

Learning and empowerment in farmer groups as one way of creating a healthy process of animal health and welfare planning

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Introduction: farmer groups as a way to animal health and welfare planning in a dairy herd

An animal health and welfare plan is a useful document as a tool for improving the farm in ways which will lead to improvements in the herd. Atkinson & Neale (2008) distinguished between 'animal health plan' and 'animal health planning', where the first was the document, and the latter was the necessary process leading to formulating a plan. This means that the document becomes useful because it is a result of an active planning process, which involves a systematic analysis of the situation and a reflective process where the people, who are actually responsible for changes in the farm, are actively participating in the analysis of the situation and articulating their perceptions and planned actions. This process can be carried through in very many ways in practice, although based around some overall principles which ensure that there is room to carry through the process.

In the ANIPLAN project, we have developed a set of basic principles of Animal Health and Welfare Planning, developed through a group work process at the first project workshop, summarised as follows:

- It has to be a process involving assessment of the state of the art, dialogue leading to the formulation of a plan, and action followed by an evaluation, which then again can lead to a new dialogue and planning;
- Farmer ownership;
- Involvement of external knowledge;
- Have organic principles framework;
- Be written;
- Acknowledge good aspects;
- The plan must be farm specific; and
- External persons should be involved

In this paper, I explore definitions of learning and empowerment, and discuss how farmer groups can contribute to the learning process related to the animal health and welfare planning process, and how empowerment can be facilitated through common situated learning. The relevance of focusing on learning and empowerment as important for an animal health and welfare planning process is based around the substantiated belief that a process leads to action for better animal health and welfare when it involves active participation, ownership and meaningful learning among the persons who are responsible for the animals.

What is learning?

Conventionally, learning is often defined as internalization of knowledge from 'the outside world'. From this point of view, learning is absorption or assimilation between two worlds; the outside and the inside, and is perceived as a primarily intellectual phenomenon (Lave and Wenger, 1991). When viewing learning as a social phenomenon and process, it can be viewed as an interaction between the learner and the learning environment where the world is not an inside and outside world, but rather one with interrelations between the learner (and his or her background and competencies) and the surroundings, which also includes co-learners, cultural and social context, facilitator, teachers and specific situations. When working with farmer groups, this is a crucial point because in this context, learning is a social process which takes place in a group where knowledge is developed and related to practice.

The link between knowledge development and practice is another crucial point. Briefly, all people learn when the knowledge is relevant to them and to their daily practice. Therefore, when learning together – as happens in a group – the knowledge which is relevant to the participant will be developed, and the participants will support each other in the development of this knowledge. This is very different from the thinking of one advisor 'pouring knowledge' into the mind of a farmer, in some cases even knowledge which the farmer will not find relevant and therefore does not pick up. The concept of 'situated learning' refers to learning from and within a given specific context and situation. This also links the knowledge, the learned, to the experience of the learner, and of the participants in a learning process, as described by e.g. Kolb (1984): *'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'*. This means that when working in a farmer group, the participants expose their experience and share it with fellow farmers, and

therefore common learning takes place. Sometimes, farmers' experiences are different, and therefore a negotiation process is necessary. This demands dialogue, and is very meaningful to the group members, because they negotiate their own experience and thereby put it into a context which – together with the experience of the fellow farmers – bring about common knowledge and constitutes a learning process.

The learning process is transformative for the learner, since it leads from one point and perception to another. This is a very complicated process, involving both first and second order experiences (Percy, 2005), and therefore also deep reflection, and periods with disorientation, surprise or 'optimal frustration' - all of these facilitating transformation and learning. This will not happen without dialogue and negotiation. New knowledge will be created as a product of the negotiations and processes in the group, where the group members work together to reach a common understanding of what is relevant and meaningful for them in their own situation.

Some learning happens through everyday activity, and does not need to be reflected. When entering a process of – like here – learning in order to improve a situation e.g. through active and continuous planning of steps in order to meet overall goals at a farm, we are moving from 'coincidental learning' to the view of situated learning as a conscious process.

The conscious and common farmer group process aims at finding negotiated meaning in the topics, issues and dilemmas shared by involved group members. The group members share all this on an equal level in the group (as described by e.g. Lave & Wenger (1991) when they use the term 'legitimate peripheral participation'), but the process needs to be facilitated by somebody who keeps the overview of the process and guides the dialogue in the group.

What is empowerment and how is it linked to learning?

Empowerment has been discussed and defined in numerous contexts in different parts of the world. In short, it can be defined as enabling humans, as individuals, in groups or in local communities, to develop a mastering of life situations and take control over and responsibility for their own life situation within a given framework and when necessary (Andersen et al., 2001). This also involves a critical sense taking action based on an evaluation of the situation and belief in ones own potential and influence, but it can be taken much further than that and also seen in relation to the building up of human and social capital. One can ask why and how it is relevant for farmers planning improvements in their own herds, because the term empowerment is built on a fundamental understanding of society as unequal and with underprivileged groups, and empowerment is linked to 'empowering the underprivileged group'. We use it in this context as an emphasis in relation to the basic principles of animal health and welfare planning described above, where the farmer ownership is a crucial characteristic. Here, we think primarily of the power to take action and responsibility, and set the agenda for ones own herd.

What brings about empowerment? Learning and becoming increasingly conscious about ones own situation, abilities and potential weaknesses are crucial elements of an empowerment process, because it strengthens the identity both as individual and as group. As explained above, a group of farmers challenge each other, negotiate and find common meaningfulness in their experiences linked to their own reality. This process is transformative in nature, and hence it leads to a process of empowerment, where individuals or groups of individuals are stimulated to take action in their own lives.

The relevance of learning together in farmer groups in an organic context

The basic principles of a good animal health and welfare planning process as described above can very well be fulfilled through a dialogue between one farmer (or the persons from one farm) and one advisor, as well as through a farmer group process. The particular focus for this paper has been the farmer group approach, as this seems to be an efficient and relevant way which, in practice, has proved to lead to action and actual improvements on farms (Vaarst et al., 2007). In the case of organic farming, it might be even more relevant, since it seems that being an organic farmer often calls for innovative approaches and local development of solutions to challenges. In a European network project (<http://www.safonetwork.org>) it was concluded that, in most European countries, there was a major need for educated competent advisors, especially veterinarians, to fulfil the needs of organic livestock farming in accordance with the organic principles and emphasising e.g. outdoor stay, integration of different enterprises into one diverse farming system and giving the animals opportunities to fulfil their natural needs and express their natural behaviour. Farmer to farmer advice, as well as common development of new knowledge based on the experience of the group members, creates knowledge which is relevant to their specific context.

The Danish Stable School concept

Farmer Field Schools (FFS) is a concept for farmers' learning, knowledge exchange and empowerment that has been widely used in various forms in developing countries. In Denmark, the concept was adopted and adjusted to Danish conditions in an action research and development project focusing on phasing out antibiotics from their herds through promotion of animal health and welfare. In this project, four Stable Schools were established and went through a one-year cycle with two visits at each of the five or six farms connected to each group. The facilitators, who were connected to the groups, were given the role of writing together with the host farmer, the meeting agenda, directing the meeting and writing the minutes to send to the group members after the meeting. The facilitator has a role of guiding the process and the meetings, and doing the practical work. The fact that facilitators were not given a role as the expert was crucial for the success to the process.

The Danish Stable Schools is one way of meeting farmer needs for development of their daily practice from inside, based on considerations and ownership of the farmers over the process.

Certain things distinguish the concept of Danish Stable Schools from the basic principles of animal health and welfare planning. The common goal of a Stable School is of crucial importance, and collects the group. No matter how different the farms, herds, and farmers are in one Stable School group, they still work towards the common goal and combine this common goal with the local goal of each farm. Another issue is the fact that the Danish Stable School builds on an idea of having an intense one-year cycle of group meetings, after which the group is dissolved and each farmer works 'on his/her own' until maybe linking up to a new group. The animal health and welfare planning is more a continuous process, and methods of forming groups where the level of intensity can go together with the wish to have a long-term continuous process must be identified.

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