

The Concept of Competence and the Challenge of Competence Assessment

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In order to promote new lifelong learning opportunities, you need practices of assessing and recognizing individuals' competences across different regimes of recognition, in particular business/industry and the formal education system. Recognition by business and industry applies an instrumental perspective and refers to structures and mechanisms of the labor market, assessing the perceived ability of the subject to function in the work situation. Recognition by the educational system is based on documented completion and description of formal curricula, based in an academic setting.

The notion of "Competence", borrowed from social psychology, is supposed to serve as the new "general equivalent" of human capability. In practical assessment this notion of "competence" is placed in a tension between the need for standardization and comparability, as outlined in Qualification Frameworks [European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF)], and the need for sensitivity to individual pathways, which is topical for competence assessment procedures. The acknowledgement of the subjective nature of competencies means that the assessment must also be sensitive to subjective diversity and to the contextual nature of informal learning.

This contribution will explore the challenge of developing a language that can grasp the re-configuration of life experience and learning that is involved in competence development.

1. The defining policy context

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 which in everyday life – in work life, in family and social life, in leisure and cultural activities. The driving force in the contemporary policy interest in lifelong learning is to mobilize human resources and competences for economic competitiveness – and an increasing recognition that not all these learning goals can be met by education and training policy alone.

A lifelong learning oriented research and policy development for this reason in principle needs to address not only education and training, but a multitude of practices relating to work organisation, labour market, community and culture, health, etc... On the one hand it implies a total program of learning for work, which is inferred not only for education and teaching but also everyday life – a new level of economic penetration of society. On the other hand, this request for competence development in which the subjectivity of working people occupies an important role, constitutes a new arena of participation and democratic struggle over the directions of learning processes ((Salling Olesen, 2013a). To conceptualize learning in both intended education/training and in all the other areas of intervention a new discourse has been established in which the concepts of learning and competence play a key role. Education and training are being described in terms of (expected) outcomes instead of (teaching or curriculum) inputs, and results evaluated against employability.

On the governance level two quite technical tools are assigned key roles in implementing lifelong learning policy. The one is the development of all-embracing qualification frameworks, which allows comparison across national systems and between qualification obtained by formal education and non-formal/informal activities. The other one is validation of prior learning/competence assessment which allows for recognition of specific (individual) competences within a new environment of recognition. These tools are functionally connected.

The qualification framework has been quite contested in Europe because it has been seen as a tool for bureaucratic unifying of education institutions – or from a different perspective as tools for reforms and deconstruction of privileges embedded in obsolete institutional structures. In some countries it has actually been used as a top-down-governance – but mostly as a tool for communication and comparison (Mikulec & Ermenc, 2016; Nicoll & Olesen, 2013).

The other tool, the competence assessment, has previously been seen as a “user-friendly” way of helping individuals to avail of new opportunities, in continuation of traditional access-measures (Salling Olesen, 2011). Institutions have used this tool on their own initiative and on the basis of their recruitment interests. The term VPL, Validation of Prior Learning, owes its specific meaning to this situation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning for obtaining access to formal education.

In the context of lifelong learning policies formal regulations in several countries oblige institutions to offer validation of prior learning for applicants without normal access background, and the European Union has recommended member states to implement validation procedures, and set a roadmap by 2018. The ultimate rationale however, is to create a procedure which enables the classification of individuals’ competences against qualification frameworks that can serve as a “neutral” measurement for individuals, educational institutions as well as labour market agents.

2. The Concept of Competence and its use in Policy

Lifelong learning policy has introduced a new vocabulary, which has flipped the lens from teaching to learning, from curriculum to learning outcomes, from knowledge and skills to competences. This shift appears most obvious in relation to formal education, but also skills in the meaning of specific task related qualifications and the term qualification as such has been replaced. The new descriptor for human capability is competence (Nicoll & Olesen, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2013a). Originally the concept of competence had a legal meaning related to legitimacy. The meaning that gained ground from the 1990s combines functionalism and psychology, where the emphasis varies a little between the two and which has been applied in different ways (Gnahs, 2007; Illeris, 2009; Rychen & Salganik, 2001). Nevertheless, there is in practice today a core meaning: competence refers to the abilities of an acting subject to translate knowledge into appropriate action for everyday practical situations, above all in work processes, specified in the following attributes (Rychen & Salganik, 2001):

- The ability to act successfully
- In a complex context
- Through the mobilization of psycho-social prerequisites (cognitive and non-cognitive)
- With results related to the requirements of a professional role or personal project

In this understanding, which is representative of the political-economic use of the term, competence is in one respect *functional, performance-oriented and pragmatic*, and defined in terms of external social demands that need to be mastered. Additionally, it also involves a questioning of previous conceptions of the application of knowledge, where knowledge is something one can *have* and where rational practice can be based on general abstract knowledge. Practice is concrete, and knowledge must be mobilized and transformed in order to be applied successfully. Therefore, competence is linked to a potentially acting subject who is able to mobilize various prerequisites in a manner relevant to the situation at hand.

In the context of the issue of recognition “competence” is supposed to serve as a “general equivalent” of human capability, replacing the dominant system of diplomas and certificates linked to formal education, but it is not meant to create a new canon of knowledge or skills.

Nevertheless, the practical application of this concept as a general equivalent between different regimes of recognition (Salling Olesen, 2014) raises some theoretical and practical issues. Here I want to mention the built-in tension evidenced in the efforts to identify key competences, i.e. the qualities of the workforce that are vital for the economy and competitiveness, and could provide a

basis for the development of indicators of competence development over time and for comparing the competence situation in different countries.

In the OECD DeSeCo project (Definition and Selection of Competencies) this analytical task was approached quite ambitiously. The scientific ambition to create clarity and consistency in the definition of key competences was obviously guided by the pragmatic need to achieve workable indicators. One of the main actors, the psychologist Franz Weinert, referring to the connection between competences linked to specific practices and key competences with broad or universal applicability, states as follows:

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. (Weinert, 2001, p.52)

To put it simply: The scientific ambition to understand the dynamics of subjectivity must be sacrificed in the pursuit of political objectives.

There are two difficulties involved in such use, both related to the political context in which the concept was conceived and propagated. One is *reification* or *commodification*, i.e. it is assumed that competences are immutable properties that can be acquired and possessed. This reification is directly triggered by objectives of measurement and comparison, but also in the thinking of economists regarding the logic of the market (commodification) and capital (accumulation). It seems reasonable to view the definition and description of key competencies as an attempt to dream of a universally flexible workforce in an era where the industrial (Taylorist) division of labour and reduction of the complexity of the employee's operations is now outdated.

The mobilizing of "cognitive and non-cognitive" prerequisites has deliberately been included in the above summary definition of competence. Psychological attempts at conceptual delineation revolve around the relationship between cognitive factors and a great many other things that are generally called motivational factors. Within the cognitivist figure of thinking and learning, which seems to be the starting point, it is the relationship between universality/abstraction and specificity/concreteness that cannot be resolved satisfactorily. This is hardly surprising, since practical problem solving involves something other than abstract knowledge. Weinert himself also refers to empirical data showing that the solution of difficult problems always requires the involvement of content-specific knowledge and skills (Weinert, 1998, 2001). This finding points to a link between psycho-social dynamics (as in problem solving) and situatedness (since content-specific knowledge is linked to specific situations). In psychological contribution to

the DeSeCo project's initial conceptual process, Weinert emphasizes that competence implies and presupposes, in the fulfilment of a task, a combination of '*cognitive and (in many cases) motivational, ethical, volitional, and/or social components*' (Rychen & Salganik, 2001, p 62).

One can get no closer within this line of thinking. This leads us to the second problem of the prevailing competence discourse, namely that it does not take *the subjective nature of competences* seriously, or rather sees it as a subordinate factor that adds to the complexity of specific tasks that can be described independent of this subjective dimension.

Although the requirements or success criteria for competent practice are externally determined, competent actions are basically subjective processes, based in feelings and interpretations: problem comprehension, mobilization of knowledge, learning, and practising skills in new contexts. Therefore, the concept must relate to the subjective prerequisites and dynamics in competent practice. It must involve a view of competence as a personal, culturally anchored and experience-based ability, located in the competent person's way of interpreting situations and engaging in them, and also as a learning tool. It must enable analyses of slackness and constraints as complexes of rationality and defence mechanisms, and seek to understand the subjective "productive forces" that may lead to learning and practice development, including the kind of expertise that supports the emotional and cognitive work of detachment and reconfiguration. An example of a competency which most people perform to some extent: Change of perspective. It is a basic aspect of understanding and accepting other people, and it may be developed by the interaction with family, leadership in community etc. In a professional career this capability to relate to clients/patients/users etc. will have to be redefined by professional knowledge – but still based in personal experience. I have presented a broader theoretical and diagnostic discussion of these questions in an article (Salling Olesen, 2013a) and the thematic issue of the Journal in which it appears. This article gives an illumination of the contradictory societal space in which competencies, including their subjective dimensions, are transformed.

3. Theorizing learning socially

In general learning research has in the last few years developed beyond a psychological and educational framework. Several more or less independent processes in other disciplines or across disciplines have contributed, also redefining the very object of research. These developments have involved several elements of radical rethinking which moves beyond the previous orientations to see learning as an individual acquisition process conditioned by more or less intentional stimulating activities in the form of education and training. First of all a fundamental constructivist thinking is prevailing: Learning is a constructive activity, which is interactive but neither just mirroring nor determined by the encounter

with the phenomena and relations of “the world”. Second: the notion of an individual, coherent subject of learning and knowing is being challenged by different ideas of de-centered social/collective/network subjectivity. Third: Learning (and knowing) as an entirely mental phenomenon is being challenged by different ideas of materiality, both on the side of the bodily nature of knowing and learning and in the sense of knowing and learning as social practices.

My own research has for decades been oscillating between two interrelated strands: i) contributing to a general theory of adult learning processes and ii) empirical and practical engagements in work life and work related learning. On this background I theorize learning on the basis of the concept of Everyday life Experience (Salling Olesen, 1989, 2007). This has been a founding concept in Danish academic research in adult education – among others because it anticipated the shifting of perspective from education and teaching to the process and context of the (adult) learner. It referred strongly to work experiences and work related learning, and more broadly enabled a new mediation between educational research and external types of research (labor market and skills research which saw adult learning as an adaptation to work life and sociocultural or as an aspect of political and cultural organizing (social movements history). With the framework of lifelong learning this theoretical approach has gained new momentum.

Seeing learning as an ubiquitous aspect of everyday life experience means theorizing a relationship between subjective agency and identity processes and the social situation of the subject. Societal relations play a role not only “from the outside”, shaping the social situation, but also “from the inside”, by the societal production of the learner subject throughout life history. To avoid the usual dichotomy between the individual and the soci(et)al level of analysis is a key challenge for learning theory. Actually, I think that the theorizing of learning may be a key to discussions about agency and democracy in a globalizing capitalism, and the role of knowledge in a late modern society (with much broader resonance to social theory, politics and epistemology than can be discussed here (Leledakis, 1995; Salling Olesen, 2002).

4. Identity processes and life history

These conceptual deliberations – but also the increasing ambition to engage everyone in lifelong learning - has highlighted the necessity to understand workers’ learning and subjective engagements as an independent dynamic instead of just mirroring work processes. This imperative precipitated a methodological development of the Life History approach drawing upon inspirations and practices from (auto)biographical research as an empirical means of understanding and elaborating individual workers’ learning process and how this arose throughout their lives and their subjective engagement, including working life. Understanding the significance of gender, class, ethnicity and previous career became central to

this line of enquiry, as did the importance of understanding engagement in the specific work process and workplaces (Salling Olesen, 2004b, 2016; Salling Olesen & Weber, 2013). An increasing focus on work identity, or the subjective engagement in the work process by individuals arose from data when studying areas of professional work. In professionalized occupational fields, it was found that the relative strength of worker identification with their occupations was stronger than others, and there were indications of the significance of this occupational subjectivity in relation to concerns about competence in the conduct of these professionals' work. These findings arose through researching the work and sense of self of engineers, medical doctors (GPs), nurses and teachers. In these cases, it was found there were strong interdependence and also tensions between personal life experiences (including gender, class and ethnicity) and the culturally shaped field of professional conduct which is transferred to the individual in the process of professional knowledge formation and the development of professional habitual practices. So learning in the work process and the learning for a specific professional career seems to be a result of the interaction of relatively different dynamics of the individual life history and of societal and structural changes of the environment of professions' work.

The challenge of understanding subjectivity as a result of life history interaction experiences led to new developments of the life history method. Drawing on social psychology and an "in-depth hermeneutic" procedure with the basis in psychoanalytic interpretation procedures transferred to cultural symbolic activities, we developed a new concept of subjectivity and a new procedure of interpreting everyday life interactions: i.e. in work and in work-related learning processes. This development enabled us to deal theoretically with the subjectivity of workers' individual engagement in work and also with the subjective involvement of the researcher in the interpretation of learning processes (Salling Olesen, 2013b, 2016) – but actually it had a clear focus on understanding the subjective dimensions of learning. Emotional and cognitive processes are seen as practically identical or closely interwoven, being aspects of subjective processing of cultural meaning and societal conditions. Studying the production of the relating subject in which they are united (the life history) leads our attention to symbolic activity and language use and their relationship to their lived experience.

5. Experience

The concept of experience have many varieties in education, some of which are simplistic cognitive ideas within curricular thinking, others informed by a training strategy assuming that people automatically adapt practices they are experiencing. The concept of experience I would like to advocate is a much wider concept of life experience. It is the individual, sensual and embodied version of a historical or societal circumstances that this individual has experienced at "eye level" and as a

personally involved agent, and on which (s)he has built a world view, developed by Theodor W. Adorno and elaborated by Oskar Negt (Negt, 1999):

Experience is the process whereby we as human beings, individually and collectively, consciously master reality, and the ever-living understanding of this reality and our relation to it. Experiences in the plural...as in everyday language... are to be seen as products of this process...Experience is a subjective process...[It is] also a collective process...through a socially structured consciousness ... finally an active, critical and creative process ...
(Salling Olesen, 1989, p 8).

The learning theory point is to connect the immediate experience of everyday life with it's societal as well as it's individual psychic dimensions. For empirical analysis it offers an operational connection between three aspects or modalities of experience. Three relatively independent dynamics, are mediated through each other in every agency and learning process: everyday life experience, life (history) experience, and cultivated knowledge. The consciousness of everyday life is a situated and embodied experience, closely related to the engagement of the individual in specific practices. The situation is structurally embedded in societal history, but it is also influenced by life experience and culturally available semantic schemes, and the way in which they are individually acquired in life experience.

We can analyse empirical material as mediations of these dynamics. It includes the individual experience building throughout *individual life history*, with the interference between cognitive and emotional aspects, which comes in a specific version in every individual. Every individual has a specific emotional and social experience which has sedimented a general view of the world and ways of seeing him/herself. We may understand *identity* processes in terms of this sedimentation and ongoing engagement in the world. Identity is thereby not seen as a final and stable self definition, but as a partly fluent, partly contradictory, and always active engagement and (re)construction of one self.

We can see *knowledge, symbols and norms* as forms of culturally objectivated experience - in relation to the development of societal labor we may speak of an industrial experience, or an urban experience, or a female experience of double work – and more specifically we can see crafts or professions as collective experiences that have been historically stabilized, and we can even see literacy and mathematical modelling in this perspective. By conceptualizing learning with the concept of experience applied here we open an examination of different levels of learning with different fluidity. Learning is a collective of progressive processes, transforming collective cultural experiences (knowledge, skills and normative directions) into individual experience, constituting individual subjects in doing so, and at the same time changing social practices. The psycho-societal insights and methodology was developed to enable the understanding of the complex interrelation between the *subjective dynamic* of experience and identity, and societal changes.

6. Validation/Recognition of Prior Learning/Assessment of Competences

Back to the tool perspective: For the realization of a lifelong learning policy it seems essential to establish structures and procedures which support individual competence development and identity processes.

Assessment of competences at the individual level have been introduced in European countries under slightly different headings – Validation of Prior Learning, Competency Assessment, Recognition of Prior Learning, the Danish “realkompetencevurdering” (an assessment of competencies from all previous experience), the French “Bilan de Compétence”, etc. Assessment criteria are completely different, procedures also, defined by the actors involved and the institutional environment (Alberici & Serreri, 2003; Andersson, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2013; Salling Olesen, 2004a). Generally, it is possible to see two main regimes of recognition; work life competence applied by business and industry and scholastic assessment of knowledge and intellectual skills applied by the formal education institutions. The concept of competence seems more adequate for establishing a framework which can mediate between these different legal and moral spheres. But remembering what has been said about the subjective dimension of experiences and hence reconfiguration of competences a substantial challenge of theoretical as well as practical nature remains (Salling Olesen, 2001, 2014)).

A couple of Danish doctoral research projects address a mechanism of individual competence assessment (IKV) of applicants to professional bachelor education within a number of areas (teacher, preschool pedagogue, nursing, physiotherapy, construction technician). The standard gateway to professional bachelor education now is an A-level and the applicants who benefit from the IKV-access are people who have a lower formal school education and then some non-academic professional education. In these projects the researchers have adopted a qualitative approach to understand the life historical dynamics of competence development. They undertake life history interviews with a sample of students who have applied for and gained access to these professional programmes on the basis of a non-traditional background. The analysis will seek to understand on the basis of these individual cases to which extent and how they have been able to reconfigure knowledge and skills between the life situations they have been engaged in, into the present situation of the educational program and the future of their planned professions. Apart from seeing knowledge and skills as situated in social practices, that are widely different, they are also analysed within a subjective process which involves a change of life perspective and preliminary identification with the situation as a student and the prospects of the particular profession chosen. The hope is to provide some exemplary interpretations which can illuminate the intellectual and emotional reconfigurations which take place in this process.

I will briefly summarize some of the emerging ideas about how these specific interpretations of life histories of learning and career can contribute to a theoretical framework or scaffold for understanding competence development and hence assessing competence in the context of guidance and formal recognition of competences.

We need to understand the competence in the context of a life experience, and competence development as a change within a certain more or less stabilized identity, or as a moment of an identity development. In categorizing life experiences we may first of all draw on fundamental social experiences of class, gender and ethnicity which accumulate to create a cultural identity, but also the experience of the role of one self in life as can be seen in patterns of biographical narration: does the individual see him/herself as the master of his/her life course, as a product of certain environments or even a victim of destiny (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Schütze, 1984). It is decisive to grasp identity more as a subjective act of identification than as the cultural imprint of social definition, and it is decisive to acknowledge the processual and most likely ambivalent nature of identity (Salling Olesen & Weber, 2001; Weber, 1998). However, it is further important to enable a more concrete differentiation of the societal relations, most importantly class, gender and ethnicity. Becker-Schmidt provided the conception of the double societalization of women (Becker-Schmidt, 1991; Becker-Schmidt & Knapp, 1987, Martin Baethge uses the term Life concept to signify the degree of work orientation in peoples' lives, distinguishing between work orientation, family orientation and leisure orientation – and more importantly in a major empirical research of young people's form of work orientation. He distinguishes in orientation to the work as concrete life activity, subdivided in self realisation through the content of work and primary orientation to social relations in the workplace, and work as an instrumental activity, subdivided into income and security orientation or career and status orientation (Baethge, 1990; Baethge, Hantsche, Pelull, & Voskamp, 1988). As can be seen these empirical sensitizing categories can be seen as specifications of class and gender identities, and in this way help to discover the micro changes and ambivalences in these fundamental categories. Within work identities one can further seek to identify specific work activities and the forms of engagement within them. Professional identification can be seen as a subjective identification presuming autonomy and responsibility in work, and in Baethge's sociological categories reaching between the specific work process content and the status/career category as a societal dimension.

My intention here is mostly to show the need to integrate categories which relate to the societal dimensions of life experiences with the idea of subjective experience process as indicated in the sections about learning theory and experience. It is – repeating – decisive to understand the complex process of career and competence development, processing on a concrete level of everyday life and identification but drawing on the previous life experience of individuals and thereby on fundamental societal categories like class, gender and ethnicity. It is

further, from our development of the life history approach, a useful point to understand the “scenic” nature of life experiences (Olesen & Weber, 2012; Salling Olesen, 2012). All the knowledge, skill, attitudes, etc, we carry with us are embodied combinations of emotional, cognitive, and agentic practices that are entangled in a concrete scenario of experience, and learning is to a very high degree *experimental and reflective reconfigurations* of elements from these life experiences which detach them more or less from one subjective configuration to another. *Competence* in the meaning here promoted is a potential for in-situ mobilization of mental and bodily resources, which may also end up being as learning, producing a new *competency* i.e. a stabilized immediate availability of these resources which facilitates and increases the potential for other situations. Competence assessment is a mapping *and prognostic* procedure in which you anticipate – with reflecting, guidance, and/or legal implications, to which extent and in which directions a person can develop his/her potential for mobilizing which resources. My idea is that the psycho-social integration, elaborated by those types of categories that have been outlined above, can contribute to a language that can handle (not resolve, because it is societal and inherent in contradictory interests) but *handle* the contradictions that are appearing in the use of the concept of competence in policy discourses like the lifelong learning agenda. And this is exactly what competence assessment and validation of prior learning is up to. But there is still significant empirical research and conceptual elaboration to be undertaken before the assessment can become a relatively transparent general equivalent of human capability.

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