
Per Andersson

The object of validation is prior learning, but participation in validation could also be seen as a learning process. Three dimensions of this learning process are identified: to learn what you know – that is to develop awareness of your prior learning; to learn what is required in a validation process; and to learn how to present your knowledge to get recognition. Validation is also discussed in terms of either a separate activity, or an intertwined part of a process of validation and new learning. It is argued that seeing validation as a learning process would help in the further development of practices of validation, but also of the theoretical understanding of these practices.

The concept and practices of validation have many facets. What is discussed in this paper, mainly in terms of validation, is often also called recognition, accreditation, or assessment – of prior learning. Thus, the individual's prior learning – what has been learnt before – is normally described as the object of validation; the knowledge or competence that a validation process is intended to make 'visible' and give recognition to.

And even if we are focussing on prior learning, the questions that this article starts from are: Could validation also be seen as a learning process in itself? Could a process that mainly is about prior learning also result in new learning? Could there even be a dual focus on prior and new learning?

Another starting point of the discussion is a broad perspective on what validation is, including many facets. Basically, processes that give recognition to the results of learning independent of when, where, and how learning took place are seen as possible expressions of the idea of validation. However, one limitation should be made: A specific character of validation is that learning and validation/assessment are separate in time and/or place. That is, assessment and/of learning that takes place within the same, educational context, for example a specific course, should not be seen as validation – such a broad definition would include even all assessment in schools and other educational contexts, which would make the specific concept of validation superfluous. Rather, the separation in time/place means that the transfer of knowledge, of the outcomes of learning, from one

context to another, or from earlier to present time, is what makes processes of validation meaningful and valuable (Andersson, 2010).

It should also be noted that this paper does not include a specific definition of what learning, knowledge, or competence, actually is, more than that learning is seen as the process that results in knowledge – where the latter concept includes facts, skills, understanding, competence etc. The reason is that there are different standpoints or perspectives on learning and knowledge, perspectives that could all be related to different types of validation processes. For example, seeing learning as situated in practices (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991) could result in a focus on authentic assessment in validation, e.g. assessing vocational competence in the work place, while starting from ideas of experiential learning (e.g. Kolb, 1984) would probably result in some type of portfolio approach.

1. Prior learning – the object of validation

The intended object of validation is prior learning. But what is prior learning, and how could it be validated? We have to define if it actually is prior learning that we mean, or rather the result or outcome of this prior learning. Learning is a process that results in knowledge, skills, competence etc., which in turn could be assessed and formalised in different types of qualifications.

In the first alternative, the object of validation is the prior learning process per se. Then we need proofs of that a learning process has taken place, or in other words, that an individual has participated in a learning process. This focus in validation could be seen as validating something that is equivalent to participation in a course, i.e. taking part in an organised learning process. This is a possible approach to validation, if participation is what is meant to get recognition. But in the second alternative, the object of validation is the outcomes of prior learning. This requires a different approach when we want to see and validate that the individual actually has certain knowledge. And, in the third alternative, the object could also be validation of qualifications from another system. In the latter case, the validation process is rather a matter of transfer and translation of qualifications – what is this degree or this certificate worth in our current system? In this article, the main focus will be the second alternative, which is what we most often mean with validation.

2. Variation in prior learning

With this focus on validation of the outcomes of learning, we should still be aware of the certain character of validation: To make visible and give recognition to learning outcomes independent of when, where, and how learning has taken place. This openness to variation in the learning process will most likely also result in a

variation in the learning outcomes, and a variation in the degree of awareness of these outcomes among learners. If you participate in an organised learning process, like a course or a study program, you are more likely to be aware of the outcomes. But in more informal learning processes, particularly if they are unintended, it is less likely that you are aware of what you have learnt. But still you have developed knowledge that could be applied in suitable situations. This is what often is described as 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi, 1958, 1966).

3. Three dimensions of learning in validation

We will now look closer at three different dimensions of validation as a learning process. All three dimensions concern learning that contributes to a more fair and valid assessment of prior learning.

To learn what you know – awareness of prior learning

Validation might require awareness of your knowledge, which might have been 'tacit'. Such awareness is not necessarily required – validation could be based on observations of knowledge in use, observations in an authentic practice, from which an experienced assessor could see and hear that an individual knows how to do something, or that s/he has a proper vocabulary for the certain context. But, when it comes to knowledge that is not always presented in action, observation is probably not enough. The same is true when it comes to knowledge in terms of knowing why – understanding. It could be more difficult to assess this latter type of knowledge without the candidate being aware of and able to present and discuss the topic and knowledge. It could be possible to derive understanding just from observing/listening, but a valid assessment of these dimensions of knowledge would probably require that the individual is able to present and discuss his/her knowledge, the results of prior learning. A 'valid validation' is a process that gives recognition to the individual's prior learning in a proper way!

In other words, in validation you have to know what you know. And if you do not know (are not aware of) what you know, you have to learn what you know. This is a first dimension of validation as a learning process, i.e. that it might be necessary to learn what you know if a fair and valid process of validation should be able to take place.

To learn what is required in validation

A second dimension of validation as a learning process is based on the condition that the candidate should know the requirements of the validation process. This is true for a process which goes beyond observation of what proofs of knowledge that turns up without an organised process where the candidate is involved, and without the candidate being aware of requirements. Thus, the candidate should normally be able to answer the question: What knowledge is it that I am expected

to present proofs of in this specific validation situation? As such requirements normally is not part of our everyday knowledge, a validation candidate probably has to learn and develop knowledge about these requirements. What am I expected to know, and also expected to show that I know? These questions are relevant independent of validation approach – when showing your skills in an authentic practice, in a written test, in a portfolio etc.

To learn how to present your knowledge

A third dimension of learning in relation to validation is that the process is designed in a specific way, which might require certain skills to be able to present your knowledge in ways expected by an assessor. Ideally, assessment in validation should employ various methods, adapted to the needs of the candidate, to produce the basis for a valid assessment. But in practice it is likely that the palette of methods is more restricted, due to limitations in resources, assessor's competence etc. Thus, as a candidate you need to learn how to present your knowledge in a proper way for the validation process to come.

All these three dimensions are intertwined in the learning process that might be necessary for a 'valid validation'. You have to know what you know, what is required, and how you could present your knowledge in relation to these requirements. And if your prior learning does not include these aspects, you have to develop them as part of the validation process.

4. Mutual understanding between subjects in validation

The candidate is the central, but not the only, subject in validation. There is also the assessor that has a central role together with the candidate. There might also be other actors that are important for the candidate to develop the abilities to participate in a valid validation process – e.g. supervisors – but the main relation is between candidate and assessor. Here, it is important to be aware of that making learning visible in validation is a process of developing mutual understanding between candidate and assessor (see e.g. Sandberg & Andersson, 2011).

The candidate needs the knowledge and skills discussed above. But the assessor also needs the complementary knowledge and skills – of the actual requirements, of the variation in learning processes and outcomes of everyday learning, of different ways for candidates to present their knowledge, and not the least of possible difficulties for candidates to fulfil the formal requirements of a validation process. When the candidate and the assessor have such knowledge, understand requirements, and understand each other, then a basic requirement for a valid validation is fulfilled – mutual understanding is possible.

5. Validation or Validation?

Breier (2005) discusses two types of validation – Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as opposed to recognition of prior learning (rpl). The capital letter Validation (RPL) is a process with a sole or main focus on making prior learning visible, a specific activity of Validation, which has been described as a link in a chain of guidance – Validation – flexible learning. What has discussed this far in this article is learning in relation to such Validation/RPL.

On the other hand, validation/RPL means that the validation process is integrated in the learning process. In that case, validation could be seen as a strand in a rope, which consists of the intertwined validation and learning processes.

Validation and learning intertwined

In practice, validation is often – more or less – of this intertwined character (see e.g. Andersson, 2007). However, the integration between the two aspects could be more or less explicit and organised. A process of validation/rpl should mean opportunities both for making prior learning visible and for supplementary learning, to develop your knowledge, before assessment takes place. The object of assessment is here prior and new learning.

‘Pure’ Validation – which only takes account of prior learning – is difficult in practice, as if you could ‘read’ or measure the individual from the outside without a relation. But learning/knowledge has to be used and presented to become visible and provide a basis for assessment. This will most likely also make the candidate aware of the requirements, which means that there is an opportunity not only to learn in the three prepare-for-validation dimensions discussed above, but also to prepare and develop new learning within the subject contents that are to be assessed, before the actual validation/assessment takes place. Thus, from the organiser’s perspective unintended integration between validation/learning of this subject contents could take place in most validation processes. But the process could also be organised in a way that supports such integration, where there is ‘space’ for supplementary learning, to ‘refresh’ or even develop you actual knowledge – starting from what you already know but allowing for new learning before assessment.

Validation and adult education ideals

An even more explicitly integrated RPL process could be found in a course, which applies ‘classical’ characteristics or ideas found in the ideals of adult education (see e.g. Merriam & Brockett, 2007) – and particularly the idea to build upon what the participant already knows. In terms of validation, this means that initial formative validation is combined with an individually adapted study process, and an assessment process where the candidate is supported to use prior as well as new

learning. Such an assessment process would also most likely be continuous, in that all 'proofs' of candidates' learning are taken into account, independent of if these proofs were seen (or heard) in the initial, formative, assessment, or at some moment during the course, or at the end – or if there were valid proofs that the candidate could present even before the course started.

Validation of current or proved knowledge?

However, in the latter case, there is an additional aspect to consider. There should be an awareness of, and maybe also a choice made, whether the RPL process is going to result in an assessment of actual, current competence, or if also proofs that are not current, i.e. proofs of competence presented earlier, could be included. Here we come back to the initial discussion on what we mean by prior learning – is it the learning process per se, the actual and (still) existing knowledge outcomes, or the possible, more or less formal, proofs in terms of certificates etc.? It is possible to include proofs of earlier presented/assessed knowledge as a basis for validation, but the consequence then is that the result of the validation is not a testimony of the actual, current knowledge of the individual. Rather, it is a testimony equivalent to most other types of certificates – a hopefully fair assessment and documentation of what knowledge an individual has had at some point in time.

It is not a realistic option that we as individuals always will have a current validation-based documentation of our present knowledge. On the contrary – the documentation will always be dated. The question here is rather if the result of a validation process is expected to be in all parts a current presentation of actual knowledge, at the time when the document is issued, or if different parts could have different currency dates?

6. Conclusion

We have seen how participation in a validation process, like most other experiences, even could become a learning process (see also Andersson, 2011). Validation normally requires that the candidate is aware of and able to present her or his knowledge, as well as knowledge of what knowledge that is expected to be presented. Furthermore, the assessor should be aware of these possible learning needs, but also of the variation in candidates' knowledge depending on when, where, and how, they have learnt the knowledge contents that is to be validated. Assessor and candidate should strive for mutual understanding, to make the validation process as valid as possible.

There is also the option of RPL – a process where validation of prior learning and new learning is purposefully intertwined in a process of assessment and learning. In this case, validation becomes a part of a process that comes close to adult

education ideals of starting from and building upon participants' prior experiences and knowledge.

Independent of approach – with a capital V or not – there are obvious arguments for understanding validation as a learning process. Such a perspective would help in the further development of the practices of validation, but also of the theoretical understanding of these practices.

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