



e-ruralnet – Network promoting e-learning for rural development

National workshop in Finland

27.1.2011 Seinäjoki, Finland

Entrepreneurship Education Conference

“Entrepreneurship gives energy to rural areas – but can you e-learn it?”

Pia Kattelus, University of Helsinki, Ruralia institute

Summary

The national workshop of e-ruralnet in Finland was organised on the 27th of January in 2011 in connection to the national Entrepreneurship Education Conference on “Forward with the entrepreneurial attitude”. The conference attracted over 200 participants from educational organisations and their networks providing a good opportunity to disseminate e-ruralnet project both at the project workshop and in the exhibition stand.

The theme of the workshop was “Entrepreneurship gives energy to rural areas – but can you e-learn it?” After the introduction of the project the findings for the "E-learning in a rural context: Alternative media and contemporary applications" report of e-ruralnet and the first results in Finland of the survey for providers were discussed. The introduction was made by project manager Pia Kattelus from Ruralia Institute.

That was followed by the introduction of e-learning Coordinator Pekka Hytinkoski on “How to study entrepreneurship virtually – case Co-operative Network Studies”. The Co-op studies are provided completely virtually and they attract a good number of students every year, which would indicate that entrepreneurship can be e-learned. But also the challenges of organising interesting and high quality e-learning were discussed and concluded once again, that there is still a need to go forward before e-learning and e-teaching become routines.



The exhibition stand of e-ruralnet

Introduction

The theme of the workshop “Entrepreneurship gives energy to rural areas – but can you e-learn it?” was chosen for being able to organise it in connection to a national event for wide dissemination and to reach educational personnel who were either experts or had an active interest in entrepreneurship education and who also would be interested in getting familiar with different methods of teaching entrepreneurship – in our case with the support of e-learning. These participants were persons who at schools and educational organisations inspire at different stages the aspiring entrepreneurs and also cooperate with those who already are entrepreneurs themselves, so they were a good group of mediators to try to attract to learn about e-ruralnet.

In the region of South Ostrobothnia, where the conference was organised, entrepreneurship is also a major issue of regional development. It is a rural area and has thrived with its large number of SMEs but it is now facing the challenges of the demographic change with decreasing number of enterprises as the entrepreneurs retire. Therefore both the conference and the theme of the workshop and the objectives of e-ruralnet project connected well to the more local development needs as well, even though the whole of Finland is challenged by the demographics, needs more SMEs and needs to rethink and reorganise the ways children, students and adults study and learn.

It was a small disappointment, that the e-ruralnet workshop attracted only 9 participants and that 5 other persons, who had registered for it, did not participate. There were also parallel workshops, so it is possible they chose to participate to them. e-ruralnet project itself had a good recognition with its exhibition stand in the main hall. Some tens of brochures were disseminated and responses to the survey questionnaires collected during the two days of the exhibition.



Questionnaires of e-ruralnet surveys

The workshop started with a short introduction of e-ruralnet project by Project Manager Pia Kattelus: the objectives and tasks of the project, its target groups, expected outcomes and the partnership. She also summarised some of the findings of the e-ruralnet report of "E-learning in a rural context: Alternative media and contemporary applications" introducing definitions of virtual learning, literature in this theme, quality of virtual learning, virtual learning from rural perspective, the technology suitable for regions where infrastructure is not highly developed and the new tools for e-learning like game based learning.

That was followed by taking a look at the preliminary results of the e-ruralnet survey for training providers in Finland. By that time there were 42 responses. The results showed that in Finland the training providers don't especially target e-learning to rural areas, most training organisations have more than 5 years of experience in e-learning and quite a number of them use e-learning materials produced by their own staff. Only up to 20 % of the provision of learning is e-learning. Most of e-learning is provided as blended learning. Methods and contents are traditional from the perspective of e-learning: attachments of emails, links to websites, presentations and text materials and videos. There is also some use of game based learning, interactive materials and role games. Most popular tools for virtual learning are the e-learning platforms, websites and DVDs or CDs. There is less use for mobile phones and even less for TV and radio. The biggest challenges in e-learning are problems with infrastructure and the skills of the e-learners to use the tools and contents. When asked about the innovativeness of the ways e-learning is provided the

training providers evaluate the different ways of interaction possible for the students with each other, the teachers, tutors or external experts as innovative features. Also the use of social media and e-learning platforms are regarded as innovative.

How to study entrepreneurship virtually – case Co-operative Network Studies; e-learning Coordinator Pekka Hytinkoski, University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute

Pekka Hytinkoski started with telling about how Co-operative Networks Studies begun in the beginning of the new Millenium. At first there were some ESF –funded development projects for creating university level studies of Co-operative entrepreneurship in the universities of Helsinki and Kuopio with the intention to start using e-learning as the main means of delivery. The coordination team in Ruralia Institute in Mikkeli started its work in 2004. The objective of the team was to establish a long-term blended learning training programme in Co-operative studies for the students of the two universities.

The pilot courses were organised and tested in 2004 for the students of the University of Applied Studies in Mikkeli and the Rural Studies Network. The first course for the students of Universities of Helsinki and Kuopio were organised in 2005.

From there on there were new development projects with the objective to further develop the studies and enlarge the network. By the end of 2007 the network of Co-operative studies covered nine (9) Finnish universities. New courses were developed in 2008-2009 within the established network and the courses were running fluently with a good number of students. In 2009-2010 it was time to make some changes as the legal and economical status of the universities in Finland changed. New network contracts were made and participation fees decided for the universities participating to the network. A lucky strike for the network was to get private financial support from some co-operative enterprises. One of the biggest department store chains in Finland is a co-operative in origin as well as some food factories and one of the biggest banks. Since 2010 there are eight (8) universities in the Co-op Network using as the material in the established courses and when developing new ones new research results in the field of Co-operative entrepreneurship and community economics, experiences and expertise of the enterprises and evaluating them in connection to the wider development trends of the society and regions.

After that Pekka Hytinkoski listed some general challenges typical for all e-learning and which they have also faced in the Network Studies:

- students don't discuss and teachers don't give comments
- there are always some new inventions to be excited about, but even the old methods are not used to their full potential in smart ways
- teachers don't have enough time and knowledge for implementing high quality e-learning
- e-learning does not connect to other courses and teaching
- no matter how the course description is written – still the e-learning tools and platforms are used for storing materials and delivering practical information about the course
- too many tools are used in too complicated ways
- the structure of the course is too tight – or too open
- there is discussion for the sake of discussion
- both technology and the contents get old and it is not possible to update them especially if they are based on a project, which is coming to its end

There are also some false assumptions of e-learning:

- the quality of learning is not high
- it is a lonely way to study
- it is not possible to control learning and participation in e-learning
- e-learning is free from the restrictions of time and place
- e-learning makes learning faster and easier

Positive in the present development stage of e-learning is that:

- e-learning has become an everyday way of teaching and studying, the objectives are more realistic
- the belief in expert consultants has decreased
- there is a lot of research information available of e-learning both from Finland and internationally
- free social media software allows a wide range of possibilities for creating new contents and using new methods especially as a community creating and using those together
- there is a tendency towards free learning materials (e.g. open sharing of presentations in internet)

When trying to see the future of e-learning, Pekka Hytinkoski stated, that the increased openness and sharing of the results of development projects and materials is a sensible trend as it helps to share the results and benefit from them – there is less inventing the wheel over and over again and instead there is a

chance of further development in cooperation in different groups and e-learning communities. This makes also economical sense.

As e-learning should happen in learning communities and that is the way of learning now emphasised, the role of the teacher is highlighted in new ways as they should be able to support groups in interaction and be able to guide them – not just deliver knowledge and teach. It is also vital to teach the students how to e-learn – what are the dos and don'ts of learning virtually.

The benefits of organising the Co-Operative Network Studies as e-learning are connected to avoiding the geographical restrictions of students and teachers, using the different geographical locations as material for providing insight, being able to quickly raise topical issues from different parts of Finland from varying situations and analysing that in the light of theory and practise. At best e-learning activates the student to both individual and cooperative learning. Active working together in a good atmosphere is also the bases for co-operative entrepreneurship!



e-learning and Cooperative Studies Expert Pekka Hytinkoski

Discussions and conclusions

There was some vivid discussion during the presentations but especially at the end of the workshop. It was agreed, that about some 10 years ago Finland was one of the top countries in delivering and developing e-learning, but since then there has been drastic decrease both in the skills of teachers, innovative use of the different possibilities of e-learning methods and tools and also resources needed for developing e-learning and updating skills and knowledge of especially the teachers. Now there is again some hope that the situation will change for the better as the strong need has been recognised.

There is now available a lot of research results, open learning materials and a wide variety of tools. But there don't help and become as a part of the everyday mainstream teaching and learning on any level of training if the structures don't change and allow new work methods and new thinking about teaching and learning to blend in. Increasing realism in the use of e-learning is a positive development with the focus in learning, not the hype of new and different as such.

Creating networks for developing contents and delivering training is a useful way to provide high quality training e.g. in the rural areas, where this might not be possible by any individual training provider. Also if it is delivered as e-learning or blended learning, that decreases other restrictions but what the ICT infrastructure and skills of the learners still may set.

Setting and running the networks is not all easy, though, and strict common rules and agreements of what is being done and how, are needed.

List of participants

- Harju Matti, Lector, Sedu Kurikka
- Hytinkoski Pekka, e-learning Coordinator, University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute
- Kärki Unto, Cooperation Manager, Oulun seudun ammattiopisto
- Kattelus Pia, e-ruralnet Project Manager, Life Long Learning Coordinator, University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute
- Kiskola Jarmo, Lector, Sedu Kurikka
- Kuusvuori Jaakko, Lector of Entrepreneurship, Ammattiopisto Livia
- Matilainen Anne, Project Manager, University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute
- Rautio Jukka, Project Manager, Vaasan ammattikorkeakoulu
- Yksipetäjä Soili, Project Manager, Pirko

In addition to these persons 5 more participants had registered for the workshop, but eventually did not come.