

ASEM-LLL RN2 – Workplace Learning: the story so far¹

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It is a great pleasure to be back in Bangkok, having participated in the 2005 ASEM-LLL Hub Conference that was also held here. This year, I speak to you as Coordinator of the ASEM-LLL Hub Research Network 2 on workplace learning, succeeding Professor Bente Elkjaer from the Danish School of Education/University of Aarhus in Denmark, well-known to and much respected by many of you here today, not least by me. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to our Thai hosts and in particular to thank Deputy Director-General Areeya Rojvithee of the Thai Ministry of Labour. She continues to be the never-failing good spirit behind so much of the development of the ASEM-LLL-Hub in Asia, and – we are proud to record – is also a RN2.

1 Today I would like to speak about the development and activities of the ASEM-LLL
2 workplace learning research network. The first slide² shows some basic statistics about the
3 network and I suppose the first question would be: Why do we have a research network on
4 workplace learning? The decision to establish a network on this topic came naturally, at the
5 research networks founding meeting in Copenhagen in 2005. The networks took up the
6 themes that had come to the forefront of discussion in the early years of the ASEM-LLL
7 Initiative. Yet there is something else which is equally important: We heard earlier this
8 morning that workplace learning is important in policy terms, but research does not
9 slavishly follow policy – there have to be intrinsic reasons for wanting to now more about a
10 topic.

11 In my view, workplace learning is a *theoretically* interesting topic for researchers. It is
12 theoretically interesting because it decentres and repositions adult learning. Adult learning
13 has conventionally been placed in existing education and training sectors, and this context
14 has been marked by a classical split, at least in Europe, between what is called “general
15 humanistic adult education” and what is called “continuing vocational education and
16 training”. *The concept of workplace learning resituates adult learning*. It distances adult learning
17 from institutionalized education and training settings, and repositions it into everyday life
18 contexts. All adults work. Not all adults are employed. Not all adults are paid for the work
19 they do. But all adults work. And therefore working is an everyday context of all people’s
20 life-courses, biographies and daily activities. This is an important reason why workplace
21 learning is a theoretically interesting topic, and it is these kinds of reasons that significantly
22 inform and guide the kind of work we have been doing since the network was founded in
23 2005.

24 Since the network was founded in 2005, we have held at least eight working meetings in no
25 fewer than six countries. This is quite an achievement for a ‘child’ of just four years of age.
26 Currently, we have members from eleven countries and in our view as a network, we would

¹ This text is an edited version of the contribution delivered at the ASEM-LLL Conference Lifelong Learning: e-Learning and Workplace Learning, Bangkok, 20 – 22 July 2009. Thanks go to Katharina Lunardon, my research assistant at the University of Innsbruck, who produced the draft of this text from the live recording at the conference. Contact: lac-professur-ezwi@uibk.ac.at. Homepage: <http://homepage.uibk.ac.at/~c603207/>.

² See the Powerpoint presentation that accompanies this transcript.

27 be delighted to welcome members from many more countries. However, it makes sense to
28 grow slowly and with solidity. In proportional terms, we have 'too many' European
29 members (seven countries) and 'too few' Asian members (four countries). The morning's
30 contributions underlined the importance of ensuring that the ASEM-LLL Education and
31 Research Hub is an equal partnership. This means that over the longer term we cannot afford
32 to have an over-dominance of either European partners or Asian partners in the network,
33 because this would automatically lead to dominance of particular kinds of perspectives and
34 traditions. And this is what we want to overcome - not because we want to dispense with
35 our respective traditions, but because we want to learn from diverse traditions.

36 To date, we have published two edited collections of papers authored by members of the
37 network.³ We are now preparing to conduct a joint survey, and will be going into the field in
38 2010. We have an overarching term for our research-based activities: the *CODE project* –
39 meaning "COmpetence DEvelopment", which can and does take place in working
40 environments and work processes, and not solely in schools, colleges, training centres and
41 universities. Competence development also refers to a wide spectrum of knowledge-in-use
42 and many different kinds of activities. People learn at work all the time, to a greater or lesser
43 extent. In doing so, they are not only learning how to do their jobs better, but also learning
44 about themselves and about how to operate in the communities and societies in which they
45 live as – hopefully – active, responsible and critical citizens. These kinds of competence
46 development are just as important as job-related learning, and they, too, can take place in
47 working contexts. The CODE project seeks to *decode working places as lifelong learning spaces*
48 *across Asia and Europe*. Decoding refers to the idea of refocusing on what happens at work in
49 new ways, by trying to look behind the obvious surface levels of working processes and
50 working contexts in order better to see what really goes on underneath the surface. Decoding
51 thus related to restructuring and reinterpreting working environments as a subject for
52 research.

53 What, how, why, with what benefits, and for whom do which people learn at work? All
54 these dimensions are significant – learning in working life as an everyday context is
55 inherently multidimensional. All these dimensions must be taken into account to try to
56 understand how people learn, what they learn, whether or not they enjoy such learning,
57 whether it makes any sense to them, what it brings for their employers and for the quality of
58 the work they do. We want to look for answers to these kinds of questions about workplace
59 learning as competence development by making comparisons, not only between Asian
60 countries and European countries, but equally amongst those countries.

61 We do not make the assumption that there is always a clear difference or cut between what
62 happens in Europe and how we think about it, and what happens in Asia and how we think
63 about it. The picture is much more complex. At the same time, an initial – and certainly not
64 yet comprehensive – set of key parameters frame the research work we are developing.

65 As an example of such a framing parameter, the *learning continuum* refers to the similarities,
66 distinctions and relations between formal learning, non-formal learning and informal
67 learning. Our interests leads us to be particularly interested in non-formal and informal adult

³ The accompanying Powerpoint presentation includes the references to these collections, and they are also available via the ASEM-LLL RN2 website (<http://www.dpu.dk/site.aspx?p=10345>).

68 learning, about which there is much less existing research than on formalised continuing
69 education and training. We are interested in the full spectrum of working places, and
70 therefore not only those that offer standard employment in established organisations –
71 though these, too, are highly heterogeneous.

72 We also need to take into account what we would call the aggregate level of learning, by
73 which is meant the *collective, organisational level* of working places as learning spaces.
74 Organisational cultures differ significantly in multiple ways, as a good deal of research
75 repeatedly demonstrates. There are also different kinds of occupational cultures: occupations
76 are linked with particular kinds of initial and continuing learning connected with work,
77 which then take on particular kinds of meaning. These kinds of parameters shape the kinds
78 of specific research projects that we want to develop in the future.

79 We began our research journey by conducting reviews of existing research on workplace
80 learning, to sketch out cognitive and empirical maps for the countries and language
81 communities in our network. The most important outcome for us was less the individual
82 contributions, interesting as they are, but the opportunity that this exercise gave us to *reflect*
83 *and interrogate between different ways of seeing and understanding* issues relevant for workplace
84 learning as a whole. European cognitive maps tend to think about adult learning as a series
85 of binaries, as 'either-or' classifications – such as the division between general and vocational
86 education. It seems that Asian cognitive maps register such distinctions, but they do not
87 carry the same symbolic sets of meanings and are not theoretically positioned in the same
88 kind of ways. There is also something about the relationship between the formation of
89 subjectivity on the one hand and the construction of the social on the other, which seems to
90 take on quite different forms in these diverse cultural contexts. This we need to look into
91 more closely, because these kinds of relationships have a strong bearing on how people
92 approach and see themselves in relation to learning and the contexts in which it takes place
93 or can take place.

94 Clearly, the objective circumstances and structuring of societies and economies between
95 Europe and Asia, and within Asia and within Europe, make an enormous difference to the
96 *framing conditions* for lifelong learning. Certainly lifelong learning in policy and practice is
97 linked quite closely – though not inevitably and uniformly – with objective circumstances,
98 which is no more you would expect.⁴ In the poorest countries of the world, lifelong learning
99 is understood as basic literacy and basic skills. In countries that fall into the middle bracket –
100 this would apply to many Asian countries – human resources development becomes much
101 more important. In the most affluent economies of Europe, North America and Asia there is
102 generally a more integrated approach to lifelong learning in which aspects of personal and
103 social development gain in importance. Interestingly, this pattern seems to be cumulative:
104 the most affluent countries of the world (must) continue to provide basic skills and literacy
105 education for adults, but they also invest (to varying extents and in diverse ways) in human
106 resources development, and they are increasingly focusing on providing wider opportunities
107 for personal and social development through adult learning. It will be interesting to see
108 whether we can devise a study to explore this cumulative pattern as it is expressed in styles
109 of workplace learning policy and practice.

⁴ The 2010 UNESCO *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* underlines this point forcefully (available at: http://www.unesco.org/ui/en/UIILPDF/nesico/GRALE/grale_en.pdf)

110 The second collection of papers – edited by our Czech colleagues Professor Milan Pol and
111 Assistant Professor Petr Novotny, both at Masaryk University Brno, is an outcome of a 2007
112 seminar for the network members from five European countries. It includes two papers from
113 Denmark on different kinds of learning in organisations. One contribution looks at
114 situational learning on the job, specifically how student nurses use unfamiliar situations for
115 learning by problem-solving. The other considers organisational learning as a kind of a
116 multi-vocality triggered by uncertainties. The contribution from the Czech Republic explores
117 how organisational learning relates to multi-faceted company cultures. The UK contribution
118 focuses on non-formal and informal learning in relation to basic skills education at the
119 workplace for low qualified workers. Austria contributes a theoretical exploration of how the
120 concept of the learning continuum can prompt reconsidering the barriers between education
121 and training sectors and the boundaries between different kinds of learning. Finally, the
122 collection includes two papers from Hungary. The first reviews patterns of workplace
123 learning in Hungary with respect to regional differences (which, contrary to expectation, are
124 not pronounced), whereas the second charts differences between companies in their
125 approaches to continuing education and training for their employees.

126 The ASEM-LLL Hub Conference at the National University of Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur in
127 2007 provided our network with an opportunity to reflect on its achievements and to
128 consider the next steps. At the following year's conference in Beijing, our Malaysian
129 members came up with the proposal to conduct a *comparative survey*, and so over the past
130 months we have been working together to prepare a questionnaire that can be used in
131 diverse countries, labour markets and languages. This survey will be exploring workplace
132 learning in terms of whether employees see it as something they choose to do voluntarily or
133 something that they are compelled to do. What are the respective implications for learning
134 experiences, outcomes and benefits – from the viewpoint of the employees themselves?

135 This focus links up with current debates in Europe about whether lifelong learning policies
136 are predicated on imposing a universal obligation to participate in education and training on
137 a continuous basis, in one's own time and at one's own cost. This is seen to be a negative
138 development, particularly by educationalists. But how are these issues understood in Asian
139 countries? Do employees in Asia look at things differently?

140 We know that everyone, whatever their age and life-phase, gets much more out of learning if
141 they are personally and positively motivated to engage in learning. From this point of view,
142 what would it mean to say that workplace learning is an attractive or unattractive prospect?
143 Much workplace learning is informal, that is, it does not take the form of intentionally
144 structured teaching and learning activity. It does not display a specific identity – a place or a
145 space – that bears a label saying 'this is learning'. Rather, it characteristically occurs as an
146 incidental, inherent part of everyday working processes. Given that this is the case, what
147 sense can we make of the concepts of intentionality and free will? These are certainly very
148 abstract questions, but we think they are important – they inform the empirical dimension of
149 our work, and the research questions for this study are formulated accordingly. We want to
150 learn more about what adults understand to be voluntary workplace learning and
151 compulsory workplace learning; we hypothesise that this is not a binary opposition but a
152 continuum. In other words, there are 'in-between' positions – such as when somebody
153 recommends that you should do something, but doesn't actually say you have to do it. We

154 also want to find out what kinds of formal and non-formal learning companies and
155 organisations offer to their employees, which of these do employees view as obligatory and
156 why they take this view. It could be, for example, that employees think they will lose their
157 job if they do not take part. Alternatively, they might know that it is company policy that
158 promotions depend on having participated. Lastly, we would like to explore how answers to
159 these kinds of questions affect employee motivation for and satisfaction with learning linked
160 with the workplace.

161 It is also important to realise that all these activities, including the current study, have been
162 developed on very modest budgets. The research network members bring not only
163 professional knowledge and competence, but also personal enthusiasm and commitment.
164 This has been essential for the success of our work, and it will continue to be so – this is the
165 real secret of the ASEM-LLL Education and Research Hub.

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