

Assessment of unskilled¹ adults' prior learning – fair to whom?

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Abstract

As in many other countries, Danish adult education policy focuses on how to encourage adults for education; the most important and challenging group of adults being those with few or no formal qualifications. Assessment of prior learning (APL) is perceived as an important tool for motivating adults for education and training. The most important part of the adults' prior learning has been obtained outside the formal school system, typically consisting of their work experiences.

This paper discusses research that examined the meeting between on the one hand the adults' prior learning and on the other the school system and curricular standards. Applying a theoretical frame that includes concepts of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the development from novice to expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), and Bernstein's distinction between horizontal and vertical learning, the paper gives an account of the students' development in relation to assessment of their prior learning. The study includes a number of VET-programs. The paper focuses on two of them: Social and health care and childcare assistant. It addresses questions of what is a fair APL, perceived in relation to both the adults' knowing in practice and the formal qualification standards, formulated in the learning outcome descriptions of the programs.

Introduction

In 2001 Denmark established an alternative educational route for adults based on credit transfer of the adult learners' prior learning and work experience. In the alternative route adults can complete qualifications in a shorter time than in the ordinary route. The idea is that combinations of work experience, life maturity and theoretical studies enable the adult students to obtain qualifications equivalent to the qualifications in the ordinary course, however in a shorter time. The legitimization of the reduced time for completion is that the adults' work and life experiences are recognized and integrated into the courses. Therefore the courses should be based on assessment of the adults' prior learning and an experienced-based pedagogy should be adopted.

Assessment of prior learning (APL) and experienced-based pedagogy are central tools in a current project: "From unskilled worker to skilled worker in record time". The project runs for two years (July 2012 - August, 2014) and includes the VET-programs: Catering assistant, hairdresser, service assistant (i.e. cleaner), clerical assistant, social- and health care helper and childcare assistant. This paper focuses on the two programs: social- and health care helper (EQF-level 3) and childcare assistant (EQF-level 4).

The aim of the project is to develop and qualify the activities related to the process of assessing prior learning (APL)² (phase 1) and the activities related to the content, structure and pedagogy of the courses (phase 2).

¹ Unskilled means not having formal qualifications as skilled worker

The project includes an action research project. The research project combines studying practice in phase 1 and 2 with supporting the development of practice in the two phases. Thus the researchers will regularly present their results in seminars for the participating VET colleges in order to inspire for further development.(Author, 2013)

This paper focuses on the preliminary research results in relation to APL.

Literature review

In the anthology “Re-theorising the Recognition of Prior Learning”, the articles represent a broad scope of issues related to APL that are relevant in relation to this paper, e.g. the meeting between the learner’s practical experiences and the knowledge specifications in the curricula of particular programs, the criteria for assessing prior learning and the significance of situated knowledge in relation to APL (Andersson & Harris, 2006).

APL is well-developed in the Nordic countries; however mostly within VET, the tendency being that within further education the APL is used for providing access to further education whereas in VET APL is also a tool for credit transfer and reduction of study time (EVA, 2010 a). The focus in this paper is on credit transfer and reduction of study time.

The alternative adult education system with a focus on APL and experienced-based pedagogy reflects research-based results about formally unskilled adults’ motivation for learning and learning intentions. The results show that the adults emphasize that education should not only be relevant to the adults’ working life but also transferable into their daily work practice (Kyndt et al, 2013, a). Another study shows that recognition of prior learning and accreditation of prior learning play a decisive role in motivating for learning and matching the individual learner’s perception of his/her competences to career plans (Pegg 2013). These studies raise the central questions in relation to the project “From unskilled worker to skilled worker in record time”: is the assessment of the adults’ prior learning fair in the sense that the adult learners actually feel acknowledged for their prior learning? And do the adult learners perceive coherence between the course and their work life?

These questions are treated in another article in which it says: *‘Relevant is the key word’* (Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 453). The article argues that APL might be tied more to the involved learners’ perception of relevance than to the actual knowledge, skills and competences in the program. The issue of relevance is central, as the purpose of APL is to secure a fair recognition of the students’ competence. One of the main challenges is how the APL fairly balances the adults’ real competences and the learning outcome descriptions of the programs (EVA 2010, b). The adults’ experiences and competences are context dependent, related to specific job functions in specific enterprises. The national learning outcome descriptions of the VET-

² Recognition of prior learning (RPL) signifies that the students should not only be assessed but also recognized for their competences. In this paper the understanding is that APL is based on RPL: you recognize the adults’ prior learning and assess the value of the learning in relation to the formal qualification standards.

programs reflect the qualifications needed across the various jobs within the current trade or industry.

Research shows that the type of knowledge and the disciplinary context of the program influence APL, as well as the persons involved in planning and performing the assessment (Cooper & Harris, 2013). Likewise the preliminary results of the research project show clear distinctions between APL in the commercial programs respectively and APL in the technical and social and health care programs. The commercial programs strongly focus on book-learning, and the adults' prior learning is measured against the book-learning standards in the curricula. In the technical and social and health care programs the focus is both on the practical tasks and on book-learning. The consequence is that in the commercial program APL is a written test and interview, whereas in the technical and social and health care programs APL combines the students' practical performances with interviews.

The significance of the type of knowledge and the disciplinary context has inspired for highlighting three factors in this paper. *The first factor concerns the meeting between different forms of knowledge.* It is the meeting or perhaps even clash between procedural and declarative knowledge; the students carry procedural knowledge or knowing how from practice, whereas school-based education acknowledges declarative knowledge, knowing that. The learning outcome discourse, which currently dominates European educational policy, has somewhat changed the focus from declarative to procedural knowledge; however this shift might not yet have been totally adopted into the schools. Another way of conceptualizing the distinction is to adopt the Bernstein categories "horizontal discourse" which is connected to local and informal everyday life and "vertical discourse" which refers to general, formal, and codified practice (Bernstein, 1999). APL is about recognizing the degree of relevance of locally obtained experiences.

The second factor concerns the context of APL. According to Danish research on APL it is difficult to document and assess competences in another context - typically a school setting - than the context in which the competences have been developed, (typically a work place) (Nistrup, 2010). As competences are tied to specific situations, one argument is that APL only gives a fair impression of the student's prior learning, when the student is allowed to demonstrate his or her competence in these specific situations. However, another argument is that APL is about testing locally developed competences in new situations in order to state whether the persons' competences comply with the qualifications required to work within the entire trade or industry.

The third factor concerns the persons involved in the APL, including the persons accomplishing the recognition - typically guidance counselors or teachers - and the students who want their competences recognized and accredited. The Danish study mentioned above showed that the students are worried about reducing their study time too much as a result of the APL, partly due to the course structure: the students will have to complete the courses in modules and thereby lose the social security of belonging to a school class, and partly because the students fear that they will not learn enough (ibid). In another study, it was concluded that low skilled workers primarily relate learning to formal learning settings (Kyndt et al., 2013, b) The

consequence of this may be that low skilled students do not perceive their work-based competences to be valuable and creditable.

Research method

The research question is: How does the process of APL influence the adult students' perceptions of their competences and their needs for education and training?

The assumption is that due to the hegemony of school-based education and academic learning over practice-based learning and experiences, the students will gradually experience a loss of expertise and devalue their experiences and competences as they are being adopted into the school community of practice.

The theoretical frame includes Jeanne Lave and Etienne Wenger's theory about the learning and socializing processes in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). According to this theory, the newcomer in a community of practice gradually moves from being a peripheral member to becoming a full member of the community of practice by imitating the old timers' way of performing in the community and accomplishing more and more complicated tasks. The setting for this socializing process is normally a workplace where the newcomers are employees or trainees. In the current case the adult students are assessed by teachers in a VET college, where they are going to qualify for a skilled position after the assessment of their prior learning; the students are not to become teachers like the old timers. However, the theoretical framework is useful for understanding the need for belonging and being accepted in a community of practice.

Furthermore the theory about the development from novice to expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986) is used to discuss the distinction between intuitive tacit and context dependent knowledge and the explicit context independent knowledge. Although the adults do not have the formal qualification as skilled worker, they perceive themselves to be expert practitioners within their fields when they arrive at the school for the APL. The assumption is that the expertise of the intuitive thinking expert is challenged in the encounter with the school community of practice that demands the experts be able to formulate their tacit and intuitive knowledge. This demand seriously questions the students' perception of themselves as experts: through APL the students gradually regress to the novice level.

Data

In the programs for social and health care helper and child care assistant, the process of APL combines course activities with interviews with the students. The APL takes place at a VET college that offers APL as well as courses that qualify both for social and health care helpers and childcare assistants. In order to provide a frequent enrollment and a rentable number of students, the assessment course and interviews of both types of students (social and care helper and childcare assistant) take place in the same classroom. The assessment takes five days for social and health care helpers and 10 days for childcare assistants, due to the fact that the childcare assistant program includes more competences and competences at a higher level than the program for social and health care helper.

The paper is based on the following empirical data:³

1. Observations of the APL process (duration two hours each time) for one group of students. The groups typically consist of 10-15 students. The observations focus on how the teachers support the students to relate and/or demonstrate their skills and competences.
2. Interviews with three teachers who assess the students: The purpose is to learn about the teachers' arguments for the assessment procedures and about how the teachers estimate the value of the students' prior learning.
3. Interviews with three students. The purpose is to learn about the students' perceptions of the assessment procedure and about how the assessment influences the students' motivation for education and training.

Findings and discussion

APL in this VET college for the social- and health care and child care programs takes place in one of the college classrooms, which has been equipped with artifacts from childcare institutions and old people's homes. The teachers are concerned that the students should feel welcome and that they from the first day should experience school as a friendly place with no references to their earlier and often more traditional experiences with school.

Based on the observations, the APL course can be divided into three types of activities: 1. The students describe a typical day in their workplace, 2. The students demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competences and 3. The students are interviewed by the teachers about their experiences and competences. Activities 2 and 3 intertwine.

The students describe a typical day in their workplace

In the teacher interviews the teachers emphasize that they plan a comfortable start for the students by asking the students to draw the rooms of their respective workplaces on a sheet of paper. The purpose is that the students should talk about how they accomplish tasks in their workplace on a typical day.

After a couple of hours the teachers organize groups of 3-4 students and one teacher. The students have placed their drawings on the table, and the drawings serve as a kind of anchor for their presentation and for their workplace identity; the students take turns telling about their typical day. The notes from the observation of the first day show that the benefit of this is that the students interchange experiences from their workplaces. In that way they learn about each other and gather inspiration in relation to their own job.

The teachers take notes from the students' narratives and occasionally ask the individual student to commit herself for a demonstration of a specific task in one of the upcoming days.

³ The data collection for the entire project is in progress and will include observations of three groups of students and interviews with 15 students. The three students referred to in this paper was part of the first data collection. In the light of the current data collections these three students seem to represent the scope of students.

On the first day the teacher mainly sticks to questions about the students' performances in their workplaces, showing curiosity towards their experiences and competences. This makes the students feel that they contribute with interesting information and in general they begin to relax.

In a theoretical perspective the students feel accepted for the community of practice in their workplace and for the expertise that they have developed there. The interviews with the students show that it is important for them to be acknowledged for their expertise. This is partly due to the insecurity they experience having been put in new surroundings and partly due to the fact that the course "From unskilled worker to skilled worker in record time" indicates that the students' former experiences are valuable. Social and health care helper student A says: *I think that I know all the necessary things to perform in the old peoples' home where I work.* She actually feels so confident about her skills that she could teach the other students the right way to perform: *I feel like advising the other students when I can hear that they do something wrong in their workplaces.*

The students demonstrate their knowledge skills and competences

Due to the fact that the professions include much interaction with children, patients or residents, demonstration of a task often takes place as a role play, in which some of the fellow students participate e.g. as children in a kindergarten, residents in an old people's home, or colleagues in one of the workplaces. The activity includes a discussion of the task or situation that has been demonstrated. When the demonstration is organized as a role play the teachers participate as 'actors'. The teachers also lead the discussion afterwards.

The role play is perceived as a challenge for the students for several reasons: many of them do not like to act; role play does not live up to their expectations about learning in a school (even though they often have bad experiences from school); and most importantly, role play is a simulated situation which does not entirely give credit to their work experiences.

The childcare assistant student says: *I do not vote for this kind of learning where you play roles. It is just not me. It is more than hard for me just to be me, which makes it difficult to play four years old Belinda. Role play is not an opportunity to show your daily working life; the teachers cannot see my closeness with the children.*

Role play puts a distance to the students' work life exemplified by social and health care helper B, who talks about the practical issues in relation to simulation: *When we do not have the tools and aids we use at work we simulate using them. Instead of an ostomy pouch we will use a plastic bag. However if someone has not worked with ostomy pouches they cannot really see how you use them.* The students thus feel that in simulations they cannot demonstrate skills and competences satisfactorily. Social and health care helper student A says: *I had expected that they would visit me in the old peoples' home and observe me performing there. At school you are a little nervous; I cannot demonstrate everything. I had to pull the teacher aside to tell her what I really know.* This corresponds to the experiences that social and health care helper student B has had: *It would be perfect if you could be tested in real life situations; here you have to play which may make you shy.*

The students gradually acknowledge that they have to be able to formulate their competences in order that they are recognized: *I had to pull the teacher aside to tell her what I really know.* The demand for formulation divides the students into two groups: the students who are able to narrate their skills and competences and the students who are not skilled narrators. Social and health care helper student B says: *Personally I think that they (the teachers) can figure out my competences; however I am also the kind of person, who opens my mouth and argues. For others something might be lost because they cannot express themselves.*

Formulation is the central tool in the recognition and assessment of prior learning, and the students' initial experiences of being experts are challenged when they sense that they will need to be able to formulate their competences. The interviews show that the students feel as novices when it comes to formulations, and their ideas about school as an academic community of practice are confirmed.

This becomes more evident as the teacher asks questions in relation to the role play. The teachers' questions can be divided into what/how or why questions. The what/how questions bring out the students' performance and includes factual questions, the why questions prompt the students' reflection on their performance.

An example from the observation: A child care student has brought along three dish towels, which she places on the floor. On the first dish towel she spreads flour, on the second oatmeal and on the third cornflakes. She asks the students and the teachers to take off their shoes and walk from dish towel to dish towel sensing the feeling underneath their feet. One of the teachers decides to play an unwilling child who does not want to participate. The student chooses to let this "child" observe what the other "children" do.

One of the teachers asks the student factual questions: Who has invented this activity? How many children participate in this normally? The teacher also checks on the student's ability to adapt to unexpected events or challenges: What do you do, if a child does not want to participate in the activity?

The teacher continues with more complex questions: Why do you go through this activity with the children? Why is this activity beneficial for the development of the children's senses? Do you know of any other means to train and develop the children's senses?

The student is able to answer the first group of questions, which are all closely tied to the specific activity. However it is hard for the student to answer the second type of questions; she is not able to reflect on her actions neither to connect the concrete actions to theory about the development of children's senses. The student is not able to perceive the activity as an example of stimulating children's senses. Thus the student is challenged not only because it is difficult for her to verbalize her performance but also because she represents a horizontal discourse, which means that she is not able to connect segments to other segments or to overall principles. She lacks the ability of coherent, systematic thinking that characterizes the vertical discourse.

The students are interviewed by the teachers about their experiences and competences

Based on the students' demonstrations in the classroom the teachers interview the students individually. The purpose of the interview is that the teacher modifies her impression of the student's competences in order to accomplish the APL, i.e. assessing what the student needs to train and know in order to obtain the qualification as a skilled worker.

Many of the teachers have had jobs as child care assistants or social and health care helpers, and they are worried that they will base the APL too much on their tacit knowledge. So in order to be fair in their assessments they base the assessment on the formulations in the national learning outcome descriptions (LO's) for the programs.

The use of LO's should do fair justice to the students' experiences and competences, as the LO's describe what the students should be able to accomplish as skilled workers. The LO's do not only emphasize the ability to perform but also the ability to reflect on performance. Through reflection the students demonstrate that they can generalize their specific experiences into general knowledge about e.g. sensory-motor development, hygiene or nutrition (from the horizontal to the vertical discourse).

In order to check the students' ability to generalize their workplace-based experiences into general knowledge, the teachers apply two types of questions. They ask students questions concerning their reflection on their procedural knowledge or knowing-in-action and they ask questions about the students' declarative knowledge such as: Which are the basic hygienic rules? Which are the main steps in children's sensor-motor development?

The assessment of the students' prior learning is thus based on the students' ability for abstract thinking: to what extent are the students able to understand that the tasks they accomplish at work are examples of principles and theories?

The observations of APL and the interviews with the teachers and the students show that the process of APL changes the student from *an expert into a novice in the sense that as adult workers they felt as experts within their fields; however as students they feel that their expertise put at a trial because they have to explicate and reflect on their practical performance*. Gradually the students acknowledge the limitations of their competences and from being a rather self-confident professional practitioner (Schön 1983) they develop into a newcomer in the school community of practice. The interviews show that eventually the students feel that they know far too little.

The social and health care student A, who was very confident about her competences, expresses in the interview that she learns a lot that she can use in her job. However she focuses on knowledge or advices that are closely linked to her particular job (horizontal discourse): *I have learned that when I enter one of the client's rooms I have to be somewhat careful and tranquil by drawing the curtains gently and give them some time to meet you*. One day this student does not turn up, and she never returns. The teachers do not know why and they cannot get into contact with her.

The social and health care helper student B says: *I have always performed rather well at school and this has motivated me for learning. I think that if you asked one of the*

others they might tell you that they learn from each other; however I have worked so many years within this profession that I perceive myself as a teacher for the others. I myself learn by our reflections after the demonstrations. The student loves learning and she feels at ease in a school community of practice. She is a good student, because she understands that the students should use their practical experiences as a launch pad for acquiring general knowledge. She has cracked the school code, and the result of the assessment of her prior learning is that she only needs a few weeks' training and education. She is very frustrated that she is not allowed into the whole course, and after she has completed her granted course weeks she keeps turning up at school occasionally to follow some of the lessons.

About the first days of APL the child care student says: *Every day I went home pondering whether I should stay or not.* However after a week she is gradually adapting to the school community of practice: *After the first week at APL I went to a staff meeting and I suddenly realized that I wanted to complete the qualification; I had learnt something which made me take a critical stand towards my colleagues whom I used to accept the way they were.* The student ends up saying: *Instead of all this (= recognition and assessment) so let me please complete the entire course. I want to learn the whole thing. From a financial point of view it is attractive to reduce the course; however I am here because I need knowledge... I have learnt that I need specific knowledge to argue for the things I want. I do not have to put up with anything!*

The student has been adopted into the school community of practice; she perceives herself as a peripheral participant who needs to learn a lot. She realizes that she is a novice in the school community and also in a way in her job. She distances herself from her former community of practice, becoming a critical observer of her colleagues.

Conclusion

The three students that have been analyzed in this paper illustrate three kinds of development in relation to APL:

One student is not able to adapt to the community of practice in the school; she accepts to learn something that is closely connected to accomplishing tasks in her job. She leaves the APL course and the reason might be that she fears to lose her perception of being an expert.

The second student is familiar with school and book learning; she is familiar with the school community of practice and she does not feel threatened; rather she enjoys having the possibility of reflecting on practice. She is frustrated that she is able to obtain the qualification in record time.

The third student is gradually accepting the school community of practice. The consequence is that she feels that she knows very little and that she has to distance herself from her workplace community of practice. She is satisfied that her course is not reduced.

The ordinary Danish VET programs are organized as dual programs in which the students alternate between school-based education and training and workplace-based training. The adult students in the course “From unskilled worker to skilled worker in record time” are automatically credited for the workplace-based training. However the study can contribute to the discussion of the value of practical experiences: are practical experiences fairly credited in educational programs? The study shows that the recognition and assessment of prior learning require that the students can verbalize their knowing in action and relate horizontal discourse to vertical discourse. Therefore the it is important to discuss whether the way of assessing prior learning is fair to students who have not have much if at all any academic training before. Is assessment of prior learning only fair to those who have cracked the school code?

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