

LEARNING FOR A NEW CONTEXT

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Introduction

I think we all remember the first day at school, a tickling feeling in the stomach, an anxiety for what you will encounter. Even if it was a long time ago the memory is still close to many of us. Entering higher education may perhaps also bring such memories to the surface. The choice to enrol in higher education is not always an easy one. One may have to move, find a new place to stay, get acquainted with a new town, and make new friends. A new phase in life starts where the main goal is to learn and pass the exams so you can finance your studies.

But not too far into the future a new transition is waiting. After the studies one is looked upon as an independent adult prepared to enter work life. The journey continues towards new destinations. This journey is the focus of this thesis. The aim is to describe Political science students' experiences from the first moment at university to after one year in work life. Focusing on the students' experiences of their education and their images of the future work life as well as their experiences thereof. By investigating students' reflections on their current situation using a cross-sectional as well as a longitudinal design their journey through university to work life can hopefully be better understood. The studies presented in this thesis are contemporary accounts by different groups of students in different phases of their studies and in work life.

The purpose with this paper is to disseminate some results from my thesis; Broad Entrance- Vague Exit (2007), where the main purpose was to describe some political science students' (mainly) experience of the transition between studies and work life.

A theoretical framework

The emergence of a new concept of knowledge in higher education

There are indications of the beginning of a new phase in higher education. We are moving from viewing knowledge in itself, as more specific and general, to emphasizing the knowledge as a by-product of education where focus is to develop competencies for work life (Barnett, 2000). The shift from knowledge as a process to knowledge as a product means that the universities are shifting from places where "Bildung" i.e. the Humboldtian concept referring to the process of self-formation (Bowden and Marton, 1998), has been seen as the main object to knowledge viewed as more practical and applicable (Barnett, 1994).

Traditionally, institutions of higher education have been accustomed to being assessed by the government as their main employer. Recent studies indicate the increasing importance of graduate employment in the private sector in most European countries. Now higher education is challenged by the debate about legitimacy and the desirable limits of influence of private employers on higher education (Barnett, 1994 1997). This can have implications for how and for whom the production of knowledge will be carried out. Both Gibbons (2002) and Barnett (1994 p. 93) are talking about a paradigm shift. We have moved from this linear thinking;

Higher education - Knowledge – Society

to a situation of

Society - Knowledge - Higher Education

The latter way of thinking could be seen as a reverse structure. Historically the universities were more independent but lately the states and e.g. the European Union have increased their influence over the production of knowledge. What does this mean? Education can now be considered to be economically driven in an international – and even global – context. Perhaps some features of the brand the old university stood for are jeopardised, for instance independent knowledge formation and critical thinking; these are rather replaced by different kinds of professional competencies such as generic skills (Barnett, 1994).

The terminology of re-production can be discussed both from an epistemological point of view as well as from the development of different competencies. When it comes to the epistemological and ontological issues, there has been a demarcation between different faculties such as engineering and philosophy. The question is if the different ideologies now have to come closer to each other, when the surrounding society demands that our production should aim at producing individuals with specific competencies.

Studies as a community of practice

Meaning is negotiated in a specific community; a community is defined as a “way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence” (Wenger, 1998 p. 4). Accordingly, the pedagogical setting is a community of practice with its own rules and communication patterns. Svensson describes this in the following sentences;

The characteristics of work practices in general, can in most aspect be applied to the specific practices of educational institutions. The point is however: not to argue that education and schooling is a work-practice like any other, but rather to argue that education can be studied using similar approaches as when studying other practices. In fact, there are a number of highly relevant aspects that makes formal education unique in comparison to other forms of labour (Svensson 2002 p.7).

The educational setting could be viewed as a community of practice and to some extent be reduced to an educational setting involving only the institutions, the power relations between teachers and student, the hidden curricula etc. Another line of reasoning is that there is a community that involves all students enrolled in higher education. There are some basic features of higher education that all students have to adapt to. This community of practice can of course vary between universities, departments and disciplines. When the students enter this practice they soon encounter other different communities, and depending on their past history, experiences and expectations they will be participants in more than one

community. This means that the students belong to different communities depending on their choices about where to participate i.e. the trajectory is formed by their individual participation in different communities of practice. A trajectory can be described as a movement that does not have a fixed course or destination; it has coherence over time that links the history, the present, and the future (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As the title implies, this thesis is studying political science students' experiences of higher education and work life and also the transition from the former into the latter. Lave argues that,

... learning can be seen as a part in the subjects altered participation when moving through many different contexts in their daily lives. (Lave, in Nielsen and Kvale, 1999 p. 52 My translation).

The entry into the educational practice can be experienced as difficult because the individuals do not know what kind of social and discursive practices that the specific community (of higher education) has established. Communities of practice can be understood as social and material contexts; e.g. at home, at work, at the gym. This implies that we all have multiple memberships; most of us are engaged in several communities that may or may not have some common features e.g. the way to talk, the way to achieve a goal, just to mention some possible features. Belonging to communities of practice is an integral part of our lives (Wenger, 1998).

Identity formation and trajectories

Trajectories are seen as motions over time, not necessarily following a predestinated course, but open to interaction with and influence of a multitude of sources. In developing a practice: the members of the practice are required to engage and communicate with each other but also to recognize each others as members of the community. As a consequence, practice entails the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context. ... inviteably, our practices deal with the profound issue of how to be a human being (Lave and Wenger, 1991 p. 149). According to Wenger (1998) the temporal notion of trajectory in relation to identity formation suggests that it is an ongoing process, it includes the individual and the collective, becomes the experience of the present made up together with the history and the future, is negotiated with the paradigmatic trajectories and finally the trajectory is invested in the history of practice and in politics. Identity and trajectory are interconnected, identity is perceived as temporal, and as trajectories the past and the future are in a process of negotiating the identity of the present. Being on a trajectory as a student includes both the past (it is in the walls, paradigmatic trajectories exist along with ideas of academic freedom, student vs teacher role etc), and the future (where did other students end up, what kind of job can I expect etc). The studies also provide the students with skills and certificates that enable them to entrance new communities of practices.

The transition: Moving from the communities of higher education into communities of work life

The research interest in the transition from higher education to employment increased in Europe in the 1970's. This was at the same time as this transition process became more complicated. Awareness grew that the intermediary institutions to a large extent followed

their own logic and dynamics. Thus, the employers' expectations and recruitment criteria became an important area for research. To a certain extent this provided useful information when setting priorities in higher education. Nevertheless, these efforts never became a regular feedback for adjustments between higher education and work life. Reasons like uncertainties about the criteria for the recruitment and the lack of routines, imperfections in identifying applicants' competencies, tactical games between higher education and employers, and fluctuations in the labour market itself, indicate the impediments in elaborating a well functioning feed back system (Students as "Journeymens" between Communities of Higher Education and Work, 2000). Apart from the question of how knowledge, especially professional knowledge, is actually being produced in our changing societies, it is rather a question of what knowledge is in the foreground. Another important question is what kind of professional knowledge should be encouraged from a societal perspective.

As Slaughter and Leslie (1997) noticed, professions are not fixed and static. Instead they are always in a process of being socially construed. Thus, a critical approach raises questions like, how does professional knowledge that is socially construed become a basis for behavioral tendencies i.e. gives status, prestige, power, high positions, more salaries etc?

What seems to be at stake in the recent debate concerning the relationship between university and society is a philosophical understanding of episteme (scientific knowledge); the question whether science in its traditional and strict sense - the quest for truth and pursuit of knowledge for the sake of its own- should be abandoned for the sake of the immediate necessities of social and economic welfare.

Methodology and analytical procedures

A multi – layered method was used including mainly phenomenography and discourse analysis. The technics used to gather information was interviews, observations and collecting documents/texts were also collected.

The Phenomenographic approach

The phenomenographic approach pertains to studies of impact within a learning perspective, which focus on learning in terms of the conceived content of the education i.e. how the students' understand basic phenomena within the educational programs. The phenomenon of learning is viewed as qualitative changes in conceptions of the content. This approach differs from the evaluative in that the basic assumption is that meaningful learning has to be studied in terms of what the students actually learn from the educational programmes and not in quantitative terms of how much the students' learn (Students as Journeymen Between Communities of Higher Education and Work, 2004 p. 5)

Phenomenography is the empirical study of the qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived, and apprehended (Marton, 1994). The point is to suggest that the limited number of ways in which a certain phenomenon appears to people can be found, for instance, regardless of whether they are embedded in immediate experience of the phenomenon or in reflected thought about the same phenomenon. Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson and Säljö at the University of Gothenburg developed phenomenography in a series of studies of learning in higher education in the early 1970:es (Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson, and Säljö 1999).

The analyses were initially performed in order to find a description of the processes and outcomes of meaningful learning from the perspective of the learner. As regards the processes of learning, these were later interpreted as indicating the existence of a surface and a deep-level approach connected, respectively, to an atomistic and a holistic approach. In the analyses we used the following procedures to understand the material.

Step one was to get *acquainted* with the material, then select the statements (useful parts) in a separate file. Step two can be called *condensation*, and here is the core of the statements searched for. In the analysis, his task (the researcher, my note) is to penetrate superficial differences in order to uncover more deeply embedded similarities and differences: this is achieved in the next step: *the comparison*. Different answers are compared with each other... (Fallsberg, 1991 p. 35). Step three is the comparison between the statements, initially a number of grouping emerges, often quite few, in step four the researcher then tries to *articulate* the preliminary category. The fifth step can be called a *contrastive* phase. It tries to answer the question – are there distinctive differences between the groups of answers and do they correspond to the name given to the content of the conception? The analysis aims for the categories being exhausting and exclusive (Dahlgren and Fallsberg, 1991). We used phenomenography to find features within these cores of the conceptions/ experiences that were found. We worked our way through the material in pairs and later met to compare notes. In this way the analysis has been carried out by more than one person in a process that might be called negotiated consensus (Wahlström, Dahlgren, Tomson, Diwan and Beerman, 1997).

The approach of discourse analysis

The intermediating role, bridging individual conceptions from the phenomenographic analysis with attempts to gain an overall understanding of academic cultures, makes the discourse analysis a central aspect of the methodology of the thesis. Discourse analysis is a set of research procedures applied to interpret complex issues of language use in particular social situations. As Gee notes, it is informed by a view of language that exceeds the traditionally communicative understanding of its function (i.e. that of exchanging information). For Gee, the main functions of language are,

...to scaffold the performance of social activities ...
and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and
social groups and institutions (Gee 1999 p.1).

This is why the linguistically expressed conceptions of educational issues can be understood as related to subjective activities (actual and planned), social (including professional) identities, and cultural and institutional structures. This approach aims at analysing the cultures of institutions on the basis of individual narratives of people involved in their activities. Social organisations are in general,

produced, reproduced and transformed through the ongoing, interdependent and goal-oriented communication practices of its members (Mumby & Robin 1997 p.181).

These practices, in turn, have “implications for how social goods are or ought to be distributed”, which means that they are political in the generic (e.g. Aristotelian) sense of the word (Gee 1999 p.2). As language is a complex and multidimensional universe, the research on language is equally complex. Procedures generally referred to as discourse analysis are diverse, and there are numerous debates and polemics-taking place within this area of studies (for a presentation of the diversity of approaches see Mumby and Robin,1997). According to Fairclough, the concept of discourse has two meanings. Discourse could either be defined as the use of language as social practice, which is both constituted and constituting, or as a way of talking, rendering meaning to experiences from a certain perspective (Fairclough 1992 1995). A discourse is also demarcated by the expressed or tacit rules of communication that exist in the specific discourse (s). These rules give the interpreter a certain degree of leeway in his/her interpretation of how the individual/ group speak and act, how they delimit and define what the formation of a discourse constitutes. Furthermore, the discourse may also shape, reshape and renew a practice. In other words, a discourse is not static but, rather, dynamic (Sandström, 2001).

The discourse analysis emphasises two units: (i) there is a mutual relationship between the discursive practice and the social practice. The discursive practice reproduces and can change the social practice and vice versa; (ii) together, these practices constitute our surrounding world (Winther-Jørgensen, 2000).

Results

The thesis presented here in a “short” version, consist of four studies, In the first study, (Fejes, A Dahlgren, M & Johansson, K “Learning to play the seminar game; some students initial encounter with a basic working form in higher education”, 2005) we describe how students entered their trajectory of learning by a first encounter with Political science. After a roll call and some initial lectures, a seminar serie started, the most striking result found was the phenomenon we call the tick-off. The students started to discuss and after a while the teacher hit his participant list rather hard and thereby indicated to the students that it is mandatory to give an insightful comment in the seminar. When interviewing the teacher he gives two explanations to why the seminar has different functions, it is as an examination and at the same time an activity for enhancing learning. The teacher viewed the seminar as both a learning opportunity and as an assessment. In other words there is a potential conflict within the teacher; on the one hand, he had to pay attention to the students’ learning and on the other hand he has to comply with the university assessment system. One way of understanding this conflict can be to scrutinize it from the perspective of community of

practice. In line with this - a person who is a member of different communities of practice has several roles to master, "she must find an identity that can reconcile the demands of these forms of accountability into a way of being in the world" (Wenger, 1998 p.160).

In the second study (Johansson, K., Hård af Segerstad, H., Hult, H., Dahlgren Abrandt, M., Dahlgren LO., "The two faces of political science studies; junior and senior students' thoughts about their education and their future profession", 2007) the trajectory of learning was further described in a cross - sectional study with students in the beginning and at their end of their studies. After about six weeks in their studies, students were asked how they perceived their studies and what their expectations were for their future life as professionals. The students' witness that the strongest incentive for enrolling in the Political science studies was the Bildung incentive, i.e. the studies in Political science is something good in itself. At the end of the program the students have broken the code, and one discourse appears to be stronger than the others and that is the learning to master an investigator's role. In the beginning of the studies the students dreamt about being a hotshot in the media or to end up in the hall of power (Brussels). These dreams have, however, been replaced by a more realistic notion of a future employment, the one of becoming an investigator. This label refers to mastering a set of generic academic skills; the political scientist should be good at digging out information, observing, investigating, analysing, and synthesizing societal phenomena. Most of these descriptors are also required in any academic profession. In this sense the students in Political sciences do not differ essentially from other student groups e.g. those that are enrolled in professional programs.

In the third study (Abrandt Dahlgren, M., Hult, H., Dahlgren, LO., Hård af Segerstad, H., Johansson, K., "From senior student to professional novice: Learning trajectories in Political science, Psychology and Mechanical engineering", 2006) we investigated three groups of students, they were from political science, engineering and psychology, in this short paper only the political science students are accounted for.

When it comes to the comprehensive and difficult task of answering the question about the impact of higher education, we found that the studies could have both a ritual and a rational character possibly to a large extent depending on how the program is designed and thereby what the students brought with them into work life. Furthermore, a rational relationship between education and work life may be substantive or generic. Substantive knowledge is content - specific and contextually situated, while generic skills are transferable between different contexts. The rational path has its strength in the logic relationship between academia and work life, the transition between the two cultures becomes less problematic if the education is preparing the students for their future profession. This is of course easier if the studies are within a programme and the target is a well-defined profession. It is also reasonable to assume that studies and programmes have a ritual character where the connection to a specific context where you can apply your knowledge is lacking or unclear.

For students in Political science the relationship between higher education and work life stands out as rational, emphasising generic skills. An interpretation is that the generic knowledge needs to be transformed and contextualised in order to be applicable in the individual case/work place. The students stated that the generic skills and the learning they achieved during their studies were perfectly suited to their present work tasks, despite the fact that they worked in very different settings. In the third study the part of the trajectory from higher education to work life is subject to further scrutiny in a longitudinal study. The experienced students are now moving out of the community of studies in higher education

to meet the demands and expectations from the work life. In the interviews a flavour of uncertainty is present or as Barnett puts it.

... this learning for uncertainty is ... a matter of learning to live with uncertainty. It is a form of learning that sets out not to dissolve anxiety – for it recognizes that this is not feasible – but that sets out to provide the human wherewithal to live with anxiety (Barnett, 2004 p.252).

One of the main results in this thesis is the great impact of generic skills or competences; from a students' perspective this could be at the expense of learning the content of the discipline i.e. the object of learning. According to Bowden and Marton (1998) there are several questions pertaining to the issue of what is learnt and what should be learnt. Their point of departure is that learning is a change in our way of seeing and experiencing something. They argue that university studies are not only studies per se, the studies should also provide the students with skills that prepare them to cope with a developing society.

So, where did the Political science students in Gdansk and Linköping end up? Were they employable? This is the central question in the fourth, comparative study (Johansson, K., Kopiewitz, L., Dahlgren, LO., " Learning for an unknown context; a comparative case study, Swedish and Polish political science students' experiences of the transition from University to Work life", 2007). When asked about their journey the Swedish students expressed satisfaction and a feeling of good hope for the future. This feeling of being privileged and having entered a personal Bildung project is the foremost impression that the students convey throughout their education. This experience is typical for the Swedish students, whereas the Polish students expressed anxiety about the future. - Where will I end up? – Are there any jobs for me? - How will I cope financially? From Barnets reasoning this could imply that the Swedish students have learnt to handle this anxiety whereas the Polish students are left to their own destiny. An additional reason could be that the Polish society today is made up by elite and driven by capitalistic ideologies. It is also nowadays difficult to motivate young Polish academics to engage in the political sphere. The great majority of young educated individuals do not seek employment in the public sector. The money and the "action" are elsewhere: in the fast growing private service sector (Szablowski, 1993 p. 354-355). As regards the Gdansk students, there is a strong contradiction between the idealized view of the profession mentioned by many senior students and the real labour market situation. Indeed, it seems as if knowledge and competence acquisition at university were irrelevant to the subsequent professional working life. The job novices particularly appreciate the value of social and communicative competence and positive self-portrayal and assimilation in social contexts. Furthermore, organisational skills, flexibility and loyalty are regarded as essential for work in companies. Specialised knowledge, on the contrary, seems to be subordinate to the above mentioned skills.

Some concluding words

The trajectory of identity formation among Political science students in their studies is by developing an academic way of being (a so called homo academicus). In work life the

novices express that they are squeezed between different interests; i.e. the politicians and the public. This identity is interpreted as having the role as a mediator. Few of the novices see themselves in a position of power. When asking the novices what kind of knowledge they acquired through studies and what kind of knowledge that is required in their present work they generally point out generic skills, these skills are important to master since most students end up as civil servants or investigators. This indicates that there needs to be a transformation between studies and work, meaning that the knowledge needs to be recontextualised to the specific tasks that the novices will encounter. Parts of the programme and the ritual character become less obvious.

One of the main results in this thesis is the great impact of generic skills or competences; from a students' perspective this could be at the expense of learning the content of the discipline i.e. the object of learning. According to Bowden and Marton (1998) there are several questions pertaining to the issue of what is learnt and what should be learnt. Their point of departure is that learning is a change in our way of seeing and experiencing something. Furthermore they state, that university studies are not only studies per se, the studies should also provide the students with skills that prepare them to cope with a developing society.

They call for more integrated curricula that go beyond the specific content consisting of integration, holistic goals, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts, and also to support the development of students' capabilities to deal with subject-specific contents of professional situations. This indicates that curricula need to be changed not only regarding the core issues in the present curriculum but also regarding the teaching. This will empower the students to search for learning opportunities that enable them to embrace the variation of specific situations that can be applied to several professional situations. This movement from the old curriculum to a new one does also makes the shift more transparent, the shift implies a reorientation from teaching to learning.

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