Learning from learning networks. Experiences of the Finnish Workplace Development Programme

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This paper examines the feasibility of a learning networks-based strategy to improve the ability of publicly supported workplace development programmes to produce broad-based and long-term learning effects in working life. After looking at typical shortcomings of programmes based on the utilisation of demonstration projects, critical prerequisites of an alternative strategy based on the utilisation of learning networks are explored. The empirical part of the paper makes an analysis of five learning network projects funded by the Finnish Workplace Development Programme TYKES (2004-10). The analysis shows that of three levels of developmental learning, the networks succeeded best at the level of local sustainability, whereas their results concerning external generativity fell short of the aim. At the end reasons for that are discussed.

Key words: development programme, developmental learning, learning network, workplace development

1. Introduction

This paper examines learning networks as a vehicle for improving the ability of publicly supported workplace development programmes to produce broad-based and long-term learning effects in working life. We first analyse shortcomings of a traditional programme strategy based on the utilization of demonstration projects and possibilities provided by an alternative strategy

based on the utilization of learning networks to overcome some of these shortcomings. In the empirical part of the paper, we examine learning effects of learning networks at three levels. The empirical material consists of written materials and key person interviews concerning five learning network projects funded by the Finnish Workplace Development Programme TYKES between 2004 and 2010. At the end are discussion and the conclusion.

This paper aims to fill the gap related to our knowledge on long-term effectiveness of workplace development programmes and feasibility of an 'alternative' programme strategy (see Alasoini, 2006; Brulin & Svensson, 2012). On the whole, a great part of what we know of the results of workplace development programmes is based on evaluation studies carried out immediately after their completion. The underlying motivation of these kinds of studies is typically to provide the programme funders with feedback about the success of the programmes and about the impacts that are easy to measure and detect. Question setting in the studies is tied with the special interests of the funder. This means that the knowledge created by individual evaluation studies does not easily accumulate.

2. Two programme strategies in comparison

The traditional programme strategy is based on a group of projects, whose purpose is to act as 'empirical proof' to demonstrate some advanced principle or practice. On the basis of these demonstration projects, researchers, consultants or other intermediaries construct 'good practices' to be disseminated for the utilisation of a larger group of workplaces.

However, experiences from different countries show that the rate of success of public programmes following the traditional strategy of dissemination is rather poor (e.g. Arnkil, 2008; Brulin & Svensson, 2012; Fricke, 2003; Gustavsen et al., 2001; Riegler, 2008; Steiber & Alänge, 2013). The adoption of any new managerial, organisational or work-related principle or practice that is even slightly abstract or systematically complex is not a mechanical process of transfer from one workplace to another, but a process of fine-tuning, adjustment and *learning,* including 'local re-invention' (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). In general, research on innovation dissemination has

demonstrated that the degree to which an innovation is re-invented, i.e. modified by adopters as it diffuses, is positively related to the innovation's sustainability (Rogers, 2003, p. 429).

We can refer to the existence of a chasm between the first-order and generative results of a programme (Alasoini, 2008). *First-order results* mean changes immediately due to projects undertaken in the work organisations participating in the projects. In programmes promoting workplace change and innovation, typical first-order results are improvements in work productivity, employee well-being, work environment, etc. *Generative results* show how the results of projects supported through the programme benefit other parties besides those directly involved. However, generative results do not necessarily, and in workplace development, not even primarily, involve ready-made 'good/best practices' that can be transposed from one context to another; rather, they involve the production and dissemination of generative ideas which can become sources of inspiration or encouragement to actors outside the project.

As argue in greater detail elsewhere (Alasoini, 2008), the programme supported demonstration projects are usually successful; they are equipped with exceptional resources and implemented in progressive workplaces. It may therefore be misleading to draw far-reaching conclusions concerning the functionality of any principle or practice employed in the project in another context. If a project produces first-order results which are 'too good', this can lead to unrealistic expectations and undefined and under-resourced strategies in terms of achieving generative results.

Programmes that rely on the utilization of demonstration projects have different means available to narrow the chasm between the first-order and generative results. Firstly, it is possible to deploy various means of transfer within programmes more efficiently and selectively for clearly targeted groups of potential adopters. The second alternative is to shift programme resources from the 'over-resourced' innovation creation stage (i.e. the stage at which 'good practices' are created in demonstration projects) to the 'under-resourced' reception stage, with an eye to providing increased support for 'second wave' adopters. Thirdly, it is possible for programmes resorting to demonstration projects to improve their capacity to provide generative results

by elaborating causal mechanisms of demonstration through rigorous analysis (Pawson, 2002). The lack of hard evidence of the link between human resource management practices and organisational performance, for example, is often considered a major obstacle to the diffusion of these practices (Gibbons & Woock, 2007; Hesketh & Fleetwood, 2006). Fourthly, instead of more convincing evidence-based argumentation, it is possible to seek to emotionally enrich the knowledge provided by demonstration projects and make it easier to adopt, by using narrative or other interactive methods (Arnkil, 2008; Denning, 2004).

However, all these means have obvious limitations in practice. In the first case, transfer is still considered a mechanical process, without any radically new tools to support local learning and re-invention at the reception stage. The second and fourth means require ample financial and expert resources, either in the form of providing support to a large group of 'second wave' adopters or creating forums for intensive exchange of information based on storytelling between 'first wave' experimentors and 'second wave' adopters. Concerning the third means, a major problem is that achieving hard evidence on the practice–performance link is, literally, hard business.

The utilisation of learning networks corresponds to a radical blurring of the creation, transfer and reception stages. As the name suggests, a *learning* network is a network created specially for learning. Here, learning is not simply a 'by-product' of the sharing of experiences, which occurs in all networks; rather, it is the explicit and primary function of the network to produce learning events. The learning subjects involved may be individuals, groups of people, organisations or other communities, intra-network consortia or the network as a whole. Within this general framework, learning networks have been utilized in various ways in practice. Here, the concept contains the idea of learning that takes place in an *inter*-organisational context (e.g. Alasoini, 2008; Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001; Bottrup, 2005; Knight, 2002; Romano & Secundo, 2009; Tell, 2001).

The learning network is based on the idea of bringing together actors who share an interest in sufficiently similar development issues, but who still have a sufficiently broad diversity of expertise. These are engaged in long-term interaction, with the aim of creating innovation potential. In addition to work

organisations, this group of actors may include researchers, consultants, trainers, labour market organisations or regional or other agencies. The boundaries between creation, transfer and reception are blurred by launching several experiments ongoing at the same time. The focus of programme support is not on individual development projects in individual workplaces as such, but on the promotion of mutual interaction and exhange of information between workplaces and, ideally, shared development work. One key assumption of a learning network is that its participants have complementary expertise. This means that participants cannot be 'freeloaders'; in any given situation everyone in the network can occupy the role of a learner or a teacher. It is also possible that the network will initiate joint explorative projects to gain in-depth expertise on matters that are new to *all* members.

Because, in learning networks, funding is primarily allocated to promoting interaction between participants, we may assume that on average it is more difficult for learning network projects to show the same first-order results than it is for programmes following the traditional strategy. However, the producing of generative results is an in-built objective in learning network projects, unlike in the case of the traditional programme strategy where the good results of demonstration projects are products of an environment which is in many ways artificial. Moreover, learning networks can function, not just as a forum for the exchange of information between participants within an individual network, but also as an intermediate-level structure which can facilitate a broader exchange of information within a programme.

There are several critical prerequisites for the operation of a learning network:

Resources. For a programme to utilise learning networks, there must be sufficient resources available at the level of the network in terms of funding; time; active ownership, steering and co-ordination; supporting staff with brokerage, facilitiation and learning-promoting skills; and trust. Building up networks, and achieving the confidential interaction relationships required for networks to function, is usually time-consuming. In practice, it is easiest to get started if the participants have already engaged in some type of interaction or actual co-operation, and have consequently built mutual trust. Trust can be considered a resource in itself. For example, Bessant et al.

(2012) talk of three types of trust: 'commitment trust', 'competence trust' and 'companion trust', that play a crucial role in different stages of the network's life cycle. In addition to active ownership and steering, learning networks generally need a co-ordinator with a sufficiently neutral position towards the network's core members, and the opportunity to make a strong, long-term commitment to developing the network's operations. In workplace development programmes, this role is typically taken by researchers or consultants.

Composition. The network's composition determines what kinds of forums for the exchange of experiences can be formed within the network. Relevant factors include the size of the network, its structure, permanence of the network's membership, power relations between the members, and the similarity or diversity of its members' expertise. However, it is not possible to define in advance what an 'ideal learning network' should look like. For example, similarity of expertise may narrow the knowledge domain of the network, whereas diversity can prevent participants from understanding each other's situation, aims, language, concepts and values (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Tell, 2001). Established co-operative relationships between members may help fluidity of communication, building trust and defining shared objects of learning and development within the network, but they may at the same also limit the capacity of the members to get radically new insights through network activities (Birkinshaw et al., 2007).

Motives and expectations. It is an important issue what motives and expectations the participants have for acting within the network, and how much these differ between them. Is it possible for the participants to define shared development agendas? Are the participants ready to bring their own experiences for collective processing? Because learning networks are a type of project, in which the underlying change process theory could be described as more constructive and less prescribed than in the more traditional types of project (see Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), it may be difficult for potential participants to understand their basic logic, let alone draw up cost-benefit assessments of participation in a learning network project.

Rules. As learning networks are formally established and defined, when used in workplace development programmes, they must have rules of play to

guide their operations. These rules concern, for example, the membership of the network, decision making, conflict resolution, information processing, knowledge capture, and sharing of risks and benefits between members (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001). The rules lay ground for the core process of a learning network: the process of facilitating learning.

Learning process. The success of learning networks to produce generative results depends crucially on how well their core process functions, i.e. how the learning process is organised and what kind of tools and methods are available to support it (Bessant & Tsekouras, 2001; Toiviainen & Kerosuo, 2013). Because our attention focuses here on learning that takes place in an inter-organisational context (see above), it is important to view what kind of interactive forums emerge in the network to support the development work and learning of participants. According to the participants' role in the network's interactive forums, generally speaking, three main set-ups can be distinguished (Alasoini, 2008): Firstly, in a traditional and expert-driven 'teacher and learners' set-up some members have superior expertise in a given area. In such cases, the other members can gain ideas and encouragement for their own development work in that area. Secondly, in the 'all teachers and learners' set-up several members already have experiences in a particular area. This enables benchmarking of practices between members, proving learning opportunities for all involved. In workplace development, however, owing to the considerable amount of context and system-dependency of practices, mechanical benchmarking that is based on using some 'best practice' as a guideline must often give way to a more reflexive way of benchmarking where the emphasis is on the use of dialogical methods, rather than detailed sets of indicators and strict measurements systems. Thirdly, in the 'all learners' set-up a network examines matters which are relatively new to all members by launching explorative activities.

3. Learning networks in the TYKES programme

The empirical material consists of learning network projects funded by the Finnish Workplace Development Programme TYKES between 2004 and 2010. The starting point for launching the programme was the idea that the

government, through tailored and demand-based activities, could significantly accelerate workplace-level development of productivity and the quality of working life. A new, experimental type of project activity, i.e. the learning network, was included in the programme with an eye to enhancing the ability of the programme to produce generative results. The learning network was based on interactive, 'open innovation' approach, inspired by the experiences of earlier Finnish and Scandinavian programmes to promote broad-based learning and sustainable development by means of network building (e.g. Alasoini, 2006; Davies et al., 1993; Gustavsen et al., 2001; Levin, 2002; Naschold et al., 1993). The project model that was used in the TYKES programme for learning networks evolved from a traditional, meticulously planned model towards more process-like, continuously developing networked co-operation. This could be achieved through the programme agency in the Ministry of Labour and network co-ordinators initially agreeing on the project's goals, R&D tasks, and total funding and duration, and then reviewing and updating the project development plan and the budget for the next project phase every 1-2 years. It is no exaggeration to say that every learning network had to 'reinvent' itself at certain intervals.

The programme initiated 16 networks built around themes, methods, business sectors and regions (Alasoini et al., 2011; Ramstad, 2009). Total funding allocated to learning network projects on the part of the programme was €7.6 million between 2004 and 2010, targeted mainly to the work input of network co-ordinators, researchers and consultants and arranging interactive forums. The participants included a group of researchers and developers with a shared interest and workplaces whose development was supported by co-operation with external experts. The total number of workplaces participating in the networks was about 350, and the total number of researchers 110, representing 30 units of universities or other research or educational institutes with a wide variety of disciplines. About one third of the researchers were doctoral students preparing their thesis based on project material.

Learning networks tended to be remarkably open. In addition to a compact core group, various forms of network activity were undertaken, either casually or more actively, by dozens of representatives of several organisations. In many cases, network participants also varied during the

project. The purpose of the networks was to increase the developmental expertise of the participants; to create and experiment with new forms of development co-operation between R&D institutes and workplaces; and to generate new, innovative solutions for Finnish working life. In the forefront were networks that aimed at the creation of new knowledge and expertise related to workplace innovation; that aimed at learning at several different levels (individual, team, organisational, inter-organisational, network level); that consisted of a large number of R&D units and work organisations of different kinds; and that showed obvious potential for development. Learning networks were intended to be long-term (3–6 years) meeting forums, rather than projects that progress in a 'linear' fashion, based on traditional 'project logic', and whose implementation is guided by an *implementation* plan based on this logic and possessing a precise timetable.

Learning networks carried out diverse activities. In addition to development work, scientific research was also conducted in almost all of the networks, resulting in some 20 completed doctoral dissertations. However, the key aspect lay in seeking new forms of interaction and development co-operation, both among active participants within the network and those outside it. The networks arranged various kinds of forums for learning and joint development processes, aimed at open dialogue between participants. These forums included interactive face-to-face events as well as virtual platforms.

4. Research design

In the following, we examine learning effects of learning networks at three levels, by making use of an evaluation framework developed by Alasoini (2008) for analysing the dynamics of development programmes. These three levels largely correspond also to what Brulin and Svensson (2012, pp. 49-53) mean by 'developmental learning'. The first level is *local sustainability*. This refers to new competences, co-operative relations or other development structures which are created by learning networks and the existence of which can be verified among the core members of the network once the programme funding has ended. This study examines local sustainability within the time span of 4-5 years, depending on the network. The other level of analysis is

external generativity. This refers to networks' generative results (see above) in terms of competence, co-operative relations or other development structures. The subjects of learning here are micro-level actors, such as workplaces, researchers, consultants, etc., outside the network. The third level is *policy learning*. The subjects of learning at this level are project and programme implementers and policy makers. The targets of learning at the policy level are design and implementation of new projects, programmes or other activities to develop working life.

The follow-up question would be how to explain the success/failure of a network in producing learning impacts. Explanation is sought, above all, in the abovementioned critical preconditions for the activities of the learning networks. The data is examined and explanation is narratively approached, in the way that Pawson (2002) refers to as 'configurational' approach to causality. Here outcomes are considered to follow from the alignment of a fruitful combination of attributes, and the networks succeed (or fail) because of the compatibility (or incompatibility) of these attributes.

The study focused on five learning network projects in the TYKES programme, and key person interviews were chosen as the principal data collection method. There were two main criteria in the network selection: the expected production of generative results by the network was estimated to be good, and it was possible to get interviewees who would have realistic chances to assess the network's learning impacts afterwards. The number of interviewees totalled 13, including researchers, consultants, public officials and labour market officials. Of those interviewed, 11 participated in a face-to-face individual or group interview lasting 1-2 hours. In addition, two phone interviews, each lasting about an hour, were conducted. No-one refused to be interviewed. The interviews were carried out between September 2013 and February 2014. In addition, the interviewer had a lot of written material on each network. The material included the networks' all project applications and project implementation plans, as well as the interim and final reports for the programme. Besides, there were publications available on the networks.

The interviews were realized as semi-structured theme interviews. Their central themes consisted of the most important results of the learning network, sustainability of the results (competence, co-operative relations, development

structures), follow-up processes achieved by the network, the network's added value compared to traditional demonstration projects, workability of the network structure and interactive forums, as well as the programme's support to the network. All the themes were such that the key persons had the necessary knowledge to express their opinion on them.

5. Learning network projects – successes and failures

Table 1 summarises the main characteristics of the five networks under study, in terms of their names, duration, the network co-ordinators, type, and connecting objects of activity and the related R&D tasks. As the table shows, the networks differ from each other in many important aspects.

Table 1: Five learning network projects under study

Name and co-ordinator LN = learning network	Type	Connecting objects of activity and related R&D tasks
The Hiisi Area Cluster (2004-09), University of Helsinki, Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education	Region-based	Improvement of expertise related to environmental management and well-being at work. Provision of information on how trust and partnership can be built and learning takes place in a network.
LN of South Savo (2005-09), Anttolanhovi Rehabilitation and Research Centre	Region-based	Development of methods and competences in collaborative, worker-oriented development in workplaces and building up a network to facilitate regional co-operation in the development of working life.
OVE – LN for Tourism Business in Eastern Uusimaa (2004-08), HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences	Region-based	Development of the region as a 'learning region' by strengthening its self-identity and enhancing networking between companies, the quality of their services and the role of the university in regional development.
SAKEA – LN for Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) and Evaluation of Operations in Municipalities (2004-09), Innotiimi Consulting Company	Sector-based	Improvement of the effectiveness and performance of municipalities with the help of a SHRM and Balanced Scorecard (BSC)-based strategy and reformed systems of rewarding.
Change Makers – LN for Participatory Development of Operating Concepts (2004-08), University of Helsinki	Method-based	Use of the Change Laboratory method in the development of operating concepts.

A description of each network reflecting the above set of research questions follows:

The Hiisi Area Cluster located in Western Uusimaa came to being in 1999 as the Lohja region environmental cluster funded by the Workplace Development Programme TYKE that preceded the TYKES programme. Once the TYKE funding had ended, the cluster's activities continued in 2003–04 through the members' own funding. With the funding of the TYKES programme, the network expanded geographically: The municipalities of Inkoo and Siuntio and a group of companies in these municipalities joined the Lohja region cluster, and a new parallel cluster was created in the Karkkila region. The network expanded thematically too, to ergonomics and occupational safety, and to the SME sector. The funding of the TYKES programme having ended and the regional continuing education unit that co-ordinated the cluster having been dissolved, the activities of the Lohja region cluster have continued with the co-ordination of an environment association. Currently, the cluster has 15 members, of which the majority is made up of companies. The City of Lohja and the municipalities of Inkoo and Siuntio are still involved. The 'hard core' has remained more or less the same from year to year.

The long life-span of the Lohja region cluster has been maintained by the common interests of various parties. In the 1990s, environmental management of Lohja region companies was wanting. The region had experienced economic decline, and fierce conflicts in environmental matters among companies and residents cost dearly to the companies and the city. Apart from creating a channel for both the companies and the city to develop their environmental management, the cluster gave birth to a new kind of communication channel with the residents. The cluster also responded to the continuing education unit's strategy to become active in regional development.

With the cluster, the region saw the emergence of a critical mass of very different actors in support of better management in environmental matters; when being supported by the TYKES programme, there were dozens of companies within the scope of the cluster's operations. The number of full members of the Lohja region cluster was at its most 23 (In Karkkila, that number was 16). Right at the beginning, a strong organisation was created

and rules were laid down for the cluster. The collectively fashioned rules have had an important bearing in creating mutual trust among the members, who typically did not have earlier experience of joint development work at the time when the cluster was launched. Intense conscious investment on building trust among the members is witnessed also by the fact that development of trust relationships was the target of its own monitoring and research in the project (Korkala, 2010). The threshold to join the cluster was low, which was important especially for small companies. The cluster also created a diverse group of various interactive forums, in the implementation of which the companies themselves have played a central role. These forums include joint development projects, training workshops, benchmarking sessions, theme-based joint clubs between companies, workplace visits and on-line forums.

The Learning Network of South Savo was born of the need to strengthen companies' and other parties' development activeness and co-operation as well as development infrastructure in an area where there were neither universities nor big flagship companies. A group of educational and public organisations as well as labour market and entrepreneurial associations became the core actors in the network. The network was co-ordinated by a semi-public rehabilitation and research centre. Company participation took place principally through sub-networks (forums). With the programme funding having come to the end, the network, after a small delay, has continued its activities through the efforts of mostly the same approximately 15 core actors, as an open development network with a revamped forum structure. The continuation of activities has been motivated by the common desire of those involved to find solutions for the area's problems including scarcity of growth companies and skilled labour, low R&D investment, as well as the population's low educational level and rapid ageing. Today, the network is co-ordinated by a regional official body.

Two years of preparations preceded the launching of the network in 2005. The initial idea about establishing a networked regional development centre was substituted with a learning network during the preparations. Inspired by the Developmental Work Research (DWR) approach, the network's ambitious aim was that strengthening of development competence should be based

on systematic adoption of advanced methods and on dialogue and co-creation amongst forums formed by employees, managers, entrepreneurs, developers and researchers. The idea about the learning process based on the methods of DWR was best realised in the Forum of In-House Development, which was supported by researchers from the University of Helsinki. The basic idea of the Forum was, through inter-organisational collaboration, to train workers to become change agents at their workplaces (Toiviainen & Kerosuo, 2013). Other forums, however, were directed by different kinds of interests, for example by peer-mentoring and empowerment ideas, and different development methods were applied in them. Thus the desired dialogue between these forums was not realised. Also the building of a joint electronic learning platform for the forums was suspended.

Public work organisations took the leading role in the network, and companies were joining the network only after a delay. The number of workplaces participating actively in the forums rose up to about 60. The network did not have a sufficiently strong management structure or strong individual actors who would have been able to realize the network's ambitious aims in a coherent manner. The rehabilitation centre was too weak and inexperienced for that. The task would have been demanding for any organisation in the area, though. The network consisted of several actors with differing interests and represented a radically novel way of action to all of them. The sustainability of the new kind of regional development structure that came into being with the network can be thought of as an important achievement as such for it, although the learning impacts themselves have been more moderate and the methods of interactive forums more traditional than what was aimed at right at the beginning.

The Learning Network for Tourism Business in Eastern Uusimaa OVE originated at the joint initiative of the regional university and small tourism companies to create new, innovative solutions for tourism business in the region and learning spaces for regional actors more generally. For the regional university, a key goal was also to find new ways for combining research, development and education in its activities. During its active operation, the network consisted of about 40 companies and other actors, including also two other universities, the City of Porvoo and the Regional

Council. The regional university's new mode of operation and the idea to produce innovative solutions for the development of tourism business through 'multi-voiced', collaborative processes can be considered the two most important learning targets for the network.

OVE contained several learning and development forums at different levels. These included SYMBIO, where teachers and students of a university together with entrepreneurs participated as 'learning partners' in the development of small businesses, the VIVA development project of the City of Porvoo's old town and the virtual Knowledge Marketplace. The Knowledge Marketplace subsequently functioned both as a database of tourism and network events and an open co-creation tool for participants in the network's research and development themes. The construction of the virtual forum in 2005-06 in itself can be considered an example of multi-voiced co-creation. In 2008, the network expanded from tourism business also to creative areas. At the same time, the forum was renamed the Competence Forum.

With the learning network, the role of the university in research and regional development has become more active. From the viewpoint of this study, the most interesting result, however, is that the ideas concerning development as multi-voiced co-creation and learning as situated and practice-based activity that were developed and experimented with in the network have had an important bearing on the contents of learning and R&D activities of the university and on the design of Porvoo's new university campus. Many of the practices, such as 'learning partnership', co-creation and research-based development, that were created in the network are today widely integrated in teaching at the university (Lassila & Rantanen, 2012). The multi-voiced practice that originated from SYMBIO has been further developed with the help of a continuing project. Also the major part of the collaborative relationships created between the university and the companies has remained. The same applies to collaborative relationships amongst the companies. Recently, the Competence Forum was superseded by a more advanced platform.

The SAKEA learning network, focusing on SHRM, evaluation and remuneration, was launched as a large-scale joint project that consisted of about 20 municipal organisations and sectoral labour market organisations

and about 15 action researchers and developers from seven universities. The aim of the network was to utilise and further develop the long experience of using participatory action research as a means to help municipal organisations find innovative solutions to their prevailing financial and operational problems through labour-management co-operation, instead of resorting solely to management-driven measures. SAKEA operated at two levels. Municipal organisations carried out development projects launched on the basis of their own needs and organised training events. Some executed their projects using their own resources while others used external experts. Five municipal organisations formed the core of the network, acting as objects of 'reflexive' benchmarking for other members. Various learning events, including thematic workshops and seminars, were realized at the level of the entire network and a virtual learning platform was established.

The SAKEA network can be described as a large development platform where individual development projects genuinely got added value through joint elaboration in interactive forums. Generally speaking, the municipal organisations were pleased to submit experiences obtained from their own development projects for joint examination at interactive forums, while the virtual environment remained more of a database than a tool for actively generating ideas. SAKEA also produced a great number of various guides and other publications. A municipal employer organisation has acted as the most important disseminator of knowledge, and it itself has afterwards uti-lised SAKEA's experiences in the development of its ability to network management. SAKEA, in fact, has created new competences and provided examples of 'good practices', particularly for the utilization of those munici-pal organisations: and especially of their HR experts and shop stewards, who, on the whole, have more actively participated in municipal development projects. Then again, with SAKEA, the size of this kind of 'active group' expanded.

The output of the SAKEA network has not spread as mainstream practices to the municipal sector. As a goal, this would have been unrealistic as well. The financial situation of many municipalities has further deteriorated in Finland, and public debate on the development of the municipal sector has lately focused, quite exclusively, on what kinds of structural reforms should

be carried out in the sector during the next few years. The network grew bigger than intended due to the great enthusiasm of the most active municipalities. This resulted in that the work of the network's co-ordinator mainly focused on running the network and organising interactive forums. Search for innovative solutions to create wider generative impacts received less attention.

The Change Makers learning network was built around researchers, consultants and in-house developers of work organisations utilising and developing the Change Laboratory method. The Change Laboratory method was developed in the 1990s under the leadership of researchers from the University of Helsinki as a novel and light rapid-cycle application for DWR (Engeström et al., 1996). The idea of the network was ambitious in the sense that the operating concept, which was meant to be the connecting link between its members, is not an established concept in the same way as productivity or quality, for example. The choice of operating concept as an object for the network's joint development was connected with the view according to which organisations in the future would increasingly compete with various concepts instead of individual products or services. The development of operating concepts requires new kind of knowledge and outlook. The core actors were the Centre for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research of the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and the Merikoski Rehabilitation and Research Centre.

More than 120 persons from 40 organisations joined the network. The organisations were mainly relatively large public or semi-public units with their own development resources. The researchers trained consultants and the organisations' in-house developers in the use of the Change Laboratory method and supported the preparations for change laboratories realised by them in different organisations. The network also constructed an Internet platform to serve as a joint medium of development for the participants. The platform functioned as a forum to collect information rounded up about the application of the Change Laboratory method and participatory development of the operating concept: method and development project descriptions and articles of the network's own e-magazine, for example. In practice, the platform functioned better as a data bank than as a medium of discussion and

co-creation. The reasons for that were both the unsynchronised timing of the development projects realised within the network and the different orientations of the participants. Many in-house developers, especially, were primarily interested only for the development of their own organisation and found it difficult to take part in joint theoretical analysis of development work.

The network facilitated the creation of a rich data bank about the experiences of the development projects which had applied the Change Laboratory method, of new applications of the method and of new theoretical viewpoints to the operating concept. In Finland, the network engendered a large number of researcher-developers, consultants and trainers with the ability to apply the Change Laboratory method and other tools of DWR in development interventions. The links between the network and changes in workplaces were weak, in a sense that even though there were a great number of work organisations within its scope, the participants typically were in-house developers, for example professionals in HRM and occupational health care. On the other hand, the top management did not participate, except in some cases. This can be regarded as a clear weakness, especially as the development of operational concepts, in particular, was held as the guiding principle for the whole network. The most successful examples of the development of operational concepts with the projects that were supported by the network concerned staff development, occupational health care and teaching in universities of applied sciences, i.e. certain specialised activities within organisations. The projects achieved less frequently changes that would have extended to the strategic level of the whole organisation. The Change Makers network is not alone in this, though. 'Selling' novel, theoretically demanding development concepts to top management is a demanding task for any research-oriented development approach.

6. Discussion

It is not possible to estimate, unequivocally, how well the TYKES learning network projects succeeded/failed as an 'alternative' strategy. As projects the learning networks were complex and multi-level. Moreover, their goals were relatively loose and their properties very different. The following brings

together, by network, the central observations of the previous chapter and the factors explaining them.

Two of the networks are still actively functioning. The Lohja region environmental cluster corresponds perhaps most closely to the idea about the 'ideal learning network' in the TYKES programme (see Alasoini, 2006). The cluster had survived two stages where external funding had dried up: with a slightly diminished membership, however. One can find several explanatory factors for the cluster's sustainability. One of these is the strong commitment of its owners, especially that of the City of Lohja; also Brulin and Svensson (2012, pp. 187-196) stress its importance as a condition for local sustainability. Another significant factor consists of the rules created for the cluster, rules which have acted as an important means to strengthen 'institutional social capital' (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) and provided support for the openness of information exchange and mutual learning. New and genuine collaborative relationships have emerged between the parties, another key factor of local sustainability mentioned by Brulin and Svensson. The co-ordinator, the university's local continuing education centre, had an important role in the creation of the rules. Attempts were also made to consciously strengthen the cluster structure in accordance with the principles of 'learning organisation'. The third issue is related to the theme of the cluster. For the members, environmental questions have kept their relevance, and their economic importance has further increased. For some of the companies, the membership has also become a question of image. On the other hand, the other sub-cluster in the Karkkila region disintegrated once the programme funding had ended in 2009. The companies of the Karkkila cluster were on average smaller than those in the Lohja cluster, and the network was less concentrated around few core actors. Even though the rules created for the Karkkila cluster were similar to those in Lohja, the network co-operation ended, having no core actors with sufficiently strong ownership.

The learning network of South Savo continues with a new name and structure but largely through the efforts of the same parties. The network lacks many of the elements which explain the sustainability of the Lohja region cluster. The launching of the South Savo network was guided by ideological enthusiasm, the Lohja cluster by pragmatism. The network of

South Savo did not expend efforts on rules; its themes were varied, difficulties were encountered with companies' commitment, no common vision to guide the network parties was formed, the co-ordination and direction of the network remained weak, and during the implementation there were disagreements among the parties about the aims as well as development methods. Also a certain degree of sectarianism was characteristic of the network. The network of South Savo, unlike the Lohja cluster, did not actively try to network outwards with other learning networks. On the other hand, behind the South Savo network one can find common factors with the Lohja cluster. The first of these is that the network's original development areas (HRM, ageing and availability of workforce, employee well-being and proactivity of work organisations) are still relevant. Secondly, strong regional institutions have been the core actors of the network. The network has been constantly supported, despite its many problems, by a strong, although institutionally dispersed, ownership. Already the preparation of the network was guided by the thought of creating a permanent regional development structure. The new network structure, which emerged after a short delay once the programme funding had come to an end, is looser and less ambitious by its aims and methods than the network during the programme. On the other hand, in the eyes of the parties its credibility and thus also its sustainability is probably greater.

The OVE network differs from the previous ones in that it largely formed around a single actor. The R&D activities of the regional university started in practice with the network. The network has also significantly affected the university's concept of learning that guides teaching, its practical contents of the teaching and the design of a new university campus. In addition, the network has created still on-going collaborative relationships between the university and the companies in the region and between the companies. Of the networks, OVE is also the most successful example of how a virtual platform could be utilised as a co-creation tool by the parties. OVE did not continue its activities after the ending of the programme funding in 2008, but many of the forms of activities that were started during the network have continued integrated to the activities of the university or through other development projects.

It is hard to unequivocally estimate the output of the SAKEA network. This is due to its large size and multi-level nature, and because it is just one of the many large workplace development projects in the Finnish municipal sector. From the viewpoint of sustainability, the network had four important strengths. The first of these was, simply, the great number of work and expert organisations that participated. The second strength was labour market organisations' support for the network, and commitment to its aims and to dissemination of results. The dialogical nature of the network's interactive forums could be thought of as its third strength. The network carried out numerous forums, arranged by a great number of researchers and consultants with long experience in participatory action research projects and dialogue conferences. Fourth, there were no problems in getting mutual exchange of experiences in the network established. Many of the participants already had earlier experience of mutual co-operation, and among municipal organisations, on the whole, there were no open communication thresholds resembling those between companies.

On the flip-side of the SAKEA network's sizeable 'internal' generative results, there are the network's less ambitious 'external' generative results in the municipal sector as a whole. SAKEA represented the approach of the Quality Network established in 1994 by labour market organisations and action researchers. The approach has functioned as an alternative to the traditional bureaucratic, hierarchical and managerial way to implement changes. The key principles of the Quality Network in development comprise the search for balance between organisational effectiveness and the quality of working life, emphasis on labour-management co-operation, interaction and communication between intervention participants, and emphasis on local development needs and project ownership on the part of the work community (Lehtonen & Kalliola, 2008). The participatory, dialogical and multi-voiced approach represented by the Quality Network and SAKEA has during the past few years been marginalised and, in comparison with both mere cost-cutting strategies and New Public Management, suffered serious discursive losses as the municipal sector's modernisation strategy. The financial situation of many municipalities has weakened since 2008, and for this reason traditional distribution issues dominate the negotiation agenda at least to the

same extent as before. Attention has increasingly turned towards structural 'quick-fix' reforms in the entire municipal sector at the expense of smaller-scale development.

The Change Makers network trained 90 persons for the use of the Change Laboratory method, provided support for several development projects implemented in different work organisations, and gave rise to many theoretical contributions to the method and the theories on its background. The network functioned as a 'top to bottom' training and support structure for those studying the method and for the developers who applied it as well as a 'bottom to top' concentrator of experiences in the use of the method for the core actors of the network. The network's polarised structure was a great challenge to its operation. One pool was formed by the researchers who had elaborated the theories behind it and by users experienced with the method, the other one by persons who were still learning to use it. Of the different learning process set-ups (see above), the traditional 'teacher and learners' mode functioned the best in the network. On the other hand, in its most ambitious aims related to co-creation processes in which the parties have ample participation the network did not succeed that well. For many, the network connections between the parties remained weak, and temporary nature of membership and large turnover of the members was characteristic of the network. Change Makers was a network for individual developers, rather than for institutional actors. The network may be regarded as having been an important factor in increasing development competence in Finland, in creating new applications and instruments for the users of the Change Laboratory method and for researchers and consultants cognizant with DWR as well as in increasing students' interest (also internationally) in the method. On the other hand, the development expertise created by the network has become scattered through individual developers to various work organisations, due to which it is hard to estimate even approximately the extent to which this competence has managed to take root in the activities of these organisations. An open question that remains is whether the network's generative results could have been stronger, and by how much, if its membership, instead of consisting of individual developers, had been based on organisations.

7. Conclusion

Of three levels of developmental learning under study, the learning networks of the TYKES programme succeeded best at the level of *local sustainability* and especially in producing new competence. For this, the networks were well qualified: they had exceptionally good financial resources, they were able to operate in a long time-frame and the terms and conditions of the programme funding left them with ample freedom of action. However, the means by which the networks created new competence often remained less innovative than was originally envisaged. It was nonetheless possible to identify genuine co-creation processes in all five projects this research focused on; of these, the most impressive examples were those of OVE and SAKEA. OVE was also the only network where it was possible to utilize the virtual platform in a manner planned, as a co-creation medium. The Lohja region environmental cluster, the learning network of South Savo and OVE are the best examples of projects where the networked development structures created by them still exist.

The TYKES programme set great expectations for the learning networks to produce *generative results*. In this respect, the results clearly fell short of the aim. In spite of their experimental set-up, the activities of many networks were guided by a fairly traditional, linear concept of innovation, and in practice they put significantly more effort on local sustainability than on external generativity. In case of some networks, it could be said that they had become downright 'encapsulated' in relation to other networks. Although they could actively participate in joint network meetings arranged by the programme[1], not many of them had interest in more extensive information exchange, not to talk of co-operation, with other networks. One important reason for this was the diversity of goals, themes and approaches. The networks were experimental, which gave them operational freedom of movement but also separated them and hampered their capacity for mutual co-operation. The networks' most important way to promote external generativi-

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[1] The TYKES programme arranged nine joint workshops for the learning network projects between 2004 and 2009, focusing on experiences of the projects and different themes that were considered important for the operation of the networks.

ty was by training researchers, researcher-developers, consultants, in-house developers and students. Especially the roles of the Change Makers network and the OVE network may be regarded as significant in this respect. The networks were less able to spread outside them actual innovative work practices or new learning methods.

It is interesting to note that the experiences of all the interviewees about their own role in the learning network were very positive. For example, some interviewees described their participation as 'awesome', 'a real stroke of luck' or 'a huge learning experience'. This indicates that, in comparison with more traditional project forms, a learning network can contain more such tacit accumulation of participants' knowledge that is difficult to achieve with the traditional means to estimate projects' impacts. We can assume that work in learning network environments necessarily includes more encounters between different worlds of competence and experiences than in traditional project forms. Comprehensive evaluation of learning networks, in fact, is difficult at the level of *policy learning*. Nevertheless, we can characterize the Lohja region environmental cluster, the network of South Savo network and the OVE network as 'learning networks' also in the sense that already over several years they have been able to develop their network-based forms of activity among core actors and, when necessary, adopt their activities to changed environments.

The TYKES learning networks did not transform into such an innovative type of breakthrough activity that could have improved, in a decisive manner, the programme's ability to achieve generative impacts. *In this sense*, the experiences resemble those in earlier Nordic development programmes (e.g. Brulin & Svensson, 2012; Davies et al., 1993; Gustavsen et al., 2001; Levin, 2002; Naschold et al., 1993). The characteristics of the learning networks' most significant impacts were 'more local', and the means used, in many sense, more traditional than originally aimed at. Harnessing the networks more tightly to align them with the programme's objectives would have been difficult. The broad operational scope allowed by the programme funding proved in that sense to be a double-bladed sword: even though it made local experimentation possible, it did not provide the programme many opportunities to direct the contents of these experiments.

From the viewpoint of the networks' core actors, the orientation of the networks towards local sustainability at the expense of generativity was understandable. In many cases, their co-ordinators had their hands full in assembling the network, helping various parties to find targets of development to link them together or maintain trust that the co-operation enabled between the parties. The TYKES programme was nevertheless under-resourced regarding methods that would have enabled better co-ordination of local sustainability and external generativity in the networks. This was unfortunate, not only from the standpoint of achieving generative results for the entire programme, but in the long term also from the standpoint of the networks themselves. Also local sustainability requires external generativity from different projects/networks. Even local success stories often do not last without sufficient generative capability, i.e. the ability of the project/network in question to provide results that benefit also other parties besides those directly involved in the project/network.

This paper shows that learning networks are a powerful vehicle for reinforcing the ability of workplace development programmes to produce broad-based and long-term learning effects in working life. However, successful deployment of learning networks in future programme activities requires that progress will be made in the design of 'next generation' learning network concepts in many areas. The analysis reinforces the view about the importance of resources, composition, motives and expectations, rules and the learning process (see above) for the activities of the networks. These factors should nevertheless be seen just as basic prerequisites for the mere possibility of learning network type activities between the parties. In addition to this, the programmes need instruments to help in making individual networks promote, apart from their *network* level aims, also broader *programme* level aims.

Learning network projects differ in many ways from traditional demonstration projects. In spite of that, within them there are similar tensions between different actors and types of outcomes. In publicly funded projects, it is important to be able to point out rather quick appearance of first-order results. Even though the pressure for this in learning networks is not necessarily as great as in demonstration projects, it is clear that the commitment of

work organisations also in learning networks depends, to a large degree, on this. For example, some of the TYKES learning networks responded to this pressure by resorting, to a greater degree than intended, to traditional development methods. With the help of these methods, it was possible to meet individual work organisations' immediate development needs at the expense of a longer-term accumulation of knowledge that would take place in an inter-organisational context through 'reflexive' benchmarking processes or through launching joint explorative activities within the network.

The tension referred to above crystallises into tension between work and expert organisations and is related to the respective importance of the network's first-order results and other results. Another tension prevails among the network's expert organisations and the programme agency/owners. As already referred to above, it is in the network co-ordinators' and researchers' mutual interest, especially during project implementation, to orient towards reinforcing local sustainability rather than towards strengthening external generativity. Obviously, it is in the researchers' interest to author scientific and other publications but typically only *afterwards:* the same way as in traditional development project types. However, this is not the solution for the problem of dissemination of the results of workplace development programmes; that would require faster interaction based on more rapid cycles both between networks as well as among them and the outside world.

The strongest method available is to pressurize networks into mutual co-operation and external generativity through projects' funding conditions. This method can work mainly in case of individual networks in some particular situations (e.g. Levin & Løvland, 2002), but it is hard to imagine that increasing openness, dialogue and co-operation between networks could be created primarily through pressure. In a more sustainable solution, a programme would be capable of creating a development agenda through which it would be able bring about genuine mutual dialogue, shared targets of learning and development and co-creation processes arising from these. The creation of this kind of development agenda requires strong common desire from the part of macro-level actors (policy makers, the programme agency, labour market parties or other stakeholders) that are regarded as legitimate (Gustavsen et al., 2001, pp. 264-265), as well as workable methods and tools in order to apply

the development agenda to practice (Toiviainen & Kerosuo, 2013). In the TYKES programme, the central weakness was not that it would not have been possible to achieve this kind of agenda. The central weakness was that no systematic process had been created in the programme to bring about this kind of agenda. Without a common development agenda, mutual communication among the networks remained, to a large extent, at the level of discussion and exchange of experiences. Labour market parties and regional authorities were among the core actors in six of the sixteen networks (Ramstad, 2009). Without a common development agenda defined on the programme level, this alone was too weak a method for strengthening the networks' generative capabilities.

It will be interesting to see to what extent social media can become the instrument with the help of which information about new kinds of ideas and solutions spreads in working life and which gives rise to new kinds of co-operation and network relationships as well as co-creation processes. The experiences of the TYKES programme's learning networks in the use of electronic platforms, particularly in co-creation, were quite unremarkable. Social media has not in any other manner either become a widespread development work medium for workplaces. The increase in the platforms' user-friendliness and their widespread use offer, however, new previously unseen opportunities also in the field of workplace development. This does not make obsolete the way workplace development is based on the programme, project or learning network mode backed by genuine participation of employees in the workplaces concerned (cf. Fricke, 2013), but it challenges us to seriously search novel, innovative solutions for the problem of producing generative results also in workplace development.

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