This issue: What's new in a new competence regime?

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European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults – RELA

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 2 OCTOBER 2013

Contents

Thematic Papers

Open Paper

European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, Vol.4, No.2, 2013, pp. 103-109

Editorial: What's new in a new competence regime?

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The contemporary notion of competence emerged in political, educational and academic discussions of adult education and learning from the middle of the 1990s. This was connected with a shift in thinking about learning and education in the policy and public domain in which lifelong learning and learning outside education had become increasingly emphasized. In spite of its origin in a field of strong political interests and conflict, the notion of competence has now become formally integrated in administrative language use and a dominant framework of thinking on education and learning. It has become a new governing regime at a European level as well as to some extent at the level of the nation state.

This editorial will pursue this notion of competence as a governing regime in discussion of what's new by highlighting some distinctive material circumstances which have supported its dominance. We trace the wider emergence of lifelong learning in the European policies of the 1990s from discourses from outside education. We argue that this reflected and fueled scepticism over whether education could fulfill societal needs. Education, before and after the Second World War had been seen as a force for social change. But after Reagan and Thatcher in the 1990s, and now coming from groups who gained influence in the development of neo-liberal policy agendas, this scepticism supported a turn to the market. Education was understood to need to become more flexible and functional in support of the labour market. Knowledge and skills became the 'objects' of value and disappointed expectations of the potential of education to transform societies paved the way for a new discursive constellation. The velocity of wider social and economic change, an older relative shift towards post-Fordist work production mechanisms and the new European Union agenda of monitoring and comparing skills and competencies combined to support a new governing regime.

The emergence of a lifelong learning policy agenda

An agenda for lifelong learning emerged from earlier notions of lifelong education or recurrent education. Lifelong education can be traced in European policies of the 1960s and 1970s in the language of intergovernmental agencies such as UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Field 2000). Lifelong education appeared again in 1993 in the Jacques Delors' White Paper on competitiveness and economic growth (European Commission 1993). Recurrent

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education, as a vision of the access of all to education throughout the life course, had been an idealistic engagement in popular education and literacy campaigns in the 3rd world. Lifelong learning was then the emphasis in 1996, after the European Commission declared that year as the European Year of Lifelong Learning.

Policy ideas of flexibility have been part of a discourse of the marketization of the economy, labour market and education in Europe since the end of the 1980s. But during the 1990s the notion of lifelong learning became widely dominant and launched into public discussion in many countries and with the need for flexibility as part of this discourse. The means to a 'learning society' was considered by the European Commission (1996: 3) in 1996, with its aim 'to plot out the route to this new society by identifying the options available to the EU in education and training'. Its report called for greater flexibility in education and training systems and practices, so as to meet diverse economic demands.

Lifelong learning was launched into public discussion in part through the international political and economic jet-set; those business managers, politicians and experts who participated in the annual alternative summit meetings of the 'World Economic Forum' in Davos. Lifelong learning brought with it an emphasis for learning *outside* education, not only workplace learning but also in everyday life activities. This emphasis became a means to promote learning. What was originally positioned as an opportunity for the individual to learn was to become a necessity and duty - this was new. There was to be no safe place anymore!

Scepticism over education fulfilling societal needs

This shift involved scepticism over whether the education system was fulfilling societal needs. Such scepticism was new, at least in Northern European countries. It came from outside – in a dual sense. It was not raised by the agents in education, but by business managers and those involved in international economic and financial institutions. These were groups who gained increasing influence in the development of policy agendas with the neo-liberal wave following Reaganomics and Thatcherism. Thus education was increasingly viewed skeptically and for its use for business and employment. In this view existing education systems were inflexible and overly independent. They were positioned as needing to become more functional and flexible if they were to be able to supply the labor required of them – more or less in response to direct market conditions. Tony Blair, when he took office in 1997, announced that three things were important: "Education, Education and Education". But the name of his Ministry of Education, "Education and Employment" was branded by neo-liberalism.

The idea that the education system could fulfill societal needs had informed the preceding years. The expansion of education had been through this time assigned a magic force - through education, economic prosperity and welfare, social inequity would wither away. Societal change was understood to be supported through formal education. This was not to suggest that family or the class dominance of particular occupations, or the trajectories of favored people in in-company careers, had ceased through the expansion of this idea. But the main trend was understood to be towards meritocracy - obtaining social positions and status through education. Career-making was to be based on certified knowledge and formal education instead of family and social relations.

Qualifications became foundational to the employment of an increasing proportion of the labor market. During the prosperous decades after World War II, there was, at least

in the milieu of social democrat parties, an optimistic expectation that education would also provide leverage for the individual. But during the 1970s and 1980s it was realized that education does not restructure the basic social order in itself. And, the political disappointment in some cases nourished a reverse thinking that the dominance of scholastic education was causing inequality.

New thinking: from curriculum to outcomes

In a meritocracy based on traditional academic or scholastic education, it was assumed that there was a strong alignment between school teaching, learning outcome and societal requirements. The political adoption of the notion of competence is an indication that this assumption was shaken. The new thinking about education and learning, however, was promoted by an alliance of otherwise contradictory forces. On the one hand there was a very traditional, utilitarian thinking, which tended to see education as costly and superfluous, and, on the other, a neoliberal governance strategy within new public management. This was an alliance that gave way to market mechanisms, exactly because it assigned a decisive role of education and learning in the global competition and therefore was not to be governed by social criteria.

In spite of the contradictions, these forces could unite in a new way of education thinking which instead of focusing on goals and content (curriculum) focused on measurable learning outcomes. Knowledge and skills became valued as activated in practices and recognized and exploited as learning potentials in everyday life, particularly work life. This relativizing of the value of education and increasing interest in everyday and work practices have become aligned through the notion of competence. This political alliance embraces educational conservatism; back to basics vocationalism on the one hand, whilst from human resource and organization theory, personal resources are regarded as perhaps the most important factor in the development and competitiveness of a corporation.

Human resource thinking has its background in a predominantly humanist psychology brought to bear in efforts to optimize individuals' contribution to organizational goals and function. The point of departure for this thinking is that human beings develop and unfold their potentials in practice, and that there is a high level of alignment between individual thriving and a surplus of potential in task-solving and improvement of work practice. In this way interest in individual competence development is aligned with company interests. The development of the competence of the individual is supported by organizational forms and management tools that create a beneficial environment for the company itself. These forms and tools are at the same time positioned as the goals and means for human development in its own right.

A progressive notion of human resource

The notion of competence has been a tool of a progressive but relatively weak human resource dimension in management and leadership, particularly in big knowledge intensive private businesses. But by the 1990s the notion was picked up by politicians and business lobbyists and in a very short time converted into a tool of policy for competitiveness that brought together domains of education, research and development, labour market and management. In Europe this was accomplished in two ways. First in

the form of the Lisbon Declaration (European Commission, 2001) there was installed, at least until the financial and economic crisis broke out in 2008-09, a much stronger political attention on actions to develop human resources, including the development of adult and continuing education policy. Second, there was a mainstreaming of governance mechanisms and a bureaucracy of descriptions of the work force and education and training available (for instance in the description of education at regulatory level in terms of learning outcomes). This focus on human resources within adult and continuing education policy and bureaucracy of descriptions of learning outcomes as governmental mechanism, were combined as a tool for competitiveness.

Qualification and skills analysis

The focus on aspects which are deemed important for the economy, competitiveness and employability for the individual had been self evident in the 1970s in vocational education and training. At this time, qualification and skills analyses became part of education and training policy development and linked to a rather narrow work-process and functional perspective. The interest in analyzing qualifications or skills might be considered a reaction to the volatility of the labour market, in part through technological change, and as an attempt to counteract increasing uncertainty about the requirements of the work force. However, this perspective was always and is still, to assimilate the skills of the work force to the technical and organizational development of work processes, or in other words, to secure the supply of sufficient relevant work qualifications.

Qualifications analyses are still conducted regularly within business areas, trades, regions or segments of the labour market. But it was soon realized on many levels that new approaches were needed to create a sufficiently dynamic knowledge based economy. In vocational education, notions like key qualification and generic skills were launched to explore the extent to which it was possible to identify basic qualifications foundational for changing specific requirements within many individual work-processes.

Several concurrent circumstances contributed to this desire to identify key qualifications. On the one hand, there was the very velocity of change, undermining the possibility of individuals acquiring lasting vocational qualifications, once for a lifetime. The response was to require flexibility, de-specializing and retraining. On the other hand, there has been a relative shift in workplace structure from industrial manufacturing to several more complex jobs (information handling and service production; welfare services).The response to which has been a new type of professional knowledge and new work identities.

Both these circumstances point to qualification requirements of a more general and unspecific nature than those which have generally been attended to, and they have increased requirements for cultural techniques (reading, writing, computing) and social skills (communication, group collaboration). Deliberately, in the interest of a good cause we must assume, all these elements were mixed in a political conceptual salad, which could turn the short term pressure for qualification analysis into an optimistic outlook for more qualified work with richer opportunities for workers. In the education policy domain, these analyses provided a new and material argument for the classical humanist educational idea of all-round education based on cultural skills and personal development; even in vocational education this has been the case. In management thinking, it provided the argument for assigning greater significance to working people as employees. A new horizon of understanding workers and their ability to meet new

requirements as a source of wealth and competitiveness was opening. The EU Commission, particularly in the period while Jacques Delors was the chair, took these arguments for an "anthropocentric" work organisation and new qualifications seriously (Hingel, 1994). A shift from qualification (modeling people by means of the job requirements) to competence (enabling people to reshape the jobs and handle unknown future requirements) was lurking, but was not really transformed into specific policies.

Economists take over the agenda

Simultaneously the significance of human resources was incorporated within an economic competition strategy. The idea fostered by the OECD of measuring and comparing competencies between countries and across time by establishing competence accounts, rendered discourses of competence a political lift, but it also implied a particular twist. At first it led to the launch of a project for Defining and Selecting Key Competences (DESECO), with the ambition to create an interdisciplinary analytical conceptual framework which could identify competences of significance in a range of different life situations and life phases – so called key competences (Rychen & Sagalnik 2001; OECD 2003). This ambition has not in any way been achieved, but with the development of the European framework of qualifications and corresponding national frameworks the endeavor has been to establish a description system independent of national institutions and structures. A competence discourse has been a main tool in this work. In Denmark, for example, all new education programs must be described by the knowledge, skills and competences that should be acquired. This latter is a mix or confusion of the new discourse and a more traditional language for education regulation. It causes a great deal of problems and triggers a lot of annoyance and substantial critique in educational institutions. The competence discourse, born in a field of major political interests and tensions, has established itself as a new dominant framework for thinking about education and learning.

The articles of this issue

In the call for papers for this journal issue a question was raised about the novelty of this discourse. This was a request for analyses of the content of the notion of competence in relation to former ways of conceptualizing the consequences or outcomes of education. The Call for Papers invited critical discussion of concepts of competence, as well as its analysis as a new way of thinking and communicating. A question was raised over the implications of discourses based on the notion of competence.

The issue that results from this Call for Papers includes a range of contributions which not least reveal substantial differences in the use of concepts of competence and interpretations of their significance across countries and language communities. The questions raised gave rise to quite different reactions. Although generally agreeing on the emergence of a competence discourse and adopting a critical view of the way it is implemented in policy discourses and management procedures, there are quite different approaches offered in thinking of its consequences.

The articles of the Issue then explore the emergence of this regime of lifelong learning and competence and its political and practical implications for adult and continuing

education. Divergences are to some extent related to different focuses in analysis – whether focusing on the material background and context for development of new concepts, or on the use of the concepts and the way these work out in social practices.

Pierre Hebrard's first paper of this Issue, called *Ambiguities and Paradoxes in a Competence-Based Approach to Vocational Education and Training in France,* explores effects of the competence regime in the design of programmes in vocational education and training in France. Tracing the origin of the meaning of the concept of competence and its evolution, he argues two different paradigms; a behaviourist and socio-constructivist version. Tracing also their ambiguity and paradoxes of effect when such understandings are mobilized in the design of programmes in the healthcare professions and social work in France, Pierre Hebrard suggests more detailed exploration in other contexts and locations.

Roy Canning, in his paper called *Rethinking Generic Skills*, turns to explore understandings of generic or transversal skills promoted through European Union policy discourses. He draws on linguistic, geosemiotics and socio-cultural theories to argue that generic skills are not universal, transferable or autonomous. He argues against adopting such notions, suggesting that the skills and knowledge of generic skills should be contextualised in cultural contexts and understandings more collective than individualistic.

Christine Zeuner, considers in her article *From workers education to societal competencies: Approaches to a critical, emancipatory education for democracy,* two understandings of critical political education for workers developed in the 1960s and 1990s in Germany; first, philosopher and sociologist Oskar Negt's notion of *'Sociological Imagination and exemplary learning'* and, second, 'societal competencies' (Negt, 1963, 2001). These two understandings are purposefully distinct from more instrumentalist notions of key qualifications or key competencies that are related to aims of the maintenance of employability for individuals or the economic competitiveness of the market. Societal competencies aim for emancipation and the development of participation in democratization processes. The notion of social competencies is based on the idea that political learning processes are only possible by working on experiences of everyday life and clearly point to class-based cultural and historical experience as a framework.

Henning Salling Olesen, in his article *A Political Economy of Competence Development?,* explores the material background for the contemporary focus on learning and competence development in changing work processes. The competence notion, in this context, indicates the dependency of employers and capital on the potentials and participation of working people, and hence makes an opening for autonomy and more democratic power relations. This article sees the prevailing competence discourse as a result of an economistic reduction, reflecting the political economy of capital. As an alternative, competence requirements might be developed in a new politicization of work on the basis of workers' learning and competence. Professions already have opportunities to develop autonomy on the basis of competence, but may do this in a narrow and rigid way. The article proposes a "Political Economy of Working People" as a conceptual framework for a new relation between work life and societal democracy.

Staffan Nilsson & Sofia Nyström, in *Adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime,* draw on the research and scholarly literature to explore changing discourses and perspectives of adult learning, education, and the labour market within the employability regime. Their analysis is of the Nordic context. Current demands of educational design for a labour market, they argue, require the

acquisition of specialist and generalist competence and personal characteristics. The shift is one from employment to employability and lifelong employment to lifelong learning. Ideas of liberal education and ´bildung' have for these authors been reinserted into the political agenda, and thus offer potential for new engagement in these terms.

The last article falls outside the main theme of competence for the issue but is aligned strongly to it in its discussion of the transfer of qualifications. In her paper *The disjuncture of learning and recognition: Credential assessment from the standpoint of Chinese immigrant engineers in Canada*, Shan Hongxia explores the problems of the transfer of qualifications for migrant engineers to Canada. This is a problem of the accreditation of prior learning and processes of qualification for professional engineers entering the Canadian work environment from other countries and cultures. She argues that the recognition of foreign qualifications, such as is promoted in many OECD countries, promotes a liberal notion of 'fairness' through ideas of universal standards. Shan then examines the credential recognition practices of the engineering profession in Canada through a qualitative study. As a fairer alternative, she argues a notion of 'recognitive justice' as starting place or 'standpoint' for recognition of the everyday experiences of immigrants in such processes.

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Ambiguities and paradoxes in a competence-based approach to vocational education and training in France

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Abstract

This article aims to show the effects of the prevalence of the competence regime within several sectors of vocational education and training in France. The first part of the article outlines the origin of the concept of competence and the evolution of its meaning. Later, the underlying theoretical and epistemological foundations are examined and two different paradigms are distinguished. The second part of the article focuses on ambiguities and paradoxes of effect of competence approaches, in specific educational programmes in the healthcare professions and social work in France. This study is based on the analysis of a corpus of documents concerning French vocational education and training that use a competence-based approach.

Keywords: vocational education and training; competence-based model; professional training; behaviourism; social constructivism

Introduction

This article aims to outline the effects of the prevalent competence regime within several sectors of vocational education and training (VET) in France (Ropé & Tanguy, 1994; Zarifian, 2001). In particular, it presents research results about the evolution of VET within both the healthcare and social services sectors. These changes, which have taken place recently in the 2000s, are the result of numerous reforms based on the competence-based approach implemented in these sectors (Hébrard, 2004, 2011, 2013).
The first part of the article examines the origins of the notion of competence and the evolution of its meaning from the legal field, through the linguistic field and to the area of training design (Tremblay, 1990; Hébrard, 2005). The endless debates over definitions given in the latter context should be analyzed but cannot be clarified without

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explaining the theoretical and epistemological foundations of the underlying paradigms (Schön, 1996; Dolz & Ollagnier, 2002; Crahay, 2006; Montchatre, 2008).
Two main paradigms will be distinguished and examined. The first, and currently the most prevalent, is based on a narrow view of pragmatism, a behaviorist idea of learning and an analytical and reductionist approach to competences. The second refers to socio-constructivist theories of learning and leans toward an approach that takes into account the complexity of the situation, the context and activities, as well as the meaning that professionals give to their work (Jonnaert, 2002; Clenet & Poisson, 2005; Hébrard, 2013). This first part is primarily conceptually based even though the inquiry is not only based on previous scholarly work, but also on the analysis of speeches and documents that circulates between practitioners.

The second part of the article aims to cast light on the ambiguities and the paradoxes that emerge from how the competence-based approach is implemented in the aforementioned areas of study. We analyze a corpus of documents: reference lists of competences (référentiel), evaluations tools, training programs within French vocational education and training programs that have been recently reformed according to the competence-based approach.

The notion of competence

From the legal field to education and training via the field of linguistics

I will first outline the origin of the concept of competence. Historically it came from the legal field and was applied primarily to legal proceedings: one court would have jurisdiction over or was competent in judging certain types of conflicts, offences or crimes in a certain geographical area. But from the end of the 17th century this term referred to 'la capacité d'une personne due au savoir, à l'expérience' (abilities from knowledge and experience) (Rey, 1998, p. 823). In the mid-20th century, the linguist Chomsky, gave it a specific meaning by contrasting linguistic competence with actual performance. For him, linguistic competence is a thing no amount of learning can teach' (Chomsky, 2003, 2010, pp. 31-53). He argues that we genetically inherit a 'language organ', that grows like any other bodily organ, and that this linguistic competence which is implanted in our brains, underlies the notion of universal grammar. In direct contrast to this linguistic competence, we have performance, which consists of the sentences we speak in the language that we have learned – sentences that make use of the rules of the universal grammar. Regardless of the debate concerning which part of language is innate and which part is acquired, the differentiation between competence and performance helps define this conceptual area. Allal (2002, p. 78) points out that the distinction between 'les structures ou fonction mentales qui expliquent l'action du sujet (les compétences) et les comportements observables qui en résultent (les performances) - (structures or mental functions that explain the subject's action [the competences] and the observable behaviors that result from it [performance]) - is an old concept that comes from the fields of psychology and ergonomics. We must keep in mind that competences are not directly observable- it is only through observing performance that we can infer the existence of competences.

Returning to our area of interest, it has only been recently in the past 20 years, that the use of the term "competence" has become widespread in the area of education and training. At the same time, this concept has had growing success in the fields of human resource management and sociology of work. However, contrary to what is often

claimed, we know that "competency-based pedagogy" actually comes from the educational field. Tremblay (1990), like Jonnaert (2002), reminds us that "competency-based education" appeared in the United States in the 1960s or the early 1970s, and therefore we see that this occurred before the competence-based model in the business field which proliferated at the end of the 1980s (Ropé et al., 1994; Zarifian, 2001).

Competence-based education and behavioral objectives

Tremblay (1990) defines the main characteristic of this pedagogical trend as its base in competences: objectives are phrased in an operational manner, in terms of know-how, with procedures for assessment and certification for each objective obtained on the basis of performance (observable behaviors) in controlled test situations. This is a first competence model in educational discourse. It is clearly founded on a behaviorist approach of learning, being analytical and reductionist with regard to the notion of competences. In the book *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education* (1980), translated into French in 1983 under the title, *Penser l'éducation des adultes*, Elias and Merriam examine "competency-based education" in their chapter on the behaviorism. They specifically note that this approach is characterized by a program which, in behaviorist terms, specifies the objectives to obtain, the learning experiences to engage in and the evaluation mode of predetermined goals. They add that competency-based education presupposes that measurable skills can be clearly itemized for all knowledge areas (Elias & Merriam, 1983). Later they describe the method for designing a program for 'professional-technical education based on competences'. It begins with a detailed job description, and this serves as a foundation for a thorough analysis of the tasks, a process that divides the work base into smaller and smaller components (Elias & Merriam, 1983, p. 97).

However, the authors note some limitations or difficulties in this approach. For example, when trying to apply this idea to teacher training, a problem was encountered due to 'a weak consensus concerning the skills required for an individual to earn a diploma in teaching'. The authors specify that, some of the skills necessary for certain tasks could be difficult to identify and they conclude that, 'critics accuse competency-based education as having a certain dehumanizing characteristic'. They find that this approach puts little emphasis on the student and it stifles creativity. Additionally it is blamed for shaping all students in the same mold and fragmenting programs, ignoring what is important (Elias & Merriam, 1983, p. 98).

If I spend time rehearsing competency-based approaches to adult learning in this paper, it is because I find it useful to place this movement in its history, a history which is very often forgotten by those who refer to it. Indeed, my goal is not to take a position for or against the competency-based approach, but rather to put it back in the context of the different schools of thought and the practices in the field of training design. From this point of view, the approach clearly belongs to the field of behaviorism from the start. In this respect, it opposes the humanistic approaches, whether classical humanism or its modern versions – the Rogerian trend or approaches based on pragmatism and the new trend named 'progressive' by Elias and Merriam (1983, p. 47), whose main inspiration is John Dewey. In looking at the most recent work in the Francophone area, we see that it differs from 'vocational didactics' (la didactique professoinnelle), which integrates notions from the fields of ergonomics, psychology of work and the socio constructivist movement regarding learning and professional development (Pastré, Mayen & Vergnaud, 2006, pp. 145-198).

In French speaking countries, especially in Europe, it seems that this approach first became prevalent in the area of VET. The competence-based approach has particularly contributed to the development of methods and tools used in the design and the evaluation of vocational training (dividing training into modules or sequences where each one centers on a specific objective, lists of competences, evaluation tools based on performance criteria).

In this context, competence is clearly a notion that is more closely related to the know-how than theory, because reference to the behaviorist theory of learning is rarely explicit. And the objectives typology used often combines input from various sources, including cognitivism. From this point of view, criticism from Crahay (2006, p. 27) is fully justified when he writes, 'la notion de compétence n'est selon nous pas étayée par une théorie scientifiquement fondée' (the notion of competence is not supported by a scientifically based theory) and he notes that various paradigms of cognitive psychology are sometimes called upon by those who desire to spread this notion, without any coherence.

Other criticisms of the notion of competence are often made, which I will not specify here, but notably from Stroobants, (1993, 1998); Brochier (2002); Dolz and Ollagnier (2002). These criticisms refer to use of this notion in initial education as well as in continuing education and training.

One difficulty in defining the concept of competence

One frequent criticism addresses the difficulty of creating a clear definition or the many attempts at creating a definition where no consensus has been reached. A review of the wealth of literature on this subject, however, reveals that some elements common to most definitions could be conserved (Baudoin, 2002). I will first highlight the most prominent features that distinguish competence from other concepts such as knowledge and qualification.

The first aspect that allows us to define the notion of competence is the focus on know-how rather than on knowledge, or the ability of an individual to complete a task, to prove his know-how in a real work situation. Therefore, it seems to me that the concept of operationality appears to define competence. But this assumes that the context and the situation where the know-how is put into action are clearly defined. In general, we find this in professional situations, where the objectives and limitations are clearly defined and the tasks are precisely outlined. This notion could also be applied to social situations in every-day life, outside of the realm of workplace- more specifically in the case of training meant to place the individual into a social context instead of adapting him/her to a specific job. We can summarize this idea under the term of contextualization.

It should be mentioned that some research challenges the idea that all competences are specific, and highlights the existence of what are called, general competences (Tremblay, 1990), transversal competences (Rey, 1996) or social competences like those relating to logic, problem solving, communication skills and cooperation with others – the latter sometimes referred to attitudes or personality traits. I would consider that it is preferable to limit the usage of the term "competences" to the operational skills that we find in certain contexts or types of situations. This is, in fact, what differentiates competences from knowledge: the latter organized by academic discipline or scientific field, is abstract, theoretical and decontextualized (Barbier, 1996).

On the other hand, competences combine and integrate a set of cognitive resources (declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge), socio-affective (attitudes)

and sometimes sensory-motor skills, which allow the individual to face certain situations or handle defined tasks.

Most of these elements are present in the definition proposed by AFNOR (Association Française pour la Normalisation): 'Compétences: capacité éprouvée à mettre en œuvre des connaissances, savoir-faire et comportements en situation d'action, dans un contexte donné' (competences: proven capacity to implement knowledge, know-how and behaviors in a real-life situation, in a given context) (AFNOR, 2004, p. 6). We find again the key features of competence(s): the operationality (implementation in real-life situations), the contextualization (within a given context), the composite character (knowledge, skills, behaviors) and finally the need to prove. Other definitions also include recognition and validation in a professional context.

Furthermore, competences should be distinguished from qualifications, which are often tied to diplomas. These qualifications, which are only acquired once, are socially and conventionally recognized and validated. Competences are specific to an individual and a situation or a type of professional situation. They are not generally recognized by collective agreements or definitively acquired, and therefore must be continually developed, adapting to changing work situations and environments.

A second model of competence

Taking these factors from the definition into account, can we develop a model of competence that is different from the behaviorist model discussed above (§ 1.2)? This is a socio-constructivist model, proposed by Jonnaert (2002, p. 9), in his book *Compétences et socioconstructivisme.* After reviewing various definitions of the 'concept' of competence and the role it plays in some areas of social sciences (Chomsky's linguistics, developmental psychology, the science of work), the author focuses on the uses of the term "competence" by various authors within the field of education. He concludes that, in this field, the notion of competence refers to a set of abilities or resources that the subject can put into action to successfully address a situation. Moreover, he suggests that in order to break with the concept of behaviorism, it is necessary to do without the notion of performance and look instead at the distinction between 'virtual competences' and 'actual competences' (Jonnaert, 2002, p. 39). I believe this particular point merits discussion.

In the last chapter of his book, Jonnaert contrasts the constructivist paradigm with what he calls the ontological hypothesis that connects to positivism. What characterizes this socio-constructivist model is the central role given to the subject who constructs meaning and creates 'schemes' through activities, interactions with objects, situations, and tasks with others, as well as through reflexive activity (or metacognitive activity) (Jonnaert, 2002, p. 63). Globally speaking, if we share this idea of socio-constructivism for the development of competences in the educational field, the competence structure that he proposes, seems to be debatable.

Some clarifications to Jonnae's model

Let me return to some questions that deserve attention. My first argument is against Jonnaert's use of the notion of virtual competences, as being opposed to the notion of performance as it is used in linguistic field. His table (2002, p. 11), which is meant to differentiate the two concepts, is too simplistic and therefore raises questions. It states, for example, that linguistic competence 'fait référence à la parole' (makes reference to speech acts) and that performance 'fait référence à la langue' (makes reference to language) and therefore linguistic competence is 'virtual in nature'. However, it seems

to me that linguistic competences are real or concrete precisely because they occur though performance (the sentences understood and pronounced by the subject). Linguistic competence also refers to language because you are competent or incompetent with regard to the use of grammatical, lexical or semantic rules of one or many languages. But looking at linguistic competence in that light means taking some distance from Chomsky's linguistic theory, created in the 1950s, and considering the contributions of more recent linguists who articulate the classic concepts of language and speech and connect them to those of competence and linguistic performance.

More generally, with regard to the contrasting terms of "virtual" and "real", Jonnaert seems to confuse two different ideas:

a) The idea that all human beings are born with a potential ability (biologically based) to speak, that is to say, the ability, during his/her development, to acquire linguistic competence. This does not mean that this competence is innate, but that the neurologic equipment of all healthy children permits acquisition to take place by learning through their interaction with adults (for this reason the definition of the term 'competence' that Chomsky proposed is not relevant in the field of education and should be disregarded).
b) The idea that competence is not directly observable, and that it does not reveal itself except through performance in real situations and therefore competences (or incompetences) are inferred through observed performance. This does not mean that the competences are "virtual"; they are real as they regularly occur through the activities of the subject.

Here, it seems that we find an error of behaviorism that dispenses with the notion of competence (where only performance is real); or performance is confused with competence and this distinction is considered unnecessary.

In addition, the usage of the expression 'virtual competence' also refers (Jonnaert, 2002, p. 39) to the distinction between target competences (for example, within a program of study or an educational curricula) and competences acquired by the individual (at the end a training program or through experience). This idea additionally makes reference to the distinction between the skills required to complete a task (or set of tasks), from a perspective of prescribed work and skills effectively executed by someone during an activity in a real-life work situation. I consider it necessary, therefore, to keep this distinction between competence and performance, in accordance with the point that Allal (2002) makes and avoid using the term, "virtual competence" which only causes confusion.

Furthermore, I am not completely in agreement with the competence structure that he proposes (Jonnaert, 2002, p. 56). It has four levels: 'compétences, capacités, habiletés et contenus disciplinaires' (competences, abilities, skills and disciplinary content). I do not see the value in dividing by discipline, but it is true that Jonnaert proposes a frame of reference for both initial general education and vocational training. I prefer to limit the definition of competence model to VET. In this framework, it seems appropriate to examine the areas of activity (or functions), categories of tasks and types of situation, and to identify content areas based on these categories, rather than through disciplinary division.

I additionally prefer to limit the use of the term "habiletés*"* to those gestures or combinations of perceptions and gestures, addressing concrete activities. Finally, we can discuss the possibility of keeping the term "capacités" for delineating fundamental elements of a competence. Indeed this term has in French a behaviorist connotation as it

has been widely used in "pédagogie par objectifs" (behavioral objectives based education). The terminology of vocational didactics (la didactique professionnelle), which is based on the socio-constructivist theory of learning, could prove useful as a replacement. The fundamental elements of a competence would thus be analyzed according to pragmatic concepts organizing action and operational schemes. In sum, the structure that Jonnaert proposes appears to be unnecessarily complex, using inadequate terminology.

To conclude this section and return to the definition of competence, I have proposed the following elements: a competence that is composed of a set of cognitive resources and socio-affective and/or sensory-motor skills that a person can use in combination to be effective in a class of situations or a category of tasks. The characteristics of this concept are operationality (effectiveness), contextuality (relative to certain tasks or specific situations) and this idea of a combination of different resources (declarative, procedural knowledge, attitudes and sensory-motor skills). These are constructed and evaluated in situations over the time; it is in this framework that they can (and should) be validated. They are not the same as (and should not be reduced to) basic skills as they involve the selection and combination of resources necessary for the completion of tasks as well as the ability to deal with complex situations.
More specifically, this involves the ability to develop a representation of the situation, identify the type of situation that it is classified under and recognize the category of the task to assure the resolution of problems. Additionally, one must choose and activate the schemes that can organize the action, the relevant operative model(s), and the pragmatic concepts that are more or less explicitly linked to a cognitive model (of validated knowledge). The "performance" or practical effectiveness in a situation is precisely the visible result of the implementation of required competences in the situation.

Analysis of VET programs based on the competence model

Recently in vocational education and training, the training design largely takes after the "modèle de la compétence" (Zarifian, 2001) or the "approche par les compétences" (Coudray & Gay, 2009). These concepts cover the methods and tools that I will be discuss in the second part of this article, with an epistemological and methodological view. With which paradigm(s) are they linked? What theoretical and methodological principles are these paradigms based on? On what model of competence are these training programs and tools developed?

A Methodology of document analysis

To provide answers to these questions, I have conducted a study of written documents used in various vocational education and training systems in both social work and healthcare: job or activity standards (référentiels), lists of competences, training curricula, evaluation tools and portfolios. The method of analysis of the documents I used is both lexical and semantic; it also covers explicit content (terminology), the rationale that underlies the categories structuring the standards and the implicit assumptions that they contain (Kerbrat-Orecchiori, 1986). This analysis also evaluates to what extent documents reviewed include a set of features that allow us to consider whether or not these approaches to training are marked by behaviorism or if they combine characteristics that fall under various and somewhat incompatible paradigms.

The main criteria are:

- the degree of breakdown of the professional activity into tasks and operations,
- the presence or absence of a distinction between competence and performance or activities,
- the phrasing of competence in terms of observable behaviors as in the kind recommended by pédagogie par objectifs (to be able to + action verb in the infinitive) or in terms referring to 'un système de connaissances conceptuelles et procédurales organisées (...) susceptibles d'être mobilisées en actions efficaces face à une famille de situations' (a system of organized conceptual and procedural knowledge (...) that is likely to be used effectively to confront a group of situations) (Gillet,1991, p. 81; Allal, 2002, p. 84),
- the lack of consideration of the relational dimensions of competence or its reduction to the communication techniques (Hébrard, 2011).

Like Jonnaert (2002, p. 34), I consider that these criteria permit us to distinguish between 'une approche par compétences (qui) serait connotée par une perspective strictement comportementaliste' (a competence-based approach (that) is implied by a strictly behavioral perspective) and approaches that may address a socio-constructivist paradigm. My analysis of written documents was supplemented by semi-directive interviews with trainers that used these documents (four interviews for each occupational group studied). These interviews contributed to the interpretation of the data, but they will not be reported here due to lack of space. Here I present the results of our analysis on four programmess of vocational education concerning two professions of healthcare (nursing and childcare) and two professions in social work –'techniciens de l'intervention sociale et familiale (TISF) (specialists in social and family intervention) and 'éducateurs spécialisés' (DEES) (educators in special education).

Nursing training in France

The 2009 reform brought forth a number of changes in the training system for nurses. A reference guide for the training of French nurses includes a list of activities and a reference list of competences (référentiel de competences). This set of materials makes up the training program. Here I will present some results from the analysis on the list of competences.

Confusion between activities and competences

The list of competences (le référentiel de compétences) defines five competences that lie at the 'heart of the occupation' and five 'general' competences common to certain paramedical professions.These ten main competences (that are more akin to functions) are broken into between six and twelve items (close to 80 in total, beginning with a verb in the infinitive and describing the activities). For example, in the fourth competence: 'Implement diagnostic and therapeutic actions', we find, among others, items like 'initiate and adapt the administration of analgesics in medical protocol' and 'manage a therapeutic aide relationship' (Ministère de la Santé, 2009, p. 258).

Therefore we can see in this document that there is not a clear distinction between activities and competences. In addition to these référentiel de compétences, there is a 'portfolio' for students, which is meant to facilitate the coordination between trainers from training institutes and those professionals that receive nursing students who are doing an internship. This portfolio contains support for follow-up training and periodic

evaluation of the internship. In fact, two-thirds of this document consists of evaluation rubrics with the various competences listed for assessment from supervisors. For each one, a series of criteria are defined (4 on average, so a total of 40 criteria) and, for each criterion, there are several indicators that are meant to assess whether or not the competence is 'acquired, to be improved, not acquired or not practiced' (there is a check box for each criterion and each internship completed).

For example, for competence number 5: 'Initiate and implement educational and preventative care', one of the two criterion is, 'relevance in the implementation of educational and preventative care' and its indicators are:

- require the participation of the person or group,
- adapt and evaluate the technical and pedagogical tools,
- assess the actions performed.

In the articulation of indicators, we frequently find terms that are very close to those expressed in the elements of the list of competences (but they are formulated with verbs in the present indicative without a subject).

The analysis of the structure of the list of competences and portfolio as well as the vocabulary used, bring us to our first observation: we find a type of terminology and methodology that is very closely linked to that used in the United Kingdom for the National Standards of Vocational Qualifications. For each profession, a small number of competence areas correspond to the main functions of each activity, which are then defined and split into elements of competence. For each element some performance criteria are then formulated and what can be used as proof is listed. The only difference is that the term, "performance criteria" is replaced by "evaluation criteria and indicators".

The difficulty with interpersonal competences

Leaving aside the more technical aspects of the occupation of nursing, we will analyze more closely the way that interpersonal competences are dealt with. We will limit ourselves to a few examples that we find characteristic of the approach studied. If we look at the evaluation criteria and the indicators in the portfolio for competence number 4, 'implement actions for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes,' out of 29 indicators, only 4 deal with the relationship with the patient:

- use therapeutic interview techniques
- analyze the relational dynamic
- explain acts to the patient
- provide attention to the individual.

On one hand, the relative weight given to the competences surrounding the relational dimension seem reduced, and on the other hand, the competences are viewed by the use of techniques, the analysis and explanation of data more than in terms of "care", with the exception of the final indicator.

If we examine competence 6: 'communicate and manage a relationship within the care context', three criteria are defined. The first criterion and its indicators are formed in terms of situation analysis, the explanation or the identification (of adapted attitudes), that is to say, through a rational and intellectual approach, outside of the relationship itself. The second criterion and its indicators are largely formulated in terms of

communication and the only indicator that refers to the attitude required in the relationship itself is the following, 'pays attention to the person'.

More generally speaking, we have noticed a kind of avoidance or difficulty in tackling the human relational aspect, as aforementioned (the relationship with the care recipient, the professional relationship or the educational relationship). The criteria and indicators for these elements in nursing competence do not sufficiently address the quality of the relationship, the attitudes, or the ethical values of the profession. Instead, they are formulated in terms of the implementation of steps to be completed, information to be communicated and methodology and techniques to be used. What has come to light in our analysis of these materials is that the affective dimensions are largely hidden. Therefore, what we see is a vision that is technicist, reductionist and focused on communication at the expense of a more relationship-centered clinical approach, of a more 'care' approach and an approach taking into account the complexity of the human relationship.

The professional child care assistant diploma (Auxiliaire de puériculture)

The documents that have been analyzed are based on two regulations from January 16, 2006 relating to the training for professional childcare assistants and the organization of the Validation of Prior Learning and Experience (VAE: Validation des Acquis de l'expérience) to obtain the diploma. Included in the annexes are: a description of the occupation, a list of activities, a list of competences and a training program.

The description of the occupation is synthesized from a list of eight activities (e.g.: '1. Take care of children in their daily activities from birth to adolescence'; '3. Help the nurse or childcare professional regarding healthcare'; '8. Welcome and accompany colleagues during internships'). The following annex presents 'detailed activities' where each activity is specified by 'the main operations that make up the activity', 'the major professional situations associated', and the 'methods, tools and resources used'. The list of operations is quite detailed and long (more than 100 operations in all).

For each of its eight modules, the training program shows a competence statement that explains the title of the module (e.g.: Module 8 'Labor Organization'; competence: 'organize work in a multi-professional team'). There are then a series of training objectives beginning with the expression 'to be able to' as well as a list of very detailed 'related knowledge' elements, which differentiate 'theoretical and procedural' knowledge and 'practical' knowledge. Finally, the 'level of acquisition' and the 'requirement thresholds' as well as the evaluation criteria in two categories (result and comprehension criteria) are described. If the attention to methodological rigor and thoroughness that this document conveys can be appreciated, we shouldn't forget to question the heaviness of such an analytical approach and the excess in prescription that it engenders. In addition, the vocabulary used ('operations, to be able to…') evokes the behaviorist model of *pédagogie par objectifs*.

Social and family help technician (Technicien de l'Intervention Sociale et Familiale) (TISF) training programme

Here we present the results from the study of the materials used to train Technicians in Social and Family Help (TISF) as reformed in 2006. The TISF, formerly called "family workers", is mainly involved in work within the home. In addition to work with

household tasks, the profession has expanded to include socio-educational and preventive action.

In an educational project describing the training program leading to the diploma in social work we find the latest reform mentioned from 2006:

> In the same vein as other reforms in social work, the TISF diploma was revised and eligible for the Accreditation of Prior Learning and Experience (*VAE, Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience*). It was created from a professional reference document (*Référentiel professionnel*) and proposes a list of competences from which the training program and curriculum were derived.

After quite a detailed description of the training process, the document presents six 'areas of training', each of which is composed of three to five modules. Each area of training is specified in terms of hours of theoretical teaching and practical training as well as a list of 'indicative content'. After that, there is a list of competences that describes domains, each divided in two to six competence (21 in total), completed by a series of 'competence indicators' (from three to twelve indicators for each competence).

The analysis of these documents shows that the same difficulties arise in dealing with interpersonal skills as those that were seen in the areas of social work and nursing. Thus, the first competence area is called: 'project management for personal care'. If we examine the corresponding curriculum in the training guide, we find that the contents cover the legal and institutional framework of the activities, the methodology (project and intervention) and the 'personal development,' but strangely there is nothing on the aspects of personal care and the aid relationship).

The second area of competence is entitled 'professional communication and work within a network'. The curriculum focus on the history of the social professions, the role and functions of social workers and the transmission of information, though the competence 'establish a professional relationship and provide mediation' belongs to this area of competence. Regarding this competence, the indicators are: 'be familiar with the general principles for interpersonal communication, identify the modes of communication in familial and intercultural relationships, facilitate discussion and exchanges between people and between people and institution, and be able to use conflict management techniques'. Again we find, like in the nursing profession, descriptors focused principally on communication and the use of methods and techniques, thus displaying a reductionist and technicist vision of the profession.

The State Diploma in Special Education (Le Diplôme d'Etat d'Educateur Spécialisé, DEES)

A comprehensive idea of this profession

Annex 1 from the June 20, 2007 law entitled 'référentiel professionnel' includes a profession definition and a description of the context of work for the professional in Special Education. It then goes on to describe a 'list of functions/activities' which outlines four functions, each broken down into three to five activities (sixteen in total). The function titles are conveyed through an expression that begins with a noun (e.g.: 'educational support of the person or group', 'design and management of socio-educational action'). The activities are defined by expressions that begin with a verb in the present indicative in the third person singular (e.g.: 'establishes an educational relationship with the person, the family or the group'). All of the activities are very broadly defined. Their statement is generally more complete than those of the other programs above analyzed. Some of these explicitly refer to concepts from the

humanities, such as 'the practice of a symbolic function' or those that have to do with values, such as 'the greatest possible respect of one's choice and of one's privacy (of the person who is supported)'. The articulation of these activities denotes a comprehensive, yet well-synthesized design with regards to the educational profession. It expresses the meaning and purpose, far from being limited to describe, from the outside, a series of tasks.

The annex to the aforementioned law then describes four competence areas that do not exactly cover the four functions. Additionally they are each broken down into four or five competences (nineteen in total). The title of these competences is often quite brief (e.g.: 'build a relationship', 'design an educational project'). Following these titles, there is a table that lists a series of indicators for each competence (from two to seven), formulated with the verb 'to know how to' followed by another verb in the infinitive form. Some of these descriptors are very concise (e.g.: 'know how to welcome', 'know how to understand a situation'), others are more developed (e.g.: 'know how to transmit values, knowledge and professional methodology and then put them into practice'). The list of competence indicators is long: close to eighty, about twenty indicators per area of competence. The actual use, through different stages of professional development of the students and notably in the evaluation during internships periods, can raise problems, which may encourage avoidance.

As with other "référentiels" studied, we notice again that the distinction between activities and competences is not very clear: sometimes the formulation of the competence is not differentiated from the activity except by putting it in the infinitive form or using a synonym (e.g.: the activity, 'evaluates the actions in the educational project' corresponds to the competence 'to evaluate the educational project' and the descriptor of this competence is 'to know how to assess actions completed and objectives obtained').

An analytical and behavioral idea of competences

In a previous version (March 12, 2004), the training programs were presented differently. The concept of competence and its descriptors were absent, and replaced by 'know-how' and 'reference knowledge'. The newer version of 2007 came back to the notion of competence and the indicators of competences; the latest ones are numerous, formulated with operative objectives as promoted through "pédagogie par objectifs". The underlying idea defining a competence and what permit its evaluation seem to be more based in an analytical approach that refers to a list of tasks and operations to be performed than based on an analysis of the activity in context carried out in a comprehensive sense. This version is less consistent with the list of functions/activities than the version of 2004.

This competence approach at first glance may seem to facilitate a rigorous and more objective evaluation of competences acquired, but professionals interviewed emphasize the heaviness of its use that could make it difficult to use systematically and it may even cause it to be disregarded. Furthermore, couldn't this intention to simplify by cutting risk us losing sight of the complexities of the activity itself or even the meaning for the actors involved (Clenet et al., 2005)?

Ambiguities and paradoxes

In the first part of the article I have examined the origins of the notion of competence and the evolution of its meaning from the legal field, through the linguistic field and to the area of training design. In the latter, I have distinguished two models or paradigms of competence and I have examined their underlying theoretical and epistemological foundations. The first one is the prevalent technicist model strongly marked by the behaviorism, which reduces the competence to a detailed list of operational know how (Elias & Merriam, 1983). The second one is a socioconstructivist model which takes into account the complexity of situations and activities, as well as the meaning that professionals give to their work (Clenet et al., 2005). In order to characterize the second model, I refered to the book "Compétences et socioconstructivisme" (Jonnaert, 2002), however I developed critical arguments about the ambiguity of the notion of "virtual competence" and about the elements of the definition of competence proposed by the author. I argued that competences, if they are not directly observable, are real since they occur through the performances, the activities in situations, which are called "real work" by ergonomists.

Then I examined a corpus of documents regulating the vocational training programmes of 4 professions: 2 professions of healthcare and 2 professions of social work. For this purpose, I used a set of criteria in order to identify the model(s) of competence they are based on. This study allow me to bring to the fore ambiguities and paradoxes in the approach of competences used by these programmes.

A competence-based approach strongly colored by behaviorism

In the majority of the materials studied with little variation, I found the same design based on the "competence approach" that is clearly influenced by a behaviorist model. The reference documents, which serve to frame the training programs in their design, structure, terminology and the foundation of their content, are created through this base. The relational skills often occupy a very limited space and the depth of human relationships is generally reduced to superficial communication and the use of "techniques". The complexity of the affective dimensions of identity and social, political and ethical issues seem to be hidden or at least pushed into the background.

During the course of the presentation and the analysis of the training programs, I noticed that the underlying concepts defining activities as well as the notion of competence were not clearly differentiated. Before proposing other answers to the questions seen in the introduction, I present a summary table of the significant quantitative data from the materials studied.

Table 1: Quantitative data regarding the reference documents (référentiels) for the professions studied

	Functions/ activities	Competence areas	Competence (elements of)	Criteria/ indicators
TISF	6	6	21	89
DEES	4/16	4	19	79
Child care	8/108 /operations	8	56 (know-how)	60
Nurses	9	10	77	40/117

Regarding the activities, some differences are worth noting. For these four different programs, the number of activities described in the documents is from 6 to 16 (for the DEES, which groups them into 4 functions). The diploma for childcare assistants is defined by a short list of main activities, but then broken down into more than 100 operations. The categorization of activities, either being broad or narrow and the choice to establish a more comprehensive or more detailed list gives an indication of the design work and the type of analysis that has been made. The terminology, for example, the terms of operations and know-how, which are used in the descriptions of the childcare assistant diploma, show a strong underlying base in the behaviorist model.

Regarding the list of competences and when we find indicators, their length and the terms used to describe them also provide information about the idea (conception) of education and training they cover. There are long lists of competences for healthcare professions studied (77 competences for nurses) and more synthesized versions for social workers. There is additionally an extensive list of indicators (60 to 117) for all professions presented.

Ambiguities of the model of competence as implemented in training programs studied

Here we find the elements of both paradigms mentioned above: in the first three programs we studied, on one hand we see a behaviorist and technicist (if not Tayloristic) vision of work and vocational training that dominates. This evokes the idea of "competences in bits" (Friedmann, 1956). On the other hand, we see a design that is more humanistic and constructivist, which is not broken down analytically into smaller slices of activities; for example, we see this design in the training program of DEES.

The influence of the first paradigm is evident in the definitions of competences as we have seen sighted in Coudray and Gay (2009, p. 41) in the article where they explain the design method of a new training program of the state's nursing diploma: 'la compétence est la maîtrise d'un savoir-faire opérationnel relatif aux activités d'une situation déterminée, requérant des connaissances et des comportements' (competence is the mastery of operational know-how relating to the activities of a given situation, requiring certain knowledge and behavior). If we find in this definition the key

characteristics of the notion of competence such as operationality and contextuality (linked to a given situation), we also see terms implied in behaviorism such as operational know-how or behavior.

On the other hand, in a socio-constructivist approach, because the competences are related to situations or types of situations forming a meaningful whole, often complex, they are composite: they combine and integrate a set of resources (declarative and procedural knowledge, attitudes, sensory motor skills) that may be activated to perform an effective action (Allal, 2002; Gillet, 1991). In order to assess their acquisition they need a developed description according to certain characteristics, like observed in the list of functions/activities of the DEES. However, they are not equivalent (nor can they be reduced) to the sum of a series of operational skills described in terms of behavior.

Additionally, the analysis of the lists of competences reveals a difficulty in distinguishing the notions of an activity, competence and performance. The contributions of the field of ergonomics, the vocational didactics (didactique professionnelle) (Schwartz, 1997; Pastré et al., 2006) and the constructivist theories of learning (Vergnaud, 1996; Jonnaert, 2002) do not appear to have been integrated into the design of the programs analyzed in this study. This is particularly the case in the distinction between the task (the prescribed work) and the activity (the real work). An in-depth study of the latter could serve as a basis for the design of professional training programs, which would describe the main functions and the list of activities. For professions with a technical nature, it could be useful to divide activities to the level of operations. But this doesn't seem particularly relevant to the relation-oriented occupations such as education or childcare. In these areas, wouldn't a technicist training design risk 'deprofessionalizing' these occupations (Hébrard, 2004, p. 215), or the 'proletarianization' (Stiegler, 2008, p. 11) of these professions? A framework of standards of activities that cuts the tasks into small parts, a competences list that multiplies the criteria or the indicators and a methodology founded in a behaviorist approach are all representatives of a design of work and training that has been the object of much criticism (Elias & Merriam, 1983; Stroobants, 1993; Allal, 2002; Ollagnier, 2002; Crahay, 2006).

The analysis of documents stating these reforms and tools designed for implementation, like the interviews performed with teachers and trainers, reveal an array of ambiguities and paradoxes. On one hand, the tools are very prescriptive – with professional activities divided into tasks and sometimes numerous operations and with competence lists showing poorly classified lists of activities, expressed in similar terms to behaviorist objectives including those recommended by the "pédagogie par objectifs". On the other hand we see an emphasis on the concepts of situation, integration, autonomy and reflexivity that refers to a constructivist approach to learning, while at the same time, the concepts of control, know-how and operational behavior evoke a behaviorist paradigm or technicist paradigm, at the very least. The theoretical foundations and the methodologies that form a base for the training design used seem to cause us to question its coherence, if not its pertinence as well as the concepts of vocational training implied. Without pretending that this study can be generalized to all occupations having to do with human relations, my results seem likely to encourage a deeper reflection for both practitioners and researchers in these areas. Comparative studies on a larger scale involving more training programs in other European countries would allow us to complete and enhance this analysis.

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Rethinking generic skills

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Abstract

The paper provides a critical analysis of the notion of generic or transversal skills contained with European Union policy discourses. The author presents a conceptual framework that challenges the idea that generic skills are universal, transferable and autonomous. An alternative analysis is put forward that argues the case for contextualising skills and knowledge within particular understandings and cultures that are more collective than individualistic in nature. The arguments are framed within wider cross-disciplinary debates in linguistics, geosemiotics and social-cultural theory and build upon an earlier paper exploring core skills in the UK (Canning, 2007).

Keywords: adult education; generic skills; Europe; language; competences

Introduction

In an early contribution to the debate on work-based skills, Wolf (1991, 2011) suggests that it would be a 'wild goose chase' to attempt to isolate and assess any generic notion of skills. Her argument rested on the assumption that generic skills can only be understood as situated practices and, therefore, that no reliable assessment can be made of them at different levels of ability. It was a persuasive argument at the time, yet largely unheeded by UK and European Union policy-makers in subsequent years.

Much of the literature on generic and transversal skills is descriptive and advocatory in nature. Rather surprisingly, there is little of it that attempts to theorise the nature of generic skills and even less that challenges existing theorisations (Barrow, 1991; Beckett, 2004). In this paper, I will explore the conceptual argument for adopting a decontextualized notion of generic skills. This theorisation of the concept will draw upon a wider cross-disciplinary literature, particularly from the fields of linguistics and social-cultural theories. Finally, although the paper does not offer an empirical analysis of generic skill practices, links will be made between theory and practice in exploring and developing generic skills within a European context, with particular reference to adult education.

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Generic skills

Within the policy-making discourse, generic skills are generally taken to mean a set of discrete clusters of skills or competencies, normally at a foundation level, that are transferable across different work contexts (European Communities, 2007). They are usually distinguished from basic skills and, it is claimed, can be identified and assessed at varying levels of ability. Although these clusters of skills and knowledge change over time, they have become increasingly identified with the work-based practices of communication, working with others, numeracy, problem solving and information technology. The theoretical argument in support of the concept of generic skills rests mainly on the twin ideas that skill sets reside within the individual and are transferable across boundaries. This notion of a transporting phenomenon seems intuitive enough, particularly when applied to contexts that are identical in nature. This process is represented in Figure 1:

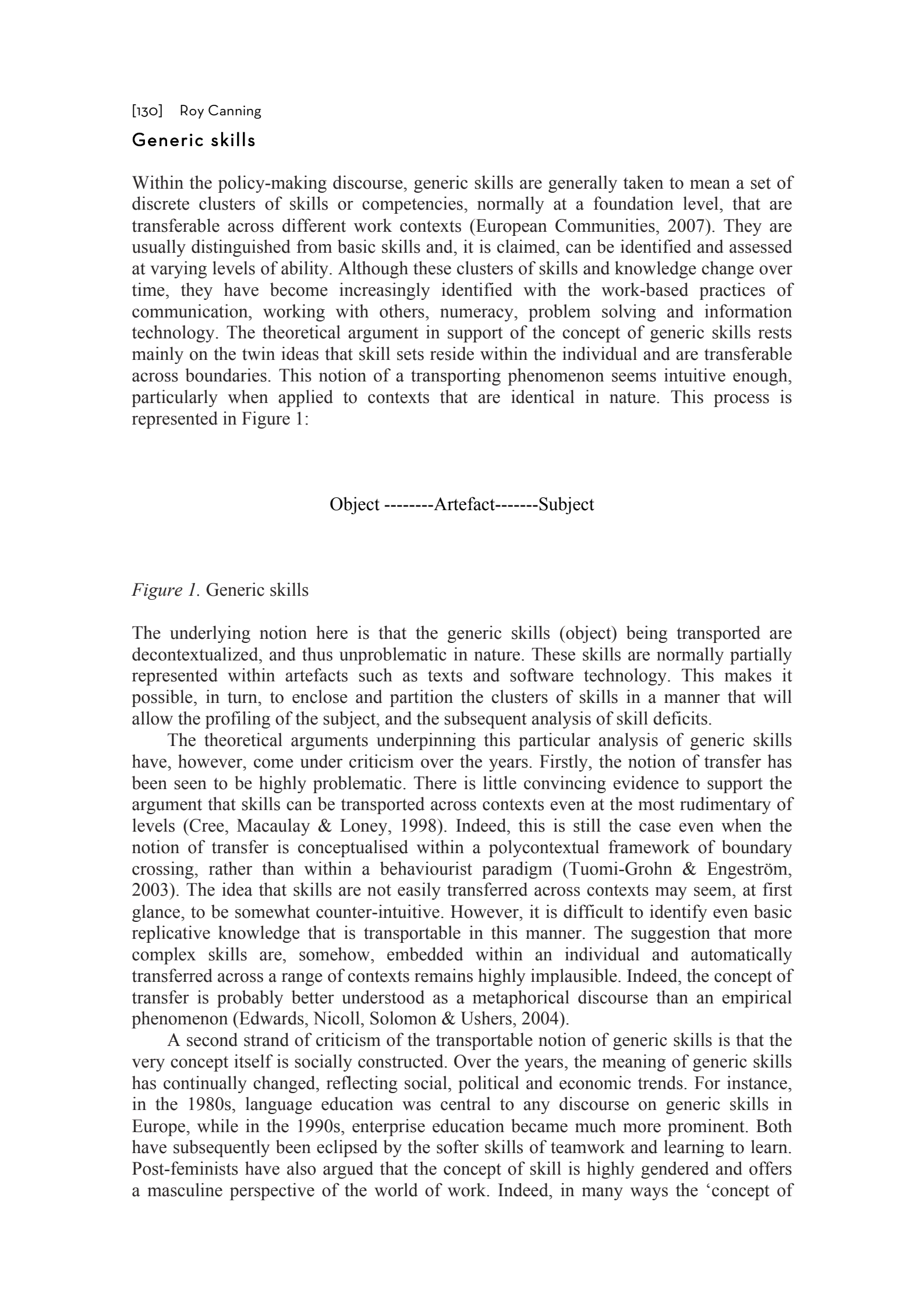

Figure 1. Generic skills

The underlying notion here is that the generic skills (object) being transported are decontextualized, and thus unproblematic in nature. These skills are normally partially represented within artefacts such as texts and software technology. This makes it possible, in turn, to enclose and partition the clusters of skills in a manner that will allow the profiling of the subject, and the subsequent analysis of skill deficits.

The theoretical arguments underpinning this particular analysis of generic skills have, however, come under criticism over the years. Firstly, the notion of transfer has been seen to be highly problematic. There is little convincing evidence to support the argument that skills can be transported across contexts even at the most rudimentary of levels (Cree, Macaulay & Loney, 1998). Indeed, this is still the case even when the notion of transfer is conceptualised within a polycontextual framework of boundary crossing, rather than within a behaviourist paradigm (Tuomi-Grohn & Engeström, 2003). The idea that skills are not easily transferred across contexts may seem, at first glance, to be somewhat counter-intuitive. However, it is difficult to identify even basic replicative knowledge that is transportable in this manner. The suggestion that more complex skills are, somehow, embedded within an individual and automatically transferred across a range of contexts remains highly implausible. Indeed, the concept of transfer is probably better understood as a metaphorical discourse than an empirical phenomenon (Edwards, Nicoll, Solomon & Ushers, 2004).

A second strand of criticism of the transportable notion of generic skills is that the very concept itself is socially constructed. Over the years, the meaning of generic skills has continually changed, reflecting social, political and economic trends. For instance, in the 1980s, language education was central to any discourse on generic skills in Europe, while in the 1990s, enterprise education became much more prominent. Both have subsequently been eclipsed by the softer skills of teamwork and learning to learn. Post-feminists have also argued that the concept of skill is highly gendered and offers a masculine perspective of the world of work. Indeed, in many ways the ‘concept of

skill has become bigger, broader and much fuzzier around the edges' (Warhurst, Grugulis & Keep, 2004, p. 14). Definitions of generic skills are, therefore, contested and the concept has increasingly become imbued with notions of emotive and aesthetic labour, and in turn, tangled up with attributes and dispositions.

Finally, a third criticism of generic skills derives from how learning is conceptualised. In recent reviews of the literature on work-based learning (Cullen, Hadjivassiliou, Hamilton, Kelleher, Sommerland & Stern, 2002; Fuller & Unwin, 2011), it is suggested that there is an emerging consensus on the importance of socio-cultural theories of learning. The theoretical work on 'communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and 'activity theory' (Engeström, 2001) has had a strong influence on how we think about learning in the workplace. The focus of learning has moved from the individual to the collective and from the abstract to the particular. This is not to deny the agency of the individual in the learning process, but to acknowledge the subject's often complex interchange with the collective. Increasingly, the literature is thus foregrounding the importance of the situatedness of practice and the dialogical interface between agency and structure.

These theoretical developments have a resonance with the work of Boreham (2004), who coins the concept of 'collective competence' as central to any understanding of the nature of learning at work. This socio-cultural conceptualisation of learning challenges our liberal humanist notions of the individual as a receptor of knowledge and, in turn, focuses our attention on collective activities that are context bound and situated.

In summary, the argument that has secured the foundation of a generic concept of skills, the transfer of learning, has become rather unconvincing in the light of recent research on both the theory of learning, and knowledge reproduction within organisational practices.

Reconceptualising generic skills

In many ways it is a more straightforward process to deconstruct a concept than it is to construct it in the first place. However, in the case of generic skills, the tools we have used to do the former will, in turn, be very useful in helping us to do the latter. The starting point is language and the way that we represent objects in the world (Johansen & Larsen, 2002). In Figure 2, below, the object in question are the day-to-day situated work-based practices that occur within a range of contexts.

In semiotic terms the object is polygonal, dispersed and situated; *multiple practices* (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Fenwick, 2010) that are embedded within social and work structures. However, these practices 'are not the same in every context and are often better understood as existing in the relations between people rather than residing in individuals' (Barton et al., 2000, p. 8). They are also typically a means to some end rather than an end in themselves (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In linguistic terms they are the signified, vernacular and situated objects of everyday practice. However, we represent objects in the world through the use of signs in order to conceptualise our thoughts and engage in discourse with others.

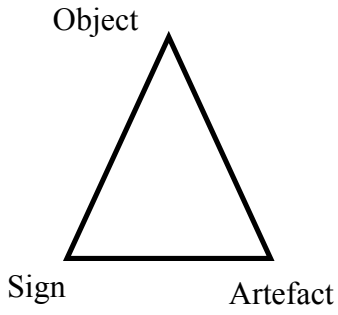

Figure 2. Semiotics and generic skills

Language plays an important role in this respect as a signifier of the object. However, the sign is not the object. In this case the sign (generic skills) is decontextualized and signals a complete independence of its placement in the world. This is not to say that there is no link between a sign and its object:

> A sign can in fact resemble the object (icon), it can point to or be attached to the object (index), or it can only be arbitrarily or conventionally associated with the object (symbol). (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 26)

In the case of generic skills, the most likely connection between sign and object is a *symbol* representing the socially constructed nature of the discourse. Indeed it could be argued that there is multiple signs being employed here, each reflecting a shifting and unstable notion of the underlying object.

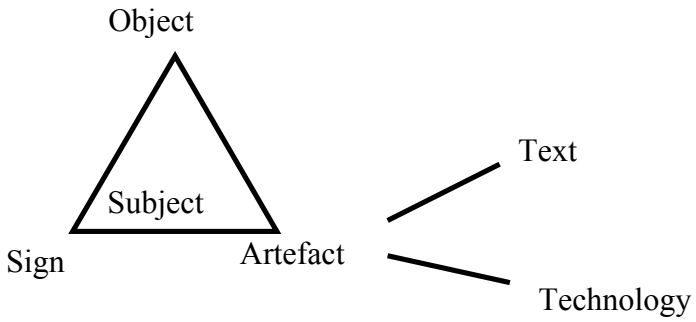

Figure 3. Objects, signs and artefacts

Artefacts

An artefact is commonly used to mediate between the sign and the subject (Figure 3)—for example, a qualifications framework or software programme of key competencies. The artefacts are typically text based or likely to incorporate technology applications. However, an important point here is that artefacts are never value free or neutral. They are embedded with the norms and assumptions that are implicit in how we think about the object. For instance, a highly gendered notion of appropriate working times

contained within a diarised work schedule. Artefacts can also be embedded with notions of the universal. This is typically represented in European debates on qualification frameworks (Cedefop, 2010a) and learning outcomes (Cedefop, 2010b). Interestingly, we can also have an artefact that is a text within a text. For instance, generic skill texts have been subsumed within curriculum texts as part of Scottish Vocational Education qualifications. They are described as front-ended sub-texts and are used in signposting intended generic skill outcomes. This *intertextuality* is a feature of curriculum development in Scotland and, rather interestingly, aligns with the intuitive idea of situating practice within a context, albeit a text within a text.

Artefacts can also be software technology applications. Like texts, these also embody socio-cultural constructs. Although this is not a form of hard determinism, in a technological sense, it is a type of soft determinism that incorporates implicit notions of power relationships and the social shaping of technology (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999). Often these artefacts are adopted at a local level, for example, using generic skill profiling applications when screening new students into adult education programmes. Rarely are the underlying assumptions of the social shaping of the technology unpacked or deconstructed in this process.

When conceptualising generic skills as decontextualised and abstract objects, the subject is often counter-imposed as an autonomous entity embodying transportable skills. This passive subject is then profiled against the object, normally through the use of an artefact, and skill deficits are identified that are in need of remedy. This institutional normalisation of the individual is then completed when the subject is partitioned within certificated chunk-sized learning blocks that attract funding. Although this process is largely accepted as the norm within educational institutions, debate continues amongst adult education practitioners as to whether these generic skill clusters can be taught as stand-alone modules (discrete texts) or need to be embedded within broader curriculum subject areas (intertextuality). The argument is, of course, meaningless as it assumes that the sign (generic skills) is indeed the object. The subject within this discourse then becomes problematic and identified as de-motivated or resistant. The normalisation of language is important in this context (Milana, 2012). For example, the nouns completion and retention are often used to describe successful institutional outcomes for students on certificated courses. However, both terms avoid any consideration of agency and normalise failure in terms of the subject. If we use the active verb of retained then this raises the question of who is doing the retaining and for what purpose. This normalisation of language has the added advantage of directing attention away from any possible systemic structural failures that may be ascribed to how generic skills are conceptualised and institutionalised within formal educational practices.

In summary, it is argued that signs represent objects in the world. These signs, however, are not the objects in question. They represent the object and may, indeed, be accepted as resembling the object to which they refer but they are constructions that provide us, at best, with a useful language or discourse. A danger here is that we start to believe that the signs are, indeed, the objects and can be used, through the mediation of artefacts, to profile and direct the subject.

Symbolic structures

A central argument of geosemiotics is that exactly *where* an activity takes place is an important part of its meaning (emplacement). If generic skills are theorised as transferable, decontextualised and unproblematic then they will be located in space and time as centred and timeless objects—in effect, as autonomous narratives encapsulating an objectified knowledge. It is a small step from here to then using artefacts to delineate, segregate and shape educational practice. The sign thus becomes the object and the subject, in turn, is then counter-posed as problematic and resistant, as they search for meaning where there is none. The artefacts are shaped within this model as alerting, diagnostic and placing tools and are often infiltrated into texts and sub-texts to assess ability.

If generic skills are reconceptualised as situated practices that are derived from where and how they are placed in the world then they become located in space and time as decentred and time-bound objects—in effect, as collective narratives embodying sociocultural practices that are localised and situated. The artefacts used in conjunction with these situated signs have an entirely different purpose. They are not there as delineating processes, but are used in a manner that will help our understanding of how generic skills can 'support, sustain, guide or impede learning and skill development' (Barton et al., 2000, p. 12). For instance, a learning journal based on a work experience activity. Here we attempt to both understand how people currently use generic skills in their everyday practices and, in turn, *how* and *where* we can immerse them in situated practices that will further develop these skills. The sign, in this scenario, is still not the object, but suggests a number of congruent and parallel practices that are particular and situated in nature.

I have argued previously that the relationship between sign and the object in generic skills is symbolic. This is recognised as part of the generic skill discourse, which as a social construction is both shifting and unstable. The notion of generic skills itself also suffers from a number of linguistic confusions, whereby it is often conflated with other terms that are distinctively different (basic skills) or converges with similar concepts that are nuanced in different ways (transversal skills). If generic skills are read as discursive practices, then any artefact that is used to mediate an object is both 'ideal' and 'material':

> Artefacts exhibit a dual nature in that they are simultaneously ideal and material. Their creators and users exhibit a corresponding duality of thought, at once grounded in the material here and now, yet simultaneously capable of entertaining the far away, the long ago, and the never has-been. (Cole, 1994, p. 94)

The more the artefact represents the local and situated, then the more likely it is to embody historical and socio-cultural aspects of practice (Daniels, 2001). Those in adult education often intuitively know this when they facilitate the process of informal learning (McGivney, 1999; European Union, 2012). However, if the artefact is embodied with notions of the abstract and transferable then it will be difficult to locate and engage with situated practices (objects). The best example of this type of dissonance was in the use of competence-based standards of education and training in the UK. These highly prescriptive narratives of learning outcomes became teaching and assessment texts within a 'tick-box' curriculum, often simply resulting in the recycling of past competences (Canning, 1999).

It is entirely possible to look in the situated context for skills; the artefact and skill are both situated and contextualised. For example congruent interchanges between object and artefact can be found within existing educational practices in adult education

centres. In community centres, adults can participate in productive and purposeful work experience programmes that include guided support from mentors. What is important here is *where* and *how* these material experiences are gained and whether they are interpreted as reflecting authentic and non-exploitative educational practices that are situated and contextualised (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

In summary, once the meta-narrative world of the abstract concept of 'generic skills' is vacated, then there is a need to grapple with the micro-analytic social–power relations of everyday professional practice. In doing so, it is possible to develop an account of how to relate symbolic structures conceptually to the actual practices and experiences of situated subjects (Kogler, 1999, p. 3).

In the first instance, this means recognising the 'tendency of language to extinguish itself as it brings the thing itself into language' (Kogler, 1999, p. 39). By conceptualising generic skills as transferable objects practitioners have 'submerged through self-evidence' (Kogler, 1999, p. 28) the very situated and decentred work-based practices that are of theoretical and practical interest—in effect creating symbolic structures that enclose the subject.

Not unsurprisingly, symbolic structures impact directly upon educational practices, particularly in the areas of pedagogy and accreditation. If generic skills are conceived of as abstract objects then it would be legitimate to teach and assess them as stand-alone decontextualised skills. Likewise, if they were embedded generic skills then it would be plausible to submerge them within existing curricula and assess them by proxy on the achievement of qualifications. However, if generic skills are recognised as representations of objects then an *immersion* pedagogy of educational placements would be more appropriate, to enable students to engage productively with the multiple and diverse socio-cultural practices that are situated within workplaces.

European policy dimensions

Policy development in adult and vocational education in the EU has tended to support the use of generic skills, competence-based standards and learning outcome approaches to education and training. These outcome-based methodologies have been used in conjunction with diagnostic assessment tools in the form of accreditation of prior learning technologies and ECVET modular systems. In order to help navigate this often messy and complex terrain of EU curricula offerings we have been presented with a new array of signs and symbols that have been embedded within essentialist and abstract concepts of skills and competences. For instance, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is characterised by the notions of seemless progression, equivalences and common flexible curricula architectures. In practice there is little evidence to date to suggest that these symbolic structures are anything more than ideal and representational. Indeed it could be argued that meaning collapses in the representation of generic skills as real. For example when stand-alone Key Skills were introduced in England under Curriculum 2000 (Hodgson, Spours & Waring, 2011). In Scotland, policy-making has been somewhat more circumspect. No attempt was made to assess stand-alone generic skills given the resistance by teachers. However, not to be deterred, a policy of embedding generic skills within a neoliberal notion of the curriculum was pursued and institutionalised within the 14–19 curriculum. This, in turn, has lead to students being given formal recognition for embedded core skills that they have no awareness of ever doing. Interestingly, a recent decision taken in England to abolish National Vocational

Qualifications (NVQs), the iconic competence-based awards that instigated the new-vocationalism in the the UK, could be interpretated as a a case of systemic policy failure. This at a time when outcome-based qualifications and the concept of competence has taken hold in the EU.

In summary, the European literature challenges us to think about how we conceptualise skills and competences within a broader set of cultural perogatives. It does so by questioning and problematizing the notion that skills can be transversal and decontextualized. It highlights the productivity of understandings of local, situated practices and thus of the acknowledgement and cognisance of the micro-political and social-cultural aspects of learning at work. A good example of this process is the space given to member countries in the EU to define and enact the concept of competence in a manner that is meaningful to them within local contexts. It also challenges us to continually problematize the use of representational ontologies that depict and mobilise technologies and artifacts in adult education. Instead, it potentially offers a collective and negotiated platform for promoting learning.

Conclusions

The paper, through reviewing the literature from linguistics, geosemiotics and socio-cultural theory, has argued against adopting an essentialist and abstract notion of generic or transversal skills. Instead it encourages us to pay more attention to how we use language and where and how objects are placed within the world. This, in turn, focuses our attention to the particular and embedded opportunities for learning e.g situated practices. However, it needs to be acknowledged that there are limitations to using a semiotic of significations model as we remain within a representationalist ontology: things still stand for other things. We need in other words to go beyond the use of language and the picture theory of truth. This requires us to replace concern with meaning by concern with use (Wittgenstein, 1958). It is where meaning has been written into things and not layered over them (Wittgenstein, 1958). It also acknowledges that the particular and universal can co-habit the same space and time. That one need not exist only in the absence of the other or as Brandom (2008) would claim a set of doings and sayings that reflect both use and meaning.

So why, then, do these ideas of transferable decontextualised generic skills persist? Perhaps this is more of a sociological question and as Young (2000, p. 524) points out, ‘fundamentally flawed ideas persist because they have powerful social functions in society’. In this case they reflect both employer interests and a technical rationality approach to educational practices. It does seem likely, therefore, that the ‘wild goose chase’ will persist as those involved continue to entertain ‘the far away, the long ago, and the never has-been’ (Cole, 1994, p. 94) notion of generic skills.

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From workers education to societal competencies: Approaches to a critical, emancipatory education for democracy

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Abstract

This article presents two conceptions concerning critical political education for workers, developed in Germany in the 1960s and the 1990s respectively. First, the conception of "Sociological Imagination and Exemplary Learning" published in 1968 by the German philosopher and sociologist Oskar Negt (1975). Further the elaboration of this conception, which since the 1980s is known as "Societal Competencies" (Negt, 1986). These competencies concern fundamental knowledge, which enables people to make political judgments, and act politically in democratic societies in an enlightened and reflected way. This conception deliberately distinguishes itself from the economic, instrumentalist notions of key qualifications and key competencies, which at least since the 1970s have been discussed with the aim of maintaining individual employability and competitiveness. 'Societal competencies' aim for individual and collective emancipation, the development of the capability to make judgments, and autonomy in the sense of the enlightened political agency and participation in democratization processes.

Keywords: workers education; societal competencies; enlightenment; emancipation; education for democracy

Introduction

The question, of which qualifications and competencies people need in work life for their profession, and for social life in democratic societies, has been discussed at length. It has been triggered and framed by political and economic goals, which were consequences of modernisation processes. Modernisation requires people to adapt to developments, as well as to participate in creating them. Modernisation was and is, accompanied by changes in the world of work. Today's, structures, work organisations,

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and requirements for workers, are quite different from those in previous industrial, service, and knowledge-based societies. The outcomes of economic and societal changes due to modernisation processes, and how people should react to them, or to which extent they should anticipate them, has been discussed since the industrialisation process in the 19th century. These debates have taken place across a spectrum between the poles of adaptation, and resistance.

On the one hand, there have been arguments for individual adaptation, so as to secure individual competitiveness, and employability. On the other hand it was asked, how societies could maintain the idea of a humane society in which solidarity among workers is possible–despite increased expectations for individual self-responsibility, which is based on appropriate knowledge and social competence.The discourse of key qualifications and competencies is situated in this context. The changes in the world of work and increasingly fast changing qualification demands, led to the development of concepts which aimed at long-term skills, applicable in and transferable to different situations. These so called, key qualifications are based on economic rationales and relate to professional activity and agency. At the same time however, a different discussion developed on critical competency, also related to professional agency (Geissler, 1974).

Ten years later Oskar Negt presented his concept of 'societal competencies' (Negt, 1986). Through the acquisition of societal competencies, educational processes within the framework of enlightenment are expected to take place. Through engagement with the societal competencies people acquire knowledge and will reflect on their positions. This can lead to judgmental and critical skills necessary for political agency and individual and collective emancipation. Johanno Strasser engages critically with both poles of the competence discussion. For him the central theme is the (contradictory) relation between human development in the sense of enlightenment and the neoliberal view of exploiting and instrumentalising human labour, which many consciously or unconsciously accept.

> Employability as a goal for an independent personal development is an abuse of the emancipation pathos of modernity as a name for the most radical alienation. Kant's famous expression 'exit from it's self-incurred immaturity', the activist concept of individual self determination, is here reinterpreted in a passive key, so that the universal exploitability emerges as the peak of human development. Life's ideal is no more that of the autonomous individual actively shaping his own life, but the comprehensive self-instrumentalisation for heteronomous purposes, the usability, a life in the passive mode. (Strasser, 2001, pp. 36-37)

It is the aim of this contribution to present through examples, *one* strand in this competence discussion, which goes back to the German sociologist and philosopher Oskar Negt. He launched this in the 1980s, strictly reframing from the key qualification debate based on economic arguments. For him, competence means stimulating societal, political, economical and philosophical thinking, enabling people to understand societal relations, to critically assess and evaluate social developments, and to enable political action.

This is an elaboration of a conception for critical workers education, which Negt developed together with others in the 1960s. For a better understanding, I will first present his conception of 'Sociological Imagination and Exemplary Learning', which he wrote as a theoretical foundation, and at the same time as a didactic-methodical guideline for a critical workers and trade union education. In a second step, I will present the conception of 'societal competencies', which is meant as a basic, critical

political education for all interested people. Finally, I will discuss the particular nature of these conceptions in relation to that of key qualifications and competence, based on economic rationales.

'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' as a conception for critical workers education in the 1960s and 1970s

The social changes in the 1960s weaknesses in economic development, and the first signs of restructuring West-Germany from an industrial, into a service society, led the German trade unions to a discussion about how to influence the political and economic structure of the Federal Republic. Especially in the metal workers union IGMetall (IGM), there were discussions between trade unionists, social scientists and adult educators who were engaged in critical workers and trade union education. The discussions raised questions about the social development and considered how trade unions and the working class could influence the emergent social structure. The participants were convinced that a societal transition into a humane, just and practised democracy was necessary. In this sense the discussion was normative–an essential aspect of the conception.

Content argument and objectives of the conception

The book *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen* by Oskar Negt (1968) was written in the context of a long reflection process from end of the 1950s by the IGM about the relations between the organisational, political and bargaining work of the unions. It was triggered among other things by the Godesberger Program of the Social Democrat Party (SPD, 1959), in which the party ceased to define itself primarily as the representative of workers' interests, but opened up for the middle class. Consequently, the trade unions not only defended their right to negotiate collective bargaining agreements, but also saw themselves as the main representatives of the political and social interests of the workers. The IGM developed 'workplace based education activity' (betriebsnahe Bildungsarbeit), by which it was hoped that not only trade union officers, but all members could be educated in political and trade union matters. In this way the idea of a mass education of workers from the time of the Weimar republic (1919-1933) was revived.

At a conference in Lambrecht (Pfalz) in 1966, the first draft of the book, *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen* was discussed. At the same time, ARBEIT UND LEBEN Niedersachsen, Niedersachsen (an association of folk high schools and trade unions), the IGM and another big trade union, the IG-Chemie, decided to implement new forms of workers education. ARBEIT UND LEBEN Niedersachsen was asked to organize the new courses. Since there was no theoretical conception nor teaching materials for this new format of workers education, the participants of the Lambrecht meeting were commissioned to write a manual concerning workplace based education. In 1968, Oskar Negt published the book *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen,* as a theoretical foundation for an emancipatory workers education (Negt, 1975). Negt understood his conception as a response to the theoretical decline in the labour movement in general, and of the workers education in particular. In his view, trade union education work was characterized by, 'a deep division between the economic struggle in the unions and the political struggle of the

labour parties'(Negt, 1975, p. 17). In this phase workers education related theoretically to a Marxist point of view, which predominated the educational debates in the 1960s. This was, however, no more the case for workers in general, as Negt stated:

> An immediate, self-evident connection between the emancipative objectives of the labour movement and a theory that would underpin it scientifically cannot any more be assumed in the traditional way. Nowadays, the information delivered by empirical knowledge must be subject to a sociological and political interpretation, in order to become usable for the emancipatory struggle of the working class and for a reasonable organisation of the society as a whole. The breakdown of the socialist theory cannot be restored at once. The conception that is presented here gives a response to this theoretical breakdown and characterizes an experimental level, which seems meaningful today for a reconstitution of the theory in connection with practical interests. (Negt, 1975, p. 18)

Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen was a first proposal for a theory of emancipatory workers education and at the same time a critique, 'If and when the workers education in terms of content and method take an independent position against the bourgeois educational institutions it will at the same time assume an eminently enlightening political function' (Negt, 1975, p. 20). At the same time as the conception was provided, didactic principles for critical workers education, were developed and practised in trade union education (Brock, 1999; Negt, 2010). Basic objectives were:

- The political enlightening of the working class in order to give them, 'the possibility to democratically control administrative and bureaucratic decisions' (Negt, 1975, p. 29).
- To define education as the development of class-consciousness, in critical opposition to the bourgeois notion of education, 'it must include the whole content of the trade union education in the strategy of politicisation for the working class, in which education unambiguously is defined as the building of class consciousness' (Negt, 1975, p. 30).

The objective of critical workers education is not the, 'acquisition of information for organisational practice' (Negt, 1975, p. 23), as usually is the case in the trade union education. Rather, 'the worker's existence as a whole social phenomenon … is central to a trade union education, which is aware of the risks, as well as the increased chances of changes of attitude in unstructured situations' (Negt, 1975, p. 34). In modern terms, Negt aims at a holistic concept of education, which positions the learning subject in the focus of attention. It aims not only at the acquisition of knowledge, but the point is to address the human being, in his or her, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions, by means of a holistic thinking, derived from subjective and collective experiences. Negt understands political enlightenment as the ability of the worker to analyse societal conditions in context, to interpret them, to explain the causes of human misery, and to develop strategies against them.

> Following the so called, "exemplary principle" learners should be enabled to translate, analytical-scientific information into concrete and intelligible, non-scientific forms of language and thought, which in terms of their political and sociological substance can motivate for social action. This is the "cardinal problem" of an exemplary consciousness-building of workers. (Negt, 1975, p. 29)

Methodical-didactic approach and implementation of the conception

Negt's conception 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' was developed independently, but the concept of 'exemplary learning in school didactics' was developed at the same time. In Negt's conception, the purpose is not only to generate general insights from specific cases, or to reduce a crowded curriculum. Rather, he aimed at a holistic view of societal phenomena. He wanted to put them in their sociological context and thereby develop sociological thinking, 'sociological imagination':

> The whole, in this sense, is the totality of the societal production, and reproduction processes, in a historical dimension and across divisions of labour. The specific, is the sociological fact, which is significant for social life, for social classes, and for individuals. (Negt, 1975, p. 29)

'The exemplary' is gained from the experience of the learners and is therefore the inescapable connecting point for learning:

> The exemplary educational value of a particular topic is determined by three factors: Its proximity to individual interests, its elements of workers' consciousness which points beyond immediate interests and deals with general societal relations, and finally the importance of the contents for the emancipation of workers. (Negt, 1975, p.97)

The second part of the conception relates to the development of 'sociological imagination' by learning processes. There, Negt refers to the idea of 'sociological imagination' as developed by American sociologist, Mills, C. Wright (1963). The particular nature of the conception 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' is not to see learning primarily as individual acquisition of knowledge (emphasizing an instrumental understanding), but to conceive learning as a way to individual, and collective self determination, and emancipation (emphasizing the political nature of learning). Learning as a social process, depends on communication, exchange, and reciprocal understanding. Learners are not objects and targets for teaching, but subjects in their own learning process, while they define their own learning interests, acquire necessary knowledge that they reflect on and apply in practice. The learner autonomously decides in the learning process whether he or she needs guidance. Critics interpreted this dimension, included in the method, as paternalistic or dominating. In response to these criticisms, Negt said:

> (…) Fundamentally it [exemplary learning] just systematizes the real learning behaviour of workers, and attempts to drive this already on-going process further in a conscious and planned way, to make its political content visible. (Negt, 1978, p. 82).

The end of the 1960s restructured the trade union education activities of IGMetall. Based on Negt's conception, a series of work materials were produced in the form of booklets, the so called, "Topics of the Workplace" (Themenkreis Betrieb). Each of them dealt within one theme with basic problems derived from workers' everyday existence and took forward exemplary problems and conflicts so as to unfold them in learning processes. Themes were:

- Industrial work and power
- The conflict about wages and performance
- The representation of employees' interests on plant or company level
- The value of people in the workplace. (cf. Brock, et al. 1969; 1975a; 1975b).

When in the 1970s the IGM discontinued using the workplace booklets, this conception of learning was used and discussed in other contexts.

Societal competencies as a conception for critical political education from the 1980s

At the occasion of a 20-years anniversary conference on 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen', Negt discussed the contemporary relevance of 'societal competence', and presented a new elaboration of the conception, taking into consideration some of the new social and political developments, which were emerging in the 1980s. The point of departure for his argument was the observation of a social crisis that he evidenced by the strengthening of conservatism in politics and society. He characterized this crisis as the 'de-collectivisation of the interests of workers, by microscopic attacks on the welfare state, and by loss or transformation of established rights' (Negt, 1986, p. 34). This had led to uncertainty and loss of orientation, which in his opinion could only be overcome through critical learning processes.

> It is a crisis that you might name an erosion of the culturally given. A crisis situation that people cannot meet in habitual ways, i.e. on the basis of what they have learned, and further do not know exactly what stable orientations are. (Negt, 1986, p. 33)

That old orientation loose their validity, while new ones are yet not available, is by the subjects experienced as a crisis, and as threatening. Already in 1960s, Negt had been speaking of this as an, 'ambivalence in the consciousness and emotional state of the worker' (Negt, 2010, p. 270), which he also related to the disintegration of the working class in modern societies. The 'basic ambivalence, which lies in the objective condition of existence' (op. cit.), results according to Negt in a dilemma, 'He does not any more want to be a worker, but cannot get rid of the feeling that he must remain a worker for ever' (op. cit.). In a way, people 20 years later also lived with ambivalence and uncertainty, even if they did not any more consciously relate this to their class position. In developing the concept of 'societal competencies', Negt introduced a new approach for trade union and political education. His starting-point is the following question:

> What must a worker, and not only a worker, but any human being know today in order to feel at ease in the world, so that his dependencies are not increasing, but that his autonomy grows? (Negt, 1986, p. 35)

Genesis and implications of 'Societal competencies'

The conception that Negt presented in its first version in this lecture can be connected with different educational discourses and debates.

1. It integrates humanistic, critical and emancipatory positions of (adult) education, which are committed to enlightenment and personal development for autonomy, judgement and agency.
2. It connects to a discourse about the integration of general, vocational and political education, which has a long tradition in the German education and adult

education discussion, mostly in the form of a dualism. This dualism has not been bridged completely up to today.
3. The conception is a proposal for a political adult education as an absolute necessity as a foundation for democratic structures and a lived, practiced and developing democracy
4. The conception can also be seen as a humanistic justification for lifelong learning, in the sense it was already developed in the 1960s by UNESCO, focussing on personal development and skills for social participation
5. Finally, the conception stands up against the functionalistic and instrumental discourse of key qualifications and competencies, which has dominated in Germany since the 1970s. (Negt, 2010, pp. 209; 218ff)

The diagnosis of crisis as the starting-point for the formulation of the competencies accompanies the development of this conception, together with the ambition to form the foundation for a critical and emancipatory political and trade union education. The changes in the welfare state which, Negt characterized in 1986 as microscopic (the reduction in the rights of employees and the changes in the world of work) are more serious today after 20 years of neoliberal economic, financial, and labour market policy, and their visible economic and social consequences. Experiences of crisis, as immensity and lack of orientation, uncertainty and so forth, are increasing rather than decreasing. Even more than before, people need to develop societal competencies such as political utopian imagination and action skills, if they want to influence their living conditions.

The genesis of the conception was not immediate. First in between the years of 1986 and 1988, Negt talked about 'alternative key qualifications', in opposition to the instrumental idea of key qualifications in vocational education (Mertens, 1974; Zeuner, 2009). By broadening the debate from the key qualification to competence, Negt introduced the conception of 'societal competencies' (gesellschaftliche kompetenzen) in the 1980s. Since its first launch, to its present versions (e.g. Negt, 2010), this notion of competence has undergone several amendments and changes. Today it includes the following competencies (Negt, 2010, pp. 218-234):

- Identity competence
- Historical competence
- Awareness of, and competence in, social justice
- Technological competency
- Ecological competency
- Economical competency

Contents of the 'societal competencies'

The acquisition of the societal competencies aims at supporting the personal development of people, so that beside the necessary vocational, social and practical skills they also have competencies that expand their personal, social and political space of action. The acquisition of the competencies will help them 'to understand existing relations in the contemporary world and to relate critically to the existing reality in order to initiate necessary reframing processes' (Negt, 1993, p. 662). Societal competencies should be seen as a goal of political education rather than as a didactic or methodological principle. Negt defines a particular idea of learning for the societal competencies, which is not based on the accumulation of knowledge

> Education, self-education, personal development, learning to learn, balance between learning of cognitive, social and emotional competencies, emancipation through education – these are keywords which refer to individual orientation, to individual self-understanding. (Negt, 1998, p. 58)

As in the conception, 'Soziologische Phantasie und Exemplarisches Lernen', the experiences of the learner as subject, play a decisive role in the unfolding of 'societal competencies'. They are the starting-point for individual and collective learning. For Negt, the recurrent return to subjective experience is a necessary condition for learning and understanding. The goal is then to think beyond experiences, which are reflected upon, to draw conclusions, gain knowledge and to formulate alternative visions. A precondition is to acquire knowledge:

> A person who exclusively relies on his own experiences does not know about the conditions on which these experiences are supported, and also does not know how these conditions might be changed, enabling new experiences. He needs knowledge, which is independent of the situation, which does not fit entirely in his situation. However, he also needs knowledge that can be translated into his situation. Knowledge, which does not reach into one's own life-situation, does not work. It leads to abstract knowledge about a societal event that is of no use to him. (Negt, 1986, p. 35)

The goal of learning is to discover relationships between societal conditions, developments and processes, considering their mutual interdependencies, as well as their contradictory and sometime reciprocal relations. Only in this way can the learner obtain, 'the conscious understanding of relations between the interests of the learning subject and the objective world' (Negt, 2010, p. 215). The orientation, which is mediated in the development of 'societal competencies' should counteract the fragmentation of life contexts and individual knowledge, and thereby also support an engagement with societal questions of existence (Negt, 1993).

Negt interpreted these fragmentations as emerging from the conscious intervention of those with political interest, in school, in the workplace, in politics and media, which reduces the transparency and increases the uncertainty for the individual, while stabilising the social system. The development of 'societal competencies' aims at, orientational thinking, i.e. concrete thinking, and this means thinking considering underlying relations and coherences' (Negt, 2010, p. 217). In view of changing political, social, and economic conditions in societies, promoted through the increasing modernisation accompanying globalisation, acceleration of development, the economisation of the life-world, and the individualisation, alienation of people, and decreasing transparency, it is hoped that the acquisition of the societal competencies will contribute to:

- A realization and explanation of social life conditions
- An understanding of the connections between personal experiences and political, societal and social events and developments
- A critical relation to these conditions on the basis of an ability of judgment
- The development of utopian ideas in order to restructure societies in the direction of further democratisation

The social competencies should not be understood as a transmitter of a predefined canon of knowledge. The learners should instead develop their competencies, reaching a stronger orientation, by uncovering the relations between 'the interest of the learning

subjects and the objective world' (Negt, 2010, p. 215). The essential contents and perspectives of these competencies are briefly summarized in the following:

- Identity competence, also called a competence of self-perception and perception of others. It empowers the individual to understand fundamental changes of society that partly lead to dissolution of traditional structures in society, family, and working environment. Being obliged to cope with new realities, the individual need higher competence to face threatened or disrupt identity. The development of new, individual, and societal values is integrative part of a future-oriented learning.
- Historical Competence, the capacity of remembering of human beings and of society determines also their future. This competence comprehends the development of "competence for utopia" which enables the individual to think in alternatives, to develop imagination in order to aim at societal changes and to implement them.
- Awareness of- and Competence in Social Justice. In society, individuals are often faced with the loss of individual and societal rights. To make this "expropriation" visible and understandable and to strengthen the normal feeling for justice of the individual, they have to learn the competence to perceive right and injustice, equality and non-equality and the interests behind them.
- Technological Competence. This is not only individual application of technological development in the sense of capacity, but also the competence to understand societal consequences of technological – positive and negative – developments in order to understand technique as a "societal project".
- Ecological Competence, the natural basis of human existence and of existence of other living beings shall be recognised, taken care of and preserved. Not only understanding external destruction of environment and preventing this, but also recognising the "inner nature", the internal structures of subjects and their human design, and the careful treatment of human beings, non-human beings and nature.
- Economic Competence, the individual shall be able to recognise and to explain economic relationships, dependencies and development. This shall lead to the development of a well-defined point of view. This aims at making clear the relationship between subjective needs and interests, and the surrounding objective world economy. (Negt, 2010, pp. 218-234)

Competencies therefore relate to one's own personality (identity competence), in their relationship to socially defined culture and tradition (historical competence, awareness of andcompetence in, social justice), to their environment (ecological, and technological competence) and to societal and economic developments (economic competence). Thus, these six competencies cannot be separated from each other since they are parts of a unit, i.e. the life world and the environment in the largest sense of the meaning. Oskar Negt sees fact-based relations and connections between competences as specifically important:

> General rules for "relationship" don't exist. The relationship as I understand it is not a formal technique of combining individual characteristics therefore this competence should rather be called a specific way of thinking, a clear theoretical *sensibility* based on the active development of the *competence of differentiating*. Not to separate what goes together, not to destroy the suggestive appearance of the directly visible and to call it

> transferred or, in terms content-wise relations, to separate reason and justified – these would be concrete working rules to test the facts. This is nothing else than critique; the other side of this further-developed competence of differentiating would be a new definition of relationships … If in learning this *theoretical sensibility for relationship* gets completely lost all remaining societal key qualifications are inevitably reduced to instrumental abstractions, that is, integrated and preserved for dominating use. (Negt, 1990, p. 19).

To create relationship and connections may thus be interpreted as a 'meta competence', which is important for the understanding and development of the other societal competencies. It comprehends knowledge that is independent of situations and it cannot be seen isolated. "If 'relationship' is the reason for learning, then *dialectical thinking,* i.e. the living development in contradictions that can neither be denied nor deviated, is of extreme actuality" (Negt, 1993, p. 661). The concept of the societal competencies requires on the one hand that politically interested people acquire knowledge. On the other hand should the engagement with these specific competencies strengthen judgmental ability, agency, and lead to the development of a political position.

Didactic-methodical realization of the conception

Negt worked out the above competencies in a number of articles and lectures, whereas their conversion into a curriculum for political and trade union education followed in a European project between 2003 and 2005[1]. This project wanted to stand clear of any discussion of economic qualification and competencies, which had taken place mainly under keywords like 'employability' and 'flexibility'. Nevertheless, participants were to be responsive to the on-going political, social and economic changes, including globalisation, and likewise changes in work life, the sectorial shifts and the changes in work life, and work organisation, were to be taken into consideration. It was also taken into consideration that more autonomy, decision making, and responsibility is required from the employees and greater cognitive abilities for the future. These more or less irreversible developments were integrated into the curriculum, to support learners in thinking independently, to develop and improve their abilities in critique, reflection and democratic participation, both in work life and a political, societal and European context (cf. Zeuner, et al. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2005e; 2005f; Zeuner 2009).

Didactically, the development of the curriculum first related to the 1960s conception,'Soziologischen Phantasie und des exemplarischen Lernens'. The focus was then the experience of the learning subject. Second, the curriculum was based on didactic analysis following, Wolfgang Klafki, who defines the following criteria for the selection of examples:

1. Actuality, the connection between the theme and the learners' recent experience?
2. Future significance, the relevance of the theme for the future of people?
3. Substance, in which greater context does the theme belong? Which sub-areas does it cover? What could make the theme less accessible to the participants?
4. Exemplarity, which more general substance or general problem can be understood through this theme?
5. Accessibility, which problems might emerge by the work with this theme? How might the theme become interesting for the participants? (Klafki, 1996, pp. 270-284).

Beside knowledge acquisition, the purpose was to stimulate active participation in society. For this reason the work booklets were also inspired by Paolo Freire's method

principles, structured along the three steps, 'See, Assess, Act', in this case, 'Observe, Understand, Political practice' (Freire, 1978). These didactic-methodical pre-considerations were transformed into a shared scaffold for each of six study materials, covering each one of the social competencies, with background knowledge, cases and study guidance relating the particular competence to the environment in the participating countries (Zeuner, et al. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2005e; 2005f). The goal is to offer participants the opportunity to acquire knowledge about a particular theme and at the time stimulate the development of his/her own interest in the content by presenting the theme from different perspectives. Work with the study materials should make visible for the learner that the starting-point for the societal competencies is consideration of the unfolding of a democratic society. Historical and social contexts can be experienced collectively while relating to subjective experiences and biographical localisation. In establishing a public sphere or space, the learner should open themselves to opportunities to question social, political, and economic conditions, and, together with others, those to reflect on, test and implement ways to social change. The engagement with societal competence should lead to political practice. Therefore, the project members deliberately decided not to substitute the term 'competence' with terms like 'education' (bildung) or 'knowledge' (op. cit). The idea was to prevent the term competence from being intrumentalised in one direction, for example focussing on an economic understanding of competencies. This would lead to the effect, that different possible meanings of a term are being disguised.

Summary

The aim of this contribution, with reference to a concept of critical workers education by Oskar Negt, and the 'societal competencies' for critical workers and basic political education, that the concept of 'competence' can be justified and defined in different ways. In this case the concept does not refer to instrumental, economic approaches, as was the case with key qualifications or vocationally related notions of competence. Here the point is the unfolding of critical thinking and understanding, with the view to changing society in the direction of a deepened democracy. This does not mean that development of societal competencies is only based on the learning of a knowledge canon. In contrary, the acquisition of knowledge in regard to the societal competencies aims at the development of a person as a whole. Like his earlier conception, 'Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen' (Negt, 1978), aims at the ability of people to analyse their living and working conditions, to recognize interests and power relations and dominance as historically grown and founded, and to understand and critically question their own role in this context. At the same time, they should be enabled to see alternatives and act towards changing social conditions. In this sense, Negt developed with these competencies a more radical concept of education.

> Education conceptions do not emerge in a societally neutralized, empty space. Generally they also do not emerge, if they are societally efficient, at the desk, but in the observations, assessments, tendencies, and not the least in the results obtained in a cooperative context. (Negt, 1986, p. 32)

In such a conception, the ambition, or pretention for societal changes is one related to wider political, economic, and global contexts. It has frequently been criticized that these social competencies, which are politically argued, and designed for utilisation as

political agency, are already surpassed in relation to their theoretical justification, based as it is in enlightenment thought, critical theory and political economy. This critique seems refuted when one looks at the causes, and consequences, of the contemporary economic and political crisis in Europe. Only the understanding of causes, relations, and consequences of this crisis, and the development of alternatives, may possibly resolve it. The political ideology of, 'there is no alternative (TINA)' seduces individuals to political abstinence, ignorance of societal circumstances, and loss of solidarity. The acquisition of societal competencies can, by involvement, and political engagement, lead to an improvement of the social and political circumstances in terms of democratisation:

> If you do not understand democracy as simply a system of rules, which can be learned and followed once and forever, but as a form of life, then political education, and its different elements, like orientation, knowing, learning, experiencing and judgment connected with each other, is a substantial foundation for a civil organisation of society. It is obvious that in such a difficult process of understanding as the one in Europe, which affects the distinctive traditions and the sovereignty rights in very different nations, the development of political judgment must be an essential medium for a peaceful and solidary communication between people. (Negt, 2012, p. 61, underscored in the original text.)

In this sense, the concept of 'societal competencies' was developed in the tradition of the critical educational theory. It has as its aim: learning, education (bildung), and the enlightenment of humankind. It not only sees individual learning and forthcoming as the main objective, but the improvement of a humane, democratic society. This overall goal is deeply rooted in a humanistic point of view that is often overlooked or denied in today's discourses on competences. In this sense, the conception of the 'societal competencies' coincides with the notion of the American adult educator, Stephen Brookfield, who claims that a critical approach of adult education should full fill certain learning tasks in order to:

> Recognise and challenge ideology that attempts to portray the exploitation of the many by a few as a natural state of affairs, learning to pursue liberation, learning to reclaim reason, and learning to practise democracy (Brookfield, 2005, p. 39).

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Notes

[1] Translation, "political education" refers to the German term, "politische bildung". More common English terms, like "education for democracy" or "citizenship education", do not really coincide with Negt's intentions of the conception.

[2] The project "Political Participation through societal competencies: Curriculum development for basic political education" was conducted as a Grundtvig Project within the Socrates Program of the European Union. In this project 20 scientists and educators from Denmark, Germany, Latvia, Austria and Poland from the following Institutions: Universität Flensburg, Institut für Allgemeine Pädagogik und Erwachsenenbildung/Weiterbildung (Project management, D); Roskilde Universitet, Institut for

Uddannelsesforsking (DK); Akademie für Arbeit und Politik an der Universität Bremen (D); Landesverband der Volkshochschulen Schleswig-Holstein (D); Oswald-von-Nell-Breuning-Haus Herzogenrath (D); Universität Klagenfurt (AT), Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft und Bildungsforschung, Abt. Erwachsenenbildung und Berufsbildung (AT); Universität Wien, Institut für Politikwissenschaft (AT); Bildungshaus des Landes Steiermark, Schloß Retzhof (AT); Latvijas Pieauguso izglitibas apvieniba (Verband der Erwachsenenbildungseinrichtungen in Lettland) (LV); Fundacja Krzyzowa' dla Porozumienia Europejskiego (Stiftung Kreisau für europäische Verständigung) (PL). Further participants in the cooperation were trade unions in the participating countries. (Project: 110622-CP1-2003-1-DE-Grundtvig-G1). (cf. Zeuner et al. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2005d; 2005e; 2005f; Zeuner 2009).

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Beyond the current political economy of competence development

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Abstract

Competence is a concept imported into the adult and continuing education arena from the psychological terminology of human resource development in work organizations. It has been elevated to a societal and political level as part of a new discursive regime. This article points out the significance of the particular circumstances in which the competence discourse has emerged, and argues for its critical investigation within a Marxist framework. A new discourse of learning and competence reflects a new material dependency of capital(ism) on the concrete quality of work and workers, requiring a total program of learning for work. This opens a new arena of political struggle over the direction of learning processes and the participation of workers in work and society. The socio-economic realities and a new understanding of the interrelationship between knowledge, skills, learning and practice central to the competence concept, raises a potential issue about the role of work and the living worker in a capitalist economy. This requires a re-development of the notion of economy based in the value and interest of working people, and enabled by the full development of the competences of the workers themselves. A notion of the "political economy of working people" is proposed as a framework for investigating the potentials of competence development for enhanced democracy.

Keywords: competence; qualification; subjectivity; profession; political economy of working people

Introduction

The notion of competence has flooded political, educational as well as academic discourses on adult education and adult learning since the middle of 1990s. It is a psychological term, imported from discourses of human resource development in work organizations, and elevated to a societal and political level. It is part of a cluster of new policy concepts of learning and educational practice. In this sense there is a competence regime emerging. The reception of this competence discourse and regime in the

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educational professions and institutions has been uncomfortable, and mainly led to a critique of the power of this discourse, questioning its consistency and pointing out its building through power relations. But a discourse shift is often also a symptom of emerging problems and new issues.

In its historical context the introduction of the notion of competence can be seen as a reaction to the increasing separation of knowledge and school based learning from the subjective horizons of work and social life. Seen in this context this discourse may reflect a desire for a new and comprehensive control of subjectivity, by extending prevailing societal rationales of work and employment to all spheres of life. But the material background and implications of this notion of competence may simultaneously be productive for investigating and reflecting on the potentials of a competent workforce.

Competence development may be instrumental in increased exploitation, but also a vehicle for autonomy and democracy. This article points out the significance of the particular circumstances in which the competence discourse has emerged, and argues for a critical investigation of it within a Marxist framework. Contemporary developments in the labour process remind us about the dual nature of work, as an exchange of commodities and the living activity of people, in changing "naturalized" societal relations. The new discourse of learning and competence reflects a new material dependency of capital(ism) on the concrete quality of work and workers. On the one hand this circumstance implies a total program of learning for work, which is inferred not only for education and learning but also everyday life- a new level of (capitalist) economy, subordinating people to conditions of paid work. 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 political struggle over the directions of learning processes and the range of subjectivities required for the participation of workers in work and in society. Looking for empowerment potential, rather than the risks of a more and more penetrating control, requires re-developing a notion of economy, based in the value and interest of working people and enabled by the full development of the competences of the workers themselves. A notion of the 'political economy of working people' is proposed as a framework for investigating the potentials of competence development for enhanced democracy.

The use of a concept of competence from human resource development to refer to the practical implementation of knowledge and skills was connected with the operational development of tools meeting political and economic desires to measure and compare educational performance internationally. Through its application within a discourse of governance and international competition, the concept of competence was translated from the organizational psychological terminology of a relatively limited sphere of business leaders and developers, to that of socio-economics. In a short time this discourse came to determine how in political-bureaucratic systems and later in public debate it was legitimate to talk about what people are capable of and how they achieve this capability. In education and the teaching professions, this discourse has broadly been seen as a "hostile takeover" of rationality in the educational system. More generally it has been seen as an attempt to colonize ever-greater areas of our lives within an economic framework and requirement for one's entire personality to be available for work. This show of force by economic political systems corresponds only too well with our more general everyday experience of demands for competence development, from morning to evening, our whole life through—with ubiquitous work, individual competition and the constant efforts of companies and organizations to create corporate identity.

In this article I will try to go beneath the surface of this new discursive regime to consider the socioeconomic realities attempted for capture through the concept of competence, as well as the management practices of which the concept has become part. A new understanding of the interrelationship between knowledge, skills, learning and practice central to the competence concept raises a potential issue about the roles of work and the living worker in a capitalist economy. This leads to the question of how we can possibly imagine "something beyond" a capitalist society.

The concepts of competence and competencies

Originally the concept of competence had a legal meaning related to legitimacy. But 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 (Rychen & Salganik, 2001; OECD, 2003; Gnahs, 2007; Illeris, 2009). The applicability of the concept in political communication as a characteristic of the needs of society in its entirety undoubtedly depends on its logical and semantic ambiguity. 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.The concept of competence generally covers the combination of the following attributes:

- 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 (OECD, 2003; Rychen & Salganik, 2001).

In this understanding, 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. But this 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.

It should be pointed out that the social requirements are not well defined, and known in advance—it is a question of being able to take the appropriate action, in unpredictable, and relatively complex situations. "Competence" is thus not a (new) canon of knowledge and skills, but a potentiality whose realization is conveyed through the subject's knowledge and will. In this way, it is correct to say that a person can *be* competent and can *realize* competencies in specific situations. There are also two good reasons to develop new ways of thinking about people's learning and abilities, and reflect on the relationship between education and everyday practice. One reason is the new challenges in work processes, especially the increase in types of work that require people to adapt rapidly and flexibly to changing tasks and conditions. The other is a radically altered conception of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and

reality. The faith in universal, abstract, and immutable knowledge has been replaced by awareness that knowledge is always interwoven with practice and historically situated—and therefore also subjectively mediated. For this reason, the relationship between societal requirements, and the individual knowledge, necessary cannot be stated in terms of a general formula. Rather, it is concretely mediated in a rather nebulous way through the development of specific competencies by concrete subjects; as when certain cohorts of women in welfare state societies become competent care professionals in public service, or when geeky men become computer experts on the basis of a job history and an education entirely different from IT. These conceptual challenges provide justification, both separately and especially in combination, for our interest in a new concept of competence that is more *dynamic* and sensitive to *specific* factors.

These qualities have however only to a limited extent been expressed in discourses emerging from political processes; quite the opposite has taken place. The interest of political management in being able to measure and compare across countries requires a common and general descriptive system. Efforts have therefore been directed towards defining key competencies. The concept of competence contains a contradiction between that defined above and a notion of invariance.

Competence and formal education

The political processes that produced the competence discourse are aimed primarily to measure educational performance and its (socio-) economic relevance. In recognition of the problems of the validity of previous measurements, this was the start of a general change of perspective. This was a change from considering educational input, still the logical focus of pedagogical thinking, to considering educational output. The concept of competence involves two critical questions for formal education. First, how important and relevant is its academic content in relation to societal reproduction and diffusion of knowledge and skills? Second, how effective are student-learning outcomes? Can people actually use in practice the knowledge and skills they have learned? The intention in (key)competence measurement is not only to measure knowledge and skills, but the development of a *practical subjective capacity* which consists of being able to mobilize knowledge and skill in a relevant way in complex situations, thus to achieve results.

In historical terms, the tendency has been for a competence discourse advanced through a neo-liberal competition-oriented strategy with its cultural roots in the business world. In schools this has paradoxically resulted in a utilitarian perspective and conservative notion of the school's fundamental tasks (back to basics), which does not rhyme particularly well with the new demands on the labour force. But the focus of the competence concept on a flexible and practical subjective capacity ought to lead to ambitions of a higher level of mastery and reflection on the academic content and higher degree of commitment to school work. An energetic attempt to outline a pedagogy promoting competence development for the formal educational system has been made in Denmark, for example, by Illeris, (2009). This is, however, no simple task. A vital aspect of the concept of competence is that it embraces "the whole person" and thus the person's subjective (individual and collective) capacity in all facets of life. For economists, this is not for humanitarian reasons of principle, but because they realize that subjective capacity is not produced in formal education alone. Consequently, the

competence discourse is oriented towards a broader field of learning than formalised education—towards seeing educational institutions as what they *also* are, i.e. lived life or social practice, where much more is taking place than the objectives of the institution. Therefore, the competence discourse has become a catchphrase of lifelong learning and also life-wide learning. For this reason, competence development cannot be thought of solely in relation to formal education.

The implications of the concept of competence can be seen in attempts to operationalise it through assessments at the individual level. These have been introduced in European countries under slightly different headings - competency assessment, recognition of prior learning, the Danish "realkompetencevurdering" (an assessment of competencies from all previous experience), the French "bilan de compétence", etc. In many cases, the assessment criteria are completely different. Here we see a clash between two regimes of recognition, business and industry, and the formal education system. Recognition by business and industry relies on an instrumental perspective and is thus subject to the structures and economic considerations of the labour market. It is also to a very great extent based on the perceived ability of the subject to function in the work situation, which staff selection procedures attempt to assess. Recognition by the educational system is based on documented completion of formal courses and description of course content. The basis here is thus partly a hierarchical ranking, and partly an educational structure, which directly or indirectly implicates an academic worldview that is one or two hundred years old. Of course there are examples of intermediate variants, but basically these two regimes of recognition are disjointed. Of interest here are not considerations of equality or legal-administrative factors that typify the question of access to education and various professions, but the operational aspect: how is people's competence assessed?

In the context of the issue of recognition, "competence" is supposed to serve as a "general equivalent" of human capability. Competence is primarily a counterpart to or replacement for the dominant system of diplomas and certificates linked to formal education. It is also a broader and more general alternative to the narrow and one-dimensional job-oriented view of work qualifications, such as is used in, for example, labour market statistics. Such a system is quite necessary to the realising of lifelong learning, using the learning resources available both in formal education and in other areas of everyday life. But "competence" faces two quite fundamental challenges. First, a language must be found that is not trapped in one of the two regimes of recognition that dominate understanding of competencies in society. Second, the acknowledgement of the subjective nature of competencies means that their assessment must in principle be very individual—which is both impracticable, and in opposition to the current place of prior learning assessment as a legal basis for access to education and work. These two factors are obviously interwoven, in so far as a language whose content is not limited to familiar societal practices, and which must also be sensitive to subjective diversity could only be established through an imaginary organisation of relevant modi and levels of experience—a proxy categorisation of careers and experiential backgrounds. It is quite clear that such a categorisation involves a contextualisation of knowledge in relation to societal practice, which involves something more than abstract cognitive knowledge. However, it is more difficult to specify theoretically the "non-cognitive" psychosocial prerequisites, and perhaps it is also politically tricky because it is in part a question of active involvement in and acceptance of given practice contexts. Procedurally, competence assessments are performed in quite diffeent ways (Salling Olesen, 2004; Alberici & Serreri 2003; Andersson, Fejes & Sandberg, 2013).

The French system, also transferred to other countries such as Italy, involves competence accounts established by business organisations and based on functional categories. In most other countries the structure consists of descriptions of levels and content categories taken from the formal education system, partly because the most tangible use of competence assessments is to facilitate access to education. In key areas of educational policy, there have in some cases been established ad hoc steering mechanisms, explicitly for the recognition of professional experience in formal education (such as the "Dritte Bildungsweg" in Germany and the professional master's degree in Denmark).

The practical application of the concept of competence as a link between formal education, and everyday life learning, raises a number of theoretically interesting questions. In EU administrative and policy implementation, the analytical interest has faded into the background in favour of a regulatory bureaucratic construction of a system of competence *levels*, and the concept of competence itself has just become part of the political jargon about lifelong learning.

The reduction of key competence in economic thinking

However, here I wish to pursue a tension built into the notion of competence. This is evidenced by the past efforts to identify key competencies, i.e. the qualities of the workforce that were 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, as in the OECD DeSeCo project (Definition and Selection of Competencies). This analytical task was approached somewhat ambitiously. The scientific ambition to create clarity and consistency in the definition of key competencies 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 competencies linked to specific practices and key competencies 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. The practical-political definition of key competencies is primarily one of its applicability in many and varied situations. This definition is relatively independent of cultural settings or requirements for any content of practices or function in a situated context. One can now describe the character and common features of these situations in a societal context and attempt to rank them so that some competencies appear to be generic.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 competencies 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 out-dated. More generally, there is an attempt—now supported by psychology—to (re)discover a general equivalent in the labour market to replace the basic watchwords of industry: time and hard work. This attempt perpetuates the capitalist political economic thinking of human labour as unchangeable and quantifiable. This way of thinking, as I shall attempt to show, is in contrast to, and neglect of, developmental trends that involve the concept of competence. However, the unavoidable realisation of the subjective nature of competencies meant that psychology was given the instrumental task of finding the qualities that individuals can acquire, and regardless of circumstances, bring into play in an unfamiliar field of changing practices. 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 cognitivistic figure of thought, which has been the starting point, it is the relationship between: universality and abstraction, and specificity and 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). This finding points to a link between psychosocial 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' (Weinert, 2001, p. 62). One can get no closer.

This leads us to the second problem of the prevailing competence discourse, namely that it does not take *the subjective nature of competencies* seriously, or rather, sees it as a subordinate factor that contributes to the complexity of specific tasks. Although the requirements or success-criteria for competent practice are externally determined (and only from an affirmative point of view), 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, local (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 lead to learning and practice development, including the kind of expertise that supports the emotional and cognitive re-contextualization of experience that always takes place.

Work processes and the subjective factor

The discussion of the notion of competence drew from research into qualifications from a (industrial) sociological approach, amongst other sources. Without expressing an

explicit policy (in most cases), qualification and skills analysis had implicit aspiration to justify better, more long-term, and progressive forms of education through empirical exploration of the development of work processes (Kern & Schumann, 1970)—the hope of a dynamic to civilize the contemporary transformation of work by capitalism. This did not involve questioning the understanding of the relationship between work and learning/education. Empirical research has predominantly produced analyses of societal requirements for the development of the educational system and workforce retraining, thus a logic of necessity. The striking fact that researchers, and educational practitioners, despite a generally critical attitude (towards society), direct their political aspirations for more versatile, and autonomous ways of working within the dynamics of capitalism, is of course a form of realism—the subjectivity is already subject to this reality. To a large extent, qualification analysis has, however, refrained from formulating theoretical concepts for the cultural background experience learning, and competencies of the workforce as a source of changing that reality. Sociological qualification analysis has mostly left such aspects to more voluntaristic political discourses, in the practical interpretation of findings. The research interest has been to demonstrate the practical significance of educational/learning paths in relation to social and political battlegrounds, in order to demonstrate a space for policy making.

There have for example been empirical studies, demonstrating that political latitude for different educational strategies, could be related to the structure of work processes. The German sociologist, Burkart Lutz (1989), argued for focusing research into qualifications (more) on the working subject. A comparative study of vocational education, and workplace structure in German and French industry, showed that companies competing on the same international market could operate with greatly different combinations of qualifications and work organisation. Germany had skilled workers and a relatively flat business organization. France had unskilled workers and technicians linked together in a relatively hierarchical organisation. The comparison between the German and French qualification structures, shows that production factors must be combined in different ways, depending on the qualifications of the workforce, but also that this is possible through the adaptation of the organisational, and institutional frameworks, which can balance productivity, living standards, and welfare system. The current crisis in Euro-cooperation shows conversely that the coexistence of very diverse production systems within the same (global) market is impossible if the balancing of relatively autonomous, disparate socio-economic structures is blocked (by the shared currency, the Euro).

A Danish study (Sommer & Sørensen, 2000), compared employee qualifications, continued training policies, and work organisation in three large and mutually competing agricultural firms, showed that they adopted entirely different strategies, even though they were competing in the same market. These strategies were based on different work organisation, different workforce training, and not least the recruitment of different kinds of employees with completely different lifestyles. This study indicates the importance of workers' subcultural life experiences, work identity, and current way of life, for business strategies to be realised within a single market.

These examples support the argument that the overall competence (ability and willingness to perform) of the workforce sets boundaries for the manifestation of work processes—and not economic dynamics. It is patently obvious that the differentiation of employee groups is connected to society, and imparted through the labour market with its competitive environment, preferences, and mobility structures. But this situation also reveals that the mechanisms of this market encounter constraints in the viscosity of labour supply, linked to individual and collective subjective factors. Some people prefer

to have more demanding tasks and an orderly employment situation through education. Others' life history makes them used to following agricultural rhythms, living in family constellations and local communities where unsocial hours are acceptable and can be effective in differently organised work situations. On the other hand, they are quite happy to avoid being trained as logistics workers. These examples illustrate that context, workers' experiential background, and social identity, play a key role in technological and organisational strategies at the level of both an individual company, and national industry. This is the key point in the cited works: They argue that workers and their qualifications form an independent parameter in production systems. A further important trend, primarily in empirical research, sometimes combined with practical experiments (demonstration projects), has sought to identify developments in work processes, and technology that could justify an increased focus on key qualifications. HR-inspired analysts and consultants, together with Marxist-inspired researchers and trade unions, could unite in this organisational and educational perspective, as long as there were common interests between capitalist modernisation, and the concrete humanisation of work—thus avoiding any explicit conflict of interest.

The critical potential of the concept of qualifications was, and is, to (re)establish a materialist understanding of education and learning by relating it to the societal determination of the work process. In a more explicitly Marxist-based analysis, qualifications are analysed in relation to capitalism's societal transformation of work processes. This type of analysis has a salient critical potential in relation to political optimism in education, and generally idealistic self-understanding of professionals in the education sector. But they could also become more or less structural-deterministic. A response was provided to the tendentious methodological determinism involved in making the analysis of work processes and the demand for labour the basis for educational policies and learning strategies, partly in continuation of a discussion of Schlüsselqualifikationen (key qualifications) in Germany. This was through interest in a relationship between vocational qualifications, everyday life, and general social skills. A Danish project on general qualifications led to the formulation of the concepts of "capacity" (kapacitet), to refer to an individual's ability (Andersen, et al., 1996; Salling Olesen, 1996), and "capacity building" as the goal of progressive vocational training.
The concept of competence was already on the market in Denmark, but we (those involved in the Danish project) saw it as a predominantly individualistic concept that did not analyse the societal conditions for competencies. In retrospect, one might consider that the concept of 'capacity', developed through this project, was an attempt to formulate an alternative—societally situated competence concept.

A societal concept of subjectivity

The concept of qualification was taken up by industrial and labour sociology, more or less influenced by Marxist theory, and brought an outside perspective to education and learning, relating learning outcomes to the specific requirements for, and societal organisation of work. The Danish general qualifications project represents a conceptual break in this tradition by introducing the learner's subjective perspective. The decisive, but not developed conceptual point here, is the perception of general qualifications as a subjective capacity, produced through life experience, and unfolding across various spheres of life. Notable examples are the work of women in (industrial) cleaning, and institutional care, based on life-historical experiences (Bering, 2002; Dybbroe, 2012).

The logical next step was to consider the totality of the life historical experiential process, and the learning processes involved in these, including those promoted through formal education and training. The life history project found inspiration in biographical and life history approaches to the understanding of the subjective handling of learning in relation to work by specific populations. Such learning often took place in situations of complex social upheaval, involving both work and gender identity, and these empirical studies resulted in a theoretical and methodological approach to learning and identity processes (Salling Olesen &Weber, 2002; Salling Olesen, 2007b, 2011, 2012). By seeing learning processes as integrated in (both determined by and contributing to) a life-long identity process, a framework emerges for an understanding of the subjective side of transfer processes, integrating cognitive, emotional, and interactional aspects. It is important that this focus does not include any kind of individualistic understanding of either learning or skill. The thinking is based on cultural analysis, in a tradition partly inspired by psychoanalysis, according to which life historical experiences are understood as individual symbolic mediations of common societal conditions of life (such as wage labour, gender division of labour) (Salling Olesen et al., 2012). The analytical question is how this mediation takes place in specific individual, but characteristic situations, and how to provide an exemplary interpretation of these experiences. I position this methodological development, based on a social, interactionist theory of the individual subjectivity, in the context of a development in Marxist theory. This provides theoretical room for the societal role of subjectivity—no trivial matter.

The predominant reception afforded to the analysis of capital and capitalism by Marx, always contained an intellectual irritation about the relation of this theoretical insight to political practice and ideas about socialism: Marxism had to encompass an endogenous understanding of potentials and conditions for political agency and societal change. Such reception also created a political void—given that "realised socialism" in the Soviet Union was obviously based on elitism, and that the social democrats had sacked Marxism, believing in more equal distribution of an ever-growing capitalist cake. For this reason, I have always been fascinated by the concept of 'Political Economy of Labour' or 'Political Economy of Working People'[1], which was not introduced but convincingly elaborated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their book *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981). The title may be approximately translated as "History and Autonomy/Self-reliance" (in the context of work*)*. I see this concept as a potential framework for the re-interpretation of the ideas of subjectivity, and learning within a Marxian theory. This with implications for political, as well as social science thinking, because it is a history of the development of the human subject as a working species—first the evolutionary origin of work capability, and then through civilization the capacity for socially organised work. This re-interpretation would potentially link the utopian idea of a society beyond capitalist organisation with the interpretation of subjectivity in everyday life in capitalism. This provided a logical complement to Marx' theory, as developed in *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, and a new version of historical materialism as a history of civilization, which promises a way out of the determinism of capital analysis, and avoids the mechanical quality of historical materialism, which was mainly developed by Friedrich Engels and communist political theory. The notion of a political economy of working people faced the basic question which still remains today: How can we amidst the flexible, and comprehensive ability of capital, to subordinate all materiality and all subjectivity see any *material dynamics* which points to substantial change *beyond* capitalism?

Utopian perspectives must be developed from the social realities within capitalism itself in order to be realistic, considering the fact that capitalism is constitutive of the organisation of our society. In the 1960s, Oskar Negt provided his important critique of political education in the labour movement, and presented his alternative vision of 'exemplary learning' (Negt, 1963). His point was that instead of stuffing people with theories of capitalism and socialist principles (which obviously failed) labour education should rather be based on the experiences of everyday life. He wrote this at a time of a rebellion among industrial workers against the price paid for economic prosperity in terms of work intensity, and environmental hazards, and against the lack of practical democracy in the labour movement itself. His points might appear less hopeful in other periods without rebellion. Subsequent years saw a general disappearance of the societal preconditions for the mobilisation of class-consciousness in the sense of the traditional labour movement. Today it has become obvious that a theory of class-consciousness, which extrapolates from industrial labour, is obsolete. But it does not negate Negt's argument that political education must depart from concrete everyday experiences. In *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (1981), the scope was much broader—a civilizational history of subjectivity, manifested in work—not in the narrow capitalist sense of paid work or in the historically limited form of industrial work, but the living engagement with the environment in all its forms (Negt, 2001). Within this notion, capitalism is an organising factor, and the life mode of wage labour, an important but not universal historical form of subjectivity. The reader can find a brief introduction in English to this enormous work in Salling Olesen (1999), or listen to the online copy of my introduction to Negt's thinking at RWL 6 (Salling Olesen, 2009).

In the Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt school, the aim of criticism is to reveal the historical and changeable nature of social reality—and discover the invisible potentials. By insisting on a principle of endogeneity, this critical tradition maintains a strictly materialist ontology while paying respect to the intellectual work and the dialectic of knowing and learning. The decisive contribution of Negt & Kluge's book is that it provides the framework for a historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as a product of capitalist civilization and potential source of a new social order. Further, this is where we see how it links with the theorising of learning and competence. Negt's critique of labour education points to the connection between everyday life experiences and the development of societal insights, such as an analytical understanding of societal structure as well as what he, following Wright Mills, named sociological imagination, i.e. the ability to imagine an alternative reality. So the challenge is to theorise the ways in which this material production of subjectivity takes place, and how it can be empirically researched, since it is both social and invisible.

Competencies: subjectivity on a societal Level

In the present context, I wish to establish a conceptual connection between learning as competence development, and societal transformation. The establishing of a notion of competence, which has a perspective beyond capitalist economy, beyond commodification, enables an empirical examination of the societal power dimensions of competence development on the micro-level of everyday life. It also opens the analysis to an understanding of the significance of the subjective aspect of competence and competence development. In the psycho-societal life history approach (Salling Olesen, 2012), we are developing a strategy for an empirical analysis of mundane everyday life.

This analysis may on the one hand, contribute to developing a social psychology theory, which is adequate for the complex mediation process. On the other hand, the analysis will explore specific social phenomena—in the present context how people individually, or together, can influence societal forces at the work process level (technology shifts, labour market trends) by means of their competencies, and their ways of relating to competence development.

Life historical experiences are a result of societal learning processes, and at the same time become individual prerequisites for new learning processes. Understanding the dynamics of life historical experiences may be a key to understand the development of the subjective capability, which is the core of competencies. The societal learning process that forms individual subjectivity is in a fundamental way mediated through gender and class relations (and in some societies race/ethnicity). Further, it is mediated through various forms of collective experience—based on individual belonging to subcultures, regions, or groups. In relation to competencies, the most important collective experiences are naturally linked to the work itself, including class affiliation, and gender, as characteristics of wage labour. They may be stabilised in collective forms, as knowledge disciplines, and in skills linked to fields of work. As such, they become meeting points, or rather tension fields, between individual and collective developments in identity and competence, and changing historical conditions, in the form of occupations and employment provided by the societal division of labour.

Classical big industry represents an apex in the subjection of the work process to economic considerations—in Marx's concepts: the real subsumption of living work to the capital's political economy, primarily in the form of mass industry. Knowledge is built into machinery, and Taylorist organisations result in minimal demands on the individual worker's skills. Post-industrial developments impose new qualitative demands. These include the capacity to subjectively mobilise knowledge and skills, as intended to be captured by the concept of competence. But they also, in comparison with big industry, include emergence of differentiated occupations and the requirement for specific work skills in each occupation.

The concept of competence is related here, to an eminent degree, to the relationship between work identity (responsibility, identification, etc.), and professional capability. Occupations and professions can be seen through this analysis as societal organisations of competence, and as a framework in which competencies can have a broader impact (Evett, 2011; Salling Olesen, 2007a). Although the concept of profession is ambiguous, and used differently in different linguistic communities, it is clear enough that a classical profession, such as medicine, for example, has an acknowledged monopoly on certain areas of work by virtue of certain knowledge and skills, and a collectively controlled responsibility for the quality of work. The raison d'être of the profession is that the rest of society acknowledges that the practitioners are *competent*. One could therefore say that competence is an attempt to codify these knowledge and skills for professional education and learning.

The existence and legitimacy of the traditional professions depends on the understanding that professionals have the right knowledge and practical skills, and their existence and legitimacy are therefore unambiguous. That, however, is not my perspective. On the contrary, the knowledge and practices of professions are problematic. They are a result of rather than the justification for professions. Categories involving societal rights and privileges, and the regulation of working conditions in important labour markets, are of course woven into power relations and societal dynamics. Therefore, an exemplary study of the relationship between learning, competence, and work processes in specific professional areas can shed light on the

very core of the competence concept: The situational capacity, being subjectively capable of mobilising knowledge and skills in practice in certain situations at work or in everyday life.

There are a number of areas of professional work that merit particular attention, particularly within the human service professions. They represent a growing proportion of the labour market, and have not been subject to Taylorist work organisation to the same degree as the manufacturing sector - although one can see features of industrialisation in the hospital system. They are distinguished by being fundamentally defined in terms of professional competencies, in the sense being developed here. In most cases, they also clearly require a subjective engagement in the work process on the part of the employee/professional, not only because human service directly involves inter-subjective interactions with clients/users, but also because such work can only be done through this subjective engagement. Some of these jobs are professions in the classical sense, while others are striving to become recognised as such.

An empirical and temporal study of whether professionalisation supports increased subjective autonomy for competent employees is interesting. What is peculiar to professionals in this context is the relationship between the specific subjects—with their professional identity determined by history, class, and gender—and the societal knowledge and abilities that these subjects command. By conducting their professional competencies they each participate in their own individual way in a collective cultural development of societal practice, basic self-understanding, and power relations (Salling Olesen, 2007a).

Competence, economy and democracy

My focus on professions is because, in concrete form, they represent the contradictions in the concept of competence, and are therefore an appropriate subject of an empirical social analysis of the dynamics of capitalism. Knowledge and skills are subject to the social division of labour, but are also sometimes in themselves resources and instruments of power. Usually they are limited in their forms of expression, and controlled by employers and global capitalism as a system. In orthodox Marxist terminology: production forces under the control of the relations of production. The historical development in the distribution of (paid) labour in occupations and those concrete work processes that require the capacity to act in unknown and complex situations, provide the main reasons why the concept of competence has been able to gain a foothold in the economic-political establishment. The concept emphasises the active, subjective, and context-sensitive use by workers of all the resources of knowledge and skills possessed by the individual, irrespective of how they were acquired, and without the need for them to be specifically aimed at the task in question. It follows that competence is also a resource for democratic power based on working life. Notably this is a different kind of power than that of trade unions or strikes, implying a possible struggle within the framework of the capitalist economy, and possibly also blocking it on the basis of particularistic interests.

During the modernisation process, professionals have had special competence-based power, sometimes directly supported by legislation. Therefore their specific competence is also a factor in historical change and power struggles. In some phases, professional groups have been a driving force in the development of society, or have risen up against the undermining of the quality of their professionalism by neo-liberal

policies. In other cases, they have defended their privileges, and opposed democratic and egalitarian developments. But in all cases, the societal mandate of professional groups is limited to a specific area, the specific quality of their profession and its practice. Neoliberal policies with populist support have now weakened this competence-based position of power in a decisive way. If the historical power position is to be defended, it seems clear that it must be redefined in order to be legitimised democratically.

In the social democratic, or socialist tradition, there is a division between the struggle of interest conducted by trade unions based in work, and the political struggle over state politics based in citizenship, as battlegrounds of social security and political power. In the one arena, we have employees with particularist perspectives, while in the other we have citizens with Universalist perspectives. But asking about competence and democracy raises the question of the relationship to economics and society's material structure in a new way, in which there is a link for the individual between the employee (such as the competent salaried professional), and the citizen, who is at the same time receiving or buying services of professional work.

In the Nordic countries, in particular, the relatively strong position of the trade union movement has meant that collective bargaining framework models of participation and cooperation have been established in industry that go far beyond the traditional struggle of interest of trade unions. The most familiar examples are the Norwegian socio-technical experiments with direct employee involvement (Nielsen, 1997). These are merely institutional attempts to activate dormant resources. The premise is that employees have always had a major influence by virtue of their knowledge, skills, and in some contexts their will. But employees also have considerable resources of untapped experience, and un-manifested autonomy, particularly in relation to technological changes and workflow design. It is possible to influence the work process in a way that exploits these experiences. There is the classic case of Lucas Aerospace where the employees set out to show how military production could be converted for social purposes, using the competencies of the staff. Another example is that of front-end technology design, in which technology changes are designed on the basis of the experiences of workers directly involved in the work process in question (Sawchuk, 2006, 2007). The more dependent the workflow is on the employees' subjective investment, the greater the possibility that they can achieve real control over the work process.

In the socialist tradition, the cooperative model has had hard times— at least in modernised Western countries. But there are some cooperative structures in other spheres of life and forms of social economy involving non-capitalist, not-for-profit economic activity. Cooperatives may gain more importance in step with global capitalism's all-pervading impact on societies of the world at all levels of social life. However, until now, notions of an alternative economic order are typically just as marginal as the activities that realise it. Linking competence development as a subjective process with forms of social economy may open new perspectives for cooperative forms of work-based democracy.

It should not be forgotten that there are many examples where employees are also (co)owners—in forms of cooperative ownership, direct employee buyout, Employee Stock Owners hip Programs, employee-owned shares, etc. In these cases, the subjective horizon is considerably more far-reaching than the immediate work process, but is still within the capitalist economic sphere of dominance. Those involved typically operate in an open market, and often have difficulty in obtaining investment and working capital. Relevant in this context is that they have to be successful in business

management and organisational development at a professional level, despite the fact that employees usually lack extensive management experience (Birchall & Ketilson, 2009; Spear, 2010).

The rationale for including the concept of the 'political economy of working people' is that it illustrates the fundamental dimension of democracy in the changing relationship between capital and labour as clarified through the concept of competence: the competent worker can not only handle unforeseen and complex professional challenges, but also assume greater responsibility and ambition for participation in the running of society.

In a continuation of this framework of thinking, Oskar Negt, with a background in political workers' education and the trade unions, coined an alternative competence canon: What are the competencies needed for a worker's orientation in future society? His competencies offer an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of competence—defining competence development as a tool for democracy and codetermination rather than a more intense exploitation. But this canon can also be read as an invitation for empirical research to investigate which learning processes take place within the regime of competence discourse and actually point beyond it—research driven by subjective experiences of socio-economic contradiction in the present phase of capitalism. Research questions would be: What is the subjective experience of the relationship between people and societal work? What could it be? Where and how is this relationship developed?

It is a dynamic material form of utopia that is linked to the analysis of capitalism of critical theory. Capitalism is a social relationship where the "dead work" is accumulated in the form of capital and rules over the living work. Marx' critique of capitalism's political economy was a theoretical critique of the way the then also liberal economic theory politicised the understanding of the economy. Marx however developed a much more dialectical analysis which considers the ambiguity of the material forces of motion—which of course depends on political learning processes. The point here is that these political learning processes involve insight and capacity for action in all areas of life in society, and also insight into the possibility of changing them.

In his later work, Negt develops the concept of "Ökonomie des ganzen Hauses", which could be translated as "comprehensive household economy", i.e. a holistic economy in which everybody is dependent on and responsible for each other. This may theoretically be a more correct term than the 'Political Economy of Working People'. First, it includes every person in the community of society and does allow work be the condition for democratic participation, and second, because it more clearly covers all types of work, not just the work performed in a societally organized form, but also the many other kinds of necessary work which present-day working society often makes invisible, and which only becomes visible when organised in society as paid work (child care, housework, relationship work). However, for now I will keep to the 'political economy of working people', since it cannot so easily be trivialised or misunderstood.

Conclusion

The concept of competence is a productive way of understanding the changed relationship between knowledge and work increasingly typical of post-industrial society. It handles notions of eternally valid abstract knowledge and its translation into forms of controlling practices, and raises productive questions for understanding the

subjective process by which experience is processed and become potentials in new concrete practices. It provides for a more dynamic and situational understanding of human potential in work and life. The concept of competence can therefore also serve as a productive concept for understanding the functioning of educational systems and their interaction with other learning environments.

However, on the basis of the concept of competence, a political-economic discourse regime has been established, which subordinates people's learning needs and career opportunities under a "capitalist political economy", through the logic of competition and markets. Bureaucratic control and comparison techniques have attempted to describe competencies as static items that can be possessed and accumulated. The dynamic, situated, and subjective nature of competence development has been rendered invisible.

Other forms of description not politically subordinated to socio-economic competition at enterprise, sector or regional level, have focused on the concrete procedural aspects. This reveals clearly the altered relationship between work and knowledge. Industrial sociology has identified the need for new types and concepts of qualifications, but has been unable to fully re-conceptualise the relationship between knowledge, work, and worker. In the practical implementation of the competence discourse as a common framework for understanding learning and skills between business and education, the following operational question very soon arises: how should human potentials be assessed in a dynamic way, which is realistic for employment as well as formal education? This question has not been answered in the development of the competence discourse.

There is a need for an alternative socio-psychological theorising of competence development as a subjective process. The premise is that competence is a learning tool and potential based on the processing of past experiences. It will therefore to a great extent be intertwined with learning theory that deals with learning at work and in relation to work. Learning and knowledge are practically situated and experienced, but an understanding of them must also involve psychodynamic aspects of motivation, defence mechanisms, identity development, and the "knowledge-sociological" issues of the societal embedding of knowledge in occupations and professions.

Politically, competence must be understood as the potential instrument of power of working people to achieve self-determination at work, and so enhance democracy at the societal level. Empirical research in competence development, and theoretical (historical-societal) interpretation of existing research in this area, is the alternative to subjugating oneself to an economic, reified, competence discourse. A conception of 'the political economy of working people' as an economic order based on ecological and democratic sustainability can hardly be imagined, let alone realised within contemporary discourses of competence development and experimental reform. It is therefore vital that criticism of the discursive regime uncovers the material contradictions and potentials obscured by that regime.

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Adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to draw on the research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives concerning adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime. The focus of the analysis is a Nordic context. The dominant employability regime maintains a technical-rational perspective on learning and employability. Education is predominantly regarded as an instrumental preparation for the labour market. The future demands of the labour market are largely unknown, however, and vocational and professional training may not provide sufficient preparation for the increasing complexities of work. Theoretical discussions have been dominated by an alleged mismatch between individual competence and the qualifications that are required in the world of work. There is no consensus regarding how the gap should be described, explained, or bridged. New demands on educational design have emerged, and ideas related to liberal education and 'bildung' have been reinserted into the political agenda, offering general preparation for a wider array of challenges.

Keywords: adult education; Nordic welfare regime; employability; competence; labour market

Introduction

The labour market has undergone major structural changes in recent decades and is currently characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability (Beck, 2008; Sennett, 1998). This trend has been driven by technological innovation, increased demand for efficiency, increased international competition, and new ways of organising work. To ensure economic prosperity, governments strive to increase the employability of the workforce. From an organisational perspective, it is important to secure the long-term provision of labour and to seek relevant competence (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to survive

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in the continuously evolving world of work. Employers strive to recruit and develop knowledgeable and well-prepared employees to meet these demands and to increase efficiency and productivity. The competition among organisations for the most competent workers is intensifying, and the competition among workers for the most attractive positions in the labour market is becoming increasingly fierce (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Many organisations have downsized and outsourced numerous functions. Project-based work and temporary employment become increasingly common (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2004).

The professional development of workers has become increasingly individualised (Garsten & Jakobsson, 2004; Nyström, 2010). The process of individualisation often has been assumed to create greater freedom for individuals, who have increased opportunities to choose and to break free from ascribed roles in different contexts, such as working life. These opportunities to shape one's life trajectory also make people more dependent on educational success (Brown, 2003). To be competitive in the labour market and secure income and social status, among other things, individuals must continuously invest in, develop, manage, and market their employability to employers in an increasingly competitive labour market (Clarke, 2008). Thus, because career changes are becoming more common, career paths have increasingly begun to resemble a series of individual projects. In some parts of the labour market—in Sweden, for example—there has been a shift from workers with lifetime employment to workers with a wide variety of jobs throughout their working life (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Nyström, Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2008). This development has led to new conditions and labour market demands.

The demands of working life vary across sectors, industries, and organisations, and they vary among different types of jobs or positions within organisations (Harvey, 2005). Compared with highly specialised professional work, unskilled work places entirely different demands on employees. Although it is not possible to identify a common set of competences that employers require from today's professionals, certain types of competence tend to reappear in studies about the requirements of the workplace (Behrenz, 2001; Hesketh, 2000; Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Highly specialised technical competence is becoming obsolete at an increasingly rapid pace and is decreasing in importance for individuals who are interested in obtaining and retaining a job. Rather, labour market demands are associated with a broader range of general competence and personal characteristics (Tomlinson, 2008). Employees are expected to be flexible, capable of orienting themselves quickly within new contexts, and able to continually learn and develop throughout their professional careers (Nyström et al., 2008). Workers must be able to establish an overview of the broader set of tasks within an organisation, work in multidisciplinary contexts, and possess the ability to collaborate and communicate with others. The demands of the labour market include the ability to perform the duties of a job, but there is also a moral dimension, which includes integrity and the ability to understand and respect the rules, values, and norms that explicitly and implicitly exist within an organisation. This moral dimension is a prerequisite for decoding and interpreting different contexts and conforming to a particular organisational culture. Employers expect their employees to be hardworking, dedicated, and loyal. Employees must create strategies, invest time, energy, and other resources that are necessary to exploit opportunities, and avoid obstacles in their organisations (Nilsson, 2010a, 2010b; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Smith, 2010).

Employable individuals are educated, qualified, independent, flexible, adaptable, creative, and innovative entrepreneurs who take initiative. This type of employee is also mobile. Because such individuals are willing and able to change jobs frequently, organisations must develop strategies to attract and retain employable workers. Individuals must continuously invest in and manage their employability, principally by investing in formal education. However, employability is a complex and relational concept, and not all individuals have the same opportunities to develop various aspects of their employability. Depending on factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, different groups in society receive differing benefits from formal education with regard to employability (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Nyström, 2010).

In recent years, this issue has arisen with the increasing dominance of instrumental perspectives of education in discussions and public policy debates, concerned primarily with measurement and relative comparisons of educational outcomes. One concept used to measure educational outcomes is employability, which concerns individuals' ability to obtain and perform the tasks related to a job. From the perspective of employers and policy makers, it concerns the supply of competence to the labour market. Adult learning and education is emphasised as important to increase the employability of individuals. There are still significant uncertainties regarding what is important for individual employability, especially in the relation between education and the labour market (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Nilsson & Ellström, 2012). It is important to reconnect with the central question of the purpose of education (Biesta, 2009) and the substance of knowledge (Young, 2009). Nevertheless, few studies have investigated the changing relationship between education and work that can constitute an alternative framework for the dominant human capital discourse and the technical-rational perspective of learning on which education policies are generally premised (Knight & Yorke, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to draw on the research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives concerning adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime.

These discourses and perspectives depend on the context because there are different kinds of relations among state, market, and family that also have implications for how education is organised. In this paper, we draw on Esping-Andersen's (1990) theoretical work on welfare regimes in order to analyse how these discourses and perspectives are emphasised concerning employability. Esping-Andersen (1990) describes three distinct welfare regimes. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, a liberal welfare regime is dominant, in which the market and the belief in individual choice play a central role. The state and collective solutions are distrusted, which results in, for example, means-tested assistance, modest social insurance plans, and less public support for education. In countries such as France, Germany, and Italy, with old corporatist traditions and where the church traditionally has been strong, the market-led solutions are less dominant. In this continental model, the state enters when the solutions created by the family are exhausted. In the third type of welfare regime, the dualism between state and market and between middle and working class is less prominent. The social-democratic or Nordic welfare state regime does not pursue equity of minimal needs as the other types do, but a demanding equity standard requiring a more universal solidarity (Rubenson, 2006a).

The importance of the local context has not been problematized sufficiently in conventional studies of educational participation (Rees, Fevre, Furlong & Gorard, 2006). In this paper, we will draw upon a more general discussion with specific examples from the Nordic welfare state, specifically Sweden. There is not a Nordic adult education model and one institutional make-up in the Nordic countries because the content of

adult education is diverse (Rubenson, 2006a). However, there are some distinct common values and basic assumptions that traditionally have characterised the way in which adult education is organised in the Nordic countries. In Nordic adult education, the participation rate is high, the relative level of public funding is high, the proportion of public education providers is high, the proportion of personal-interest education is high, and there is a strong public support for disadvantaged groups (Laginder, Nordvall & Crowther, 2013; Rubenson, 2006a). Traditionally, there has been a strong link between adult education and labour market policies. For example, the labour unions have been engaged in the development of research-based policy documents on adult education and have been trying to influence public policy on the national level. At the same time, the unions have been active on the local level, organising study circles for the members, which is one of the reasons for the relatively high participation rates among blue-collar workers in adult education and training in Sweden (Rubenson, 2006a).

In the following sections we will analyse research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives about adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime. First, the employability regime is scrutinized from individual, organisational, and societal perspectives. In order to increase the employability of individuals, education is put forward as one of the most important aspects. The analysis continues with different perspectives on education, drawing on examples from the Nordic countries. Third, we continue with how education has been transformed and what are the challenges for the educational system. Thereafter, we analyse the mis(match) between education and work, which is a key issue concerning employability. We end with a concluding section, where we draw together the discourses and perspectives.

The employability regime

Since the early 1900s, there have been different perspectives on employability and different perceptions of what employability entails, all of which reflect changing labour market demands. Today, employability is a central concept in the educational and labour market strategies of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (European Commission, 2010; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2000; OECD, 1998). Employability is central to the European Employment Strategy, defined in the Presidency Conclusions at the European Council Meeting on Employment (Luxembourg, 20–21 November 1997). It constitutes one of the four lines of policy to be followed by the Member States with regard to employment, among them developing entrepreneurship, encouraging adaptability in businesses and of the employees, and strengthening policies for equal opportunities.

Employability has been studied from societal, organisational, and individual perspectives, all of which focus on different groups (unemployed and employed individuals) to identify potential employability aspects (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). From an organisational perspective, the meaning of employability has changed from primarily referring to a person's health and age to focusing on how individual competence is compatible with employer demands. The notion of employability includes various forms of general and specific competence (van der Heijde & van der Heijden, 2006). Employability is associated often with an individual's preparedness for work, capacity to manage work and retain his or her job, continued career development, and potential for mobility in the labour market, including the ability to obtain work after

a period of illness or unemployment. Thus, on an individual level, employability refers to an individual's assets in the form of competence and qualifications as well as how this competence is marketed and ultimately implemented (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Knight & Yorke, 2004).

On a societal level, the current governing discourse in the OECD countries is characterised by a relatively narrow perspective on the relationship among education, employability, and the labour market (Brown & Tannock, 2009; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Labour market policies and educational strategies, as well as organisational recruitment, training, and competence development policies, are generally based on a market-driven technical-rational approach to matching supply and demand for labour at the societal, organisational, and individual levels. This approach can be traced to a human capital perspective (Becker, 1964). Investing in one's human capital, primarily through formal education, is expected to increase one's productivity in a proportional manner. Formal education thus becomes a proxy for the productive capacity of an individual. Human capital theory is based on some central assumptions: (1) individuals strive to maximise their material well-being, (2) individuals have complete knowledge of the market conditions, and (3) individuals use this knowledge as a basis for rational action to reach their goals (Rees et al., 2006).

This approach has encountered criticism during the past half century. From a consensus perspective, employability can be viewed as a driving force for social evolution. From a conflict perspective, however, employability can be regarded as a means of legitimising inequalities. It has been pointed out in sociological theory that individual choices are governed not only by material motivations or preferences, but an individual may pursue goals other than maximizing material well-being, such as self-development, self-esteem, investing in job-related education and training in order to increase the intrinsic pleasure achieved from doing a better job, and may be ignorant about job vacancies and competition. Also, individual behaviour in the market is dependent on social relations and embedded in social systems (Rees et al., 2006). Not all adults have the same opportunities and access to formal education or certain positions in the labour market. There is also a difference in who the adult learners are, their motivation for learning, and what activities they engage in (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Moreover, investments in formal education may have limited effects on productivity and economic growth (Livingstone, 2010; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Wolf, 2002). There has been a trend in, for example, the Nordic countries, where responsibility for investing in employability and career development has been transferred from the state to organisations and to individual workers. Increased individual employability is often associated with career progression, intra- and inter-organisational job mobility, and boundary-less careers (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). There is an on-going debate, however, regarding the extent to which careers are boundary-less and subject to individual agency and the extent to which career opportunities and choices are constrained and shaped by contextual or structural factors. Individuals are socialised into certain structures that shape their preferences and their perceptions of possible options from which to choose. From a critical perspective, the shift towards individual agency is associated with social and economic inequalities and the marginalisation of less privileged groups in society (Pang, Chua & Chu, 2008). Rees and colleagues (2006) argue for 'the possibility of analysing individual behaviour with respect to learning opportunities not in terms of some universal economic rationality, but rather of alternative rationalities which are socially constituted' (p. 928). At the same time it is important not to overstate the influence of socialisation on behalf of individual choice (Rees et al., 2006). Individuals are capable of making an autonomous

choice within set parameters in a specific context subject to processes of social exclusion and integration. Therefore, it is important to problematize that not all adult learners have the same opportunities for education and training (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Individual employability includes nearly all aspects that are relevant to an individual's ability to obtain a job and perform the tasks associated with the job. Research has shown that formal education and competence are central to an individual's employability; however, other aspects, such as gender, ethnicity, personal qualities, health and work ability, also affect an individual's potential to obtain a job and perform the tasks that the job demands (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012; Nyström, 2010; Smith, 2010).

To conclude, the employability concept has primarily been framed by the perspectives of policy makers and employers, who focus on the supply aspect of competence in the labour market (Brown, 2003; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). There are also numerous accounts of the labour market demand requirements of successful employee performance (Hesketh, 2000; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Pool & Sewell, 2007). In policy debates and research, less focus is placed on the demand side of the labour market, which is increasingly beyond the control of governments, (Brown, 2003) and the process of matching competence to qualifications required in the workplace (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) in, for example, recruitment processes (Keep & James, 2010). Employability is related to context, however, and it is associated with the supply of individual competence as well as with labour market demands, organisational structures, and professional demands (Clarke, 2008; Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

Perspectives on education

In this section we will discuss different perspectives on education. In the literature, it is stressed that the principal means of securing a supply of skilled labour equipped to handle the complex and changing labour market involve increased investments in learning and education (Brown et al., 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Livingstone, 2010). Education is primarily regarded as a means of educating, training, socialising, and qualifying individuals in relation to labour market demands. For example, education increases the human capital or employability of students upon graduation (Teichler, 2000). A narrow functionalist or instrumental perspective on education, which focuses on the concept of human capital and the employability of individuals, has begun to usurp the view that, for example, dominated in the Nordic welfare state in past decades (Filander, 2012). Education is regarded primarily as an investment and sometimes as a production factor. An instrumental and technical-rational view of education has resulted in increasing demands for education curricula to adapt to the demands and the logic of the market (Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004; Brown et al., 2003).

Adult and continuing education is often defined as 'activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception, define them as adults' (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 8). This learning can be formal, non-formal, and informal. This article focuses on the formal learning because it is emphasised as one important aspect when it comes to increasing adults' employability (Hansman & Mott, 2010). Formal learning among adults occurs, for example, in adult education, in higher education, and in work-related activities. In the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), it was reported that 69% of those who had participated in some form of adult education and training had received funding from their employer. In the Nordic countries, the corresponding share was 73%. Adult

education also incorporates popular adult education, for example, second-chance education, study circles, folk high schools, and study associations. Study circles and adult education associated with labour unions traditionally have been regarded as a fundament for ensuring that the workers have knowledge and opportunities for participating in civil society and in securing a democratic development. The highly institutionalised popular adult education system in Sweden has been a counter-hegemonic strategy of the labour movement and a way to focus on the individual members' awareness, motivation, and commitment to work for social change and justice (Rubenson, 2006a). In Sweden, popular education has an important role as an educational provider, with a unique level of participation (Laginder et al., 2013). These educational practices are supporting individuals' possibilities for influencing their position in life and participation in the development of society. Popular adult education in Sweden has three roles, as (1) an agency of popular movements, (2) an adult educator, and (3) a supporter of culture (Rubenson, 2006a).

In the past decades there has been a trend towards increased pressure from market liberal ideas on adult education policy and the transfer of public funds to private sector providers (Rubenson, 2006a). In Sweden, this development has influenced higher education, adult education, continuing education, and popular education in different ways, but a common denominator has been a more instrumental approach and labour market adaptation (Brown et al., 2003; Gustavsson, 2013; Rubenson, 2006a). The participants or students are increasingly expected to be prepared for continuing education and, in the end, for becoming productive contributors to the labour market. Rubenson (2006a, p. 945) argues that the 'collective ethos is further being eroded by the shift in the Nordic countries from a concern about adult education to a preoccupation with lifelong learning which naturally puts the focus on the individual.' For example, since 1997, popular education has pointed out the unemployed as a prioritised group in order to increase their qualifications, activity in society, and self-esteem (Mustel, 2004).

Education can be understood from various perspectives. Educational systems and educational institutions have different philosophical roots (Gustavsson, 2013). Some of the first educational institutions focused on scholastic vocational preparation. During the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century, the perspectives of the educational institutions widened. Education began to promote the development of hard materialistic values through technological innovation based on the empirically oriented sciences and the philosophy of nature. Moreover, education began to develop and incorporate softer values that addressed highly abstract ontological and epistemological theories related to the spiritual and political arena and that were intended to affect the norms of individual action. Concepts such as liberty and equality were central. Educational institutions also began to incorporate human liberation, critical enlightenment, and the notion of 'bildung.' This perspective may be traced to rationalists such as Descartes and Kant, but it is primarily associated with Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767–1835) ideas that he developed when he worked with the reformation of the Prussian educational system. The educational tradition in Sweden, for example, traditionally has been influenced strongly by this Humboldtian tradition (Bron & Schemmann, 2003; Gustavsson, 2013; Liedman, 2002). From this perspective, education is expected to develop and enrich individuals without considering primarily the direct use-value of education (that is, the benefit of education in relation to the specific demands of the labour market). The incentive for learning should be based on people's own initiatives, activities, and experiences (Gustavsson, 2013). Educational design focuses on individual open learning, emancipation, interdisciplinarity, inclusion of philosophical issues, and the development of critical thinking, and reflecting thinking subjects (Bron & Schemmann, 2003). The

central idea is that popular education creates knowledgeable subjects who develop their potential and their intellect by speaking, writing, and thinking more competently. From this perspective, direct vocational preparation for the demands of working life is considered a secondary outcome or an unintentional by-product (Gustavsson, 2013; Liedman, 2002). In Sweden, this perspective or pedagogical tradition has been dominant in the development of the educational system, not least adult education.
Adult education and training policies in the Nordic countries in the last decades have been strongly influenced by a human capital thinking and a notion of knowledge as a commodity, for example in the adult education initiative in Sweden (Gustavsson, 2013: Rubenson, 2013, 2006a) Adult and popular education is increasingly focused on instrumental labour market preparation. There is a conception that although education does not create jobs, more education leads to better opportunities to handle new demands and increases the individual's chance of obtaining qualified work. Adult education has been regarded as a way to compensate for imbalances in the labour market and to assist unemployed or underemployed workers to enhance their employability (Rubenson, 2006a). The ideas of 'bildung', humanism, and democratic values are becoming marginalised in both Europe and Sweden (Gustavsson, 2013).

The demand for more individuals to be more educated has increased, and the labour force is better educated now than in the past. It is unclear, however, whether the actual requirements of the workplace have increased correspondingly (Livingstone, 2010). From an instrumental perspective, more education increases the formal and/or actual competence of students. Education may have use-value in the labour market by increasing the productive capabilities of graduates in different ways. However, education may not always be capable of directly preparing individuals for the specific tasks that they will encounter in professional practice (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; Nilsson, 2010b). Adult education and training can be viewed as a means of preparing individuals to cope with challenges by contributing to an individual's ability to develop and change jobs.

Formal education increases an individual's likelihood of obtaining a job, but it does not provide a guarantee that his or her actual competence has increased. The credentials and diplomas that are gained from education programmes also have a symbolic function and a labour market exchange-value that is used for sorting and selecting potential employees. Education is central to the allocation of individuals to various positions in the labour market and in society. Thus, education may lead to the reproduction of inequalities (Collins, 1979; Brown & Tannock, 2009; Gaskell & Rubenson, 2004). Overall, from these instrumental perspectives, educational design is expected to consider primarily the labour market that awaits participants or students upon graduation. However, this goal is not an easy undertaking (Hesketh, 2000). Education programmes have different focuses, prerequisites, and impacts. Individuals have different personal motives and goals for their education. The purpose of popular education or liberal arts courses is likely to differ from courses in specialised professional or vocational programmes, both in terms of the students' personal motives and the teachers' views about how these courses should be planned and executed.

There are alternative ways of understanding knowledge and learning that are different from these instrumental perspectives. Many studies have adopted a sociocultural perspective to show that the knowledge gained in formal education needs to be recontextualised in the context of working life and professional practice (Köpsén & Nyström, 2012; Nyström, 2009).

This section has discussed different perspectives on education with a special focus on the Nordic countries. Today, the instrumental perspective has been dominant,

emphasising an increased educational level to enhance employability and marginalising the ideas of 'bildung', humanism, and democratic values. The next section will continue to analyse the changes and transformation of the educational systems.

Education in transformation

In recent decades, the Anglo-Saxon model, which governs higher education in North America, has strongly influenced curriculum reform in the Nordic countries. From this perspective, instrumental labour market adaption and vocational preparation are key factors. Business-oriented professional management influences the governance of educational institutions, and competitive models are being strengthened. Demands for efficiency, relevance, accountability, and the employability of graduates are increasing (Rubenson, 2006a, 2006b).

Credentials and formal diplomas have become more important and have come to be regarded as the currency of opportunity (Brown, 2003). With the expansion of and a broader access to education, there has been an increased competition for all kinds of positions where formal diplomas are relevant to the entry requirements (Brown, 2003; Collins, 1979). Increased access also means increased expectations to participate, and absolute performance is not enough because the individual's opportunity/employability depends on the opportunities/employability of others or, in other words, the market value of the credentials depends on the credentials of others. Brown (2003) refers to this as the opportunity trap and argues that

> as opportunities for education increase, they are proving harder to cash in. . . For societies, this means that what can be offered to the winners cannot be offered to the population as a whole. There are simply not enough good jobs to go around (pp. 149-150).

The entry requirements to the labour market are raised and in order for individuals to remain competitive, they need to increase their individual employability by engaging in education and securing diplomas that certify their individual educational achievements. However, the bar is being raised and education is becoming a tick in one of the boxes of qualifications (Tomlinson, 2008). There are indications that education is decreasing in relative importance for the allocation of individuals to different positions on the labour market. Strategies for closure and exclusion, in the neo-Weberian vocabulary, are becoming more central. The power of credentials as a sorting and selection mechanism is increased by exclusion and decreased by inclusion. If the value of credentials is weakened, other selection criteria will be used for entry to the labour market (Brown, 2003), such as other forms of personal capital (Brown & Hesketh, 2004) or social or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). This is sometimes referred to as over-education.

This utilitarian view of education indicates that the purpose of education is associated only with the labour market and economic returns. Education may have other values, and learning may be an end in itself (Brown, 2003). Education may also lead to a transformation of working life, and this leads to challenges for the educational system (Baker, 2009).

Challenges for the educational system

The literature emphasises that the educational systems are challenged from different perspectives and discourses. Within technical-rational discourse, investments in educational activities are associated with an increase in individual employability, which is attributed to an increase in the formal qualifications and/or actual competence of individuals (Dafou, 2009). The purpose and impact of different educational programmes vary, but professional and vocational education programmes are often implicitly associated with individual changes. These programmes also are assumed to improve an individual's ability to perform tasks with greater efficiency or perform more complicated tasks. However, less focus is placed on exactly how an individual has changed or how the substance of the learning is related to increased productive capacity (Livingstone, 2010).

It is difficult for professional and vocational education programmes to promote direct preparation for the labour market. Vocational and professional education and job-related training are expected to prepare students for an unknown future based on current knowledge. However, it is not always easy to predict the future challenges for graduates (Billett, 2011). In general, highly specialised theoretical knowledge is increasingly becoming outdated, and thus it is often deemed less relevant. Jobs are learned in the workplace. The specialised vocational competence that is required to manage work tasks in many organisations is linked to the workplace and the specifics of professional practice (for a more elaborated discussion see, e.g., Billett, 2011; Streeck, 2012).

The focus of many vocational education programmes appears to have generally shifted towards a generalist competence, which refers to competence that supports further development and lifelong learning in the world of work, which is also focused in a 'bildung' perspective (Nilsson, 2010a). There has been an increased focus in professional and vocational education on how to define, develop, teach, and assess generalist competence, which transcends discipline-specific competence (Bowden & Marton, 2004; Nilsson, 2010a). Such competence includes learning abilities, socio-communicative skills, leadership skills, critical thinking, reflexivity, flexibility, self-efficacy, creativity, initiative, working capacity, awareness of quality aspects, problem solving, and analytical abilities. Thus, to prepare adult learners for increased complexity and specialisation in the world of work, educational activities must focus on the development of generalist meta-competence and general enlightenment of the students in educational design (Nilsson, 2010b). Today, being employable is often primarily associated with being a generally knowledgeable and educated person who is able to adapt easily and learn specific procedures (Bowden & Marton, 2004).

A problem is that the opportunity gap leads to a diploma disease characterised by increased pressure of attaining high grades and diplomas and that the focus of the education becomes acquisitive rather than inquisitive. Acquisitive learning has come to define the purpose of education. Participants and students focus not on learning and developing knowledge for its own sake or for learning to do a work task, but in order to pass examinations (Brown, 2003).

Educational experiences are largely cumulative and progressive. This means, for example, that education is not accessible for individuals lacking certain basic credentials. Learning opportunities and access to education are not equally distributed, and the governing structures vary with the local context (Rees et al., 2006). For example, although the level of public support for adult education and training is not related to participation rates, public support is highly related to the participation rates among those least likely to enrol (Rubenson, 2006a).

This section has explored the challenges for the educational system. These challenges concern the issue of education for what and for whom and the relationship between education and work. This relationship is often problematized on the basis of theory and practice, competence, and qualifications. Some scholars argue that there is gap or mismatch between education and work.

The (mis)match between education and work

Many studies have shown that there is a mismatch between education and the world of work (Livingstone, 2010; Nilsson, 2010b). Formal educational job-entry requirements have increased since the Second World War, but the actual requirements to perform such jobs may not have increased to the same extent. Numerous studies observe an inflation of formal educational requirements and a gap between worker capabilities and formal job requirements (Tomlinson, 2008; Livingstone, 2010). There are concerns that the rapid expansion of education has led to underemployment and an opportunity trap (Brown, 2003). Furthermore, individuals require an increasingly long period of time to become productive in their jobs. Several studies have suggested that employers, workers, and students believe that professional education programmes supply inadequate preparation for working life (Hesketh, 2000; Livingstone, 2010).

Educational policy governing adult education is connected to labour market policy and characterised by economistic market models. The discussion of the official discourse has been dominated by an alleged mismatch or gap between individual competence and the qualifications that are required in the world of work. However, there is no consensus regarding how this gap should be described, explained, or bridged (Nilsson, 2010b). Professional and vocational training and development may be excessively narrow and may not prepare individuals sufficiently for the increasing complexities of the world of work. Professional and vocational education are characterised by different rationales than the world of work is. Furthermore, there are problems associated with transferring knowledge between contexts. Knowledge that is obtained in formal education must be re-situated or re-contextualised within professional practices (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; Köpsén & Nyström, 2012; Nilsson, 2010b). When attempting to bridge the gap between education and work, one must consider both the supply and demand sides and the processes in which the competence of the workers is matched to the requirements of the jobs.

It is possible to identify in the literature a disparity between the organisation of educational programmes and the manner in which work is organised, the way things are done, and the methods and tools that are used in the world of work (Billett, 2011; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). The Nilsson (2010b) study shows that higher education graduates have suggested the need for better preparation for the complexities and uncertainties of the working world. Working conditions in professional practice are characterised by problems that are not defined in advance. Additionally, knowledge is treated as relative, and interpretations vary between different contexts. Various parameters, such as deadlines, specifications, and budgetary restrictions, are unknown and constantly changing and thus require flexibility and adaptability. In the working world, professionals must identify problems, appropriate knowledge, and find solutions. In contrast, the rationale of professional education programmes in Sweden, for example, could be characterised by clearly structured assignments, predictability, convenient arrangements, fixed parameters, problems that are defined in advance, delimited tasks, uncertain outcomes, a complex interdependency on the work of others, financial and

political considerations, and often a focus on measurable results instead of processes (Nilsson, 2010b).

Increased complexity leads to the further division of labour, differentiation, and specialisation. The purpose and effects of different forms of education differ, and the demands of the labour market vary. The compatibility between what is learned in different forms of education, such as vocational education programmes and job-related training, and the demands that are encountered in professional practice differ according to professional areas and other specific characteristics of the labour market. For example, graduates of educational programmes in engineering and economics secure a wide variety of positions, and they are widely dispersed upon graduation throughout the labour market. Thus, such individuals encounter a wide variety of potential tasks and demands for which it is difficult for these professional education programmes to provide direct vocational preparation. Specialisation occurs primarily after graduation. The specifics of a job and an organisation must be learned in the workplace, such as tasks, routines, and vocational and professional language (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; Köpsén & Nyström, 2012). In contrast, for individuals who graduate from other professional programmes, such as medicine or law, the labour market is comparatively narrower. These graduates are relatively homogenous after graduation with regard to both vertical and horizontal dispersion in the labour market, and they encounter similar demands in their work. More direct vocational preparation and specialisation can occur in these educational programmes (Nilsson, 2010b; Nyström et al., 2008; Nyström, 2009; Statistics Sweden, 2010). However, some broader challenges are common for different education programmes.

The relationship between education and work can also be problematised from both the supply and demand perspectives. From a supply perspective, the focus is primarily on individual agency and formal learning. Educational institutions encounter challenges related to providing individuals with appropriate competence and preparing them for the demands of the labour market. From a demand perspective, the focus is on the requirements of specific jobs, organisations, and markets. For organisations, the primary challenges involve identifying future needs and developing valid methods of matching individuals with jobs (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). For example, the processes of selection, recruitment, training, and development within organisations are becoming more complicated. Generalist competence and non-formal employability aspects that are difficult to assess and validate have become increasingly important at the expense of hard technical specialist competence (Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008).

There are indications that the rapid expansion of the educational system, which currently leads to more graduates with university degrees, may result in an overall decreased emphasis on the merits of formal education. Currently, formal qualifications are not sufficient to secure a job. Previous employment history, health, work ability, as well as ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, and other less easily identifiable factors are also central to the education and employability of individuals (McArdle, Waters, Briscoe & Hall, 2007; Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012; Nyström, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). Individuals who lack proper training, qualifications, or experience with skilled work may not have the same resources and opportunities to participate in activities in which they can develop and fully implement their employability. The employability of an individual according to a traditional understanding (that is, the possession of the proper education and training) does not necessarily indicate that he or she is considered worthy of employment. Opportunities for learning and development are often designed in a manner that places individuals who do not fit into the standardised employability discourse at a disadvantage. The traditional explanatory model of employability and the

critical means of obtaining and retaining a job appear to be less relevant to certain groups, such as those attempting to return to work after a prolonged absence (Labriola, 2008; Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012).

Broader access to education within the OECD, has been associated with increased opportunities for social and economic progress for many people, which is positive from the perspective of democratic equality. These ideas have ensured that education remains on the centre stage of the social and economic policy agenda. The increased importance of educational credentials is a sign of a tighter bond between education, jobs, and success, and more learning is associated with higher earnings. More learning is related to increased productive capacity and higher rewards, and it is also a fair and objective way of sorting and allocating individuals to different positions based on individual achievement (Brown, 2003). However, employability is related to individual socio-economic conditions and class (Kossek, 2000). The concept may be relevant only for those with specific human, social, and cultural capital. Formal and informal learning is not equally distributed in the working population (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). In the employability regime, some individuals encounter more barriers to participation than others.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have drawn on the research and scholarly literature to explore the changing discourses and perspectives concerning adult learning, education, and the labour market in the employability regime. The discussion has focused on examples from the Nordic and Swedish contexts to exemplify how these changes influence adult education and learning. In the context of a recession and high unemployment, research on conditions for individual mobility among different social practices is even more relevant now than it was in the past. However, there are still significant uncertainties regarding what is important for individual employability, especially in the relation between education and the labour market.

In this paper different relationships of perspectives of education in the employability and competence regime were discussed. Professional and vocational education is important for allocating people to different positions in the labour market and in society (Collins, 1979; Nilsson, 2010b). However, the role of education in relation to the world of work appears to be changing. The expectations of employers are inconsistent with the central discourse of education and labour market policies today. A technical-rational perspective on learning and individual employability seems to be dominant. In the Nordic countries, for example, there has been a strong influence by human capital thinking for the last decades, making adult and popular education increasingly focused on preparation for the labour market. One of the consequences is that the ideas of ‘bildung’, humanism, and democratic values are being marginalised (Gustavsson, 2013). However, the expectations of the market may be more consistent with the ideas of liberal education, which can offer general preparation for the wider array of challenges and work tasks that individuals encounter in the workplace. It is important to acknowledge the interaction between individual choice and constraining social structures and parameters. Individual choice may be rational, but it is not restricted to the relatively narrow assumptions of the pervasive human capital theory.
Furthermore, it important to connect clearly educational design to the prerequisites of specific professional practices and to focus on promoting generally enlightened and knowledgeable workers in terms of generalist competence. Labour market conditions

create demands that are related to the acquisition of specialised competence and personal characteristics and to generalist competences (Hesketh, 2000; Nilsson, 2010a; Pool & Sewell, 2007). Workers are expected to invest continuously in, develop, and manage their individual employability. Learning is associated not only with formal education and is not limited to pre-career concerns. There has been a shift from employment to employability and from lifelong employment to lifelong learning. Workers must be prepared for changing working conditions and continuous training and development. However, not all individuals have the same opportunities to enhance their employability. When employability is discussed, some forms of social and cultural capital are often ignored. Factors that are difficult to invest in and develop, such as personal characteristics, are also ignored, although they are key aspects of an individual's ability to obtain and retain employment. Some scholars indicate that methods that aim to enhance individual employability in some groups should be focused on strengthening social and cultural capital rather than on increased investments in formal education (Nilsson & Ekberg, 2012). It is possible that society currently might be undergoing a shift from a credential-based society (Collins, 1979) to a lifelong-learning society in which factors other than formal credentials or merits are gaining importance and becoming more influential in the allocation of people to different positions in the labour market and in society (Kariya, 2009).

The shifting relationship among adult education, employability, and the world of work that has been presented above could also be related to Rubenson's (2006b) notion of three generations of lifelong learning. For the first humanistic generation, which was associated with humanistic ideals, critical theories, democracy, and social equality, lifelong learning was viewed as a way to reduce gaps in society. The second generation of lifelong discourse was driven by an economist or neo-liberal agenda, which has become central in national education and labour market policies. Central to the discussion in this paper is that education has been regarded as a way to increase human capital, and individuals were expected to be flexible and to adjust to a society that was not responsible for shaping them. In the softer, third version of the economistic generation of lifelong learning, issues of social cohesion and equality are reintroduced. The primary rationale of education and training is still associated with employability, and it is regarded as a way of increasing individual and societal prosperity (Rubenson, 2006b). In this new employability regime, secure employment is a thing of the past and there are increased demands for mobility, self-reliance, and individual agency. The acquisition of generalist meta-competence is central to being able to quickly adjust to new circumstances. The responsibility for the investment in lifelong learning is increasingly individualised, resulting in increased inequalities with regard to participation in adult learning, the labour market, and society. However, we emphasise a more optimistic interpretation of the third generation of the lifelong learning discourse because it can be interpreted as a shift towards learning outcomes similar to a more humanistic approach to lifelong learning. Learning to learn, critical reflection, and equality have been reinserted into the political agenda.

The current requirements of the labour market appear to be inconsistent with the technical-rational perspective on learning and the instrumental view of individual employability. In the third generation of lifelong learning, expectations of the labour market may be increasingly consistent with the traditional idea of liberal education as offering general preparation for a wide array of challenges in the workplace. It is essential to clearly connect educational design with a discussion of what the purpose and impact of adult learning and education is and what it normatively should be. An implication of the theoretical discussion above is that it is not only important to focus on

substance or content when planning, designing, conducting, and evaluating education; it is also imperative to clearly connect educational design to the prerequisites of the specific professional practice and to consider promoting the general enlightenment of participants and students. Furthermore, it is important to provide opportunities for reflection and to promote the development of meta-competences. In a sense, the foundation of employability as it relates to competence appears to significantly overlap with the fundamental ideas of liberal education based on a 'bildung' perspective.

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The disjuncture of learning and recognition: credential assessment from the standpoint of Chinese immigrant engineers in Canada

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Abstract

To better recognise foreign qualifications, many OECD countries have promoted liberal fairness epitomised by universal standards and institutional efficiency. This paper departs from such a managerial orientation towards recognition. Building on recognitive justice, it proposes an alternative anchoring point for recognition practices: the standpoint or everyday experiences of immigrants. This approach is illustrated with a qualitative study of the credential recognition practices of the engineering profession in Canada. From the standpoint of Chinese immigrants, the study identifies a disjuncture between credential recognition practices and immigrants' career stage post-migration. Taking this disjuncture as problematic, it further pinpoints recognition issues such as redundancy and arbitrariness, a narrow focus on undergraduate education, and a deficit view of training from other countries. While some of these issues may be addressed by improving administrative procedures, others demand a participatory space allowing immigrants to become partners of assessment, rather than merely its objects.

Keywords: recognitive justice; foreign credential recognition practices; standpoint; Chinese immigrant engineers

Introduction

To facilitate the mobility and integration of skilled immigrants, various governments and organisations in OECD countries have recently sought to improve foreign qualification recognition (FQR) policies and practices, often through introducing liberal fairness epitomised by ideals such as universal standards and institutional efficiency. In 1997, the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region was developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO. The Convention stipulates that degrees and educational experiences must be recognised across national borders unless substantial difference is identified. This

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convention as of today has been signed by 54 countries, including the majority of EU member-states, and non-EU states, including Canada, and ratified by 52 (Council of Europe, n.d.). In Europe, FQR concerns immigrants from both within and outside Europe. For immigrants within Europe, a benchmark initiative is the Bologna process, which was instrumental in creating an overarching harmonising qualification framework that facilitates the articulation of educational qualifications across Europe. To a great extent, the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area (EHAE) that was established as a result of the process, serve to promote a European-wide quality assurance system (Saarinen, 2005) and constitutes a neoliberal way of governing through standardisation (Fejes, 2008).

For immigrants from outside Europe, or, in the case of non-European settlement countries, international immigrants, FQR policies and practices vary from country to country. From March to June 2012, the Independent Network of Labour Migration and Integration Experts (LINET), run by the International Organisation for Migration, carried out a study on *Recognition of Qualifications and Competencies of Migrants* in six EU countries: Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom, and two non-EU settlement countries: Australia and Canada (Schuster, Desiderio & Urso, 2013). The study provides an overview of the existing national policies and practices for assessing, validating, and recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning of immigrants in the participating countries. It also highlights the role of multilateral and bilateral recognition agreements such as NAFTA and the Washington Accord, which have set the framework of recognition within a particular region and field, or with regard to specific goods and services.

The LINET study pinpoints a number of challenges facing different countries. For example, the study shows that even within the same country, different methods might be used to recognise foreign qualifications. It also finds fragmentation of responsibility for assessment and recognition to be an issue in the majority of the countries studied. Additionally, it notes that a lack of statistical information on recognition outcomes and changing requirements of job competency in the labour market have also complicated recognition practices for immigrants. To improve existing FQR practices, the study recommended measures such as harmonising assessment practices, enhancing transparency of the assessment system, establishing a one-stop shop for recognition, and coordinating different authorities involved in assessment and recognition. To a great extent, these recommendations are about improving the institutional efficiency and the public accountability of recognition practices across countries.

In Canada, FQR has been recognised as an (economic) issue since the 1990s (e.g., Reitz, 2001; Watt & Bloom, 2001; Walker, 2007). However, it did not make it to the federal policy agenda until 2001, when it was named a priority in the Throne Speech. Canadian governments of different levels have since taken on a range of initiatives. For instance, the Forum of Labour Ministers was given the task of developing a Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications. In the province of Ontario, the Fair Access to Regulated Professions and Compulsory Trades Act was implemented in 2006 to hold licensure bodies responsible for making assessment processes transparent and fair. Similar bills have subsequently been passed in three other provinces. Additionally, governments and professional bodies have also negotiated mutual recognition agreements either with other governments or with their professional counterparts in other countries. For instance, in October 2008, the Province of Quebec and France signed the Mutual Recognition Agreement on Professional Qualifications. This is the first agreement of its kind between Europe and the Americas. It aims to expedite the process of acquiring a licence to practise a trade or profession

that is regulated in either place through the adoption of a common process for credential recognition. Professional organisations such as Engineers Canada have also reached mutual recognition agreements (MRA) with their counterparts in some countries. Unlike the EHAE framework which provides a qualification articulation framework for different countries, these agreements simply mean that members from MRA countries will have their credentials recognised by corresponding regulatory bodies in Canada.

While there have been significant changes in recognition practices, the measures introduced for change are often geared towards improving the efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of recognition practices. What is being promoted is managerialism and the ideal of liberal fairness premised on assumptions of equality of opportunities, objective knowledge and universal truth. Given such an orientation, paradoxically, FQR has become an ever more legitimate social stratifier (Guo & Shan, 2013), as well as a more sophisticated technology of power that produces particular subjects and subjectivities out of immigrants. Increasingly, immigrants are positioned as flexible, autonomous, and entrepreneurial lifelong learners, who should learn to make up for their deficiencies, institutionally defined by assessment and recognition organisations (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Fejes, 2008). What gets reinforced in the changing context of recognition is the credential and certificate regime (Shan, 2009) where Western education is centred as "the" benchmark against which foreign credentials are assessed.

This paper departs from the managerial focus on institutional efficiency and liberal fairness. Building on the notion of recognitive justice (Guo, 2010, 2012), I propose that the standpoint of people undergoing assessment serves as an anchor point for the realignment of recognition practices. To illustrate my position, I draw on a qualitative study of foreign credential recognition practices in the engineering profession in Canada, which was conducted from the standpoint of some Chinese immigrant engineers. Specifically, in this paper, I explore two questions: 1) what are the engineers' experiences of writing confirmatory exams and getting licensed in Canada? and 2) how are their exam and licensure related experiences shaped by credential recognition practices? Following, I first introduce the notion of recognitive justice and illustrate how standpoint of people matters to it. I then introduce the context of research, followed by a presentation of the research methods and research participants. Thereafter, I focus on the research findings and conclude with a discussion of their implications.

Engaging the standpoint of people as a pathway to recognitive justice

Guo (2010, 2012) is the first scholar to promote recognitive justice for immigrant professionals. His work is primarily informed by Gale and Densmore, and Fraser. Fraser (1997, 2000) has engaged in a project that simultaneously tackles cultural domination and economic exploitation. Her work is concerned with two distinct assumptions underpinning social and intellectual movements today: one focuses on the cultural politics of recognition where status groups strive for the recognition of their perspectives and knowledges, and the other on egalitarian socioeconomic redistribution, which is interested mostly in political economic restructuring. She proposes a "perspectival dualist" analysis that takes up social and economic redistribution and cultural recognition as two mutually irreducible dimensions of justice. Gale and Densmore (2000) are interested, in particular, in what it means for a teacher to act justly in the classroom. They embrace a notion of recognitive justice that is concerned

specifically with cultural politics of social institutions and what it means to validate group differences. They argue that a recognitive approach involves three conditions for social justice: fostering respect for different social groups through their self-identification, opportunities for self-development and self-expression, and participation of groups in decision-making processes. Bringing the notion of recognitive justice to the fields of immigration and lifelong learning, Guo (2010, 2012) rejects a deficit understanding of immigrants' transnational lifelong learning experiences and an assimilative approach to integrate immigrants. Rather he points out that immigrants are attached to different traditions, values and cultural practices, which should be affirmed and treated as assets to ensure their equitable participation in host societies.

Side by side with cultural affirmation and entitlement to social participation, to achieve recognitive justice in the context of immigration, I argue that it is also crucial to explore the standpoint of immigrants to re-orient western-centric institutional practices. To this end, I turn to the feminist scholarship on standpoint. Standpoint theories were made popular by feminists in the 1970s and 1980s. Having a strong Marxist foundation, they acknowledge that the social position of a person shapes his or her knowledge; in other words, the socially oppressed class can access knowledge unavailable to the socially privileged (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004). Feminists especially endorse the standpoint of women because it reveals social realities that are often repressed, dismissed or inexpressible because of a lack of language in the dominant and often masculine discourses (DeVault, 1999; Smith, 1990). Women's standpoint is not about justifying the voices of women as being more accurate accounts of reality (Harding & Hintikka, 1983). Neither is the knowledge produced by taking women's standpoint only another discourse of knowledge, although women's discourse might contribute to 'a less repressive society' (Hekman, 1997, p. 25). What is more important is that women's standpoint provides an alternative ontology for us to challenge domination and marginalisation.

While also using the term of women's standpoint, Dorothy Smith, the founder of the feminist sociological approach of institutional ethnography, goes beyond asserting women's voices. Rather, she pinpoints that, often implicated in masculine institutions, women and by extension people have developed a bifurcated consciousness, constantly torn between our intimate, embodied and everyday knowing and a subjectivity regulated by objectifying social relations extending beyond the local; unfortunately the former is often relegated to the latter (Smith, 1990, 2005). With this insight, Smith tries to turn the status quo around and she proposes that women's and indeed people's standpoint, or their intimate everyday knowing provides an ontological alternative for social research. In other words, rather than treating theoretical constructs and ideological frameworks as the basis to construct reality for people, Smith believes that people's standpoint should be engaged as a valuable way to generate knowledge. According to Smith, people's standpoint provides us not only a language that is obscured by the dominant ideologies and practices, but also a political stance of action. In practice, engaging in the standpoint of people means that researchers departs from institutional discourses, and that they start from the empirical knowing of people in the local to unpack the objectifying social relations that work to the disadvantage of the minoritised and marginalised (Smith, 1990, 2005).

To achieve recognitive justice for immigrants, I believe that immigrants' standpoint, or their everyday knowledge derived from dealing with qualification recognition and assessment provides a critical anchoring point to examine existing recognition practices. In my study, it is based on the local knowledge of immigrants that I problematise the credential assessment practices in engineering. Throughout the

investigation process, as Smith (2005) has warned, I make a conscious departure from the dominant managerial and administrative perspective, and refrain from 'institutional capture' or reproducing institutional discourses of efficiency and effectiveness.

Research context

Historically, Canadian immigration policies consistently gave preference to white, male, European descents with sufficient means of support upon landing (Jakubowski, 1997). It was not until the 1960s that Canada ended the overt gendered and racialised practices. To achieve a competitive edge in the globalised knowledge economy, Canada started targeting skilled immigrants with desired educational and work experiences. In recent years, skilled immigrants account for more than 50 percent of all immigrants to Canada (CIC, 2007). An increasing percentage of these immigrants are from non-traditional immigrant source countries such as China and India. Recent immigrants are also most likely to be trained scientists and engineers (Couton, 2002). In 2001, of the 44 percent of skilled immigrants who identified an intended occupation at the time of immigration, 63 percent indicated engineering (Lemay, 2007). Asia, in particular China, has become the major provider of the most recent immigrant professionals in science and technology (Couton, 2002; Lemay, 2007). In 2000, 39 percent of immigrants intending to work as engineers (all specialties combined) were from China (Couton, 2002).

Despite the likelihood for immigrants to be trained in engineering, they are less likely than their Canadian-trained counterparts to be hired in engineering; when they are hired, they are often under-represented in engineering and managerial positions (Boyd, 1990; Boyd & Thomas, 2001; Wong & Wong, 2006). Credential recognition has been found to be a huge barrier preventing immigrant professionals, such as immigrant engineers, from succeeding in the Canadian labour market (The Conference Board of Canada, 2007). Against this context, Girard and Bauder (2007a, 2007b) have explored the historical rise of engineering licensure practices. Their work shows that in the province of Ontario, the engineering practitioners moved towards professional closure and made Canadian credentials the entrance criteria essentially to protect the economic interests of the Canadian trained engineers. Slade (2008) further explicates how the current engineering licensure process in Ontario is exclusive to immigrant applicants. At the root of the problem, as Guo (2009) points out, is the epistemological conflation between difference and deficiency and the positivistic tendency to endorse universal and "objective" measurement by licensure bodies.

In the past decade, the issue of recognition has attracted attention from different levels of governments in Canada. The federal government in particular has funded a number of initiatives for different stakeholders to move towards fair recognition practices. For instance, in January 2003, it funded the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers, now named Engineers Canada, to launch a project entitled *From Consideration to Integration*, which is to encourage occupational licensing and regulatory bodies to adopt best practices in foreign credential evaluation and to improve the integration of internationally-trained professionals into the Canadian workforce. Despite these endeavours, there is not yet any attempt to examine the recognition practices from the standpoint of immigrants undergoing assessment.

The research methods and research participants

This paper draws on a larger study that explored the social organisation of Chinese immigrant engineers' learning experiences in Canada. This paper focuses specifically on immigrants' experiences of going through the licensure process and writing confirmatory exams, and how their experiences are shaped by credential recognition policies and practices in the engineering profession. The field research took place in Edmonton, Alberta and Toronto, Ontario between 2006 and 2008; two cities with good concentration of immigrants and engineers.

For the field research, I started by conducting life history interviews (Plummer, 2001) with Chinese immigrant engineers. Altogether, I interviewed 14 Chinese immigrant engineers in traditional engineering fields: seven in Edmonton (two women) and seven in Toronto (three women). At the time of the interviews, ten of them were between 30 and 40, and three between 41 and 50. They had been in Canada for between 15 months and nine years. All except for one immigrant were married. Of those married, all except for one had at least one child. Before immigrating to Canada, one of them held a doctoral degree; seven had one or more master's degrees; the remaining six had bachelor's degrees. Interviews with immigrants typically took two hours, although the longest was 4 hours over a period of a few weeks. They covered the respondents' life and work experiences since they graduated in China, with a particular focus on their transitional moments and struggles, as well as their shifting perceptions and professional investment as they tried to manage their career life in Canada. For the purpose of this paper, I tried to follow up with the respondents in 2013 and was able to reconnect with four. Although follow-up interviews were not taped, notes were taken.

While conducting interviews with the immigrants, I also started mapping the organisation of the engineering profession through using a combination of key informant interviews, event observation and textual analysis. Altogether, I conducted 14 key informant interviews (3 other interviews were excluded due to reasons such as poor recording quality) with employers, project managers, senior engineers, HR recruiters, trainers, and staff from the licensure organisations: Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta (APEGA) and Professional Engineer Ontario (PEO) (8 in Ontario and 6 in Alberta). Key informant interviews ranged from half an hour to an hour. The interviews were used to understand the work of the key informants in their different positions within the engineering profession. Additionally, I observed three immigrant training events and conferences and analysed a range of public and policy documents, including licensure guides. This paper draws only on interview data and textual analysis.

Interviews with immigrants were thematically analysed. Key informant interviews and texts are analysed to map out the organisation of the engineering profession, or the social happening across sites that coordinates immigrants' experiences. Trustworthiness of the study was ensured through triangulation (using mixed data collection methods), member checks (giving respondents an opportunity to review their interview transcripts, and review and provide feedback on the preliminary research findings), and maintaining an audit trail (keeping a journal of my reflective notes on the research process) (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The following two sections report on the findings of the study related to immigrants' credential related learning experiences and credential assessment policies and practices in the engineering profession in Canada.

Getting credentials recognised: Immigrants' experiences with confirmatory exams

It took between one and 24 months for the immigrant respondents to land their first engineering jobs in Canada; before entering engineering, the majority of them did labour intensive work in restaurants, hotels, or manufacturing factories. The first engineering positions they obtained in Canada were often as drafters (or draftspersons), designers, and specialists, which are far from comparable with their last positions prior to immigration. To become engineers proper again, all 14 immigrant respondents except for one applied for Professional Engineer (P. Eng) licences in their respective provinces. At the time of the interviews, one already gave up on his application. Three were required to write professional practice exam only, which is required of all licence applicants; among them, two finished challenging the exam and acquired their licenses and one was in preparation for the exam. Three were in the middle of writing exams to confirm their prior credentials or to address "deficiency" in their academic backgrounds. Five were awaiting assessment results. One was to contest his assessment result through a meeting with an Experience Requirement Committee. In 2013, when I tried to follow up with the respondents, only four responded and all four had acquired their licences. This section is based on a thematic analysis of the interviews with all 13 immigrants who applied for licensure, with specific attention to the issues they faced with credential assessment and confirmatory exams.

Postgraduate learning discounted

Among the 13 people who applied for licences, two were told to write eight exams. Among the two, one gave up and returned to China. The other, Frank[1], said that in China, he enrolled in mechanical engineering for his undergraduate program but switched to civil engineering for his postgraduate program. Since he worked in civil engineering since graduation in both China and Canada, he applied for a P. Eng. licence in civil engineering in Ontario. Not recognising his training in civil engineering at the postgraduate level, PEO required him to make up for his education by writing eight exams. He said that some of the exams have exactly the same titles as the postgraduate courses he took. At the time of the study, Frank was to have an interview with an Experience Requirement Committee, hoping that his exam program would be cancelled through the meeting.

Non-recognition of postgraduate training as academic training was also a problem faced by Bing. Bing majored in mechanical engineering for her undergraduate program and studied for geotechnical engineering for her postgraduate degree in the US. In Canada, she found a job conducting structural analysis, and therefore decided to apply for a P. Eng. Licence in civil engineering. She said:

> I was asked to write four confirmatory exams… One of the compulsory exams is Geotechnical Materials and Analysis. I have chosen many courses, for my post-graduate program (in the US), in Geotechnical Material and Analysis. I have also done lots of research in that area. … so I wrote to them. After a while, I got an email from PEO. I was exempted from Geotechnical Materials and Analysis. But then, they assigned me to write another exam. What the heck! If I knew that, I would have remained quiet.

Bing was caught up by the rigidity of her exam program, as well as the systematic discount of postgraduate programs from outside of Canada in Ontario. What is interesting to know is that had she applied for a licence in Alberta, she later on found

out, she might not have to write any exams given that her postgraduate program was completed in the US (see next section).

Arcane curriculum and expanding training market

Not only did the immigrant respondents take issue with the limited recognition of their educational background, three were particularly critical of what Bing suspected to be the "purposeful" withdrawal of information that is directly relevant to the exams by licensure bodies. Bing for instance said that her load of work could have been reduced greatly had the list of recommended textbooks been relevant. She said:

> [Initially], I went to the library and borrowed a stack of books recommended by PEO. [Luckily,] [my husband and I] (knew) someone who just finished writing Municipal Engineering. He gave me the name of a book – he registered for a course and the instructor gave his class the title of the book. I then borrowed that book from the library too … I found out that many of the exam questions [from the past exams] were directly taken from that book. When PEO recommends books and materials to you, it does not recommend these kinds of books [which are directly relevant to the exams]. That book was easy to read, and was all relevant to the exam. But the books that were recommended … was nothing but mind boggling. I was furious! … For me I needed the book only to cope with the exam. … … actually if you take that course, the exam is not difficult at all. … I suspect that they did it on purpose. … as well, I bought their exam questions from previous years from PEO. But later, people told me that those questions are actually available on-line for free in Vancouver, British Columbia. How come they asked us to pay?

Two other respondents Gong and Jin also found that the textbooks recommended to them were of little relevance to their exams. As a result, Jin took a training program. Gong chose to study previous exams to prepare for his exams. When he had questions, he would pay a tutor whose name was recommended by the licensure body to provide solutions. Other exam writers dismissed the idea of paying a trainer or tutor for financial reasons. They mostly relied on the recommended list of textbooks to study for exams themselves.

It is not clear whether withdrawal of information is an intentional strategy on the part of the licensing bodies. It is however possible that an arcane list of textbooks may help fuel a training market that came about in response to the "needs" of immigrants to write confirmatory exams. What is clear is that when the curriculum structure and exam structure set up by the credentialing bodies are not in synch, it will result in excessive labour of learning for immigrants. The arcane curriculum, which hinders rather than helps exam writers, indicates a lack of what Fraser calls the redistributive (economic) and recognitive (cultural) justice (1997, 2000) in recognition practices. It also suggests that while these two dimensions of (in)justice are irreducible to each other, they certainly overlay and reinforce each other to the detriment of immigrants.

The labour of learning

While the respondents were reluctant to attend training programs for exams, five attended Master's or Doctoral programs in Canada (one dropped out in the middle of the degree program). Among them, Amy suggested that she took a Master's program because she always wanted a foreign degree. As well, by obtaining a Canadian degree, she should not be asked to write confirmatory exams when applying for a P. Eng. licence. While getting a Canadian degree would help immigrants bypass confirmatory exams (see next section), two respondents, Gong and Eric, were simultaneously writing

exams while attending a degree program. Gong, whose hair "turned grey" from writing exams on his own, and taking courses at the same time said: 'I need at least two years to write my confirmatory exams. To do a Master's program part-time, at least, I need four years. I could not let one wait for the other'. He then laughed at himself for having a "(western) degree complex".

If writing confirmatory exams itself is arduous, as all respondents reported, taking postgraduate courses in lieu of, or at the same time of, writing exams is gruelling. Eric described a period of his time when he was working full time in Calgary and attending a postgraduate course in Edmonton (a three-hour drive from Calgary) where his family was based:

> I was kind of busy a while ago when I was taking a course [at a university]. I went to work around 6:30 and 7:00 am and got off work at about 5:00 pm. Sometimes, I could work up to 7:30 pm because we were asked to work 50 hours a week for a project that we just finished. … at that time, I also had homework [from the course]. After getting off work, I would do homework. I would have to stay up until 1 or 2 am the next day. For quite a few times, I stayed up the whole night.

Eric was asked how he was taking care of himself during this period of time. He said that each week, he would drive from Calgary to his home in Edmonton, and bring back the next week's food prepared by his wife. Clearly, behind the labour of learning engaged by immigrants is also the labour of some family members, often the wives, and sometimes also the husbands, and even parents, who cook the meals, clean the house, take care of children, and generally keep things running at home while they study to earn a legitimate membership in their chosen profession.

Since the immigrant respondents spent a lot of time and energy on writing their exams, I asked them how useful their exam-related learning was. In response, some said that the confirmatory exams were not relevant to their work. Gong for instance said: 'I do structural analysis for mining projects. In one exam, I was asked to calculate the interval of a traffic light switch. What is that for? 'Eric said: 'Everything you learn is useful, in a way. … But the exams were not written for us. They were written for (the licensure bodies)'. I then asked the respondents what kind of learning would have been useful for them. They suggested some immediate needs and interests, such as Canadian codes and standards, theories related to their fields of practice, software commonly used at work, communication and so on.

The credential-related labour of learning is particular to immigrants whose backgrounds are not readily recognised in Canada. To get their prior and specifically undergraduate educational backgrounds recognised, the immigrant respondents had to take up heavy learning loads, which sometimes involves financial investment, and often demands huge commitments of time and energy from both immigrant applicants and their family members. What is more, their exam-related learning was often not relevant to their professional learning needs at the time when they were going through the licensure process. The study as such pinpoints a disjuncture between credential recognition practices and immigrants' stage of career development post-migration. This particular disjuncture prompts me to inquire into the ways in which confirmatory exams are meted out to immigrants in both Alberta and Ontario.

Academic assessment policies and practices: Institutional procedures problematized

Immigrants' experiences of writing confirmatory exams provided the standpoint for my examination of credential recognition practices in the engineering profession. In particular, the disconnectedness between the respondents' exam-related learning and their career needs post-migration led me to inquire into the institutional processes producing the learning labour and learning loads for immigrants. In this section, I specifically examine the academic assessment practices in the engineering profession in Canada, with particular attention paid to the ways in which, PEO and APEGA, two licensure bodies in Ontario and Alberta respectively, assign confirmatory exams for the foreign trained. Findings in this section are based on an institutional ethnographic analysis of interviews with key informants from the two licensure bodies and of the licensing and credential assessment information from both the two provincial regulatory bodies and from Engineers Canada.

The dual-system of credential assessment

There are 12 provincial and territorial engineering licensure bodies in Canada that conduct independent academic assessments and grant their own licences. This might be confusing for immigrants, especially because Engineers Canada, the national organisation of the provincial and territorial associations that regulate engineering practices in Canada, also provides education assessment for internationally trained engineers. On the official website of Engineers Canada, it says:

> While not part of the registration process to become a licensed professional engineer in Canada, the Engineering International-Education Assessment Program assesses the educational qualifications of individuals who were educated and trained outside of Canada by comparing their education to a Canadian engineering education. It is the only assessment service in Canada specialising *exclusively in the assessment of engineering education credentials* (Engineers Canada, 2008. Italicised original emphasis).

While on the same webpage, it claims that the assessment, which costs CA $175, helps immigrants to make an informed decision to immigrate to Canada and 'provides useful information for employers, universities and other officials' (Engineers Canada, 2008), it has no bearing whatsoever on how readily immigrants may pass their academic assessment by local provincial licensure bodies.

As part of the licensure process, internationally trained engineers who do not hold an undergraduate degree from a Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB)-accredited program will need to go through an academic assessment process administered by provincial licensure bodies. Academic assessment committees may assign technical exams to 'ascertain whether an applicant's academic preparation is equivalent to that provided by an *undergraduate* engineering program accredited by CEAB, or to remedy identified deficiencies in an applicant's academic preparation compared to a CEAB-accredited program' (PEO, 2012a. Italicised author's emphasis).

Credential assessment process

In Ontario, if immigrants' qualifications are deemed to be "similar to" what is provided by Canadian programs, they may be assigned a confirmatory exam program that comprises three technical exams and one complementary exam. Applicants who are

assessed to meet the minimum academic requirement to apply for a P. Eng. licence, but do not hold a Bachelor of Engineering degree and have fewer than 10 years of engineering experience, are normally assigned a Phase 1 Exam Program, which comprises at least four exams in Basic studies. Applicants whose academic qualifications are judged to be lower than an engineering degree will be assigned a specific exam program, which may consist of up to 18 exams (PEO, 2012a; Slade, 2008). Once the qualifications of immigrants were determined against Canadian standards, the Academic Requirement Committee will typically assign exams in subjects that, according to some respondents, do not show up in applicants' undergraduate transcripts.

In Alberta, academic assessment follows a similar procedure as that in Ontario, but there are some differences too. In Alberta, academic assessment is conducted with reference to the foreign degree list (the list), which is a list of universities and undergraduate programs that APEGA recognises. Should applicants' degrees be on the list, APEGA will start with a standard confirmatory assessment with the Fundamentals of Engineering (FE) exam, an exam developed by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), a US-based accreditation board for post-secondary education programs in applied sciences, engineering and engineering technology, or with three technical exams plus Engineering Economics if the applicant has not taken the course before (APEGA, 2012). If the applicants' degrees are not on the list, they will be assigned either a FE or five technical exams. Course-by-course exams may also be assigned to cover deficiencies in the applicant's training and in such cases, university courses can be taken in lieu of exams. If the applicants do not have an undergraduate degree, they may be assigned up to 24 technical exams (APEGA, 2012).
In both provinces, confirmatory exams may be waivered under some circumstances. In Ontario, three cases may warrant exemption from confirmatory exams. First, if the applicants complete postgraduate studies at a Canadian university in the same engineering discipline as their undergraduate engineering degree. This partially explains why some immigrants decided to go back to school for postgraduate programs. Second, if applicants hold an undergraduate degree from an MRA country or area. MRA is an agreement that Engineers Canada negotiates on behalf of the engineering profession in Canada. It recognises the equivalency of the accreditation systems used in some countries, such as the US, Japan, Hong Kong, etc. with the Canadian system. Third, if the applicants have five years of engineering work experiences, they are given a face-to-face interview opportunity with the Experience Requirement Committee to see whether their experiential knowledge will be recognised in their discipline-specific engineering field (PEO, 2012a). Frank, for instance, had a face-to-face interview and through the interview, had his required number of exams reduced from eight to four. In Alberta, APEGA may also waiver technical exams if the applicants obtained post-graduate engineering degrees from an accredited Canadian, ABET, or MRA institutions. As well, for those whose degrees are on the list, should they provide evidence of at least 10 years of acceptable engineering experience, they might be exempted from confirmatory exams (APEGA, 2012).

Gaps and fissures in credential assessment process

While reviewing the ways in which PEO and APEGA assess foreign credentials and assign exams, a few core issues emerged. First of all, separate academic assessment processes are carried out independently by Engineers Canada, and the local licensure bodies. Immigrants whose qualifications are assessed to be up to Canadian standards by

Engineers Canada, and who therefore decide to move to Canada may still need to prove their qualification equivalence to another assessment board at the provincial level by writing confirmatory exams. Secondly, the ways in which APEGA and PEO carry out their academic assessment work is somewhat ad hoc. As a result, the same immigrant may be assigned a different number of exams in different provinces. Once the number of exams is assigned, it is often fixed unless exam writers demonstrate "good performance" by passing the first exams with fairly high scores (70 percent out of 100 and above in Ontario for instance) (PEO, 2012b). The conditions under which applicants may seek exemption from the exam programs are also different. For instance, applicants with five years' work experiences in Alberta will not get the same opportunity as those in Ontario to demonstrate their experiential learning in front of an Experience Requirement Committee (see APEGA, 2012). The discretion of academic assessors may differ as well. In Ontario, assessment of educational qualifications is conducted on an individualised and case by case basis (Slade, 2008). In Alberta, the list, which according to the key informant from APEGA, continues developing, serves as a reference point for academic assessors.

More importantly, both APEGA and PEO make Canadian credentials "the" standards immigrants from other countries have to meet. Foreign training by definition is either inferior or at best equivalent to engineering education in Canada (Guo, 2009; Slade, 2008). What is more, in the assessment process, immigrants are rendered the object of assessment, rather than subjects and participatory members with a voice on the value of their own experiences and learning needs (cf. Gale & Densmore, 2000). Such exclusion, I believe, prevents Canada from learning from the knowledge of the "others". Finally, confirmatory exams are to fulfill the administrative needs to assess immigrants' undergraduate backgrounds. Postgraduate training and other kinds of training immigrants receive later in their professional life is largely overlooked unless it is delivered in Canada, and in accredited ABET and MRA institutions in the case of Alberta. In other words, a significant part of immigrants' educational experiences may not be considered by academic assessors. For immigrants in the middle of their careers, this narrow focus on the remote past could easily result in a disjuncture between what is being evaluated and what is important for them to learn at their stage of career development post-migration.

Conclusion and implications

Since the latter half of the 1990s, national and international agreements have been negotiated and new polices and initiatives have been put into place in many OECD countries to improve FQR practices. While these changes have facilitated the mobility and recognition of some immigrants, they have also made western-centric standards "the" standards against which immigrants are gauged. Moreover, they have served to strengthen institutional management and control in line with the ideal of liberal fairness, an ideal that is premised on the assumptions of equal opportunities, homogeneous population and universal knowledge. They are a far cry from recognitive justice which is about giving voices to, and legitimising other knowledges, and more importantly extending a participatory space to the others, and thereby expanding local knowledge and practices.

Rooted in the ideal of recognitive justice, this paper ontologically introduces an alternative orientation towards recognition. Rather than making institutional efficiency and effectiveness the primary consideration, I propose that immigrants' standpoint and

everyday experiences serve an anchoring point for a realignment of recognition practices. This proposal may contradict the institutional interests of recognition bodies for institutional effectiveness. I do not presume that the tension between immigrants' individual needs and the mandate of professional licensure bodies for institutional assurance will ever disappear. Yet, by centering the standpoint of immigrants, licensure bodies and credential assessors are presented with an opportunity to start appreciating the experiences and knowledge of immigrants that are previously rendered invisible. More importantly, they will be better positioned to rectify existing institutional practices that severely undermine recognitive justice, which is tied to immigrants' economic outcomes as well as the economic prosperity of the host countries.

The research that I draw on to illustrate my proposal started by exploring the experiences of some Chinese immigrant engineers as they tried to obtain P. Eng. licences in Canada. Based on the immigrants' experiences of undergoing assessment and writing confirmatory exams, the study further identified a number of issues with foreign qualification assessment within the engineering profession. These are: redundancy, arbitrariness, Canadian-centrededness, and a focus on the past. The process is redundant as engineering organisations conduct their independent academic assessment at both national and provincial levels. The national assessment outcomes have little bearing on assessment results at the provincial level. It is arbitrary, as provincial licensure bodies set their own procedures, which may lead to different assessment results and hence differential learning loads for immigrants in different provinces. It is Canadian-centred for it precludes the possibility that other kinds of training and education can be complementary to Canadian education. Finally it focuses on the past, i.e. applicants' undergraduate training; postgraduate training undertaken outside of Canada (and MRA countries), which could be more relevant to immigrants' working life at the time when they apply for licences, is unfortunately discounted.

Some of the problems identified are administrative issues that might be addressed through streamlining the procedures adopted to assess foreign credentials. For instance, communication channels should be established between the academic assessment boards at the national and provincial levels. It is important that immigrants do not have to go through two separate processes to get recognised in Canada and that they have a consistent understanding of the value of their education in Canada. Further, credential assessment should look for ways to take into account immigrants' continuous learning after graduation especially postgraduate education obtained outside of Canada and MRA countries. As well, relevant and current resources should be directly communicated to exam writers, without the mediation of paid training programs; exam related materials should serve to facilitate exam-writing for immigrants rather than increase their learning loads. All recommendations aforementioned can still be criticised for using the master's tools to consolidate the master's house (cf. Lorde, 1983). While they may help address some obvious gaps and crevices in the academic assessment processes by engineering bodies, they may be reinforcing the positivistic trend of assessment and measurements (cf. Guo, 2009). To start addressing this epistemological issue, a participatory space should be created for immigrants to have a voice in the assessment process. In other words, in line with the ideal of recognitive justice (Gale et al., 2000), immigrants should be made collaborators in the assessment process, rather than merely its objects. That is, credential assessment for immigrants should not only serve the institutional desire for assurance, but also fit itself into the professional career development trajectory of immigrants. As collaborators of assessment, immigrants may also educate us on how other knowledges can add to the educational and professional practices in the host societies

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Note

[1] Both English and Chinese pseudonyms are used to reflect the name preferences of immigrant respondents.

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Aims & Scope

The European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions. It encourages diversity in theoretical and methodological approach and submissions from non-English speakers. All published contributions in RELA are subjected to a rigorous peer review process based on two moments of selection: an initial editorial screening and a double-blind review by at least two anonymous referees. Clarity and conciseness of thought are crucial requirements for publication.

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