio. The managing reader of the discipline 'Sustainable Development' is enthusiastic about the positive impact of Studio Countryside in terms of the research that is conducted within Saxion University (Knowledge Centre Living Environment). Managing reader Theo de Bruijn comments: *'In order to perform theory-directed research, you need to use a practical approach. It's about being in touch with the soil you stand on. These kinds of micro projects are essential to develop a genuine feel for the subject. Take, for example, education and research in relation to public participation in open-plan processes. You can only really develop a grasp of it by being right there, in the actual process. You need to experience first hand what participation means. It's through these practical projects that students may realize a true understanding of the value of participation. Knowledge must be experienced and felt. Think of the learning cycle of Kolb. You can only get to understand the context by being practically involved in a project.'*

Some facts and figures about the first two years of the Studio Countryside Salland.

- ❖ 35 projects
- ❖ 4 network meetings
- ❖ 1 course, from concept to project
- ❖ 150 students involved in projects of Studio Countryside Salland
- ❖ 15 Saxion University lecturers active on behalf of Studio projects
- ❖ Theme areas: cultural history, leisure activity and tourism; broadening and deepening of agriculture; care farms; governance; nature and landscape; energy.
- ❖ 15 projects relate to the theme 'leisure activity and tourism'
- ❖ Examples of engagements: process evaluation, explorative studies, location studies,

market research, methods development, design, expert judgement, coaching and sound boarding functions

The social impact of individual projects is measured in evaluations and by follow-up actions by the initiators (clients). In the first two years, face to face evaluations took place when products were being offered and in other cases initiators were contacted by telephone. The performance outcomes of Studio Countryside Salland are recorded in detail in six-monthly and yearly reports. As of 1 January 2009, a written evaluation routine will be in place for all projects. The face to face evaluations show that of the 35 projects undertaken in the first two years, 26 were perceived as having delivered added value to the initiator. In 3 cases the result was ambiguous, whereas in another 6 cases the projects were not perceived as having contributed to the targets of the initiators. For 12 projects, follow-up actions have been or are planned. A follow-through can take the form of ongoing research, a report being used by the initiator for communication, a subsidy application, or the start-up of a new activity.

From within the education system students, lecturers and management respond positively. Of course problems experienced in real life are also being encountered in Studio Countryside Salland. Initiators often do not have a clear view on their issues. The necessary material is not always at hand. Essential information may not become available until late in the process. Issues encountered in practice often produce the desired learning effect. In some cases, the student will struggle to get any grip at all on the situation. Intensive coaching is needed at times, and external expertise, in particular, can be very stimulating in the start-up phase. The experiences in the studio Veluwezoom at this moment comprise too short a time span to be evaluated yet, but will be evaluated in due time.

An essential factor in the success of the studios has been the intermediary role, namely brokering between the initiators in the region and the implementation of projects in the regular education programme. This requires a system of structural networking between the University and the regional partners, and a forum for sharing information. Connecting the supply of projects and demand from the region to the appropriate education entities, and assuring the involvement of the appropriate disciplines and required number of students, requires matching, both in a quantitative and a qualitative sense. In addition, the studio structure needs the coaching lecturers to stimulate not only process-directed learning, but also practical, result-focused learning activities, thus combining educational objectives and content-specific objectives with a focus on competencies.

Conclusion

The experiences with studios Veluwezoom and Studio Countryside Salland Plus so far indicate that the learning effects of tasks set in an authentic environment result in better understanding as well as more effectively application of competencies in new situations. Outstanding students perceive the assignments in the studios as a welcome opportunity for making a mark. Students who participated generally develop a network of contacts and relevant work experience which offers an advantage in finding a position in the labour market, using the acquired competencies. All of those experiences underscore the value and importance of retaining

the complex character of the authentic learning environment. Students should be involved in both complex and unstructured assignments as well as with more simple tasks (authentic learning in a context-bound, complex environment) to enable them to develop into confident and effective professionals.

Knowledge-based work in the studios usually takes place in multi-disciplinary or multi-professional teams, in which knowledge-intensive, innovative results are being developed. Continuous learning takes place in the context of knowledge-based work at the following two levels:

- Through competencies development (tacit knowledge), by building bridges (by the intermediary) in terms of content and context, between regional initiatives and the education system, in a dedicated way.
- By knowledge development (explicit knowledge), as it intrinsically stimulates exploration of knowledge for the benefit of fulfilling authentic professional tasks.

The 'experiential learning' studio model (Simons, Van der Linden and Duffy, 2000) appears to connect to this method of working, thereby combining three objectives: result development, learning and knowledge development.

The triangle construction ensures the commitment of the participants and stimulates the objective: from parties to partners. The professionalization which the studio structure offers leads to authentic learning and inspires creativity, entrepreneurial spirit and innovation in the region. The articulation of questions and problems to be solved by the external partners has been accomplished since the start of the studio as a new learning environment. The experiences of external partners with the studios of Saxion University diminish the threshold and stimulate the cooperation with other parties. The role as intermediary is important to clarify exact need for support by the external partner and to design a suitable approach in research and appropriate advice that also fits in the competencies of the curriculum. The interdisciplinary character of many projects in the studios leads to a growing awareness among Saxion University academics to participate with more disciplines in order to meet the expectations of the participated partners in the triangle. The development and dissemination of applied knowledge to the partners seems to grow during the continuation of the cooperation between the partners in the triangle of students, external market and experts. Studios provide a new educational approach that acts as driver of commitment and creativity in the region.

Limitations

An important aspect is the need for accurate evaluation systems, to determine whether the outcomes of the authentic learning environment in the education system are indeed different from the outcomes obtained in regular education (not providing authentic learning environments), both in terms of academic results assessment and in terms of a more positive evaluation or increased motivation of the student.

Growing innovation in regional projects and businesses, along with a proportionate growth of the leisure industry, warrants a concise formulation and analysis of relevant performance indicators.

A monitoring instrument for determining and evaluating the envisaged effects in a qualitative and quantitative way – to ensure if the proposed aim is realized – will be developed in consultation with the Chamber of Commerce, the municipalities, the provincial authorities and the industrial organizations.

The ongoing research in the second studio Veluwezoom underlines the relevance in dissemination of knowledge but the exact effects have to be ascertained yet. Due to this new learning approach of studios the role of ‘expert’ in combination with ‘educator’ engaged in teaching is new, as the project oriented character inspires new and uncertain findings compared to the more traditional education programme. In tourism and leisure focused studies this is considered as essential because it needs a clear relation with the real world (Carr,2003.;Xie, 2004) This requires more of an external focus of the staff. This external focus is a necessary requirement to continue and improve this new learning as a way to stimulate professionalization of students. Understanding this new role needs further research.

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