



IS THE OPENNESS A PROBLEM IN OPEN WORKPLACE-BASED TRAINING?

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Abstract

The issue of openness in prospective open courses, in workplace-based training, is investigated in this explorative study. Staff responsible for training at five companies was interviewed about open courses and MOOCs as possible for work based training. Both the both the interviewees themselves and the company they belong to is collaborating with scientists at higher education institutions (HEIs). The study raises the question whether they consider open courses and MOOCs might be a way to reinforce workplace-based training supported by ICT tools.

The companies displayed a positive attitude towards expanding the technology-enhanced learning and openness, and foresee few problems with the openness when they participate in teaching and other course activities. Nonetheless, the current use of ICT tools for communication and strategies to make use of technology-enhanced learning and open courses are surprisingly limited and vague although e-learning for well-defined routines is utilized. The size and business model of the companies are also factors that determine the potential interest for open courses.

Conclusively: the interest is obvious in order to succeed with technology-enhanced and open workplace-based training and the issue of openness seems not to be a major hindrance. There is a large potential in collaboration between companies and in collaboration between the scientists and industry.

Open education and open publishing are parts of the change that has been on-going for decades, and include the ideas of sharing open source and open content on internet, as well. Open education is believed to provide a great opportunity for more people to acquire access to higher education, and also to develop new business models. In this setting, the possibilities for new collaboration and partnerships should be intriguing for both HEIs and business (de Vries, 2013; Hamburg et al., 2014; Kim, Bonk & Teng, 2009). Ernst and Young (Bokor, 2012) points at different trends in an Australian setting in the report "University of the Future". A clear trend is deepening cooperation between industry and universities, where they cooperate in both research and teaching. In the European setting is many initiative taken and the

commission claims “the need to develop effectively and close co-operation between universities and industry”. (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011, p.8)

While the number of open courses and MOOCs is increasing there exists an opportunity for business to benefit from these flexible online courses as work-based training. The providers are still trying to find suitable and sustainable operating models for this activity. Individual teachers, researchers, companies and university management have in most cases only a vague idea about appropriate operating and business model of open and online courses (Olsson, 2014).

MOOCs that are developed in the collaboration between the business sector and HEIs create opportunities to improve pedagogic quality. Collaboration can increase opportunities for students to use authentic data and case studies. Through researchers’ collaboration in MOOCs, the conditions are enhanced to develop expertise among people already active in the business sector. One important result from collaboration between the academic and business sector is the improved ability to recruit qualified personnel as well as strengthen brands

In our view, the business sector is lagging behind the opportunity to enter this new arena. There are many motives and business models that can be developed. “Free” continuing professional training, training sales persons (world wide), and or customers in using the company’s products and try to strengthen the brand.

It also raises questions concerning openness. Do the enterprises considered it risky to reveal business information from inside the companies when participating in an open course? Can business enter this market as co-supplier of a course or as active course participants without revealing secrets for their competitors? Does a case unveil weaknesses and strengths in the company that is not meant to reach the public? Are the course participants avoiding providing cases from their own company into open training depending on this or other risks? Is there any ambivalence to utilize ‘the crowd’ for generating new ideas and solutions in the MOOC setting? What evidence for and against open courses does staff responsible for workplace-based training have to consider? This study has a bearing upon this.

Procedure

Each company’s contact person participated in an interview. The companies are Manufacturer of diesel engines, Consultancy company management development, Steel mill, Aerospace engineering company, Consultant company combining technology, environment and security and a Telecom company. The six semi-structured interviews conducted November 2013 – January 2014 at each respective company. The contact person representing the company were asked, based on an interview-guide, about their work-based training, the issue of openness in open courses and possibilities to us open courses in their work-based training. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, recorded and were carried out for on average 1 h 30 minutes. The statements were analysed, and particular quotations were selected to represent statements in the findings. The purpose was to obtain in-depth knowledge about the different ways the

interviewed think and the way they represent the companies' strategy for training. Quantitative or any statistical analysis was not the purpose of the study. The interviewees are mostly termed "company" in the text. Be aware that the result despite this is based upon the individual interviewees' opinions.

Findings concerning openness into prospective technology-enhanced and open workplace-based training

Openness is considered by the companies to benefit businesses and the information included in open courses can be managed. The companies are accustomed to dealing to e.g. master students and external people access to important processes and data. In collaboration with other businesses, you do simply not bring up that which is secret. A company that collaborates very much in their own sector points out that you have written documents to regulate how and in what form cooperation takes place and how any secrets should be handled. The same company believes that "... if both [Company A] and [Company B] succeed, our casting plants will be even better, it's just benefits for all "and continues" ... we are not competitors, not casting plants between. Companies in between, yes, that's another thing." (Manufacturer of diesel engines)

One interviewee from an aerospace engineering company explains that several companies have comparable technology and the same challenges to solve. Since they did not compete with the same products they can cooperate both in training and development of new methods. A telling example is the turbines manufactured by the companies in question. One company manufactures turbines for the aerospace industry and the other company turbines for the hydropower industry. Everything is to be gained by jointly learn more about cutting techniques, etc. that benefit both businesses and the entire district.

Several companies questioned what really was secret. The interviewed person at the telecom company pointed out "people move around, change jobs between them [the companies] so how much secrecy is there in reality? I know very well what challenges [Company X] and [Company Y] are up to. We have people who came from there and vice versa. I think you can keep it at an appropriate level." (Telecom company) Some tasks would mean that they continually try to reuse what others have come up with before. System development is a typical area where a lot of the work is to re-use and build on source code developed elsewhere. One aspect that mentioned is that the most advanced research and development you have, the more secret it is. However even in research and development environments you have cooperation in clusters, and they must deal with what may be public information or not.

Common to all companies in the study is that the knowledge of generic level is no problem and already in practice. When you have started the process or operation, it also becomes normal general knowledge and the problem of what may be the secret of the process will be obsolete. An important aspect regarding education is that "if it is to be a secret, we have to hire people and then train them. It ought to be good if they learnt the stuff before they are hired with us." (Aerospace engineering company)

Although the transparency is not an issue, the companies are pointing at some things that will be held from the courses. There are commercial secrets, innovations and specific inventions, which cannot be disclosed. Customer lists and similar information have to be secret. One company must also take safety aspects into account.

One interesting finding was when a couple of equal companies existed inside the same industrial group. A competitive situation existed because they did parallel things, where they do not want to let off their own development or their own innovations to the other companies, despite belonging to the same industrial group.

Conclusions and summing up the question of openness and collaboration with higher education institutions

Companies' approaches to collaboration with HEIs in the development and implementation of open workplace-based training relates to their core competence, strategies for their competence development and experience of participation in R & D projects involving HEIs and other companies. The interviewees were surprisingly positive about transparency and saw few problems with the openness in training even if it certainly are customer lists, business secrets and innovations that one must keep outside. However it is possible to find a balance. "You make more money if you are open than if you try to keep it a secret as it looks in society today." (Consultancy company combining technology, environment and security)

Among the companies interviewed are two large multinational companies based on high-tech products. These companies have partnerships with HEIs for both research and education. They have also developed strategies for employee skills that include collaboration with HEIs. This applies primarily to engineering but also other areas such as management and business development. Generally express these companies interest in open training as an additional basis for its competence. One also sees the value in contributing their knowledge to the course content. It is only a relatively small part of the company's knowledge that may not be disclosed by the company in a course.

The other companies in the study are focused on services or technology-based products. A few are relatively large with an international market. Even for those companies' informants express some interest in participating in the development and implementation of open technology-enhanced courses. Collaboration with HEIs appears not as a thought-out strategy for corporate succession planning. The possibility that through collaboration with HEIs strengthen university trained staff to better match the companies' own needs and increases the ability to recruit new employees seems not to have been a big issue for these companies. As the supply of skills at an advanced level may be more important for these companies may also their commitment to technology-enhanced and open training grow.

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