7. THE CHALLENGE OF COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT

Problematizing Institutional Regimes – Proclaiming a Paradigm Shift?

Adult education has often been perceived as a social practice that had the potential to change the world. The driver for promoting, organizing and teaching in adult education has then been informed by the vision of changing the world, and struggles inside adult education were seen as political struggles. Today it is rather the other way around – external societal changes often determine the need for adult learning. Although adult learning has gained much stronger attention and is viewed as more necessary on a societal level, the significance of the agency within adult education is becoming less obvious. In this situation it seems even more important to study adult education micro-practices and seek to trace their unrecognized potentials for societal change. Often micro-practices are doing something different from their immediate and declared functions. Critical research should reveal possibilities not normally recognized by the agents themselves, it cannot be developed by focussing on the explicit power relations. It seems easy to be critical on the level of intentions or by revealing hidden agendas in political discourses and documents. But I think a critical social science of learning and education should rather seek to discover the possible implications of everyday life practices and relevant alternatives within the horizon of individuals' and professionals' agency. In this sense a bottom-up orientation may have exemplary epistemological value.

This perspective underpins my interest in competence assessment and the bureaucratic procedures involved in establishing qualification frameworks – something which at first glance seems to be part of the general economic mainstreaming of continuing and adult education in service of employment and competitiveness. In particular, I am interested in exploring the technical challenges in the implementation of procedures for validation or the recognition of prior learning. On the one hand, it consists of relatively hidden or unnoticed decisions and bureaucratic initiatives on a general systems level – in the guise of being 'just technical'. And on the other hand, it is being practically applied and refined on the level of individual agents – in relation to guidance, admission, administration and fulfilling commitments to improve institutional inclusivity. I contend that a comprehensive policy for lifelong learning – which is a shared agenda all over the world – can hardly be implemented without these tools. In the next few years validation of prior learning will be part

of an overall EU strategy of open coordination. Understanding these changes and considering how, and for what ends, the tools of competence assessment and validation of prior learning can be developed is at the centre of the themes of power and possibility in this book. It is also worth studying for the theoretical challenges it raises: the practical process of validation entails a set of complex assumptions about the nature of the transformation of life experiences from one life situation to new ones. In this chapter I present a case to the reader of the importance of this topic.

The idea of Lifelong Learning entails a vision of every individual not only having access to formal and non-formal education and training throughout the lifetime but also making use of all the informal learning in everyday life. The driving reason in the contemporary policy interest in lifelong learning is to mobilize human resources and competences for economic competitiveness and an increasing skepticism among business people and bureaucrats towards the formal education and training system. This has led to a new interest in workplace learning and an increasing emphasis on learning in everyday life (Rubenson, 1996; Salling Olesen, 2008).

On the policy level the thinking about lifelong learning has broadened to include not only education and training, but in principle a multitude of policies related to the organization of work, labor markets, community development and culture. Already in 2001 the theme of ESREA's triennial research conference had the theme of the *Wider benefits of learning*, with the aim of widening the discussion of adult and lifelong learning beyond its previous horizon which was increasingly employment and economy (ESREA, 2002). This was an early anticipation of a more integrative approach which has been gaining ground, seeing learning as an integrated dimension of societal and cultural processes in general, and seeking to highlight and support the learning dimensions of policies in key areas such as gender equality, health promotion, agricultural reform etc. This thinking has been transmitted into international adult learning promotion, e.g. UNESCO (2016). Integration of policy domains is seen both as a necessary and productive way to increase learning resources by developing learning policies for those other important life spheres.

Diverse as they are, these ideas can only be formulated in rather abstract policy notions like the learning society, learning cities etc. which nevertheless point to a more holistic view of learning. Access to educational resources – the agenda of *Education For All* (UNESCO & United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015) – is still relevant and important for large parts of the world in the Global South – but it is increasingly being questioned if the institutions and forms of knowledge can just be transferred from “western culture” or the Global North (Preece, 2009; Torres, 1996). And in the developed capitalist countries there is also a new trend: instead of just continuing a process of expanding formal education and specialized knowledge institutions a more comprehensive thinking of learning and a more open attitude to informal learning is emerging. This complex and asynchronous historical transformation may either lead to a decline of the role of formal education and training and knowledge institutions, or to radical reforms, which will inevitably recognize the importance of informal learning in different life

spheres. My idea is that micro-practices are not only symptomatic, but may also be a key to a reform process and new ways of thinking. Such new ways of thinking can hardly be promoted by a top-down regulation. In this chapter my focus is on the challenge of developing a language which is able to embrace learning in formal education and other institutions and life world contexts in which informal learning is taking place.

REGIMES OF COMPETENCE RECOGNITION

In the developed capitalist world we can see two dominant regimes of recognition each with their own specific criteria for recognizing competence: work/life competence applied by business and industry; and scholastic assessment of knowledge and intellectual skills applied by formal education institutions.

Recognition by business and industry usually operates from a fairly basic instrumental perspective focused on the perceived ability of the subject to function in a work situation. Staff selection procedures and Human Resource Development (HRD) functions attempt to assess competences in relation to a specific job. Simple in principle, but complicated in practice. It could be argued that some of the short-sighted practices in industry (hire-and-fire) are simply the result of the real complexity in assessing staff competences combined with relatively low on-the-job-training costs which enables a trial-and-error approach to recruitment. Vice versa HRD policies with high internal investments and/or long cycles in employment are benefitting from a huge adaptability of work force which is often not recognized in theory. Employees learn and adapt more than one can predict or direct. But the underlying rationale, even with these variations, in business is still orientated to employability and specific job relevant competence. During recent decades, and with great variation, internal labor market adaptation and competence development have come to play a more significant role – businesses increasingly make their own “bilan de competence” (competence accounting).

Unlike this, recognition of learning in the educational system is based on the documented completion of formal courses. This mode of recognition validates specific knowledge and skills, and presumes a linear learning structure in which each element stands on the shoulders of the previous element. In recent decades this rationale has been modified in at least two ways, Educational systems are no longer so clearly linear. First, training and vocational education has developed institutional systems in their own right in many countries. Second, a mix of liberal culture and the need to mobilize new groups of students have led to a range of new admission and access pathways to higher education and continuing professional education. It is my impression however that validation of prior learning is still granted very much *in spite of the main educational structures*, and is driven mainly by counsellors and liberal educationalists, who deal with a minority of students. And last, and not least, the admission criteria are assessing equivalence of prior learning to the traditional core *curriculum* of the education in question, or the perceived potential to fulfil this

criterion within the education program. It is not an assessment of some alternative competences that might be valued socially or professionally.

With some variations these two regimes of recognition are basically disjointed, and rather narrow-minded. The introduction of competence assessment does not change that. Tools for assessment at the individual level have been introduced in European countries under slightly different headings – such as “Validation/Recognition of Prior Learning”, “competence assessment”, “learning portfolios”, the Danish “realkompetencevurdering”, the French “bilan de compétence”, etc. (Alessandrini, 2016; Duvekot, Coughland, & Aagaard, 2017; Salling Olesen, 2018). The assessment criteria used in these various examples vary considerably and the functions are also different. In some cases, they are just used for recruitment or for determining learning needs in relation to specific jobs. But mostly they are used to enable new pathways into formal education. Rapid changes in technology, the division of labor, and the structure of the labor market combined with cultural detraditionalization have made traditional career ladders within occupations, industries and institutions obsolete or less accessible, and formal educational qualifications are expected and seen as ‘standard’. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a basis for access to formal education can be seen as a more systematic way of facilitating and accelerating career shifts and developments.

Often these interventions thereby consolidate the recognition regimes of formal education. Never the less these interventions can be seen as beginning to fragment. In order to meet the ambitions of a lifelong learning policy that integrates formal education and informal learning it is necessary to develop tools and procedures which are relatively independent both of traditional academic and scholastic curricula on the one hand and labor market skills requirements on the other hand – while it must at the same time make the description of competences understandable in both contexts. The real challenge – which is also the opportunity – is that the need to overcome the incompatibility of these “regimes of recognition” – will enable a critical reflection of their different rationales and their limitations. This may open a real chance to move from an *adaptation measure* based on the categorization of individuals by two rather static and narrow set of criteria to an assessment which discovers and appreciates the potential and hidden capacities of individuals.

PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION AND MOTIVES FOR LEARNING

These implications in the shift from ‘access to education’ to ‘lifelong learning’ have not always been grasped clearly. Most policies aim at coupling the existing regimes of recognition without integrating them and provide a bureaucratic framework that can fence the conflicts between the two main regimes outlined above through qualification frameworks.

To unfold the transformative potential in the validation and recognition procedures requires new thinking and a new language, which adopt the perspective of the individual subject and see validation and recognition not only as necessary

adaptation measures but as potential tools for autonomous self-evaluation and windows to alternative careers and new life perspectives.

The micro-practices of recognition may illuminate the sutures in the repair work, from which a different approach might arise.

The motives for learning are deeply seated in the entire life situation of each individual, and dependent on collective social and cultural pathways. Interests in education and training are widely differentiated in strength as well as direction. The wide difference in motivation and potential for learning is symptomatically clear in sociological analysis of participation in formal and non-formal continuing education. But much of the variation may also be less visible, connected as it is with people's life experience, lifestyle and identity, and not primarily related to education and training. Under these political and social circumstances, the increasing appeal for learning may be perceived as a promise for new opportunities for some, for others a stressful attack on one's sense of identity, and for others again just something quite irrelevant.

I present some cases which illustrate the potential role of competence assessment in different types of learning. Three Danish doctoral research projects have addressed the mechanisms of individual competence assessment (IKV) of applicants to professional bachelor education within a number of areas (teaching, preschool pedagogy, nursing, physiotherapy, construction) (Mellon, 2018; Salling Olesen, Aagaard, & Husted, 2017). These professions were previously based on practice-oriented education and training with a close connection to the field of practice. In recent years entering these fields requires a professional BA and the standard gateway to this is through the final stage of formal education and state exams. However, an access pathway exists for people who have a lower formal school education and then some kind of non-academic professional education, called an IKV (Individual Competence Assessment). The specific admission procedure evaluates whether students' individual background can compensate for the absence of formal school qualifications. The assessment procedure involves an evaluation of these students' "messy" careers, and the education program is expected to integrate this relatively small group of "deviant" students. Our research investigated these students' career shift through a life history approach which explored their life experiences and their prior education, their decisions for a career shift, their experiences of the education for a new profession. We focused on the students' subjective experience of their identity process in which knowledge and skills were reconfigured and gained new cognitive as well as emotional meaning, and also paid particular attention to how the students make use of their non-academic experiences and skills, which can in some cases be seen as resources in the education and later in the profession (Mellon, 2018; Salling Olesen, Aagaard, & Husted, 2017). A wider purpose of this research is to problematize the adequacy of the "scholastic turn" in professional education by investigating carefully how learning takes place when formal schooling, informal learning and identity formation are interwoven. We see in this research examples of the complex development of (new) competences on the base of life experiences –

empathy, social and organisational skills, self-reflection – and in this way the study is a contribution to a general theory of learning.

Whereas the admission to professional educations on the basis of untraditional trajectories represents a case of validation within the recognition regime of formal higher education I would like to sketch out another, quite different direction through a discussion of the possibilities of using validation procedures of prior learning within the labor market of skilled and unskilled work. The Danish trade union *3F* has launched the idea that each worker should have the right for a “competence development plan” or more plainly an “education plan”, based on a “real competence assessment”. The union’s members are mainly unskilled workers and some groups of highly skilled workers in manufacturing industry, construction, food processing, and transportation who are among those who are most vulnerable to economic and technologically driven structural changes, most often in the guise of globalization. These workers have very diverse relations to education and training (Kondrup, 2013). The necessity of strengthening the workers individually and collectively in a risky labor market with increasing competence requirements presents a challenge to the trade union. There are already quite numerous – and to some extent not fully exploited – opportunities for continuing education for these workers. But the problem seems to be the fact that they are not based on employees’ interests and motivations apart from those which are direct and narrow preconditions for their employment. The union launched the demand that every worker should have access to a competence assessment, and guidance helping him/her to consider possible training and education opportunities, future employment outlook, potential career shifts in the light of his/her life situation and visions for future life.

The idea was that a competence assessment and “education plan” would on the one hand strengthen workers’ self-recognition of their own capacities. On the other hand, it should raise workers’ awareness of opportunities immediately or at a later stage. Such a procedure would have to combine individual and collective rights for competence assessment with guidance and proactive provision of relevant education and training related to *subjectively relevant* career developments. For the moment there are individual rights but they are limited to adopting a full apprenticeship on unfavorable terms. The alternatives are mostly narrowly instrumental – and declining.

The challenge already appears in the policy discourse: The union argues for an education and training plan, well aware that many members are already ambivalent to this education, and decline to foreground the notion of competence, which appeals to workers’ self-consciousness grounded in actual possession of competences.

INVENTION OF A NEW LANGUAGE OF COMPETENCE

A language for validation of prior learning – and in a wider sense for linking different arenas of learning – must not be confined within one of the existing regimes

of recognition, but must on the other hand be able to integrate and reformulate the concerns which are their core rationales. In this context the challenge is not a language issue in a narrow sense, it is a *discourse issue*. A discourse depends on language use which is closely interwoven with and reflects societal practices and realities that cannot be made disappear by inventing a new terminology. This means that the development of a new language based on the competence notion must be developed through processes in the societal relations and institutional contexts. Such new ways of thinking can hardly be promoted top-down, by defining a new language of regulation. Validation of prior learning can be useful if it enables a dynamic practice from below.

Norwegian and Danish VPL initiatives have selected the term “competence”, as can be seen from the terms of “realkompetanse/realkompetence”. This concept has been launched by economists – first in the OECD – as an element in an overall reconfiguration of the evaluation and description of education. The concept of competence was picked from social psychology, and transferred to organization and management theory about work organizations. It was the intention to grasp the relation between the objective practical functions, in which people are supposed to apply their capabilities, and the psychological generic nature of learning these capabilities.

Competence has been promoted as the standard tool in order to describe all educational and training arrangements to outcome (target) descriptions instead of input (curriculum) descriptions. The purpose was to enable measurement and comparison of the efficiency of education. The notion of competence offers a new and more holistic view of human capabilities, which is in line with lifelong learning, rethinking the relation between education, training and learning in everyday life. In the meantime, the new terminology is also used as a governance tool *within the educational systems*, and more widely as a mental priming, preparing for a more market driven management. The use of the terms of competence in the European and national qualification frameworks and in governance documents is until now mainly a paper exercise. The objective of enabling more flexible cross-national comparison is obviously obtained on the surface, at least as far as institutional education and learning is concerned, by using more standardized vocabularies, but the connection to underlying realities is very loose.

I contend that a language for validation can be based on the notion of competence, but it will have to be reinterpreted. In the first place this will be a great challenge for formal education and training: a deeper reconfiguration of educational practices in line with the outcome description and the notion of competence. Education and training is still mainly structured around disciplinary knowledge and prescriptive approaches to professional practice, making little or no use of students’/participants’ experiences and insights from previous learning in other spheres of life.

The main understanding of competencies in everyday language is actually related to work. But it has a broader meaning than the narrow and one-dimensional job-oriented view of work qualifications, such as is used in, for example, labour market

statistics. When economists imported a concept from social psychology it was not only in order to educate the bureaucracies in formal education systems, they also intended to provide a framework for a new and more dynamic perception of human resources in business.

In the 1950s and 1960s both industrial sociology and management realized that industrial one-to-one-qualification framework was insufficient to identify the qualification needs – partly because they changed rapidly, partly because they changed qualitatively so that different types of non-specific, processual skills became essential. In the following years discussions were running both in business, among researchers and politicians about “soft qualification”, “generic skills”, “Schlüsselqualifikation” etc. OECD launched a project to identify the generic factor(s) under the headline of *key competence*, Definition and Selection of Competencies, DeSeCo (Rychen & Salganik, 2001).

However, this project seems more or less resigned from its original ambitions, and resulted in the bureaucratic use of the vocabulary in a seemingly general matrix of all people related to formal education and training.

In Denmark the agency for Labour Market training supported a large R&D-project which should draw up those new trends of general/generic qualifications that could hardly be conceived within a narrow job-related training, but were important for this segment of the work force. In this project we tried to define a concept of general qualification which was based in life experience and mediated the subjective (prior) learning and the actual labor market skills requirements (Nicoll & Olesen, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2013).

The original competence concept acknowledges the subjective nature of competencies. This means that the assessment of competence must in principle include individual experiences and assessment of subjective dynamics of the individual. Taken to its limits this is both impracticable and in opposition to the current function of prior learning validation as a legal basis for access to education and training, and in a few cases to certain jobs or work licenses.

One of the experts who were engaged in the project describes the problem in the following way: “such scientific plans have often failed in psychology, however. The underlying multilevel models can be logically reconstructed, but not validated psychologically. The different degrees of abstraction mean, therefore, a fundamental asymmetry in competence research – high abstraction: intellectually brilliant, pragmatically hopeless; low abstraction: pragmatically useful, intellectually unsatisfactory” (Franz Weinert, in Rychen & Salganik, 2001, p. 52). I think that Weinert’s difficulty was connected with the built-in challenge for the development of a “general equivalent” of human capability. And this difficulty is also the reason that the break-up in dominant regimes of recognition opens a window for new negotiations of competence, knowledge and power. I shall try to explain.

The validation procedure attempts to interpret and assess the potential for transforming specific individual life experiences into a capability of changing perspective in a new professional context, or in relation to the type of study which is

the aim of the individual. A suitable language must be able to describe such individual transformative potential. A language which is sensitive to subjective diversity could only be established by an elaboration of a more dynamic concept of competence. The ambition to establish a canon of generic skills that could be measured/assessed for each individual, and held against criteria of recognition related to one or the other job or a scholastic curriculum can – as Weinert remarks – not be carried out in a psychologically valid way. Competencies are established in processes of subjective engagement which are individual and situated – they may be gendered, class based etc. – but always mediated in individual experience. Their “transferability” represents the cognitive and emotional work of the individual subject which has the nature of learning, detachment and discovery of *something specific*.

I do not think there is a theoretical solution to the gap between logical output categories and psychologically valid subjective transformation. But there is a task for theoretical and empirical research as well as the accumulation of practical experiences from conducting validation procedures in practice. I tried with my two examples to illustrate that such categorization involves a contextualization of capabilities in relation to societal practice. This contextualization involves something more than abstract cognitive knowledge, it involves also the subjective significance of these practices. It is difficult to specify theoretically the “non-cognitive” psychosocial prerequisites (Salling Olesen, 2016).

In order to become a useful tool also for the legal/certifying part of validation it will have to enable description of *patterns of transformation* – cognitive and emotional in relation to careers and experiential trajectories – that are (for the time being, in the context) socially acknowledged *in practice* – this means that the language will emerge from the struggles within the practice contexts – i.e. matters of professional domains, the relations between professionals and clients, industrial relations and eventually of politics. This is the real societal space of competence recognition, in which the questions of ‘power and possibility’ is grounded, whether it operates with the term competence or not, and, I have presented a broader theoretical and diagnostic discussion of the questions in Salling Olesen (2013) to illuminate different ways of using the notion of competence and the connotations with which a competence discourse is perceived.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of Prior Learning and Assessment of Competences are tools for the reshaping of adult learning from above, under the heading of competence development. But the competence requirements are contradictory, and these tools might also be shaped to enable individual and collective empowerment of learners, recognizing their own capacities and discovering new possibilities for learning and career. How they will actually work depends among other factors on the way of conceptualizing competences in the micro-practices in adult and continuing education. The task of critical research could be to follow the micro-practices of

validation of prior learning carefully, support assessment procedures which enable the discovery and reflection of learners'/workers' resources and possible life prospects, and conceptualize the recognition as a collective effort to make visible "the potential of people" for individuals. In a time where globalization and increasing precariousness really requires defensive actions it is extremely important also to create conceptions of worker autonomy which are based in subjective experience and the actual lives and careers of people, forming the minimal background for a self-conscious worker identity.

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