INTERVENTIONS ON THE PROCESSES OF THE UAS E-JOURNAL

Abstract

We have studied the activities of the UAS Journal published by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (ARENE). The UAS Journal focuses on education, research and development activities of practice-oriented higher education in Finland. The intent of this study was to find out if our interventions have supported the development activities of the e-journal; the distinct research method employed is action research supported by content analyses. Interventions have been targeted both to the formal activities and to the informal activities of the UAS Journal.

Our paper is organized as follows: the first chapter introduces UAS Journal e-publication. The second part of the article discusses the network as background to the UAS Journal based on the different network roles. The action research orientation of the study is introduced next. In the following chapters, the interventions and the outcomes are presented. The results of the study are discussed and summarised in the concluding chapter.

Keywords: higher education, open journal, university of applied sciences, action research, interventions, UAS journal, online publication

1 Introduction

This article deals with the activities of the UAS Journal; the journal is published by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene) and has been financed by the universities of applied sciences (UAS) since 2010. The UAS Journal is published online (www.uasjournal.fi) and includes four issues a year. The articles of the journal are published mainly in Finnish with summaries in English. The aim of the UAS Journal, according to Arene, is to be a window to the Finnish UASs. Networks are in the important role of creating human capital and help increase institutional support for local actors and stakeholders (Coleman, 1988), so the higher education institutions are significant regional actors (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2010). The UAS Journal has partly a role in carrying out the third task of the Finnish universities (Arene, 2013) focusing on education, research and development activities in the Finnish UASs. The main target groups of the UAS Journal are the staff members of Finnish higher education institutions, their interest groups and actors in the related world of work. Lately, the journal aims to attract contributors and readers from outside Finland, especially from European countries (Kantola & Friman, 2012).

The UAS Journal is a combination magazine and scientifically-oriented publication. The authors can both write expert articles and publish peer-reviewed articles (PKP, 2011). Both the semi-closed Internet publication platform and the new possibilities provided by open social media have been applied (OJS, 2011 and it is the possibile to share multimedia presentations via the journal, as well.

The roots of the UAS Journal’s activities can be traced to the developer network of Finnish UASs, 2000-2009 (Kever) an it’s Kever e-journal as well as to the magazine Osaaja. The Kever network and journal were established for researchers. The magazine Osaaja was published by Arene for the Finnish working life experts. The purpose of the network and the publication was to develop and gather together
researchers and developers interested in practical higher education (Rauhala, 2002; Kantola & Friman, 2011).

The Osaaja magazine, from 2005 to 2009, was established to demonstrate the tasks and profile of the UASs for the working life in different industries. The Osaaja e-magazine focused strongly on the UAS’s business partners publishing articles that debated about the R&D projects carried out together by the universities and the companies.

The UAS Journal has been published since 2010 as the result of a merger of Kever and Osaaja. The merger created new challenges merging a new kind of combination of two different cultures.

The distinct research method of this study is action research supported by qualitative and quantitative content analyses (Kuula, 2001). The first author of this article Dr Friman, is the chief editor of the UAS Journal, while the second author, Mr Kantola, is the journal’s social media expert and the third author, Ms Linko, is the subeditor for the journal. All three authors are members of the UAS journal board of editors. The user data has been collected using Google Analytics.

2. Action research and the network roles

The action research is a framework of how to deal with situations where the researchers are active stakeholders of the research subject. The possible different profiles that the action researcher may take are that of the active manipulator or that of the outsider (Norton, 2009). The authors of this article have taken the role of the manipulator. The purpose of our action research described in this study was to support the development of the UAS Journal. We used quantitative data when studying the activities of the author network and qualitative content analysis when categorising the topics of the articles. With the Google Analytics, we studied the activities of the readers.

The action research is purposed to solve problems and is led by experts working with others; it involves a process of actively participating in a changing situation while conducting research. By adding to the above, Lewin (1951) stated that action research can be undertaken by larger entities, such as networks, and it can be assisted or guided by researchers with the aim of improving strategies and practices concerning the environments where the stakeholders operate. From our point of view, it seems that the method is suitable for the UAS Journal and the way in which it organises activities across the organizational and national boundaries. As designers and actors, researchers work with other experts with the purpose to take new directions of activities to support the UAS Journal network. Additionally, The action research can be viewed as a form of self reflection (McNiff, 2013).

In this study, we have intervened to the three main processes: the editorial process, the marketing process and the network process. Dealing with the editorial process, the activities focused on the work of the board of advisors, the editorial council and the board of editors. On the marketing process, the activities targeted the social interactions within the network and Facebook activities as well as collaboration using e-mailing. The use of the Face Book (the social media) has been targeted to encourage authors and readers to collaborate with the UAS Journal and with each other. By the term network process, we mean the activities, such as the merging of the former two networks, the choice of the themes for the issues, the choice of visiting editors and members of the board, and the activities of the conferences and meetings organised for the whole network.

Comparing to the types of action research, introduced by Norton (2009), in our study we adopted so called mutual-collaborative perspective based on the assumption that the practitioners-researchers
invoke a fluid approach that enables them to interpret and change their practices. Action research of this type foregrounds the practitioner and her way of knowing and understanding.

The network roles served us as platforms, when we asked what kind of processes we could find from the research target, as if we went to the processes through the network roles. The UAS Journal network consisted of different roles in the production process. The journal itself can be seen as a project supported by the network. The Rectors’ Conference of Finnish UASs has required that a related, national expert network should be supported publishing a recommendation that all Finnish UASs are somehow involved in the journal’s processes.

The board of advisors represents the interest groups and stakeholders. The role of the board of advisors is to set the general guidelines for the procedures and themes of the publication. The members of the board meet twice a year to review the past season and to discuss future actions. The board of editors consists of the staff members of traditional universities and universities of applied sciences. The board of editors suggests themes, subjects, articles and authors to the chief editors and bring their expertise and networks to the assistance of the UAS Journal. The board of editors meets three times a year to discuss past and future issues.

The chief editor bears the juridical responsibility for the UAS Journal and sets the publication’s guidelines and policies. In practical matters he/she acts in close cooperation with the editor, visiting editors and also the writers. A visiting editor is an invited expert on the subject matter. His or her task is to commission interesting articles by inviting knowledgeable authors to participate. The visiting editor reviews the articles for (formal) correctness before sending them to the chief editors and to the editor. The visiting editor prepares or commissions the editorial and takes part in preparing the issue data. For each issue, the subeditor manages the table of contents and the incoming articles, acquires the permission to publish from the writers, proofreads and does the layout for the articles, submits them to the publication, prepares the issue data, publicises the issue and sends out the marketing e-mails and press releases. He or she also follows, analyses and reports the statistics.

The network of authors is actively involved on the supply side, and yet the authors are also a very active group on the demand side as well (as readers and users). As stated earlier, the main objective of the e-journal process has been to facilitate knowledge sharing and educational practices by building up the capacity of these kinds of networks in strategic multidisciplinary areas to bring the collaboration to a more integrated form of partnership.

Lacking user surveys and identified user data, we are assuming that our regular readers consist of the staff of universities and universities of applied sciences as well as their interest groups and those involved in related projects. The world of work, and regional companies, in particular, are a special target group of the publication.

Next, we will introduce our interventions to the UAS Journal in line with the journalistic schedule. The new information technologies have widened the possibilities for flexible systems of production (Dewdney and Ride, 2006). Concerning the different roles and actors involved in the UAS network, in our previous studies we had not yet dealt the readers (demand side) but instead had analysed the supply-side (writers, articles, themes, contents).

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the UAS Journal is to inform and advise the working life experts and staff of the UASs about research and development activities (of the universities of applied sciences) in order to promote cooperation between educational institutions, business and industry, thus advancing regional vitality and prosperity (Friman & Rissanen, 2011). These aims also serve as the basis for our interventions, which are targeted at the different processes of the network.
In this document, we describe each process at the same time, introducing our ideas about how to intervene in and develop the process. Each intervention may have different sub-elements or indicators, which again can be analysed in different ways (user data, meeting memos, etc.)

3. Interventions to the editing process

The main intervention concerning the editorial process has undoubtedly been the merger of the Osaaja magazine and the Kever journal in order to establish the new UAS Journal. The goal of the merger was to preserve and develop the best practises of both publications.

The board of advisors of the UAS Journal was combined from the former members of the previous Osaaja magazine and Kever journal boards, but the UAS board of editors was established more quickly and somewhat more freely with the idea that representatives from every field of UAS education be included and that the members should be invited from different types of UASs. Additionally, a representative from the field of academic research on higher education was invited to be on the board of editors.

Selecting the online platform. Soon after the two publications were merged, an electronic platform was inherited from the Osaaja magazine. The reason that the UAS Journal chose to use the open journal system is practical: both preceding publications were published on the very same platform and major technical changes seemed unreasonable at the time of the merger. We have also chosen to favour the authors’ possibility to submit manuscripts based on the modern practices of visuality and reader-friendliness.

Building the author network. Our primary action of building and strengthening the author network has been to gather together writers from the networks of editors and board members. The articles are both independent pieces of work and co-written texts. The number of writers has risen from 76 in 2011 to 106 in 2012. In 2011 and 2012, there was approximately the same number of articles in each of the four issues: thus, in 2012 the number of co-authored articles was significantly greater than in 2011, which we wish to see as a sign of increased networking. (The amount of articles varies between 16 and 19 per issue. There were no significant changes between 2011 and 2012.) The number of participating organisations was about 30 in both 2011 and 2012. Most writers come from universities of applied sciences, many from universities, and some from business and industry, the public sector and NGOs.

Defining the structure and layout of the publication. As one concrete action, a new visual identity, including a new logo, was designed for the UAS Journal. The structure (including the use of categories, the role of the front page, the relation between text and photos, the use of video, and so on) was formed on the basis of former practises. Over time, slight changes have made to the layout of the publication (e.g. the photo on the entry page) as well as to the structure of the content (e.g. shorter articles).

Defining the production process. At the same time as we were making decisions about the design and appearance of the journal, the editorial process was defined. The role of the editors (board of editors, chief editor, visiting editor, subeditor) is to make proposals about the issue themes, to filter agendas, to acquire and choose between articles, and to evaluate and to “package” the content. For the readers, there is an endless load of data and information on the Internet, and one issue of the UAS Journal can be seen as a selected “package” of certain themes. Of course, each reader has his or her own reading habits and experiences, and the journal tries to support them via information filtering and gathering.

The production process for the UAS Journal has mainly been as follows:
1. The yearly plan for the themes for each issue is discussed by the board of advisors and the board of editors during the preceding year. The chief editor has a major role in this process, and she is supported by the board of editors. The visiting editor is often a member of this board or a member of the board of editors.

2. The process for the refereed articles has a schedule of its own, depending on the submitted articles and timetable of the peer reviewers.

3. Each issue is compiled with the cooperation of the chief and visiting editor and the subeditor.

4. The exact formulation of the headlines and the choice of authors are mainly done by the visiting editor and the chief editor just before publishing.

5. The marketing of each issue is roughly planned when the themes are discussed. More detailed target groups, channels and schedules are planned when making the issue.

6. User statistics are the numeric data we use for analysing the success of our actions.

Broadening the scope of topics and articles. Publishing theme issues is our way of broadening the scope of topics and articles and, at the same time, of focusing and packaging the contents. We had a different theme for every issue in both 2011 and 2012, and this will be continued in 2013.

Perhaps the most visible intervention, which also affects the usability, has been the shift from the use of pdf format files to the use of an HTML format. The OJS platform of the UAS Journal is somewhat challenging for users and reading the journal requires a large number of mouse clicks. The start of each reading process is quite lengthy and certainly affects the user statistics (bounce rate, number of pages visited, time spent at the site). We have taken a conscious effort to make all of the articles shorter (limit: 10,000 characters) in order to publish them in HTML format so as to eliminate the need for extra mouse clicks in the process. In practice, we have advised writers about the character limit, provided written instructions and reminded the visiting editors to communicate the limit to the writers.

Evaluating and developing the publication. We evaluate and develop the publication and the activities surrounding it by discussing the process and the product in advisory and editorial board meetings and by gathering feedback from the visiting editors.

We count the continuation of funding as one form of feedback and a sign of satisfaction: Arene continued to finance the journal after the initial project phase.

4. Interventions to the Marketing process

We aim to both widen and engage the reader audience. In addition to utilising existing networks, we use focused e-mail marketing to attract new readers to the publication. We are also present in social media to both market the publication and to network with people through a common interest. The target reader group and the UAS Journal network are mixed so that in part the readers and authors share the same environment in which the contents are produced and used. In other word, the network itself produces themes and topics that the publication processes for the network and for other readers as well. Google Analytics was systematically taken into the use in April 2011 and that intervention motivated the editors to boost their efforts to widen the readership and writer base of the journal.

Direct E-mailing was the first and the only marketing method, and taking it for the use of it being the very first intervention method. The main target group was the communications departments of the Finnish universities of applied sciences. New groups have been included step by step in the mailing procedure and, at present, e-mails about each issue are sent to the following groups:

- The communications departments of the universities of applied sciences
- Writers of each issue are encouraged to spread the e-mails in their circles
- The boards of advisors and editors get an e-mail reminder about the latest issue
- The former Kever network members) are informed
- A focused distribution list of about 700 e-mail addresses have been purchased for the use of each issue.
We measured the success of the e-mail lists by following user statistics. Most of the traffic to the site is direct, such as through e-mail links. The source number two is organic Google.

Over the years, we have widened the reader audience, but there is no strong level of engagement — this is natural, as the themes and contents vary from issue to issue: approximately 70% of visitors were new both in 2011 and 2012. (Google Analytics was systematically taken into use in April 2011.) compared to the figures for the former publications:

The circulation numbers of the Kever e-journal were collected from the Open Journal System (OJS), the platform for the journal. In the autumn of 2007, the journal had just under 10,000 page views and 18,200 page views at the end of 2008. In 2008, Õsaaja’s page views were about 3,000 per issue.

Unfortunately, there was no systematic user data monitoring system for either one of the former publications, and statistics cannot be collected retroactively nor are they comparable.

Press distribution. Once a new issue of the journal has been published, a brief press release has been sent out to the key media contacts (70 recipients) and to a select list of editors, freelancers and bloggers (typically between 100 and 200 persons). So far, the editors have not traced media hits as an outcome of this activity, but it could be one way to measure the impact of our actions.

The use of existing networks. We believe personal promotion to be an important activity in the marketing process. We aim to encourage all those involved to spread information about the publication in their professional networks and as part of their work in a university of applied sciences.

Some UASs are keener to promote the UAS Journal through their intranets than others, and this is evident based on user stats: those intranets can be identified as a clear source of traffic. This is thanks to the actions of the visiting editors, authors and communications departments.

We believe personal promotion to be an important activity in the marketing process. We aim to encourage all those involved to spread information about the publication in their professional networks and as part of their work in a university of applied sciences. The main purpose of our presence in social media is to support sharing and discussions about the content of the UAS Journal items. Additionally, Facebook activities have been focused on as a way to inform others about and discuss the publication. The number of friends in the UAS profile has varied between 450 and 550 over time. The number of views for single FB comments and postings has not been very high, but most of the friends see those postings on their own Facebook timeline. Discussions in Facebook have been mild so far. The UAS Journal has so far used the free activities of Facebook, but paid advertisements and the like have also been considered.

So far, social media mainly covers the previously mentioned 500 Facebook followers, but Twitter and LinkedIn have also been used somewhat. However, the audience has only had a minor role in these media. The UAS e-journal internet link to the new issue has been posted on Facebook and Twitter for the friends of UAS Journal. Each article and item has an independent URL of its own, so it has been rather easy to inform the Facebook network and to raise topics for discussion. The active discussions and comments have occurred on a rather seldom basis, but the liking actions have mildly increased. User statistics for the UAS Journal platform show that Facebook is a clear source of direct traffic. Facebook comments about the articles have helped increase the number of visitors and readers of those articles.

5. Interventions to the networking process
One aim of the UAS Journal networking project is to promote networking between both people and organisations. By analysing the knowledge sharing and networking processes together, the efforts to get authors to write and produce together in new kinds of expert combinations have been important interventions implemented by the chief editors of the UAS Journal. This part of the intervention process has proved to be quite challenging and positive results have not materialised to the extent that we had anticipated. Likewise, some new collaborations and co-authoring can be seen but not to the extent that we had anticipated. Organisational changes tend to be slow, and network-based changes seem to be slow as well.

There were 76 writers in 2011 and 106 in 2012. The number of articles has remained the same, so there were more co-authored articles in 2012. This may well indicate an increase in networking among writers.

Invitations and choice of the referee readers is an important element in the networking process. The writing in the refereed articles is more important from a content point of view, but there is no defined mechanism for inviting evaluators, and in many cases the peer selection depends on the editor’s own network. In some cases, a proper strategy for inviting referee readers could be more fruitful. In this case, the practice was adopted for the UAS Journal from the former Kever journal, where the board carefully discussed the focused invitations sent to readers. The importance of the process is easier to understand when keeping in mind that there is no other journal in Finland that focuses on pedagogy and methodology in the practical-oriented higher education sector. The main goal for the invitations has been to broaden academic awareness of the research being done as well as the R&D activities of the various UASs. The second goal has been to seek out international readers because about every second refereed article is written in English. The group of referees consists of about 20 experts, but it is increasing all the time.

The intervention of boosting the use of social media have been mainly connected to the goals of networking, sharing and learning from each other across different organizational, sector and network boundaries. It is challenging to analyze whether this intervention has produced additional value. The UAS Journal has friends on Facebook, but the active communication level is rather low. Though, each time we distribute some information about UAS journal items in the social media, some people indicate they liked and some visits to the journal site itself occur.

8. Conclusions

The UAS Journal has been survived and the user base has widened. The mission of the journal has been to inform about the research and development activities at practical oriented universities as a means of promoting activities, facilitating cooperation and support regional vitality. Some of the interventions introduced in this study have been successful while the others have not been so much.

We think that it is possible to study the processes of the e-journal in a network-related context by using action research. This kind of an approach helps developers to focus on development interventions in different environments. Action research strips the processes bare, boosts the stakeholders to make more conscious interventions and enables them to evaluate with somewhat more measurable results.

One clearly measurable outcome of our actions in the editing process has been that the amount of writers has increased. More writers mean more viewpoints and more interesting content.

The success of the marketing interventions wase measured by counting the number of e-mail addresses and by using the user statistics of the Open Access system and Google Analytics. Most of traffic at the
site of UAS Journal has been direct and the rest of the traffic by organic Google. Google Analytics was systematically taken into the use and that intervention has motivated the editors to boost their efforts to widen the readership and writer base.

The use of social media has increased the number of active experts and helped promote collaboration activities. The use of social media boosts the e-journal’s readership and other virtually mediated open learning activities. The increase in the amount of the writers has meant increased networking as well as the increased density of the collaboration.

References


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