Cooperative development of higher education

The main aim of this work is to study the possibility of applying the cooperative learning approach to develop academic learning and teaching culture. In this work cooperative learning refers to a pedagogical approach that applies social psychological knowledge of group dynamics and small group teaching. Furthermore, theories of collaborative learning and organization development have been applied. Based on these theories a model of developing learning and teaching culture was developed. The model was tested in the development project that was carried out in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry of Helsinki University.

The research questions were: How were the theories of cooperative and collaborative learning and organization development applied in the project? What kind of effects did the development project have on the learning and teaching culture? Through which kind of mechanisms did the project influence this culture? How should the development model be revised after the empirical test?

The project lasted five years and the major part of the project consisted of a one-year pedagogical training course. Altogether 145 people (teachers, researchers, library staff, and students) participated in the training, two to three departments at a time. In the pedagogical training cooperative learning methods were widely used.

A questionnaire was used to study effects of the development project. The questionnaire was sent to 87 people and 65.5 % answered it. Both the answers to the questionnaire and a sample of learning diaries (n=61) were used to study the mechanism of the project. A sample of the learning diaries consisted of two pedagogical training group members’ diaries. The frequency distributions were calculated as extrapolations from the answers to the structured questions. Furthermore the answers were classified by the main background variables. The analysis of the open answers to the questionnaire and the learning diaries were data-based.

According to the answers to the questionnaire, the effects of the pedagogical training were as follows: The participants consider learning more as an active process of constructing knowledge. Furthermore they considered the individual learning styles and strategies, cooperation and motivation as more important part of the learning process than before the pedagogical training. The role of the teacher was viewed more challenging than before. Additionally the cooperation between teachers, other staff members and students had projected to increase. After the project had ended the teaching methods in the whole faculty were viewed to become varied and the teaching was considered to be more valued than before.

The technicalities of the project were according to answers to the questionnaire: the project stimulated the change process, provided new methods for learning and teaching, had an effect on conceptions of learning and teaching and facilitated meaningful communication with others (staff and students). The analysis of the learning diaries supported these findings. In addition, the analysis of the learning diaries deepened the understanding of how the cooperative learning methods supported positive learning atmosphere and reduced the negative effect of the status differences between the members of the group. The critical comments in the learning diaries could be interpreted as collision between cooperative and traditional teaching culture.

Cooperative learning gives theory-based methods to develop academic learning and teaching culture. The approach helps the developer to create positive collaborative learning environment and gives ways to support learning in small groups, which can promote cultural change. On the other hand, to understand the whole process of organization development and promote change the theories of organizations and more socioconstructivist theory of learning are needed.

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