



Larena

Swedish network for research into informal learning at work and in everyday life

Purpose

Larena is a Swedish network of researchers on learning in everyday life and at work with the purpose to stimulate interdisciplinary and cross-section discussions.¹ Furthermore, it promotes dialogue and exchange of experience between researchers and practitioners on the research into learning in everyday life and work. Part of the task is also to promote new research in the field, and to stimulate young and senior researchers to apply for funds for various projects from the Swedish Innovation agency, VINNOVA, (www.vinnova.se), Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research, FAS, (www.fas.forskning.se) and the Committee for Educational Science, the Swedish Research Council (www.vr.se) and other financiers. *Larena* also wants to work for a firmer establishment of research into learning in everyday life and work through jointly applying for funds and initiating programmes as well as through intensive dialogues with the social partners and with other players in this field. Moreover, *Larena* will facilitate exchange of experience and intercommunication between researchers in the field, within and outside Sweden. Special attention should be given to possibilities to support and stimulate doctoral candidates.

Our intention is to create moving meeting places for researchers from various disciplines within, primarily three fields: i) education and training, learning based on experience, reflection, and professional skill; ii) life as learning, everyday learning processes, learning environments and learning communities, learning patterns linked to various life phases and changes of life roles, life histories and life maps/biographies and iii) entrepreneurship, growth and innovations as an arena for learning.

¹ *Larena* is just a name of the network, reflecting the mission of a moving meeting place, created by a combination of the Swedish words Lärande and arena (learning and arena). The network is funded by the Educational Science Committee, ESC, at the Swedish Research Council and is monitored in co-operation with the National Institute for Working Life, CMTO, University of Linköping, and the Department of Human Work Sciences at Luleå University of Technology. It is open to interested researchers and practitioners in the field. Marianne Gustavsson, Arbetsmiljöforum, the Swedish Work Environment Association, marianne.gustavsson@arbetsmiljoforum.com, is the administrative co-ordinator, and with the support of the steering group, also responsible for publishing our Newsletter.

The network project is carried out in co-operation with the Department of Human Work Sciences at Luleå University of Technology, the National Institute for Working Life, and CMTO, at the University of Linköping. The purpose is however to successively widen the circle of participating institutions and research environments. Network meetings have, so far, been organised in Stockholm, Halmstad, Linköping, and Luleå.

Today the network's distribution list includes about 300 scholars and practitioners in the field of informal learning in Sweden. The information supplied includes a plain newsletter and various types of work reports and surveys. A core group of 20-30 researchers and practitioners in the field are actively working in the network. Co-operation is also going on with some programme initiatives for doctoral students (forskarskolor), for example the "doctoral student school" on learning at Luleå University of Technology, a doctoral student school on adults' learning (with support from ESC), and a research school on vocational education and pedagogy. International contacts are also being developed. With funds for planning from ESC, data about international research into informal learning at work and in everyday life have been compiled (see the report Overview of international R&D-initiatives on informal learning in everyday life and work by Kenneth Abrahamsson & Sofia Sandgren). The intention is also to accomplish a description of ongoing research in Sweden in this field.

Work place learning as a field of research in Sweden

Comprehensive research and development work in Sweden on competence and learning at work has been carried out in the last decades and, in particular during the last ten years (see *Lärande i arbetslivet – tio års forskning och utveckling i backspegeln* /Learning at work – ten years of research and development in the rear view mirror/ by Mats Utbult, published with funding from FAS, VINNOVA, and Luleå University of Technology). As an example, Arbetsmiljöfonden (Swedish Work Environment Fund), later the Swedish Council for Work Life Research (RALF) invested in the 1990s nearly SEK 250 million in some two hundred various research projects on competence and learning at work. Additional thousand million Swedish crowns were allocated for development work regarding issues of competence and changes in working life by the European Social Fund through "Objective 3" and "Objective 4" and by the European community initiatives "Employment" and "Adapt" during the second half of the nineties. The Social Fund then took over the baton from the Working Life Fund, which during the first half of the same decade contributed several thousand millions SEK to projects and work for better work organisations and more effective and humanitarian production models.

The Swedish foundation for development of knowledge and competence, KK-stiftelsen (The Knowledge and Competence Foundation, www.kks.se) has also invested several millions in practically the same fields. Besides, the then Swedish Agency for Enterprise Development, NUTEK made important efforts to initiate and implement policy studies of competence and learning. In addition, contemporary social and environmental studies were carried out by the technical attachés, STATT, (today incorporated in the Institute for Policy Studies on Growth, www.itps.se and current production of statistics is carried out by Statistics Sweden (www.scb.se). Furthermore considerable research is going on at universities, colleges and special institutes, as for example the National Institute for Working Life (www.arbetslivsinstitutet.se) and the Institute for Social Research, SOFI, which forms part of University of Stockholm (www.sofi.su.se). Last but not least the social partners have, in policy investigations and initiatives, raised issues about competence and learning at work.

Current changes

Today, research on competence and learning takes up different lines. On one hand there is a growing interest in “situated learning” as it is called, that is learning under very distinct conditions and in clearly defined knowledge environments. On the other hand, there is a strive to build up more aggregated knowledge of qualification requirements and working conditions based on large surveys or longitudinal projects. At the same time the dynamics are increasing between specific action-oriented knowledge and general analytical survey knowledge.

To set this right, initiative was taken to set up an interdisciplinary knowledge survey on the topic: Education, competence and work, which was published in late autumn 2002 by Studentlitteratur. In the editorial group, coordinated by professor Jan Johansson, Luleå, participated Kenneth Abrahamsson and professors Torsten Björkman, Stockholm, and Per-Erik Ellström, Linköping. In the final phase, Lena Abrahamsson, associate professor, Luleå, was linked to the project. Moreover, a prototype of a portal for research into competence and learning at work has been developed in co-operation with the Swedish Work Environment Association. A summary of ten years’ of efforts in research and development on learning at work² was drawn up by RALF. More initiatives have been taken in the form of surveys and work on creating a competence portal.³ There is also a need to increase the knowledge about ongoing work on the European level on projects about lifelong learning.⁴

Plans for 2004 and 2005

The network is planned to continue in 2004 and 2005. The administration of the network will be handled by Luleå University of Technology (LTU) but in close co-operation with the National Institute for Working Life and the University of Linköping. There will also be administrative co-operation with the Swedish Work Environment Association. At the Department of Human Work Sciences at LTU there are some ten researchers who concentrate on learning at work, in school and community. There are probably about twenty researchers in all who study and analyse various aspects of learning and competence at work from a scientific point of view. CMTO at the University of Linköping also has a large number of researchers in this field. At nearly all universities and at many regional colleges in Sweden there are institutions/development environments for research on learning.

The plans for the coming two years are to continue organising network meetings in various parts of the country, for example in Gothenburg, Jönköping, Uppsala and Lindesberg, where interesting research is going on. Moreover, the international exchange will increase; among other things there will be intensified co-operation with Nordic research environments. There

² See *Forskning om kompetens och lärande under 1990-talet* (Research on competence and learning in the 1990s). A survey of R&D-projects funded by the Working Environment Fund and the Swedish Council for Work Life Research (RALF), by Cecilia Eng and Maria Mårtensson.

³ The Swedish Work Environment Association has developed a prototype for a competence portal based on the feasibility study *Arbete och lärande* (Work and Learning), a portal for inspiration to research and development. At present, various possibilities are discussed for the funding of this project, in which also the Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications takes an interest.

⁴ Such an example is the Finnish project, *Life as learning*, funded by Finland’s Academy and the European Union.

are preliminary plans to organise a small international workshop in Kiruna in March 2005 on the topic: From grounded skills to sky qualifications, with the focus on social, economic, and technical transformation as well as on the transformation of work organisation in which context analyses of competence will be of great value. Furthermore, contacts between the parties will be more intensive. Larena also co-operates with the Swedish ESF Council in furthering synergy effects between EQUAL-projects aimed at learning.

We have applied for continued funding of three to four meetings between researchers per year in various places in Sweden. One of those meetings will have an international character. In addition, the budget will cover the costs for co-ordination of the network, documentation of meetings, work reports and information about international trends in the field by publishing a newsletter.

Societal and scientific relevance

The discipline “Informal learning in everyday life and at work ” has been brought out as an important part of the scientific field of education. The interplay between formal education and learning constitutes a very central field of knowledge in politics, research and everyday life. Of special importance is also to improve the knowledge of the informal, sometimes spontaneous and unforeseen learning that is taking place in everyday life through change of life, trauma or other new conditions in everyday life and at work. There is also a need for critical analysis and examination of the possible overuse or abuse of concept of learning and also of lifelong learning, in politics and public debate. What is useful learning, and which learning means an adaptation to prevailing structures instead of working for a change? These are central issues in the dialogue going on between the parties on the labour-market and are to a great extent about which possibilities and limitations for learning are formed in the working life of today. Gradually, contacts with social partners are being established; some of them are already participating in the network and get current information.

In ESC commission is also included to act as an intermediary to promote exchange of knowledge and to further an active dialogue between researchers and practitioners. The research could embrace wide fields, from research into school, teachers and learning, to for education and teachers and with – and still more marked – by teachers. The dialogue between researchers and practitioners could assume different forms and use varying methods to further deepened work-related reflection by teachers and school leaders. ESC’s profile does not only include school, teacher education and learning in formal education. An important task is to elucidate learning in adult education, professional work, and everyday life in the light of lifelong and life-wide learning.⁵

Project description in summary

⁵ See *Memorandum om livslångt lärande* (Memorandum on lifelong learning). EU Commission 2000, and the recently published note by the European Commission: *Att förverkliga det europeiska området för livslångt lärande* (To implement the European field for lifelong learning), November 2001.

Kenneth Abrahamsson
2004-04-09