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Adult education and social capital in local communities

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Introduction

Over the last 15 years the population the peripheral areas of Denmark has declined, whereas it has grown significantly in districts close to the large cities and in the metropolitan area. Compared to Denmark as a whole the rural districts in the periphery have the relatively highest proportion of children and older people and an educational profile dominated by unskilled workers and persons with vocational training. The geographical inequality in levels and patterns of education is not only present between the most urban and economically strong regions – especially the Copenhagen area – and other parts of Denmark. It also characterizes the situation inside the individual regions, where marked differences are found between municipalities.

In this situation it is worth emphasizing the potential of adult education for the peripheral areas. Whereas full-time education often attracts young people to the centre areas, part-time education for adults is an opportunity for learning that may be combined with and strengthen the competences for work and everyday life in the local community. Adult education arrangements may constitute social spaces where learning is combined with experience sharing and expansion of social networks (Rasmussen 2012).

However, just like other types of education adult education is characterized by institutional concentration. Specialization of education programs and teacher competencies, professionalization of administration and management as well decreasing levels of public funding – these factors combine to constitute economics of scale that encourage adult education institutions to merge and concentrate into larger units and close down schools in smaller peripheral communities. To remedy this situation adult education institutions have been experimenting with different types of distributed teaching, including distance teaching based on ICT or video-conferencing. In this paper we discuss another type of distributed adult education, the so-called flexible teaching where teachers are not always present. The paper draws on research done in 2005-06 as part of a major development project called ‘Competence Development in the Periphery’ (see Hviid et al 2008)

One of the initiatives in this development project was to organize general adult education through so-called IT cafes in local communities. An IT cafe consisted of a room with several PCs where flexible courses for small groups were offered. One objective was to attract new target groups, which would otherwise not join the courses; another was to inject “social capital” in the community, as it is assumed that the IT cafes could have a positive effect on network cooperation, social cohesion and development in the local communities.

Evaluations showed that the first objective was fulfilled to a large extent: new target groups signed up for adult education. It is mainly persons with a low level of education who participate in this type of course, and many of the participants indicate that they chose to join because the

courses take place close by (in community centers or the like) and not at the Adult Education Center (VUC) located further away.

This article, however, focuses on the second objective, the strengthening of local communities through development of social capital. We will start by outlining relevant meanings of the social capital concept, which we then relate to the IT cafe courses through two case studies (Rasmussen and Rasmussen 2006). Finally, we will discuss the type of development – “social capital accumulation” – that takes place or may take place in the local communities in connection with these IT cafes.

Adult education and social capital

The notion of social capital can be traced back to classic sociologic theory, but has only been elaborated in recent decades. It is based on the assumption that networks and network relations constitute resources that can ease individual persons' or groups' access to other valuable resources. The interest in the concept of social capital has probably grown due to a common conception that social cohesion is generally decreasing in contemporary societies.

There are various definitions of social capital, and especially the concept of capital requires a more detailed definition. With Pierre Bourdieu's sociology on different forms of capital, we can define capital as cumulated work, which in a materialized or bodily form is converted by individuals or groups and enables creation of resources in the shape of things or work (Bourdieu 2006). Bourdieu defines resources as the possibilities the individual person can elect to use and convert in strategies for making oneself trustworthy and important in a group, to “cultivate” and since exploit the network capital in the form of accumulated credit. These strategies are based on practical reason. They are therefore not rational in an economic sense and do not aim at accumulating economic capital, at least not primarily. This leads to a definition of social capital as an aggregation of actual or potential resources which are related to the possession of lasting networks of more or less institutionalized relations of mutual benefit and recognition. Unlike traditional economics, Bourdieu thus offers a social science that bases resources in social structures and focuses on an understanding of the practical reason behind actions.

James Coleman (1996) also breaks with traditional economic views. His concept of social capital is rooted in a rational theory of action and choice, in which each actor has certain interests to pursue and certain resources that can be mobilised. Social capital is then a specific type of resource available to the actor. Coleman defines social capital through its function, as aspects of social structures that make it easier for individual or collective actors to carry out certain acts. As one of his examples Coleman mentions the wholesale diamond market in New York, which is characterised by strong and close ties based on family, religion and community. These ties enables trade to take place without the many formal procedures and insurances that would otherwise be necessary, and thus helps to make the diamond market work smoothly.

In the field of education Coleman illustrates the importance of social capital by relating it to the concept of family background in research on educational achievement. He argues that while family background is often treated as one coherent factor, it does in fact contain three components, these being financial capital (the income and wealth of the parents), human capital (the education of the parents) and social capital. An example of social capital is the norm of investing time in supporting children's homework, which according to Coleman is widespread among Asian immigrant parents in the US. If the human capital of the parents is not supplemented by social capital, it has considerably less value.

Analyses on the interplay between education and social capital often focus on a macro level with entire nations or regions as analytical units that are compared via different indicators of educa-

tional and learning activity and social network, cohesion and trust (e.g. Field 2005). However, in the study of the IT cafes and their significance it was more relevant to examine how social capital affects the micro level, people's every day lives and local relations. The same approach was used in an Australian research project that focused on the micro processes in the interplay between social capital and learning (Balatti and Falk 2002).

Balatti and Falk assume that social capital is knowledge and identity resources to which a community has access with the purpose of reaching a common goal. Networks are understood as knowledge and identity resources, and social capital is thus both the networks and the resources created through the networks. Learning occurs when social capital is created, i.e. when the interaction in the networks mobilizes existing resources and adds something new to them. Based on their research and discussions, Balatti and Falk conclude that the interplay between adult learning and social capital results in a mutual reinforcement.

Inspired by this approach we have examined whether a similar interplay can be identified between the IT cafes and their local communities.

The local framework of the IT cafes

The two IT cafes examined in the case studies had strong relations with the surrounding local communities. The local communities differ in various ways, and the IT cafes also appear to have been dependent on and have drawn on local foundations and driving forces when they started. One IT cafe was located in a community center in a small village of approximately 1000 citizens; the other in an activity center in a small town inhabited by about 3000 citizens.

The IT cafe in the village was one of many activities in the local community center. Like the other activities in the center, it was launched by active citizens in the village. The principal organizer had considerable experience with adult education and knew how to raise funding. The participants in the IT class that we studied were mainly recruited via the close contacts between people in the village. The course members explained that they participated because they wanted to learn basic computer skills and use these skills in connection with their family and social activities. Another reason for joining was the social context of the IT café; it kept the community center alive, which was important as it hosted many village activities.

The IT cafe in the municipal activity center was originally part of the municipal day care. Day care moms still made up the core of the class, but this type of job has closer links to the local community than many other jobs. The main reason among the students for participating was that they often found they need IT skills in their spare time. There was a positive social atmosphere in this class – the students helped each other and worked focused with their IT skills, also when the teacher was not present. The municipal activity center did not have the same significance for the town as the community center did for the village, but the fact that premises and IT equipment were available made it possible to run this type of course locally.

Both case studies indicate that local social capital had been a key factor in establishing the courses. The active citizens in the community center had been decisive in establishing the IT cafe. The IT cafe in the town municipal activity center emerged more from a work context, but this context (day care) was embedded in the local community. In both classes the social interaction among the students was a major quality that helped keep the participants in the course and increased the utility of the flexible teaching method.

Independent learning in the town community center IT café

The community center was located in a small town, some 30 kilometers away from the nearest adult education college. The center housed a number of activities, among them a library, a local

historical archive and a course center. The IT café was held in a course room equipped with some 20 PCs and a printer. The course lasted one school year, from August to May, and consisted of 30 lessons of which half were held without the presence of the teacher. After the end of the course the students could take an exam in order get a certificate.

The class consisted of six students, all women. The youngest student was a little past forty of age, the oldest some ten years older. The course curriculum was that of the IT subject in adult formal education, but the content was adjusted to the needs and interests of the participants. Ideas and tasks that the students had encountered in their everyday lives were included in the teaching. An example was doing the layout of a confirmation song. The teacher said that in his planning that he took account of both the demands of the curriculum and the current needs of the students.

'I have the overview, I know what the exam demands, but it is very flexible, I can emphasize the parts I find most relevant. If they have a problem at home, for instance inserting pictures in a confirmation song, we do that together in class, and the other students can offer their suggestions. We learn from each other'.

As already said the course included ordinary lessons with a teacher as well as lessons where the students worked on their own. Here is an observation from the latter type of lesson.

The four women present have had trouble getting into the course room (it had been not been unlocked as promised) and they are a little late when they start. Each of them finds a PC and starts it. One of the PCs has start-up problems, and the student finds another. The students have brought along materials and assignments and go to work. There is no paper in the printer, but one of the students finds it. They have brought along coffee and cake, but they do not discuss when it should be served; apparently there is a fixed routine for this.

The women work individually, but sometimes they talk and help each other, for instance in remembering where different functions are located in the Word menus. Remarks are hear like 'I don't remember how...'; 'Have you done a table of contents?'; 'Did you manage to transfer those pictures?' Satisfaction is expressed when things are done successfully, like the table of contents. And worry or irritation is expressed when something unexpected happens on the screen – 'I hope it's not lost'. There is also a bit of small talk, for instance about the confirmation coming up. But they focus on the study work and most of the time there is silence.

For part of the lesson especially three of the students are in contact with each other. Somewhat later three students are again helping each other, but not the same as the first time. One of the women seems to have more resources than the others to help.

After an hour and a half one student says 'Time for coffee soon?' More or less simultaneously the stop working and get out coffee and cake. Now the study work is done, and the women talk about family, work and other issues before they go home.

As evident from the description the observed students focused on the course content. Before the concluding coffee break communication was limited and concerned almost completely elements of the curriculum. The course teacher also held the view that the students in this class worked seriously both with the teacher present and when they were on their own. Not all classes worked so well. The teacher saw the successful teamwork in this class as a result of the fact that the students knew each other beforehand, both through their work and through the community. The

focused approach of this class was also showed in the fact that five of the six students chose to take the exam, something the teacher mentioned with pride.

As mentioned the community center where the course was held housed many different activities. We did not register any interaction between the IT café and these other activities, but the fact that IT equipment and classrooms were available made it possible to have this kind of course locally. The teacher also emphasized this.

'The IT has the significance that something happens here. Not everything is moved out of the small local community. We do not say 'We serve everything in Viborg [the town with the adult education college] and you have to take the bus or the train. People really feel that something is happening here. OK, it involves a small group – but I think it really matters'.

The village IT café: participants' backgrounds and learning

The interaction in the IT cafes clearly drew on the participants' shared backgrounds and goals. We will elaborate on this aspect on the basis of the village cafe in the community center.

The IT cafe in the community center has hosted several classes. The class in the case study consisted of six women, all from the village. They had learned about the course from different sources – news about upcoming activities travels fast in the local community.

One participant said that she became interested when a similar course was held the previous winter. She mentioned her interest to the person who started the course and was the local organizer of educational activities in the community center. He told her that another course would be offered, and she joined the course along with her husband, who then dropped out due to a lack of time. She explained that she joined the course to learn about computers and not feel at a total loss in relation to her children.

Another participant said she had read about the course in the paper and had received a course program as member of the residents' association. She also discussed her interest in the course with her husband, who had participated in a similar IT course a few years back. It had helped him a lot both as a farmer and as chairman of a local constituency association. She was thus encouraged to learn more about IT, which "*it is important to know*". But she also joined the course for social reasons since she spends most of her time alone on the farm.

The examples show that the participants' relations in the local community had great importance for their recruitment to the course. However, both the local, social context and the vocational relevance affected their reasons for participating in the course. Like the students in the town IT café these students also helped each other in class; the atmosphere was relaxed and it was OK to ask one of the others if you got stuck – both with and without the teacher present.

The six women in the class were between 32 and 61 years old and seemed to have strong local ties. They had lived in the area for much of their lives, had or had had children in the local school, and most were members of the residents' association and familiar with its activities. The conversation in the coffee break revealed that they knew each other from other local contexts where they also meet. They shopped at the local grocer's and compared him to the previous grocer. A few of the women also attended other activities in their spare time, but most of them had only signed up for the computer class. They all felt that it was important for the family that they participate in the course, but not in relation to their work (four were unskilled workers, two were not working), which did not require IT skills.

But regardless of where and to what degree the participants needed the skills and knowledge taught in the course, they put a high priority on participating. They all showed up almost every time. There was also a mutual social commitment in that they took turns bringing cake for the coffee break. As mentioned earlier the exam was not mandatory, but an option. According to the teacher this question had not been discussed in class; but the participants apparently wanted to learn more or continue in the positive social context, for they all signed up for the continuation next season.

The development of the village community – before and after the IT cafe

The IT cafe in the village community center had opened two years previously after a series of local initiatives, which included among other things an expansion of the community center and a few educational activities. The cafe was established after a long and persistent effort by active citizens who wanted to start more activities. They applied for funds for the IT cafe and thereby an expansion of the community center. These two elements thus ran in parallel processes and were interdependent. The activists applied for funds for both processes, which according to them did not pass without difficulties and resistance.

“There were definitely some obstacles in the countryside and perhaps some people didn’t agree that this was the right project to support. So it can be difficult sometimes.”

But with a joint effort and assistance from the Adult Education Centers (VUC), the activists established a future lab¹ which became the foundation of the IT cafe.

“I have worked closely with VUC and have also used the future lab at my job, so I knew somebody who knows what they could do. But it is a little difficult to go out there and tell somebody who is used to things moving along that a future lab is a good way to bend things a little. But we managed to get it done. It was actually the precursor to it, and all associations in the village were invited.”

Some 30 persons from various associations in the village participated in the future lab. As an offspring, Business, Culture and Communication, a local association was founded as an umbrella for the existing associations in the village. A total of nine associations were included in the umbrella structure, and the board consisted of board members – mostly the chairmen – of five of the associations.

The purpose of Business, Culture and Communication was to apply for funds for the individual associations and their local projects based on the view that united they would stand a better chance of raising funds than individually. This structure turned out to be a fruitful idea, as it had secured significant funds from EU foundations and other bodies to start up local projects.

The IT cafe thus brought a number of other local activities with it. Many of them took place in the community center, which was reserved for scheduled activities all weekdays. There were two or three simultaneous activities every day, which was made possible by the expansion of the building. The IT cafe alone had had 47 students in the previous school year, including classes with participants that were very different from the students in the class we studied.

¹ A future lab is a specific type of workshop designed to allow a group of persons to develop strategies for engaging with a common problem and developing solutions. The model was originally developed by the German futurologist Robert Jungk.

According to the organizers, a web design course was held, targeted at a specific group. Almost all participants were local business people who signed up for the course because the village needed a new homepage. They had the idea that they could establish such a course, which would serve as a meeting point for discussing the content of the homepage. A part of the web design course was thus basic knowledge and skills in the presentation of home pages. The class focused especially on this part of the professional content when the teacher was present. When the teacher was not there, the participants had invited guest teachers to supplement them in their work with the homepage - for instance a journalist and a photographer. The local business people thus had a joint project, which was consistent with and could be implemented within the framework of a VUC course. This class did not have any special interest in taking an exam, which they associated with more general interest in the IT subject. The teacher pointed out, however, that the teaching covered the course curriculum; he could go and teach only design of home pages, but of course this topic could be given a high priority in the individual course.

The example shows that teaching in the IT cafes could be extremely focused on developing the local community. The circumstances of establishing the IT cafe show that it was not just based on strong local forces willing to make a social commitment, but also on the fact that these forces possessed the required knowledge and the network resources that could ensure its economic and social foundation.

There seems to have been a dynamic development in this community both before and after the launch of the IT cafe. Since local activists had played a decisive role in its establishment, it would probably not have materialized if these people had not been so committed and worked so hard for it. In that way, we can say that social capital had been a kind of dynamo for other activities in the local community, since it gave rise to other projects and thus new networks that could mean increased activity and social capital. The existence of networks that knows how to raise funds and establish courses lays a foundation for new activities, which again carry the potential for new networks.

Discussion

As the above case shows, there appears to be a mutual reinforcement in the interplay between adult education and social capital (cf. also Balatti and Falk 2002). However, it should be pointed out that social capital can also have a negative effect in relation to education. For example, strongly cohesive communities may contribute to maintaining norms that are negative towards education, and too much dependence on informal forms of information exchange can undermine the need for more formal and systematic forms of education (Field 2005). This does not seem to have been the case with the IT cafes, but it may be relevant to discuss whether the strong communities and network formations in local communities are open or closed vis-à-vis not just new ideas, but also newcomers.

A Danish field study with focus on the significance of social capital in the interplay between natives and newcomers in a fringe area illustrates the ambiguities of the context in that regard (Svendsen 2004). The study offers a micro-oriented, "from within" description of the social capital in a peripheral municipality in Lolland (a Danish island), which is characterized by both cooperation and confrontations between the two groups. The encounter between the groups gives rise to a mixture of openness and closure, conceptualized as respectively bridging and bonding social capital (cf. Putnam 2000). The flipside of social capital is the bonding form, which manifests itself in excluding types of social networks that focus mistrust towards the strangers and upholds monopolization of the social capital in the area. These factors lead to mistrust, distance, insecurity and lack of contexts instead of trust, closeness, transparency, civil engagement and security. The tendency is widespread in the municipality; but it does also show signs (although to

a lesser extent) of bridging social capital. This form appears not least in the business community, which has good examples of including networks. The business associations are in many cases only an “excuse” to gather around something neutral and that way get to know each other. For the newcomers, it is a good opportunity to be accepted. To become one of those who knows “somebody who knows somebody”.

With reference to Coleman, Svendsen (2004: 43) describes “knowing somebody who knows somebody” as a virtuous circle, which is associated with the building of positive social capital. The virtuous circle arises when close to everybody in an area knows each other (and each others’ children), which creates common norms, opportunities for quick, joint action and, generally, a secure environment – but also a risk of excessive social control and cliques.

The case study of the IT cafes does not tell us whether they had an inclusive effect in relation to newcomers, since this aspect was not examined. However, it would be interesting in future studies to study more specifically which role the IT cafes play in terms of integrating new members in the local population.

The initial difficulties in the organizers’ work to establish the IT cafe in the village community center mobilized some local resources, most of which were already mobilized in the existing associations. But the joint project seems to have given them new energy and social cohesion as well as openness towards new ideas and creativity. The resources contained in the network and the associations, for instance knowledge about available courses and funds, facilitate acquisition of new resources, for instance IT competences in connection with designing the common homepage. This supports further expansion of the platforms as meeting points where citizens can pursue their common interests and exchange ideas, information, experiences etc. (Svendsen 2004). This is not only true in the business community, but also in the workplace, at school meetings and outside institutional contexts, in the neighborhood and at the grocer’s. It is characteristic of such meeting places that they can help ensure that newcomers and locals meet regularly and have a chance to get acquainted and thus become trustworthy in each others’ eyes – or, at times, confirm each others’ prejudices.

It was evident that educational initiatives like the IT cafes with the strong local base and interplay with the business community can have a positive effect on the formation of new social capital. However, it is not quite as clear how such a process is started. If at the outset the expertise required to raise funds is not present and the ideal framework therefore cannot be created, how is it created? If the organizers do not have a clear cut framework to work in or a common cause to organize there is a risk that initiatives die out over time. Physical distance in large municipalities, which will soon be even larger, and lack of meeting points may mean that people never get acquainted. With the current centralization of politics, production and education, it appears decisive that such local networks already exist to mobilize common ground in the fight to raise funds and have “a piece of the cake” in the form of grants from central foundations. Local communities that have already mobilized a strong social capital may survive and give centralization vibrant social resistance in the countryside. But local communities that lack social capital to begin with risk facing even harder times in this development.

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