

Challenges in relation to assessment of prior learning

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Introduction

The paper deals about preliminary results from an on-going project: “From unskilled worker to skilled worker in record time”. The aim of the project is to qualify unskilled workers for skilled positions in record time by drafting up a plan for the training based on assessment of the students’ (the unskilled workers’) prior learning, i.e. their work experiences and informal learning. In the paper we will describe and point to some challenges in relation to assessing the students’ prior learning.

The assessment is accomplished by teachers and supervisors in VET colleges. The assessment includes 1. Observations and or with the students about the students’ workplace based experiences and learning and 2. Drafting up an individual study plan based on the individual student’s prior learning.

Facts about GVU

Qualifying for skilled jobs the project focuses on the basic adult education programs in Denmark (Grundlæggende VoksenUddannelse, GVU). GVU-programs train for VET-qualifications. GVU is part of the parallel adult education system which includes programmes at all levels including master levels. The parallel or practice-based programs were established in 2001.

In the practice based programmes the training is based on the student’s prior learning, vocational qualifications and experiences, the aim being to combine the student’s practical experiences with formal knowledge acquisition. Thus the students must have at least two years of relevant work experience in order to be admitted into the GVU programs.

Eight out of 10 GVU programs are completed within the social and health care programs, the commercial programs and the catering programs.

GVU has not been used not as much used as has been expected: A recent evaluation of GVU shows that among the target group, adults over 25 years of age, GVU is used much less than the ordinary

VET-program. While 32.395 adults over 25 years have completed an ordinary VET program in 2009-2011, between 2600 and 3200 adults have completed a GVU-program in the same period; in other words one out of 10 adults choose to complete VET through a GVU program. One explanation of this is that in order to be admitted into a GVU program one must have at least two years relevant work experience. Another explanation is that GVU has turned out to be used as competence development for groups of workers in specific enterprises while the ordinary programs are chosen by individuals (EVA, 2013). The project “From unskilled to skilled worker in record time” may contribute to boost GVU.

The evaluation also shows that only three out of four individual assessments of prior learning lead to drafting up an educational plan for the adult’s GVU-course (EVA, 2013). Why do 25 percent of the adults not get any further than to the assessment of prior learning? In this paper we will focus on the challenges connected with transferring the assessment into credits.

The project and the action research project

The project “From unskilled worker to skilled worker in record time” runs in the period 2012-2014 and includes the VET-qualifications for “catering assistant”, “chef” (gastronomer), “hairdresser”, “service assistant” (i.e. cleaner), “clerical assistant”, “”, “social- and health care helper” and “childcare assistant”.

The aim of the project is to develop and qualify the activities included in the assessment of prior learning as well as the activities included in the content, structure and pedagogy of the GVU-courses that train the adult students for skilled qualifications.

An action research project has been connected to the project. The aim of the actions research project is through studying practice to currently improve both the process of assessing the students’ prior learning and the GVU courses that train the students for skilled positions. Thus the researches will regularly present their results in seminars for the participating VET colleges in order to inspire for further development.

The paper focuses on that part of the research project that studies the assessment of the students’ prior learning. The assessment of prior learning, in Danish “realkompetencevurdering” has been studied and elaborated in various project; please use this link

<http://nck.au.dk/search/local/?q=realkompetencevurdering>

How do the VET colleges assess the students' prior learning?

The various programmes have different procedures for assessing the students' prior learning. The assessment can be based on interviews with the students; the students demonstrate their skills and competences by solving practical tasks or performing in simulated practice situations or combinations of interviews and practice performance. Assessment of prior learning might also take place in the workplaces; however in this project the assessment solely takes place in the VET colleges and is accomplished by the teachers.

The research question and scope of empirical study

In the research project the main interest is to study how the student first demonstrate their prior learning and secondly how the teachers assess the students' knowledge skills and competences into credit transfer.

The research question is: How is the students' prior learning assessed and which are the criteria for assessing the credit transfer?

The empirical study of the assessment processes in connection to the VET-qualifications mentioned above include:

1. Observation of the assessment of the students. The observation focuses on how the students are supported in describing and or demonstrating their skills and competences.
2. Interviews with the teachers who assess the students: The purpose is to learn about the teachers' arguments for and considerations in relation to assessing the students' prior learning.
3. Interviews with the students: The purpose is to learn about the students' perceptions of the assessment procedures and about how the assessment influence the students' motivation for education and training.

Results: Assessment of prior learning in a college for social and health care programmes

The students, who want to join the programme for childcare assistants, typically work in child nursing or kindergartens and the students who aim at a qualification as social and health care helper typically work in old peoples' homes or within home care.

The assessment, which takes 5 for social and health care helpers and 10 days for childcare assistants, combines accomplishing practical tasks solving with interviews with the students.

The overall idea is that by basing the assessment on the students' daily practice in their workplaces from the very beginning of the assessment period, the students should feel as confident as possible. On the first day the students are asked to draw an outline of their workplace in order to show, how they move from room to room, people to people, task to task through a typical day. The students are then asked to tell about a typical day in their workplace, in groups of students and one of the teachers. As the students take turns telling about their work day the other students are free to ask questions and to comment. Now and again the teacher asks the student whether she would like to later on demonstrate e.g. how she organize a specific activity with the children in the kindergarten, or within social and health care how the student e.g. clean in an old woman's flat.

The students will then plot in their times for performing the different tasks in a scheme placed on the board. The following days will consist of alternations between the students demonstrating various and the teacher interviewing the students.

When a student accomplishes a task, she will do that in a group of students and one teacher.. The teacher may also disturb or surprise the student during her performance in order to check the student's ability to reflect in action (Schön, 1983).

However the teachers cannot assess the students' prior learning merely by observing them. They have to ask questions to check the student's knowledge about her knowing how and knowing that. The teachers' questions can be organized into the following categories:

Factual questions about the task which the student accomplishes or the situation in which the student performs The teacher asks questions which are closely related to what the student have done when accomplishing the task. If e.g. the student shows a situation from a sing a song activity with the children in the kindergarten the teacher will ask questions like: How many children participated in the song? Where did it take place, inside outside? What did you do to make them sing? Etc. These questions serve to reassure the students about the teacher's interest in their performance. The questions are also relatively neutral as they refer to a situation and not directly to the student. However the purpose of the questions is also to make the student aware of what she is precisely doing when accomplishing the task and to check the student's ability to describe her acts.

Questions about the student's skills and competences: Through these questions the teacher will check whether the student is able to accomplish specific tasks. A student tells about a situation with an old woman who wears support /elastic stockings. The teacher asks: Are you able to give the resident stockings on? The questions relate to the practical parts of the VET programs.

Questions about the student's knowledge: The purpose of these questions is to obtain knowledge about the student's scope of knowledge related to her performance. One of the students says: I have to use soft soap when I clean the floors in the old peoples' home. The teacher asks: Why do you have to use brown soap? Or in relation to using the names of the residents in the old peoples, the teacher asks: Do you know the regulations for confidentiality? These questions are related to the knowledge-based parts of the VET-programs and to instrumental learning.

Questions about the student's opinions: The questions belong to the sphere of communicative learning and deals about the student's moral stand and opinions. The student tells about a resident who has rheumatism in his fingers and who tries to make the social and health care helper pour the coffee for him. Should she do that or should she encourage the resident to help himself? These questions are meant for reflection and discussion among the group of students in the assessment. Through these discussions the teacher can detect the students' level of argumentation and reflection which is also part of the regulations for these VET-programs.

The preliminary results related to the social- and health care programs are that the teachers have developed a systematic way of testing the students' skills, knowledge and competences by posing differentiated questions. However according to the student interviews the students would like more practical testing in real settings preferably in their workplaces. The results until now thus points to the challenge of balancing demonstration of practical skills on the one hand and formulations of skills, knowledge and competences on the other side.

What are the challenges related to assessing prior learning?

Interviews with the teachers in the social and health care programs show that they have no clear and common criteria for measuring the students' qualifications; there is no common scale for operationalizing the students' qualifications, respectively the learning outcome description in the regulation for the program. Thus the teacher uses the learning outcome described in the regulation for the particular program as a scale for estimating whether the student's qualifications are equivalent to the learning outcome descriptions. However the descriptions of the learning outcome in the regulations are not operationalized. Consequently the process of assessing and giving credit transfer include an interpretation and operationalization of the learning outcome descriptions in the regulations as wells as an interpretation and operationalization of the adults students' skills, knowledge and competences.

The gap between the students' demonstrating of skills and competences and the regulations of the VET programs is rather wide, when the students accomplish practical tasks as in the social and health

care program. However in the commercial programs the students do not demonstrate their practical skills. In the assessment of prior learning the students should first fill in a questionnaire about the subjects and levels they have obtained previously typically in formal learning settings. Based on the questionnaire the supervisors at the VET college make interviews with the students and based on this the supervisors draft the individual educational plan. In that case the gap between focus in the assessment prior learning and the formulations in the regulations - at least those concerning the subjects and the levels- is not as wide as in the previous example.

However it is an central issue for further research that even though the learning outcome descriptions in the regulations for the VET programs should encourage a focus on the students' skills and competences it seems as if the teachers need to test the students' level of knowledge and that this testing is a central part of the assessment.

Tentatively – being based on preliminary studies – further research will include the following three challenges which we want to discuss in this workshop:

Tacit knowledge

The teachers' criteria for assessment of the students' knowledge, skills, and competences are to some extent based on tacit knowledge. In the interview the teachers have difficulties in explaining how they assess whether the student possess the necessary knowledge, skill or competence. When the teachers watch the students performing, they may intuitively know whether the student is competent or less competent. The tacit dimension is reinforced by the student who will often be able to demonstrate their skills and the knowing how that is included in their performance, however who cannot formulate their knowledge and skills. The students are in the Dreyfus sense (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) experts within their local practical settings, just as the teachers are experts within their local settings.

The issues for discussion are: How can and should tacit knowledge be included in the assessment of prior learning?

Is it possible to assess tacit knowledge tacitly?

Can tacit knowledge constitute a common knowledge base for students and teachers or is tacit knowledge a local knowledge that cannot be shared?

Knowing how and knowing that

As a paradox to the teachers' tacit knowledge the observations and interviews show that the teachers urge the students to formulate their knowledge (please see example above). The teachers emphasize the

significance of being able to demonstrate *knowing that* or *declarative knowledge*. In the catering program it is not sufficient that the students demonstrate that they can prepare meals for e.g. diabetes; they should also know the chemical concepts for sugar.

The issues for discussion are: How much *knowing that* (declarative knowledge) should a skilled professional have (e.g. a chef, a social and health care worker) in order to perform as a competent skilled worker? Is it e.g. important that the chef knows about the chemical concepts for sugar or for protein in order to be a good cook? Does the social and healthcare helper need know about the chemicals in various detergents if she is able to choose the right ones for the specific cleaning tasks?

Identical or equivalent to

In the parallel adult education system the idea is that the adults obtain credits for work experience. At the diploma and master levels the rules for the credit transfer are quite clear: In order to be admitted into the program the students must have at least two years of relevant work experience and have obtained relevant formal educational qualifications (e.g. Level 6 in the NQF, if the student wants to be admitted into a master program) Once the student has been admitted into the program (s)he can complete the program in one year equivalent to 60 ECTS point and obtain qualifications (level 7 in the NQF) equivalent to the ordinary master programs of 120 ECTS points.

In connection to the GVU programs it is not clear whether the GVU qualification should be interpreted as *identical* to or *equivalent* to the ordinary VET qualification. Currently the option is identical to the ordinary programs. This is due to the fact that the GVU exams and tests are the same as the exams and tests in the ordinary programs. If the GVU should be identical to the ordinary programs the GVU courses should not only include knowledge that is relevant for accomplishing the tasks within the trade or industry. The courses should also develop the students' general qualifications which give access to further education.

The issues for discussion are: The teachers will typically use the learning outcome descriptions in the regulations for the ordinary programs as the measuring scale. However, is that in line with the ideas of the parallel adult education system?

Is the practical functional knowledge (knowing how) sufficient or perhaps even better than the school-based academic book learning in relation to further education?

How can training for skilled jobs be combined with training for further education?¹

In conclusion

The procedures for assessment of prior learning vary; however it seems as if the assessment will include formulating one's knowing how as well as one's knowing that. The consequence of this is that the students' cognitive ability and formulating capacity as well as their learning styles will significantly influence the exactness and fairness of the assessment. Is this a fair conclusion: The better your ability to formulate yourself the more credit transfer you will obtain?

References

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¹ The issue is also relevant in the relation to the Danish professional education programs training to e.g. nurse, teacher and social advisor while at the same time leading to a bachelor's degree that give access to master level programs