The Distance College: a network of upper secondary schools in Iceland.

Networking for the benefit of education in the Icelandic countryside

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Context in Iceland

340.000 inhabitants –

2/3 living in the capital area around Reykjavík

30 upper secondary schools/junior colleges

17 in the countryside,

13 in the Reykjavík area

in general public schools run by the state and municipalities

The upper secondary schools in Iceland

- Junior colleges/grammar schools offer general education for matriculation exam for age 16-19,20
- Comprehensive schools offer both general education and vocational-industrial (trades/craftman) education
- Students tend to be (up to ten years) older in vocational programs
- Most of the upper secondary schools in the countryside are comprehensive schools and offer both general programs and vocational programs

The role of small upper secondary schools in rural Iceland

1. Offer general education in upper secondary schools for young people age 16-19/20 as close to their homes as possible
   - Offering flexible solutions with a mixture of online connections to smaller places
   - and campus weeks, providing place in internats e.g. one week in month
   - Some students live in internats the whole school year
2. Offer shorter vocational and craftmanship programs
   - Usually students are older – age 20-30
   - Available periodically
   - Boatmasters and mechanical studies are much demanded in the coastline regions
   - The labor market in the small communities need educated health care and social services staff

Contradictions:
The importance of education vs. economic feasibilty

- Upper secondary schools support the viability of small communities in the countryside
- Diminishing student cohorts threaten the existence of the small schools
- Economically: more feasible to merge small schools or run them as departments of bigger schools
- For the communities: important to have an independent school for supporting local identity and serving local needs

Theoretical framework: CHAT

- Expansive learning theory; Engeström
  - *Expansive learning* refers to processes in which an activity system, for example a work organization, resolves its pressing internal contradictions by constructing and implementing a qualitatively new way of functioning for itself (Engeström, 2007a, p. 24)
  - The concept *knot-working* for describing how interacting activity systems operate in networks where interaction requires flexible knot-working

- Contradictions: historically accumulating structural tensions that become noticeable in disturbances and innovative solutions (Engeström, 2005, p. 314).

- During the process of transformation people may find themselves in a *double bind* situation, receiving contradictory messages to which thy are unable to react

- Vygotsky developed the *functional method of double stimulation*, where a mediating tool is made available to the subject for mastering such situations

Research questions

1. How did the contradictory situation in the schools and their communities, bring about the need for establishing The Distance College?

   Or

   How did the idea of networking act as a stimulation for overcoming the contradictions?

2. Which have been the main challenges and what have supported (served as a double stimulation) the development of the network?

3. Which possibilities are inherent in the network for the rural school; what is the zone of proximal development for the network?

Data

- Diverse information on the website of The Distance College
- Visits to some of the schools and interviews with principals and teachers
- Telephone interviews with principals, vice principals or project leaders in October 2016
- Yearly reports from the schools and reports on developmental projects within The Distance College
- Information from the Ministry of Education and Statistics Iceland

Networking – **working relationally** – a double stimulation for developing practice

- Facing the problems caused by the contradictions between the importance of the schools for their communities vs. the economical reasons the ministry has for merging

- In 2013 The Distance College was formed as a grass-root initiated collaboration of some small rural upper secondary schools

- Now 13 upper secondary schools collaborate in the network
- In most of the schools, the number of students from 100-300
- Number of students in all schools in the network was 3.147
- total in Iceland 24,711

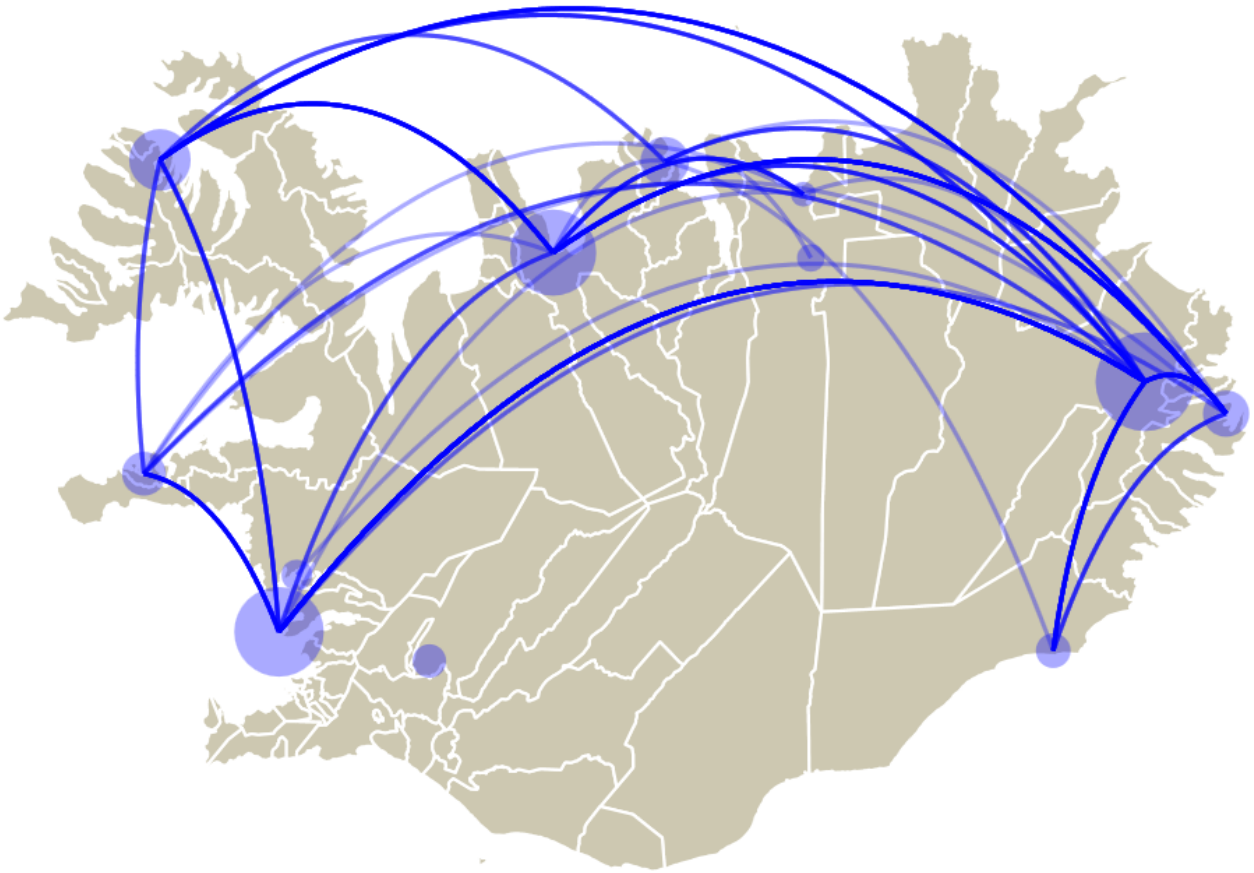
The Distance College´s object of activity

1. 3-4 schools form a temporary collaboration for providing vocational programmes in a blend of online and face-to-face meetings, with apprenticeship organised in collaboration with local organisations

2. Exchange of students and teachers by enrolling students online for making feasible class sizes – both professionally and economically

3. General consultation important for supporting the small schools
   - The principals hold telephone meetings twice a month
   - Collaboration in the network has strengthened the status of the small countryside school in the national union of upper secondary principals

- ✓ The map shows the placement of schools participating in the Distance College Network.
  The size of the dots indicate the number of distance students in each school.
  The lines show movement of students between schools in October 2014, students in all 202



Material and conceptual tools for supporting the development of the network

- The Internet and digital resources – Moodle, online communiciation etc
- Networking as a form for practice vs. isolated school practice

- Teachers and principals learn to expand their practice by collaborating with colleagues in other rural schools

- Expanded ideas about teaching and schooling practice supported by online technology

- Two of the shools that have developed know-how and creative solutions in online learning have been able to strengthen their positions by enrolling up to 300 online students each semester
  - the online provision has become their lifeline by enlarging their student cohorts

Activity II

5. Developed networking; particiapting schools use networking as a mode of practice on multiple levels

4. Implementing Formalising?
Tertiary contradictions: mismatch between the way in which schools participate

Activity I

The need state

Small schools in the Icelandic countryside.

Students too few

Fragile communities

Challenges:
1. To let the schools survive in spite of too few students
2. To offer an econmically and qualitativly recognized education for rural youth

Support:
ICT: LMS for distance learning and teaching
The networking model, working relationally
Visions for the importance of local schools – the local needs

2. Secondary contradictions

ICT tools for teaching online vs. traditional teaching methods by teachers isolated in their classrooms

Networking schools vs. isolated school practice

3. Emerging model

13 schools at the countryside participate in The Distance College

Schools open their general education courses for online students from other schools in the network

Shorter vocational programmes are offered periodically by each school or 2-4 schools collaborate

Professional collaboration of principals and teachers between schools

Challenges:
School practice different, traditional vs. innovative
Get the network functioning for the different tasks – expanding shared objects

Need to expand students experience –teacher organize collaboration of students in the small schools
Principals' regular meetings for consultaion.
Support and need in the local community.
Working relationally with the local community.

Hypothesis:
Developing school-community relations for supporting the viability of the schools

- Networking practice expanded and used for supporting school-community relations
- Explore studies on the *interplay of schools and local communities* especially in sparsely populated and fragile rural communities
- Look at the possibilities for school-community development that lie in the *blurring of boundaries between schools and other practices* in the community

A study of one of the rural upper secondary schools in Iceland:

- Jóhannsdóttir, Thurídur. (2017). Creating a school that matters: Networking for school-community development. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 1-18. doi:10.1080/00220272.2017.1337812

The Ministry of Education threatens the existence of small schools

- In 2015 The Ministry expresses doubts about the independent existence of the small schools
  - doubts about the quality of the education they were able to offer

- In North Iceland The Ministry suggested merging or incorporation of the small schools in the region in two big schools (750-1500 students) in Akureyri the main town in the North

- The Local communities reacted strongly against this idea, emphasizing the importance of the schools for empowering their communities – often fragile because of diminishing population

- **The challenge** for the principals of the schools was not to loose belief the the capacity of the small rural schools of providing quality education
- **Support:**
  - Collaboration in the Distance College network where more experienced principals boosted the group not to give up
  - The importance of the school for the local communities – calling for school-community collaboration