

Conference Report

When Shall We Meet Again?

An Overview on the International ‘Insightful Encounters’ Conference, 5th-7th March 2008 in Porvoo, Finland

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The conference entitled ‘Insightful Encounters – Regional Development and Practice-Based Learning’ gathered together 100 participants, including researchers, lecturers, students and entrepreneurs and other practitioners, representing twelve countries, in the Finnish town of Porvoo for three days, 5th-7th March 2008. Porvoo (*Borgå*, in Swedish) is a small bilingual town, located on the Eastern Uusimaa coast, in which Swedish heritage has always played an important role in the cultural feature of the community. Porvoo is the second oldest (established in the 14th century) town in Finland after Turku, and a place where the Russian tsar Alexander I, after being appointed to grand duke of Finland in 1809, solemnly promised to keep the constitution Finland had previously enjoyed under Swedish rule, and leave the Finns with their own laws and law courts, their own army and their own administrative system, all staffed by Swedes or Finns.

The idea leading to an international conference originated within the members of a regional learning network project for the tourist industry in the Eastern Uusimaa region (2004-08), funded by the Finnish TYKES programme. The project, which is coordinated by the HAAGA–HELIA University of Applied Sciences, aims to develop the region as a ‘learning region’ by strengthening its self-identity and enhancing networking between companies,

the quality of their services and the role of the university of applied sciences in regional development. One of the major media for interactive communication within the network is a virtual platform entitled *Tietotori* (Knowledge Marketplace), which is used as a multi-voiced tool for joint development processes, for example, in developing regional tourism strategy, local events and joint learning sessions. In addition to HAAGA–HELIA and local enterprises, the project participants include expert organizations and intermediaries in the Helsinki area and the Eastern Uusimaa region. The project, and the idea to arrange an international event as the culmination point at the conclusion phase of the project, is a showcase of the embodiment of the new statutory task of Finnish polytechnics. The new act that took effect on 1st August 2003 in Finland added applied research and development serving education, working life and regional development to their statutory duties.

The conference gained an international dimension through contacts that were previously created to a Swedish-Norwegian benchlearning project between six regional networks and clusters. The three-year (2003-06) project, which was funded by the Swedish development agency Vinnova and the Norwegian Research Council, was active in getting into touch with corresponding regional-based development networks in Finland also. A small-scale Nordic workshop that was arranged in Helsinki in September 2006 paved the way for finding shared interests between the Finnish and Scandinavian networks, finally leading to the idea of joining forces in the arrangement of the conference.

The objective of the ‘Insightful Encounters’ conference was to deepen understanding of regional development, learning and innovation activity from the viewpoint of practice-based theorizing. The idea was to construct the conference itself as a learning space, which promotes dialogue and multi-voiced encounters between people with different backgrounds, between science and art, between practice and theory, and between approaches and disciplines of different kinds. All in all, insightful encounters were considered something that emerge from the action, practice and participation, rather than something that can be ordered, presented or performed.

All this was reflected in the practical arrangements of the event, too. The different sessions were organized in different places around the town, includ-

ing an old manor-house at the outskirts of the town of Porvoo and small restaurants and cafés in the Old Porvoo area (i.e. small wooden houses built in the past centuries). Many of the local entrepreneurs who are active participants in the network, in fact, acted as hosts for the sessions.

The number of plenary sessions was kept to a minimum, and even they were organized in an interactive way (i.e. as encounters between the contributors and the audience) rather than following the traditional lecture pattern with a clear-cut physical and social distance between the ‘expert’ and the ‘listeners’. The two major international contributors at the plenary sessions included Professor Silvia Gherardi (University of Trento) and Senior Research Professor Kenneth Gergen (Swarthmore College), both of whom had been an important source of inspiration to the way the learning network project was initiated and the conference organized. Gherardi’s presentation examined practice-based studies and their diffusion from a historical perspective. The encounter with Gergen consisted of a short introduction by him, followed by a group work with a number of ‘provocative questions’ and a general reflective discussion. A third plenary session was arranged as an encounter with two active members of the Eastern Uusimaa network, Researcher Hanna Toiviainen of the University of Helsinki and Principal Lecturer Anne Äyväri of the Laurea University of Applied Sciences, revolving around the issue of ‘learning in networks’.

Presentation of the papers (totalling some 40) was split between seven theme sessions including the following:

- 1) Regional innovation processes and benchlearning between regional innovation networks
- 2) Learning networks – evaluating the effects
- 3) Innovation at workplace – collaboration around innovation, learning and productivity in local networks
- 4) Action research and corporate social responsibility in regional development and innovation activity
- 5) Mediating in regional development and learning
- 6) Learning new practices as identity re-construction

7) Methodological experiments and action research innovation process

The theme conveners were left a lot of leeway in arranging the sessions in different ways, the only guiding principle being that the sessions should be well in line with the basic idea of the 'Insightful Encounters' conference as a learning space emphasizing the importance of dialogue and crossing the boundaries. In practice, this meant that paper presentations by the writers themselves should not dominate the sessions, but enough room should be left for interaction and joint development. A 'standard format' followed in most of the theme sessions was to have short presentations of some 10-15 minutes by the authors and then work in a learning café.

In theme session 2, a somewhat more complicated procedure was applied. Instead of people who actually wrote the papers, the papers were presented by another participant who was called 'resonator'. Her/his task was to briefly discuss with the writer of the paper on 'what resonated with me', including issues such as what attracted my interest, fascinated or puzzled me, or raised questions into my mind against her/his own experience. The roles of the resonators were distributed beforehand between the people who had submitted a paper to the theme session in question. In addition to the roles of the writer and resonator, there was a third role of 'reflector' reserved for two other participants. Their task was, while listening to the presentation by the resonator and the short comment given by the writer, to pick up interesting learning issues and dilemmas concerning the theme of the session on flip-charts. The two reflectors were given the floor and they had about 10 minutes to 'think aloud' what they had heard and what they had picked up on the theme from the discussion; something that could be interesting from a more general point of view, too. All this was finally followed by a general discussion.

Theme session 3, too, was organized in an experimental way. The group, which centred on action research and corporate social responsibility in regional development and innovation activity, was divided into two smaller groups in advance. Members of the small groups had had the task to read the papers written by members of the other small group and reflect on interesting issues raised in these papers as well as any relationships found between the papers. After that, the bigger group gathered together and the small groups

presented papers of the members of the other group. This was followed by a short panel with the authors and a dialogue session in the small groups again, leading finally to plenary reports by the groups and a joint discussion on them.

My own experience on the experimental way the conference was organized, both as one of the theme conveners of session 2 and as a rank-and-file participant, was a very positive one. In retrospective, I think that the context in which all the events took place was helpful in creating the kind of physical and social proximity between the different participants that is not easy to achieve in conventional conferences taking place in, for example, big conference houses or university campuses. The conference proceedings are available on DVD and on the Internet (take a look at the home pages of the HAAGA–HELIA University of Applied Sciences, www.haaga-helia.fi). Some of the papers will surely be published afterwards in scientific journals as well. The only thing bothering me is ‘when shall we meet again?’

About the author

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