

Research and education activities on disability and disabled people at the Virtual University in Nordic countries

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the practical implementations and possibilities of virtual university for research and education on disability and disabled people. The development of internet technology supports the practise of this mission. In the late 1990s the Finnish Network for the Research on Disability (<http://www.jyu.fi/~vamtutk/lomake.html>) and the Nordic Network on the Disability Research (<http://www.harec.lu.se/NNDR/index.html>) were founded. The members of these networks are mostly non-medical disability researchers and authorities in Nordic countries. With the help of internet technology these networks together are building the virtual university, where it is possible to study disability issues. For example the internet based network makes possible to give a study counselling on-line easily between Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). In these countries several disability organisations and universities are the members of the virtual university project. The development of virtual university and study programmes are coordinated by the board of Nordic Network on the Disability Research (<http://www.harec.lu.se/NNDR/members.html>). So far practical examples are the annual Nordic conference on disability research since 1997, the first doctoral course in 1999 and the publication called "Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research" (<http://www.harec.lu.se/NNDR/activities.html>) since 1999. Besides these activities all the information and advisory services are available via internet and mailinglist. (<http://www.jyu.fi/~vamtutk/tietopal.html> and <http://www.harec.lu.se/NNDR/maillinglist.html>). A long term goal is to wide this project from Nordic countries to other European countries.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the practical implementations and possibilities of virtual university for research and education on disability and disabled people. The development of internet technology supports the practise of this mission. In the late 1990s the Finnish Network for the Research on Disability and the Nordic Network on Disability Research were founded. These flexible organizations are ensuring the development and activities of the Nordic Virtual University. First we present the structure of the University. Second we shortly grasp the main theme of the Virtual University reasearch subject that is "disability organisations as social movements".

2. THE STRUCTURE OF NORDIC VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

The Finnish Network for the Research on Disability was founded in Jyväskylä 1996. The purpose of this network is to get together researchers, institutes and organisations on disability. The main task of the network is to promote the cooperation between disability researchers of different disciplines at the national level. Thus the network is organising scientific conferences and smaller meetings, informing about disability research projects and promoting international cooperation. A technical instrument of the network is The Foundation for Research on Disability, who provides internet and e-mail connections.

The Nordic Network on Disability Research were founded in Fredrikshavn 1997. The purpose and intention of this association is to promote and advance research and development in the field of disability, including creating opportunities for presentation and publication of such research. The association's area of activities and operations is the Nordic countries.

The members of these networks are mostly non-medical disability researchers and authorities in Nordic countries. So they mostly are representing psychology, social sciences and history. With the help of internet technology these networks together are building the virtual university, where it is possible to study disability issues. For example the internet based network makes possible to give a study counselling on-line easily between Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). In these countries several disability organisations (e.g. Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired and Finnish Association of the Mentally Retarded) and universities (e.g. University of Jyväskylä and University of Stockholm) are the members of the virtual university project. The development of virtual university and study programmes are coordinated by the board of Nordic Network on the Disability Research.

So far practical examples are the annual Nordic conference on disability research since 1997. The first conference was in Fredrikshavn, the second one was in Jyväskylä and the third one in Trondheim. This year's conference is in Malmö. Themes of the conferences have dealt with the quality of life and the challenges of the new millenium of disabled people. The first doctoral course was in 1999 and there is a publication called "Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research" (SJDR) since 1999. SJDR is published by Nordland Research Institute on behalf of Nordic network on Disability Research (NNDR), who, in addition to the journal, also organise yearly conferences. Members of NNDR receive the journal free of charge. At a conference in Fredrikshavn in 1997 a new network - Nordic Network on Disability Research - was established. One of the purposes of this network is to establish a journal in English about social research on disability: Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research. Its main purpose is to disseminate results from social research on disability. Social research is - in this context - including for example educational sociological, socio-psychological, historical, legal, economical, socio-medical research. Its defining characteristic is a focus on the relation between persons with disabilities and their environments in a broad sense. Although the ambition primarily is to encourage Scandinavian researchers to submit articles for publication, the Journal welcomes articles from all over the world.

The editorial board hopes that the Journal will stimulate researchers to consider the Journal as an appropriate arena for publishing their research, as well as teachers, students, professionals and disabled persons and their organisation to realise the worth of this channel for disseminating research.

The financial background of these activities is mostly coming from the Nordic Academy for Advanced Study (NorFA). NorFA is a supporting organisation of research education and Nordic Council of Ministers is liable for it. Other activities are the financing of doctoral courses and mobility scholarships, research networks etc. Other financial sources are member-universities and other associations.

Besides these activities all the information and advisory services are available via internet and mailinglist. A long term goal is to establish a permanent faculty on disability research and education and wide this project from Nordic countries to other European countries.

Figure 1 shows the current situation of virtual university that we have pointed out in this paper.

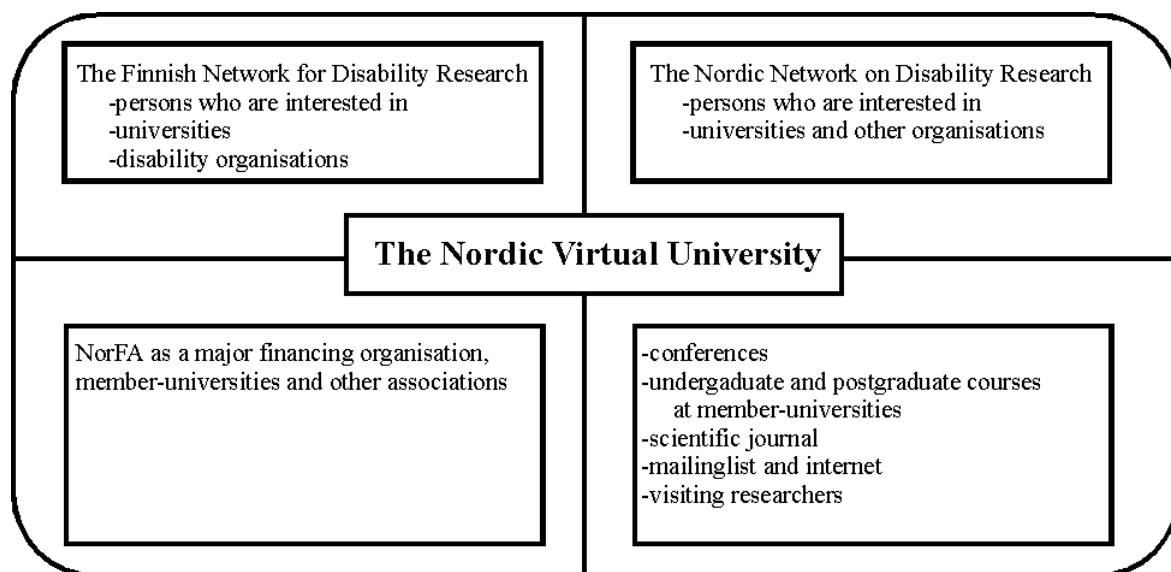


Figure 1. The network structure of the Nordic Virtual University.

3.THE SOFTWARE

For the e-mail and internet connections the software is as follows:

3.1 The Majordomo System:

Majordomo is a program which automates the management of Internet mailing lists. Commands are sent to Majordomo via electronic mail to handle all aspects of list maintenance. Once a list is set up, virtually all operations can be performed remotely by email, requiring no intervention upon the postmaster of the list site

Majordomo controls a list of addresses for some mail transport system (like sendmail or smail) to handle. *Majordomo itself performs no mail delivery* (though it has scripts to format and archive messages).

Here is a short list of some of the features of Majordomo:

- Supports various types of lists, including moderated
- All list management activities are handled by email, so list owners don't need access to Majordomo server machine
- Supports archival and remote retrieval of messages
- Supports digests
- Modular design - use only the features you need
- Written in Perl - easily customizable and expandable
- Includes support for FTPMAIL
- Supports confirmation of subscriptions, to protect against forged subscription requests
- List filters, based on header or body regular expressions

3.2 The Internet System

Here is a short list of the services are including (an example in Finland)

- Internet connection using a modem or ISDN (1 or 2 channels)
- Or, by GSM (cellular phone):
 - Internet services can be used with an Internet cellular phone (not WAP!) or with a normal cellular phone attached into a computer.
 - Radiolinja connection should work with our numbers 1079001, 1079003. and 0600-9-4003 (in Finland).
 - Sonera connection works only with number 4499001 and 0600-9-4003 (in Finland).
- Modem-, ISDN- or cell phone connection includes: routing of IP traffic using a dynamic IP-address with PPP- or SLIP-protocol, through the chosen telephone connection to customer's computer. Customer is only entitled to reroute the traffic locally inside their own organization.
- Another alternative is a fixed monthly charge, which allows using the number 4499001 without an additional charge (over normal phone charges).
- E-mail:
 - Pine- and Mutt- e-mail programs, and POP/IMAP- and SMTP- e-mail services on our server.
 - Option to use "*forename.surname@co.jyu.fi*" -type of e-mail address.
 - E-mail alias (mostly for businesses and societies), for example "*business@co.jyu.fi*".
 - Mailing lists
- Reading and posting into Usenet News
- WWW home page
- Using own CGI scripts on WWW pages
- FTP file transfer
- 10 megabytes of disk space on server

3.3 Additional services

- Additional hard disk space, according to separate contract or current prices

- Domain, for example “*www.business.fi*”
- Domain parking: you can reserve a domain name (including .net, .com, and .org -domains) and park it here for later use.
- Fixed connection: 2- or 4-wire connection, fixed copper, optic cable, radio or microwave links; also, ADSL is coming in the near future.
- Statistics: automatic ftp-, web-, etc. statistics.

4. THE RESEARCH SUBJECT OF VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

As we have mentioned earlier the research activity is in social sciences and so the main subject lately has been “The position of third sector in a service process of disabled people when the relations between welfare actors have changed during the 1990s”. The critical social study can be focused on a power analysis. The attempt is to address a power analysis to the situation, where disability organisations are representing the third sector and consequently they have a (political) relation to a public sector. There is a good reason to perceive service processes of disabled people as a reciprocal dependence and a power relation between authorities and clients. These two parties are searching some kind of balance as macro social changes are happening. Transitory balances can be named as figurations (van Krieken 1997) that are processes of bio-politics (Foucault 1988) in governing practices especially when our focus is disability services. To put it simply in service practices people’s biological and mental characters defining their social conditions.

Disability organisations work together with public organisations, but disability organizations’ work has contingent tendencies, because those unofficial social networks that they are involved are flexible to different situations or should be at least. Thus the flexible social network is an opposite to organisations of public welfare services. Flexible social networks can easily complement public services right now after the recession of the 1990s. Social networks are side by side or even alternative with a public sector. This tendency has changed a character of a welfare state from a state-run principle to an emphasizing of clients’ initiative potentiality and basically alternative services have increased. The relation between a public sector and surrounding social network is defined and re-defined all the time. That is why this relation is contingent and flexible. These features are including Elias’ (1978) view of processes that are based on people’s interdependence (power relations) and that’s why processes are more intentional than rational. In these processes some economical, political and military player always has a dominance, but it is only one figuration that is not a static situation. The power relation should be understood as a interdependence of macro and micro social processes that are changing the world (cf. The Giddensian structuration theory [Giddens 1984]).

The contemporary dominance of service processes for disabled people is compressed in governmentality. This Foucauldian (Foucault 1988; 1991) term represents the techniques of power and its practical form is above mentioned bio-politics in a truth production that is focused on subjectivity. In a case where the system’s outside disturbances are notified, the new bio-political techniques of power are developed in modern society. That means e.g. new or renewed medical diagnoses and new definitions of possibilities in social life with disabled people. The whole governmental system (public social services) in Nordic countries seems to be very predestined for disabled people. However the system as a whole is not so repressive as we are thinking about subjectivity. Foucault (1988) emphasized the meaning of self-techniques as one possibility of subjects to gain their goals in modern societies’ power techniques. I would say that these self-techniques are consist of system-oriented services practices, but also interdependence of different service organisations and people (clients and servants). All in all the final practices of services are the outcomes of complicated non-predictable processes.

5. CONCLUSION

The subject of this paper has been an example of the Nordic cooperation on non-medical disability issues. Today this development takes its early steps, but we believe that new technological advantages make also social issues of disability research and education easier to reach. The social dimension of our well-being to combined new technology is the only way to improve humanity.

6. REFERENCES

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- Nordic Network on Disability Research: <http://www.harec.lu.se/NNDR/members.html>
- NorFA: <http://www.norfa.no>