

Competence validation in working life – a study of identification, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement of competence in work organisations

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Introduction

In this working paper an ongoing project is presented; a critical analysis of activities regarding the identification, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement of competence in work organisations in the Swedish working life. The aim is to in part highlight some problems with validation and to shortly discuss some preliminary results from a study.

Validation is a phenomenon and a concept that in recent years has drawn great attention and can be seen as a strong discourse within working life and in adult education in Sweden. Validation stands for different methods to make visible and evaluate previously acquired competence, mainly competence acquired outside the formal education system, e.g. informal competence acquired in working life. Validation is mostly described as something that all involved profit from and is seen as a vehicle to be used by many, such as the individual, the business world and the educational system. However, it is not a homogenous discourse (Lundgren & Abrahamsson 2005). Even if the Valideringsdelegationen, an authorized project by the Swedish government, with great effort been trying to standardize the concept of validation in the Swedish context there is still different users that do not share the same perspective or usage of validation, (Valideringsdelegationen, 2008). This project is mainly focusing on Swedish working life, such as personal managers, team leaders and different trade union representatives in their view and use of validation since this has not much been made visible in the Swedish working life debate. Usually the focus has been on education, vocational training, labour market or employment policies, i.e. the 'outside' perspective, validation run by the state. In our project we are studying validation more from the companies' perspective, i.e. the 'inside' perspective, validation run by employers and their activities in evaluating, using and making their workers competences visible in their own work organisation.

The background purpose of the project is to compare validation activities run by employers with those run by the state. The latter has been much observed and focused upon in research and policy contexts, but the former has not. The main purpose with this project though, is to problematize 'validation' and similar learning activities (identification, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement of competence) at companies in the Swedish labour market by studying both the rhetorics and practices in different contexts.

We put emphasis on critical analysis of the activities of identification and measurements of skills and competence of workers. Validation means formalisation, standardisation and measurements of competences. This is done within the existing production systems; e.g. lean production where stabilisation and reduction of variation and individual initiatives is important parts. This means that validation not always becomes a positive learning and reforming tool in all regards; rather it can have preserving and restoring effects upon a

company's organisation as well as predominant power systems within the labour market and the education system.

Validation also means subjective evaluation of competences. For that reason the identification, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement of knowledge is therefore also studied from a gender perspective. What are the consequences of the different types of validation from a gender perspective? In what way does the gender segregated labour market affect and how is it affected? How is women's and men's competence identified, evaluated and acknowledged when validation is used in these different contexts, in companies and organisations? In what way does validation interact with constructions of gender?

Some preliminary results from the project shows that validation both as a concept and as a now more or less standardized method is not commonly used neither in companies within the private sector nor in working activities within municipalities. Despite this, when validation is divided into its elements, *identification, evaluation, documentation and acknowledgement*, the results shows that both companies and municipalities in one way or another 'validate' the competence of their employees in order to make use of it. This is mostly done within a logic of production and effectiveness, rather than, as in more traditional validation situations, within a logic of empowerment and lifelong learning. This means that the explicit purpose for this validation that is performed as a visualization of competence, is mostly done for the cause of the company or the municipality working context rather than to lift up and strengthen individuals. The question remains in what way this kind of 'validation system' can be seen as a society gain even if it is seldom visualised outside its context.

Learning at work as rhetorics and politics

Not many years ago the concept of learning meant teaching and memorisation, mainly within the institutional frames of the youth school system. Today the concept has considerably widened. Policies from the 70's focusing recurrent education and parallel studies has now been replaced by the concept of life long and life wide learning (Skolverket 2000, CEDEFOP 2003). During the recent decade flexible learning has been stressed and words such as learning centers and learning environments has more and more come into focus (Prop. 2000/2001: 72). The concept of flexibilisation of learning is also containing ambitions and desires to make learning contextually independent in relation to time and room. A correspondent development is even more clearly made visible in working life, where flexibility has been discussed regarding work tasks, employment forms and working hours (Isidorsson 2001). The adult education level of the population has also been evaluated by the Swedish Government and is seen as a coming challenge (SOU 2003:94, SOU 2004:30). The increasing interest for informal learning is not only made visible in the rhetorics of education politics but is also seen in the activities developing tools for better taking care of and applying knowledge and skills acquired in both formal and informal contexts. This means for example tools for identifying, describing and evaluating embedded knowledge, i.e. professional skill, knowledge of conversance and everyday experience or latent knowledge. The validation trend is an example of this development (SOU 2001: 78).

Various kinds of validations

In the public debate validation has mainly been discussed from an individual perspective (Jansson 2004). This might be seen as obvious since the advantages of validation are clearly connected to the individual, mainly to the low educated workers or to the unemployed. This

perspective seems to be the most common perspective within the rhetorics of the field of working life today. To a high degree actors 'outside' the business world are driving this perspective, e.g. The Center for Flexible Learning (Centrum för flexibelt lärande, CFL) and many projects within the EQUAL Programme (e.g. NTN-Learn, www.ntglar.se). A couple of years ago the concept of validation was primarily used in relation to immigrants with low education or other school experience than Swedish (SOU 2001:78). Today models for validation are being developed at different levels in the formal educational system and also in relation to various professions (SUHF 2003, SOU 2004:29, Andersson et al 2001). Within the municipality adult education models and methods has been developed in order to use validation as regular elements in the pedagogical process. Therefore many people in Sweden have been validated within the frames of education, labour market or rehabilitation measures. In these groups of validated people women are in a majority since validation has been common in the field of health and nursing care (Andersson et al 2001, Lundgren 2005).

The rhetorics of validation is built upon the idea that the individual through validation achieves higher and more general education in order to become more attractive on the labour market. The level of employability is increased by making knowledge more visible and the position for negotiating employment and pay is improved. Therefore the benefits of validation are closely connected to the individual and by that the main responsibility for further and supplementary education lies with the individual. Naturally the state also have interest in stimulating and financing validation in order to raise the general educational level in society, and consequently the flexibility on the labour market (Björnåvold 2000, Jansson 2004). At the same time validation is a way for the state to avoid educational costs 'in vain'. This type of thinking is in line with the aims of the government to facilitate life long learning (Ds 2003:23, SOU 2001:78). The government has taken a further step towards that goal when proposing all adults the right to validate within the frames of the educational system (Ds 2005:33).

When it comes to the benefits of validation for employers within the private sector the question is more complex and not much research has been done. Validation is often seen, at least rhetorically, as a possible way for the employers to assure competence within the own company. A more obvious gain for the employer is when certain professionals, competence or certifications is lacking. In such situations the employers more naturally validate in order to recruit workers with relevant competence. Another example is when employers pay the education of their workers. This is a way to shorten the time of the education and by that, lower costs. Disregarding these special cases a discrepancy between benefits and motivations of the employers and the individual/society can be stated. It is seldom in the interest of the employer to validate in order to help the workers to apply for raised salaries or becoming more attractive and mobile on the labour market. A possible gain for the employers would be to make competence visible by transforming individual, tacit or practical competence or skills into visible and formal competence, which then can be used in the own company (Andersson 2003, Jansson 2004).

Research on learning at work – a brief summary

Research on learning at work is today a broad and a sprawling scientific field of knowledge (Abrahamsson et al. 2002, Fenwick 2005). It contains several perspectives and starting-points and we will only present a short and slightly simplified summary. Many perspectives is focusing upon the individual and her understanding. In US there is for example an increased interest in neuroscientific research about different functions of the brain. An important field for discussion regarding validation is research about knowledge of conversance and tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1974, Göranson 1990). Fenwick

(2005) is describing this as an extensive tradition with many different development directions, where some have moved towards Human Capital theories and relatively simplified assumptions about individuals learning useful things which she uses and brings into the organisation. A closely related field to theories about learning is the development of the individual, Human Resource Management, recurrent vocational education, flexible learning and autonomous learning (Straka 2000). A lack in this field is that it seldom includes analysis of organisations, contexts, systems of power or hierarchies.

Another field of learning that is discussed is learning seen as something that happens when individuals and groups through reflexive dialogue and critical reflection create meaning. Learning develops through reflecting over the concrete practice, work or experiences. New knowledge is created by individual and collective work with conflicts and contrarious perspectives. Kolb's (1984) model about cyclical processes of learning is an important part of this field. The work of Gustavsen (1990) with theories about democratic dialogue can also be included in this field. An adjacent field is theories about different levels of learning, for example individuals, groups and organisations and how these different levels interactively is influencing and affecting each other. The discussions of Ellström about learning focused on adaption or development has long been a leading perspective in Sweden (Ellström 2002). Learning focused upon development is very much built around reflection and Fenwick (2005) is stressing the point that there is a tendency in this field to overemphasize the importance of reflection.

Another leading discourse is the socio-cultural perspective and the interest for situated learning (Säljö 2000, Wenger 1998). A starting-point of this perspective is that the learning of the individual is related to the participation in contexts/cultures and dependent on how this culture is structured, the individual's learning is affected in different ways. An adjacent field is network theories but with less focus on individuals. In this field relatively simplified models about flows of information, diffusion and knowledge management in organisations (compare with knowledge management) together with theories about socio-cultural aspects is dwelling together. Individuals learn in and knowledge is diffused through networks, both inside and between the organisations. The networks have different forms, functions and effectiveness dependent on context, e.g. social dynamics that affects in which rate the individuals and groups are willing to share their knowledge. The environment is affecting the individuals through socialisation and demands of certain competence and definitions of what important knowledge is. In this field discussions are also found about the importance of different environments for learning (Carlgren 1999).

Another field that strongly emphasize the individual and the environment as dialectical systems is process theories that are focusing upon relations between the acting of the individual and the organisation of and practices within the working place. To this environment, socio-cultural factors and socialisation can be included, but most of all the social construction of identities, gender, competence and the issue of what important knowledge is and also discourses and artefacts such as technics. The focus is upon processes, flows and systems of activities rather than on individuals and it is the changeability and the variableness in this field that draws the most interest. Learning is at the same time individual and collective and is done interactively within a wide range of contexts. It is in this field that this project has its theoretical foundations. A closely related research field that has come to be widely spread is the Activity Theoretical approach (Engeström 2001). In this approach CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory), ANT (actor-network theory) and complexity theories can be found.

Can knowledge be measured?

The theories mentioned above show that knowledge is not an easy thing to measure. A specific and approved competence of an individual in a certain context doesn't always work in other contexts. Knowledge is not like a product that can be bought, but it is created, changed and recreated in socio-cultural contexts in both individual and collective processes. Knowledge is not just about the conduct and behaviour of the individual but perhaps more about money, politics, power and even the gender organisation. Ideas and norms of what knowledge is and who can be the carriers of knowledge can also hide other types of knowledge and other actors. Put together this makes validation as a concept and a phenomenon important to study. What is validation really about?

Gender and learning

Just a simple gender analysis of working life and the education system shows that these systems for a long time have been constructed for men with strong marks regarding stereotypical gender norms and ideals of learning (Fridh-Haneson & Haglund 2004, Nordberg & Rydbäck 2001). The activities and learning of women has in many ways been made invisible and also low esteemed. Women and girls has also for a long time been excluded from higher education, been directed to special 'arenas' for girls and women, been given less space and resources or been considered to being in need of certain discipline or guidance. Today all this looks quite different, with women being more highly educated and with higher grades than men. But the traces from a former gender system is still left in today's schools and working life, e.g. in the form of gender segregation and different terms for women and men. This gender division has shown to be very stubborn and hard to change, but at the same time the gender division on the labour market has changed appearance and character in several 'shifts' back and forth (Löfström 2004). On a higher level both the attitudes and actions of individuals can be identified with formal organisations and systems of power as well, which all contributes to the stability of the gender pattern, something that often contains both dividing and ranking women and men (Hirdman 1988, 2001). The fact that women and men work in different professional fields and have different terms in working life has also different consequences for learning at work for women and men (Abrahamsson 2000, Gonäs, Lindgren & Bildt 2001).

The gender patterns also play a vital role in the organisations. In an organisation with stereotype gender organisation ideas/myths about what's female and male decides what one can learn, what one can not learn and who can learn what. Gender-filled practices can be hard getting access to if you don't have the "right" sex. This creates stiff and narrowed systems that limit the acting space and learning for both individuals and organisations (Abrahamsson 2000, Drejhammar 2001). The risk is that ranking differences between women and men is being reinforced. From the perspective of the company a stereotype gender structure can become a barrier towards activities of learning and processes of reforms and shifts, and can also hinder a free and creative flow of knowledge, i.e. the learning organisation, something that is often looked for in modern management concepts.

An interesting aspect of the gender structure is its close relation to learning. People have to learn the local gender organisation because it is not stable, self-evident or natural. It is a part of the structure of the organisation and the culture at the working place and is something that the individual learns and is socialised into simultaneously with other types of learning. This is often called "the hidden curriculum" and is not in all matters positive (Westberg 1996). Sometimes this type of learning can contradict and conflict with the aimed and planned learning at the work place (Somerville & Abrahamsson 2003).

A growing field within gender theory research is analysis of gender creating processes, i.e. a social constructionist and interactionist perspective (Gunnarsson et al 2003, Gerhardi 1994). According to this perspective schools, educations and working places are places where gender (women and men, female and male) is constructed and places where gender differences is being created and recreated. The place of the individual in the working organisation, the position and structures of possibilities can also affect and form individuals and their actions more than the actual gender belonging (Kanter 1977). The gender segregation within the educational system and in working life has often been seen as an end result, as a consequence of something that has been. But structures can also in itself be important "actors" and carriers of clear signals and symbols that affect people's behaviour, identity work and understanding perspective (Abrahamsson 2006, 2004). According to this interactive and process focused perspective working life and education systems is not only gender divided, many times they are also gender *dividing*. One lesson from these gender theories is that gender is made very concrete, in a routine manner and the constructions are many times stereotyped.

Gender and validation

Validation is often a formalisation of subjective evaluation of competence and this can in some ways become problematic from a gender perspective. Qualification requirements (requirements for certain types of education, competence, skills and knowledge) have a close connection to gender marked fields, doings, characteristics, standpoints and attitudes. They do not need to have relation to the work that is to be done and they change according to different 'needs'. They can in certain circumstances function as door-keepers and give men priority to what's locally is perceived as status jobs, e.g. works that demands technical competence or skills or physical strength (Gunnarsson 1994, Baude 1992). As soon as hard defined factors as informal learning, social competence, cooperation capacity and personal chemistry is treated as competence the doors are opened up for more subjective evaluations that easily follows stereotyped prejudices about the work of women and men (Elwin-Nowak & Thomsson 2003, Arrenius 1999, Björk 1996, Wahl 1996, Holmberg 1996). In a routine manner, often unaware, we choose to focus on certain things whether it's women or men – regardless what competences they really have. These choices are often founded upon socio-biological ideas about the connection between certain characteristics and sex. The same knowledge, competences and skills is evaluated and named differently dependent upon if it concerns a woman or a man. This gender routine manner easily strengthens the segregation mechanism of the gender organisation, both symbolically as concrete (Hirdman 2001). Validation can both recreate and even strengthen gender marked tasks of work if attention is not drawn to this fact.

Validation can also have restoring functions when it comes to the hierarchic structure between women and men. Synonyms for male characteristics are often more positive, important and valuable and most of all, competent. Many surveys from the field of school shows that the gender structure lower our capacity to make at least fairly just evaluations (Fridh-Haneson & Haglund 2004, Bondestam 2003, Wennerås & Wold 1997). Both women and men tend to rate men higher. In some cases women are not seen as carriers of knowledge and their professional qualifications is both questioned and made invisible, especially when it comes to fields of technique, functionality, rational thinking, analytic capacity, inventiveness, playfulness and curiosity (Wahl 2003, Ahl 2004, Berner 2003, Sundin 2001, Mellström 1999). The symbolic connection to masculinity makes women to be seen as imperfect and insufficient – regardless of what capacities or competences they have. Notice that knowledge and competence that has been made invisible should not be mixed up with tacit knowledge or knowledge of conversance. Unfortunately this is

sometimes done when learning at male working places is evaluated higher and workers tacit knowledge is seen as competence and valuable for the company, while at female working places there is a risk that workers is seen as insufficient and in need of (formal) education, measures and 'discipline' (Lundgren-Abrahamsson 2005). Both types of validation usually have good ambitions and there is no way in telling that one is better than the other. But these examples of differences in practical validation is often falling into a 'common' public way of treating and evaluating women and men in different ways, i.e. ways that often reproduce the traditional gender organisation.

Method questions

This project is a qualitative study and the material will be analyzed with the help of theories within the fields of learning and organisation theories, gender perspectives, and discourse analytical perspectives. A critical analysis of validation will also be made in the frame of the project. The empirical material is complex and demands a broad range of methods as reflections about interpretation and subjectivity (e.g. the difficulties in analyzing discourses which you may partly be a part of yourself).

In this writing moment most of the empirical data has been collected, though not analyzed in depth. This research project have had a multi-case study design with four cases, Rönnskårsverken, a smelter company, Kalix Tele24, a call center company and two municipalities, Luleå and Piteå from the county of Norrbotten. In the municipality of Luleå the technical division was studied and in the municipality of Piteå the social service division was studied. Two of these, Rönnskär and the Technical division at the municipality of Luleå had a male domination of employees, while the other two, Kalix Tele24 and the Social Service division at the municipality of Piteå had a female domination. Personal managers, team leaders and union representatives from each organisation were interviewed. In total 19 interviews has been conducted with 21 persons. The interviews has been word-for-word transcribed and is for the time being in an analyzing process.

An analytical tool

The now almost canonic definition of validation within the Swedish context is as follows:

'Validation is a process which means a structured assessment, evaluation, documentation and an acknowledgement of knowledge and competence which an individual has independent of how it has been achieved', (DS 2003:23).

In order to study the concept of validation within organisations as private companies and municipalities it has been inevitable to in a way operationalise the validation concept. This concept is almost never used within the studied organisations, especially not in the everyday situations. For this reason it has been necessary to 'break down' the validation concept into its smaller components. These elements can be identified as; *identification*, *evaluation*, *documentation* and *acknowledgement*, which are not made-up concepts but rather much discussed and taken for granted parts in the ordinary validation process, (Jansson, 2004). In the following we like to discuss this.

The first part, *identification*, contains the aspects of visualisation and mapping and is about the process where knowledge and competence is brought into the light and is made explicit. In more ordinary validation situations this often means a conversation with the individual that is about to be validated in where his och her knowledge and competence is in a way made conscious. Within working situations this part can be seen in everyday situations in

the work context, of for example in the development conversation the team leader has once a year with his staff or in employer initiated courses.

The *evaluation* part, can be seen as a continuation of the identity part of the validation process, but is brought further on and is evaluated in relation to something. In ordinary validation this part means that competent evaluators evaluate the competence of the person being validated. In companies and in the working context this can mean that the knowledge and competence now visualised are put in relation to work tasks, needs and also in relation to the surrounding environment especially the team and their knowledge and competence.

The third part called *documentation*, is of course about the knowledge and competence being documented in one way or another. In ordinary validation this often means some certificate och document that shows what the person who has been validated knows and can do. The point here is that this document can be mediated and in that way does not stay inside the head of someone. The documentation points to a continuation of the validation that has been conducted. But it can not become useful unless the fourth part also is present, the *acknowledgement*.

This part has much been discussed in a Swedish context and an object for many development projects, since the main aim for validation has been the speeding up of integration, education and employment, (Valideringsdelegationen, 2008, Andersson & Fejes, 2005, Colardyn 1997). This means that the product of the validation, the visualised knowledge and competence, also can be used in a wider context and in other contexts than it originally was produced in. In ordinary validation the main question has been how to standardise the validation method and its content in order to produce a nationally equivalent document. In a working context this part is about in what way knowledge and competence made visible also can be used in the company or organisation. In a wider sense it is about in what way it can be used in other contexts than it was produced or validated in. This is a matter of generalisation.

Some preliminary results

This way of breaking down the validation process into its elementary parts is a way in operationalising the concept in order to study the phenomena in working organisations as companies in the private sector and different division within municipalities in the public sector. In this way the operationalised concept also can become an analytical tool in finding out whether these organisations validate or not, and if, how. Ordinary validation can much be looked upon as a progressing and developing process where two actors, the validating person or persons and the validated person, meet and in a process, step by step, make the knowledge and the competence visible, and further on, documented. In this process an evaluation has been done in an 'environment' of acknowledgement. This means that there is an understanding, from the beginning, that the product can be used for a specific purpose. There is also an important pre-understanding in this type of validation, and this is that it is the individual and his or her knowledge and competence that stands in focus of the validation situation, and it is mainly for the benefit of the individual that it is done. This can mean the speeding up of an education process, facilitate employability or visualize and acknowledge competence acquired in a foreign context. This type of validation we can say have a logic of empowerment, because of the focus upon the individual, even though it is not hard to be aware of the gain that both society and companies enjoy in the long run from this.

In the companies and municipality activities studied validation, or should we say, elements or traces of validation is not primarily within a logic of empowerment and lifelong learning

but rather within a logic of production and effectiveness, (Walther, A. et al, (2006). Within this type logic it is not the individual that stands in focus but rather the production system. This means that the elements of validation 'pop up' whenever it is according to this kind of logic. The knowledge and the competence of the individual employees is only being identified, evaluated, documented or acknowledge in relation to the actual needs of the company or the municipality.

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