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Recognising prior learning: Understanding the relations among experience, learning and recognition from a constructivist perspective

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Introduction

In practices of recognition of prior learning (RPL), the focus is typically and unsurprisingly on finding ways to recognize and document a person's prior learning. Yet, this process offers other educational potential. Considering prior learning, engages issues about the relations between learning and experiences. A central issue discussed here is to consider how participants' experiences and learning from working many years with the care of elderly people should be most fully assessed and recognized. The consideration advanced here is to assess prior learning from these experiences and complement them with educational activities through in-service training, thus making it possible for the participants to receive a diploma from the health-care programme at upper secondary school. However, this requires problematising questions concerning experience, learning and recognition. In this article, we address the questions: (i) in what ways is recognition of prior learning and prior experiences present in the process of in-service training? (ii) In what ways is new learning an aspect of the process of recognising prior learning and experiences? These questions are addressed by first considering different perspectives of the recognition of prior learning to identify in what ways it might be appraised. Then, some experiential constructivist perspectives on learning are discussed as are issues of power in relation to learning, which stands as an important element of the RPL process. In the third section, we describe the background of the in-service training programme and the methods used to understand further the learning potential of RPL. We then continue to illuminate how the recognition of prior can be integrated into an in-service training programme. Finally, we focus on how learning is part of the recognition process itself. In all, it is proposed that the RPL process itself has a learning potential that is not yet being fully utilised or acknowledged

Perspectives on RPL

The history of RPL goes back at least to the early 1970s (see e.g. Michelson, 1996), when 'prior learning assessment' was introduced in the United States of America in an effort to broaden access to higher education, but similar ideas and practices have been considered earlier (see e.g. Andersson and Fejes 2005). Most RPL initiatives have one or more of the following aims: (i) *social justice* (in relation to individual opportunities, broader access to education, etc., such as in the example from the 1970s), (ii) *economic development* (RPL should make it possible to use existing vocational/professional competence more effectively in the labour market, an idea developed, for example, in the UK where RPL had been introduced in the 1980s), or (iii) *social change* (making the actual competence of the population visible creates better conditions for changing society; this is an idea mainly promoted in post-apartheid South Africa starting in the 1990s) (Andersson et al., 2003). The practices of RPL are diverse. One widespread tradition, inspired by Kolb's (1984) idea of 'experiential learning', involves working with an individual portfolio. This is a popular method, focusing on making visible

and recognising prior learning through reflection and documentation. Indeed, research on recognition/accreditation of prior learning has expanded in the last 10–15 years, and different theories have been employed to broadening the understanding of RPL. The current state of the (re-)theorisation of RPL is presented by Andersson and Harris (2006) with examples drawing on assessment theory; the sociology of education; poststructuralism and situated knowledge/learning theory; activity, actor-network and complexity theory; and symbolic interactionism. This variation in useful theoretical approaches illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon RPL. We will analyze some specific aspects of this phenomenon.

Here, we will focus in particular on RPL in the context of adults' educational and learning processes. In this context, a number of educational ideas or principles are often promoted, sometimes in the name of andragogy, for example, to start from and make use of adults' life experiences in the learning process. The idea of outcome-based education (OBE) has also been introduced in this context. The relations among RPL (or APL, accreditation/assessment of prior learning), outcome-based education and andragogical principles has been discussed (Challis 1996; Cretchley and Castle 2001). Challis (1996) proposes how the ideas of andragogy focus on the process of learning, while accreditation of prior (experiential) learning focuses on assessment of learning outcomes. Nevertheless, both approaches have points in common as the identification of individuals' prior learning involves a learning process in order to develop awareness of this learning. In a review and discussion of quality in assessment of prior learning, Joosten-Ten Brinke et al. (2008) also promote the use of edumetric (i.e. focusing on measuring within-learner growth) as well as psychometric (i.e. focusing on measuring differences between learners) quality criteria, because the edumetric criteria do more justice to the flexible and often multiple methods applied in RPL, while psychometric criteria such as validity and reliability call for more standardized methods. Further, Breier (2005) claims that RPL is usually seen as a separate activity, a pre-entry assessment process, and she suggests it would also be helpful to understand post-entry adult pedagogy in terms of recognising and building upon prior experience and learning. The latter is described as "rpl" as opposed to "RPL" – recognition of prior learning as an integrated aspect of a learning process as opposed to Recognition of Prior Learning as a separate activity. There are also different types of RPL that, to different degrees, promote social inclusion or social exclusion (Harris 1999). One more purpose with RPL is that credits for vocational competence could be awarded to those with no or limited formal education, but if this will be meaningful there is also a need for cultural changes in the workplace to enhance learning and development (Davies 1999).

The discussion here concerns RPL in relation to vocational competence and changes in the workplace, analysing a Swedish case. Recent initiatives have been taken to recognize prior vocational learning in Sweden, which place the focus on the influence of the school tradition of grading, and the important role of the Swedish language in assessing competence (Andersson et al. 2004). Similarly, Andersson (2007) shows in an example from Swedish adult education how recognition could be intertwined with learning, rather than being a separate activity (i.e. rpl rather than RPL), even if the explicit aim is to recognize ICT competence. In other contexts, it is shown how the French history of RPL includes a broader and more holistic approach than the British tradition, which also leads to a discussion about the universalistic claim of a somewhat Western individualistic approach (Pouget and Osborne 2004). This discussion concerning universalistic claims is related to the argument in favour of a more radical perspective in experiential learning and RPL, where situatedness and the collective dimension are taken seriously and knowledge is valued on its own premises (Michelson 1996; 1997). Thus, a central concern here is what is meant by experience and experiential learning in relation to RPL.

Many RPL processes occurring, such as the one referred to here, have as their starting point the idea that prior experiences gained outside formal schooling have resulted in knowledge that can be assessed and documented. In such processes, theories of experiential learning have been one prominent tool for understanding and designing the processes. Warner Weil and McGill (1989) describe four different ‘villages’ of (ideas and practices concerning) experiential learning, which can learn from each other. These ‘villages’ focus on: (i) assessing and accrediting prior experiential learning; (ii) bringing about changes in post-school education; (iii) social change; and (iv) increasing self-awareness, personal growth and development. The discussion here concerns the two first villages, as it focuses on RPL in a case of renewal of formal in-service training. Experiential learning has also been prominent in adult learning research in recent decades. Fenwick (2000) defines five broad categories of (perspectives on) experiential learning: (i) reflection - a constructivist perspective, (ii) interference - a psycho-analytical perspective, (iii) participation - a situative perspective, (iv) resistance - a critical cultural perspective, and (v) co-emergence - the enactivist perspective. These positions are helpful when illustrating the many ways experiential learning can be understood. As our focus is on the relation between experience and learning, the analysis will be based on authors in the tradition of experiential learning and foremost in the constructivist perspective. This is also a perspective that is implicitly present as a background of the methods used in the case we have studied, even if the focus in the example is on oral reflection rather than written portfolios. This means that we analyze this case on its own terms. A constructivist perspective helps us to understand learning as an active individual process of meaning making, where experience is the starting point for, and part of, a reflective learning process.

The case discussed here is of an in-service training process where recognition of prior learning is said to be a central component, but nevertheless one component among many others. Typically, in-service training programmes in the care sector does not take the participants’ prior learning into account when choosing what and how to teach and study (Fejes and Andersson 2007b). In-service training is often reported by the employees (i.e. carers) to repeat what they already know and, therefore, is uninteresting and un-engaging. It often takes the form of lectures – one-way communication, and fragmented. In the project, an ambition to engage in a holistic approach to in-service training, where prior learning is assessed and then complemented with educational activities leading to formal documentation, was identified. Further, the process is clearly integrated with the workplace in which the participants work. The manager and a supervisor (one of the assistant nurses) in each unit collaborate with an educational provider. Consequently, the starting point in the design of the process is shaped by the idea that workplace experience is important in relation to formal educational requirements. That is, the educational provider and the employer work closely together with planning and carrying out the in-service training programme, and the experiences gained through the years within the vocation are acknowledged and given credit in relation to formal educational requirements. Thus, this project provides an interesting empirical example from which questions of experience, learning, and recognition can be problematized.

We can see how the role of experience in relation to RPL within nursing has also been analyzed by Scott (2007). His study of the perceived learning of pre-registration student nurses during the foundation programme at university level shows no significant differences between students with and without prior clinical experience. This is contrary to the hypothesis that those with clinical experience would report a lower perceived learning, as they should have already learnt from experience. Scott’s interpretation is that the knowledge these students have developed from experience is of a different type and, therefore, they learn in the founda-

tion programme too. We will also problematize this relation between experience and learning, but from another perspective. In sum, there is a variation in ways of understanding RPL and experiential learning. In particular, recognition is not always separate from learning. Rather, RPL (or 'rpl') and learning could also be seen as integrated aspects of the same process. To broaden the basis of our analysis of experience, learning and recognition, we will now discuss the perspective of experiential learning further in relation to issues of power.

Experiential constructivist learning and issues of power

Experiential learning is a central concept to the practices and outcomes of RPL processes. Dewey (1929) and his ideas about problem solving are seminal for understanding the importance of experience and experimenting in adult learning. His ideas have been an inspiration for many researchers working with theories on experiential learning. For example, Kolb refers extensively to Dewey in his writing on the learning cycle. Within their work learning is seen as a process from concrete experience to reflection, in order to abstract generalisation, to active experimenting, and then back to experience. In the same tradition, Schön (1983) focuses on people's experimenting, and Brookfield (1987) points to how critical reflection about one's experience can contribute to developing our understanding of different phenomena. Critical reflection is also central to Mezirow (1991) and his theory of transformative learning. Common to all the above perspectives is that they view knowledge production as constructions made by the individual. Reflection about experience is the central aspect of a learning process that produces knowledge, which means that the focus concerning knowledge is on explicit knowledge rather than 'tacit' knowledge (cf. Polanyi 1958). Further, the role of the context in which the knowledge is produced is recognized but is not the main focus. In this way, experiential learning can be helpful to understand experience as an important part of an individual's learning process. However, what these kinds of perspectives fail to acknowledge is how questions of power and power relations are important aspects of learning processes.

The importance of issues concerning power and context is acknowledged by other writers working with research on care work. For example, Somerville (2006) illustrates how care work is a gendered practice with a lack of education and training opportunities. She argues, (referring to Wallace 2000) that female dominated service industries provide fewer training opportunities than other industries, and women within service industries received less training than men. By analysing micro-practices of workplace learning, Somerville (2006) illustrates how the gendered construction of care work operates in the construction of gendered and caring subjectivities. Further, Fejes (2008) analyze how reflection operates within nursing practice as a governing technology which shapes the desirable problem-solving, autonomous, self-regulating nurse subjectivity. Such kinds of analyses illustrate the importance of analyzing power and power relations. However, as our interest is in understanding how recognition of prior learning can be seen as a learning process in itself, we draw on a constructivist perspective on learning as outlined previously. Such a perspective will be complemented with theories that focus on issues of power as a way to further understand parts of our material.

One of the theories that focus on power in practices of learning is provided by Giroux (1988) in his outline of a critical pedagogy, in which teachers are seen as transformative intellectuals who help students understand the transformative potential of experience. This is done by relating the knowledge content to students' life experiences. Further, such experience needs to be made problematic and critical as a way of exposing its hidden assumptions underlying the experiences, thus making it possible for students to recognize undesirable behaviour in their everyday life: 'That is, knowledge and power intersect in a pedagogy of cultural politics to give students the opportunity not only to understand more critically who they are as part of a

wider social formation, but also to help them critically appropriate those forms of knowledge that traditionally have been denied to them' (Giroux, 1988, p. 106). Along similar lines, Freire (Shor and Freire 1987) outlines his dialogical method of teaching. For him, dialogue is part of our historical process of becoming human beings. 'Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it...through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality' (Shor and Freire, p. 98–99). Such endeavours are not without problems, and the teacher needs to be supportive and sometimes support the students by making summaries of the course so far – thus giving examples through action.

Here, through the writing of Giroux and Freire and Shor, we can see how power becomes an important part of educational practices. Such perspectives will complement the theories of experiential constructivist learning when we conduct our analysis. By using these ideas as an interpretative lens we will analyze how the RPL process (the assessment) in itself can be seen as a learning process. Therefore, it is not only prior learning that is assessed, but also new learning which might lead to new or revised ways of acting at work. In the next section, we will describe the project analyzed followed by a section on methodological issues.

Background

This article is based on a study of parts of a large governmental project in Sweden called 'Steps for skills' aimed at supporting the municipalities in their work with quality and in-service training in the care sector (health care and social care) for elderly people. The reason for starting up this project is related to the situation in Sweden where the population is growing older at the same time as fewer young people educate themselves to become assistant nurses. According to the committee for this project, there will be a shortage of 200,000 assistant nurses in 2015. However, they argue, the largest problem is that people who work in the care sector do not have the 'correct' educational background. They often have a diploma from upper secondary school, but not from the health-care programme.

In the last decade, the idea of recognition of prior learning has received increasing attention in Swedish adult education and vocational training. It is seen as a tool for making informal and non-formal learning visible, and for making education/training shorter and cheaper – a gain both for society and for the individual. In particular, much attention has been paid to RPL of vocational competence in the caring sector (Fejes and Andersson 2007a).

As part of the 'Step for skills' project, six municipalities participated in an experimental project focused on educational activities related to the workplace. These activities were of three kinds:

- To trial an alternative training programme for adults corresponding to the programme-specific subjects of the health-care programme.
- To test a certain number of modules within different knowledge areas as a basis for in-service training integrated in the workplace.
- To explore whether it is possible for the care sector for elderly people to exert greater influence on and participate more in the decisions about the content and the implementation of basic training as a means of developing a learning organization.

The first of these three activities is discussed here: namely, a programme for in-service training based on recognition of prior learning as a way for care workers to become assistant nurses. The discussion here is informed by a study of one of the six municipalities participating in the experimental project. The municipality is medium sized and located in southern

Sweden. The reason given by the municipality for participating in the project was that it wanted to increase the number of employees in the caring sector who have a degree from the health-care programme or who have diplomas from the relevant supplementary programmes. An important ambition was to relate the formal educational programmes more closely to the workplace as a way of focusing more on what is really needed in order to perform in the specific vocation. Thus, when we discuss in-service training based on recognition of prior learning, we mean an activity where the educational sector and the workplace are closely intertwined. In-service training is an activity that regularly takes place at work, normally without any formal connections to the educational system. In this case, there was an ambition to integrate parts of the educational system (health-care programme documentation, teachers) with the workplace.

This ambition was a central starting point for organising this programme in one such municipality, which is the focus of the research discussed here. In this municipality, six nursing homes participated in the experimental project. Three of the nursing homes are privately owned and three are owned by the municipality. The homes were divided into three groups, with one private and one municipal nursing home in each group. Each group also included one educational provider, which carried out the recognition of prior learning and training. Two of the providers are private, and one is run by the municipality¹. During the course of project, representatives from all six nursing homes met to discuss progress as well as discuss issues relating to in-service training. There was also communication between the educational providers. They had to design a programme based on the programme-specific subjects in the health care programme at the upper secondary school level. The health-care programme is the common requirement for employment as an assistant nurse in the Swedish care sector. The three-year study programme for youths at upper secondary school is the usual path taken. They study both the programme-specific subjects and more general theoretical subjects that give them basic eligibility for higher education. In adult education, it is normally possible to take a 1.5-year programme consisting solely of the programme-specific subjects. There are different initiatives for reducing the study time for experienced adults through recognition of prior learning. The reason for this is that it is not possible to recruit a sufficient number of assistant nurses. Thus, persons who have not attended the health-care programme are employed as care workers for limited periods of employment, and learn on the job. In addition to this, there has previously been a shorter study programme for becoming a care worker, and there are many care workers employed in the municipalities. In every case, the care workers have more limited competence than the assistant nurses, at least formally, and they are not allowed to perform the same tasks as the assistant nurses, and – last but not least – they are paid a lower salary. Consequently, the state and the municipalities, as well as individual workers, are interested in a process of transition from care worker to assistant nurse.

In summary, we can see how the governmental ambition to raise the level of education among those working in the care sector for elderly people resulted in a trial in-service training programme in six municipalities. Two important ideas of this programme were the close link between the workplace and the educational provider and the ambition to provide a programme, which was shorter than the regular programme in adult education.

¹ In Sweden, the municipalities fund educational providers and nursing homes no matter whether they are privately owned or run by the municipality. One could say that the municipality ‘buys’ a certain amount of ‘individual places’ for care or for education. Thus, as a citizen you only pay a minor fee for care, and for education you do not pay anything at all.

Methodological issues

The goal of this study is to understand in what ways recognition of prior learning and prior experiences are present as part of the process of in-service training and how new learning is an aspect of this process. To understand these concerns, 26 semi-structured interviews (Kvale 1996) were undertaken with a total of 30 care workers, assistant nurses (some of them acting as supervisors of the participating care workers), local managers and teachers, where the aim was to see how they perceived their participation and work within the in-service training programme where RPL was integrated. Altogether, 14 participants, 6 local managers, 5 supervisors and 5 teachers were interviewed. All interview persons were females. Some of them were interviewed twice (2 managers, 2 supervisors and 3 participants), at the beginning of the process and four months after the process had ended. 20 interviews were individual, and 6 group interviews were conducted with 2–5 interview persons together. All group interviews were conducted with care workers who participated in the project. The reason for conducting group interviews with the participants was practical – to make it possible to meet as many of them as possible with a time schedule that had to be adapted to their work and study schedule. The selection of interview persons was based on the nursing homes participating in the experimental project in the specific municipality. The municipality was chosen because it had made rapid progress with the project. We chose to cover the entire experimental project in the municipality as a way of developing a broader understanding of the project in the specific municipality.

The interviews in the project were conducted based on interview guides with questions specifically related to the category of person(s) we interviewed (managers, supervisors or participants). The guides were divided into four sections: background of the interview persons and work assignments; in-service training; RPL; and effects of RPL. Each section contained a few follow-up questions. As our focus was on the interview persons' experiences of in-service training and the experimental project, we chose the semi-structured interview in which the first question in each section is quite broad, and the follow-up questions are used if the specific areas to which the question is directed are not discussed spontaneously by the interview person. The duration of each interview was 30–70 minutes, with an average time of 40 minutes per interview, and each interview was transcribed in its entirety. Illustrative quotes from the interviews are used in the article to elaborate our analysis.

The analysis was conducted using a qualitative interpretative approach focused on discerning categories related to how the in-service training in the experimental project was perceived by the actors participating. In the first part of the results, we discuss the way the process of in-service training was organised and how prior learning was assessed. Secondly, our focus is on discerning what role is ascribed to prior learning in the process of training/learning. Thirdly, we problematise the relation between experience, learning and recognition. In this way, we have used qualitative interviews and group interviews as a way of answering our research questions. The interview transcripts have been analyzed through a qualitative interpretative approach. In the next section, this approach is taken forward through describing how the in-service training programme was organised and carried out.

Organising in-service training based on RPL

The six nursing homes participating in this project were divided into groups of two – one privately owned and one municipal home. Each group also consisted of an educational provider with the task of carrying out the process of in-service training based on the health-care programme and on recognizing participants' prior learning. The process was carried out by means of two different modes of organisation. At three nursing homes, the participants

worked every second week as usual, without any interruptions by the recognition and training process, and the other weeks they went to the school that was carrying out the RPL/training process. At two nursing homes, the participants participated in the process one day a week. In the first week they were engaged in self-study for one day, and they were also guided by their supervisor, who was an assistant nurse from the nursing home; in the second week, they were visited on one day by the teacher, who gave lectures and conducted discussions as a basis of recognizing their prior learning. The process in which the participants at these five nursing homes participated was planned to take approximately seven months to one year to finish (compared to one and a half year to finish the programme if one studies full time in the 'traditional' programme as an adult). After this, all the participants were expected to receive a degree from the health-care programme, and thus be able to be employed as assistant nurses. At the sixth nursing home, all the employees were already assistant nurses. Thus, they chose to organize a process of recognizing prior learning in relation to the course of ethics in the health-care programme, as that course had been extended in terms of content (and credits) compared to the same course a few years ago when these employees received their degrees.

As a way of conducting these processes of RPL, the participants at the different nursing homes were involved in different activities, which could be related to both a process of education and teaching and to a process of recognition and assessment of prior learning. Teaching was conducted by the teacher who gave small lectures related to the module to be assessed. Further, the participants were to discuss cases among themselves, and also to discuss these cases with their supervisors in 'learning conversations'. The focus for discussion in these learning conversations was an issue or a case raised by the supervisor, and the participants were encouraged to reflect on the issues discussed while the supervisor guided the conversation so as to involve everyone. The idea was also to have a 'reflector'; a person who was quiet during the conversation, taking notes, and at the end presented a meta-reflection of how the conversation had proceeded. The idea behind the method of 'conversational learning' was introduced during a university credit course in which all the supervisors participated. During the course, the supervisors learnt how to conduct learning conversations. Thus, there were clear instructions as to what method was to be used by the supervisors during this process of in-service training.

As mentioned, the process was based on recognition of prior learning. The assessment was carried out by three different educational providers, depending on which group the participant belonged to. On an overall level, the assessment of the participant's knowledge was made by means of discussions and written assessments. A central component was the use of cases that the participants were to discuss, both orally and in writing. The aim of the assessment was to see firstly what the participants already knew in relation to the health-care programme, with a focus on care for the elderly people and, secondly, in which parts they needed to study more. One method used in relation to these cases was, as mentioned, learning conversations. Although the focus in the process was on acknowledging the participants' prior learning, there were parts that they lacked, e.g. theoretical medical knowledge. In those parts they needed to read course literature and take written exams similar to if they had participated in the health-care programme as a regular student.

Based on the presentation above, we can see how in-service training based on recognition of prior learning in the cases studied is a collective and individual process of teaching, assessment and learning. On the one hand, the participants participate in a collective learning process based on discussions relating to prior experiences. Further, their learning is based on small lectures by the teacher, and on reading books and doing oral and written assignments. On the

other hand, there is an assessment being made based on their prior learning, although it is hard to distinguish exactly to what extent knowledge based on prior learning is being assessed, and to what extent it is the result of new learning (partly based on prior experiences). In the following sections, we will illustrate in greater detail what role prior learning has in the process and what relation between experience and learning is constructed.

The role of prior learning

In this section, we will focus on the role of prior learning in the process of in-service training with RPL as an integrated part. We will present three areas that are expressed as the specific characteristics of this process. These three areas interact in the construction of prior learning as a central part of the process: the individual's prior knowledge acts as a starting point, discussion as a main working form, and production of new knowledge.

The individual's prior knowledge as a starting point

A prominent feature of RPL is its focus on participants' prior learning and knowledge. As one local manager expresses it: 'the focus is on what the specific individual, how the specific individuals learning looks like and how that individual apprehends him/herself' (Manager 9). The process focuses on what the individual needs (in relation to the individual background as well as certain criteria), instead of on what someone else decides that they have to study. As a supervisor expresses it when she speaks about this process:

Here, the way they learn makes them say – but we know that. And then the teacher knows – I don't need to waste any time on that. Here, we can focus on what we need. That's the difference I believe (Manager 9).

What is apparent is the focus on individuals and their prior experiences, learning and knowledge. Instead of a focus on what someone else wants you to know, irrespective of what you already know, the focus is on what you know, which is the starting point for developing your competencies. One participant compares this process to regular schooling:

Here, you really find out about the experiences, what you have. And then you can, so to say, speed up the pace of an educational programme, you don't need to drag it out in time. In a regular educational programme you need to read through everything. And also do these usual assessment tasks or in other ways show what you know. So for me, this process of recognition of prior learning was really good as you didn't need to read so much. Instead, you can acknowledge what one already knows (Participant 1).

For this participant, the training is focused on what she already knows. It is her experiences that are focused on in the process. Such an interpretation is supported by the idea of estimating one's own knowledge before the teacher designs and carries out the RPL process. Participants from two nursing homes describe how they are encouraged to make a self assessment, to estimate their own knowledge in a certain area before the teacher plans how to assess their knowledge, and how to design each module. Thus, the starting point for the process is the individual and what she knows. Consequently, the individual's prior experience, learning and knowledge are the starting points for the RPL process. In the next section, we will illustrate how discussion as a main working form construes prior learning as an important aspect of the RPL process.

Discussion as a main working form

The focus on the participant's prior learning and experiences can also be seen in relation to the main working form in this project. Instead of the one-way communication that often

seems to be the norm in regular in-service training at the nursing homes analyzed (Fejes and Andersson 2007b), the focus here is on two-way communication by means of discussions. Almost all the interview persons describe how discussions are important part when it comes to recognizing the participant's knowledge. Through the discussion, you make visible what you already know, and this is then assessed by the teacher. But the discussion also means that you are exposed to what others know, something which should be reflected upon in the discussions. Thus, there is the potential for new learning taking place in the discussions. As two participants express it in an exchange of words:

All the discussions we can have here and everyone has experiences, and the exchange there. It's not possible to compare with anything else (Participant 13).

It brings together the group that we are, I believe. This is great, you get to know each other. And you view each other in new ways than was previously the case, even if we have worked together for 15 years. You find new good points in the others which you hadn't see before. And you helps each other and... Yes, this is great (Participant 12).

Here, we can see a relation constructed between experience, reflection and learning. By discussing certain issues, the participants' experiences are reflected upon, which results in new ways of perceiving each other. RPL in this shape can thus be seen as both an individual and a collective process of learning in which participants increase their participation in a specific community related to their own nursing homes and in which they learn from each other's experiences (or at least they are exposed to the experiences of others).

By using discussion as the main working method, the participants are encouraged and 'forced' to be active. Thus, there is a focus on dialogue and two-way communication as a means of recognizing learning and to enable learning to take place. Therefore, some participants feel more pressure to be active than in regular in-service training. As two participants express it in an exchange of words:

Now it's about grades which in some way feels a bit more serious (Participant 8).

Yea. Now we could say...we go to school, yea, so really that's what we do. And it feels a bit more that one has...to learn more than in a lecture on how to treat a wound. Of course that's also useful, but it's not...there we haven't been given a task or anything. Here we have a task, therefore one needs to be alert and...it's not enough to just sit here and let the time go by (Participant 7).

Here, we can see how the work forms used require the participant to be active. In one sense, the discussions are designed as a way of making everyone active. Having grades and assessment tasks makes the participants feel that this process is more serious than only participating in a lecture every now and then, which is the common format of in-service training at these nursing homes.

However, some of the participants would have preferred more regular schooling where some-one lectures. The reason is that they feel a bit frustrated when the discussions get stuck and they are unable to understand what the teacher wants from them. In an exchange of words between two participants, the following is expressed:

I miss that teacher who stands and talks and talks. And you take notes and based on what the teacher has said – based on it your given an assessment task. But here, there's so much, you have to...so we say, we get stuck (Participant 9).

Yea, we are taking two courses at the same time (Participant 10).

We get stuck on some word, or what is it they want and a lot of... (Participant 9).

Yea, what do they want? I have trouble sometimes. What does she want me to answer? So, it's a bit unclear sometimes (Participant 10).

Such an experience can be interpreted as frustration at getting stuck. As the participants are probably more used to having someone tell them what is correct or incorrect, as often seems to be the case in regular in-service training (Fejes and Andersson 2007b), they get frustrated when *they* are the ones to find the solutions. In such a discussion, you will probably sometimes get stuck, which can be frustrating, and in this case they feel that it is unclear what the discussion is about. We can find a similar result in Ellström and Ekholm's (2001) study of care workers in the same sector as in our study. According to them, the care workers at one unit were sceptical about a course on quality in care work in which discussions were the main work form. They had a diffuse perception of what the course was about, thus they were hesitant as to what effects it had. Such problems and frustrations raised by the interview persons are something that can occur when students encounter knowledge that has previously been denied them (or not been available in the contexts they have been active in). Thus, the teacher needs to be able to handle such anxiety (Giroux 1988). According to Freire (Shor and Freire 1987), it is not an easy task to help the students to develop the knowledge that has previously been denied them, and the teacher needs to support the students by giving examples through action. However, the quotations illustrate the focus on the participants to learn how to reflect about a problem – problem-solving without any major interference from the teacher.

It follows that discussion as a main working form captures prior learning as an important aspect of the RPL process. Moreover, teachers need to be able to handle the students' anxiety when they encounter knowledge which had previously been denied them. In the next section, we will argue that the process, besides assessing prior learning, also produces new knowledge, as discussed.

Production of new knowledge

Many of the respondents have said that the process based on RPL is more substantive than regular in-service training and thus creates a clearer structure. Instead of small pieces every now and then (as claimed in the case of regular in-service training), you have a clear, comprehensive process, which the participant follows. Further, several of the local managers discuss the importance of having a long-term plan for how to create a good in-service training process. One of the managers defines this kind of in-service training as production of knowledge, instead of consumption.

What happens after February? Will we return to our usual consumption of knowledge...competence consumption in which we buy something and that's really good so we show it to others? How can we produce this knowledge here, and make it clear. I think that in some way one can – with guidance, with these techniques, create those moments of reflection, which we often lack. With more work on the issues we have problems with – questions that are raised here every day in our workplace. It will be a way of bringing out what...the knowledge that is actually here already. Instead of searching for it outside all the time (Manager 6).

Thus, RPL and the method of learning conversations are seen as something that produces knowledge among the participants instead of the participants consuming knowledge. Reflection about the issues in the workplace is seen as a way of producing knowledge. We could say that a relation is construed between work experience, reflection and learning. We have the

experiences of all the care workers, and reflecting on them results in production of new knowledge (learning).

As we can see in this section, the participant's prior learning and experiences are seen as important parts of the recognition process. A construction is also made between experience, learning and recognition, something that will be elaborated on in greater detail in the next section.

Experience and learning

Our main focus here is on the relation between experience, learning and recognition. The initiative analyzed aims to give recognition to prior learning and to develop new learning through educational activities. However, as will be illustrated in this section, there is also learning that takes place in the process of assessing the prior learning, something which is not accounted for in the interviews, or in prior research on RPL.

From constructivist perspectives such as Kolb's (1984), learning is the result of reflected experiences. In the project analyzed, the recognition process was to a large extent based on reflection, for example, in the learning conversations. Such a process is not merely a process of recognition but also a process of learning. The participants have a lot of experiences from working in elderly care. To some extent, these experiences have probably resulted in learning, particularly in instrumental learning, where they have learnt how to do different things in the workplace. One central aspect of the recognition process is that the participants show that they can do these things, and they get recognition for this. A supervisor emphasises the importance of experience in this specific vocation. She argues that that is what counts, and education is only a complement.

Yes, it's experiential knowledge. We have a lot of that knowledge here...this work we are doing here, it's experience that counts. That's how it is. And then, education is a complement (Supervisor 1).

Such experiences have probably sometimes turned into learning but not always. This latter issue can be related to another aspect, namely, what happens when they solve tasks and participate in reflective discussions in the learning conversations? It turns out that the participants have not been used to reflecting on and discussing their work and what they do. Thus the tasks and the conversations do not only mean that they make visible and get recognition for what they have learnt previously – from their work experiences and/or from the training process – but also that they might turn their prior experiences into knowledge through the learning process of conversation and reflection. In this way, prior learning is a part of the process of in-service training, where it both gets recognition and is a starting point for new learning. But when it comes to prior experiences (that have not yet resulted in learning), it is the other way around. Here, it is new learning that becomes a part of the recognition process. Prior experiences form the basis of reflections that result in knowledge, which could then be afforded recognition.

Accordingly, RPL cannot only be seen as recognizing prior learning, but also as recognizing learning that takes place during the assessment process. In this process, there is reflection on prior experiences (which might result in new learning), which is also being assessed. So even if we have empirically illustrated that prior learning plays a central role in the process, we must also add the new learning that probably takes place during the process. By new learning, we do not only mean the learning taking place in those areas where the participants lack knowledge (eg. medical knowledge which requires additional teaching), but also the learning

taking place in the assessment process when one's prior experiences are reflected on and questioned. In another quotation, we can see how, according to a supervisor, such questioning of prior assumptions takes place among the participants:

They recognize a bit more, how should I put it...to think in another way. You don't have to continue to have this tunnel vision all the time. They have become a bit more...wider in their ways of thinking (Supervisor 2).

By reflecting on your prior experiences and ways of doing this, you might create new assumptions, or revise/discard your old ones. On another level, we could also reflect on the experience of the recognition process *per se*. This is a new experience for the participants, and if/when they engage in reflection on this process, they will learn something about the process of conversation, reflection and recognition. It could be both instrumental learning, concerning how to reflect and how to behave in a recognition process, and communicative learning, developing the capacity to reflect on and communicate about the experience of participating in this very process.

So, it seems that the process of RPL results in new learning, and this learning is part of what is being assessed. Consequently, it is hard to distinguish between prior and new experiences and learning when the assessment is carried out. In the next section, we will discuss how the kind of self-reflective techniques used in this programme can also be seen as developing one's capacity for critical thinking, i.e. new learning that is also assessed in the process.

Critical thinking

We can also see self-reflection of experience as a process in which the participants practice their capacity for critical reflection. According to Brookfield (1987), critical reflection consists of four parts. Firstly, it is about defining and questioning basic assumptions. The second part concerns an understanding of how the basic assumptions are dependent on their context. Thirdly, the person who thinks critically tries to find an alternative to his/her basic assumptions, which leads to the fourth part, reflexive criticism. The sceptical person is one who does not accept explanations such as 'this is the way things are' or 'this is the way it has always been'. This person can devote herself to ideas and explanations that refer to social structures. But, as we see it, it is an informed choice that the person finds to be closest to reality. Critical thinking is seen here as a process instead of a product. In different situations, we intuitively experience a discrepancy or indistinctness, something that we act in relation to. When our intuition is confirmed, rejected or changed, our assumptions are redefined and form the basis of new ways of acting and so forth. A situation of critical thinking is illustrated by a supervisor:

Yea, it's this critical thinking that one doesn't swallow what the nurse believes. That she knows what is correct. Instead, one questions the nurse. I believe, or I feel, as I've also leaved through these books, that one thinks a bit more. Should we do it in this way? (Supervisor 4)

In this case, we can see how some of the participants seem to have become more critical of what the nurses believe is correct. Learning conversations and the collective discussions have contributed to a process in which critical thinking is encouraged and promoted. Through cases, the participants reflect and discuss what way of acting is the best one. In such a process, the participants are forced to question their own assumptions and explanations. They have to find and rely on their own explanations (instead of 'only' relying on explanations from doctors or nurses). Such explanations can, of course, and probably often do, coincide with the ones provided by doctors and nurses. But the point is for the participants to be able to 'stand

on their own two feet'. One participant describes how she, to a greater extent than previously, questions what she does.

Yeah, it was as I previously said, maybe one question why one acts in a specific way and one thinks more about what one does, I believe. As I said before, one becomes more comfortable in one's role (Participant 9).

Through processes in the shape of conversations and reflection in the recognition process, the participants are encouraged to question what they previously found to be correct. Sometimes, such reflection leads to revised frames of references, and thus revised ways of acting. Here, critical thinking is one form of new learning that can be realised during the assessment process. Thus, what are being assessed are not only previous experiences, knowledge and learning, but also new knowledge and learning that are developed during the assessment process itself.

Discussion

RPL is about identifying, assessing and documenting a person's prior learning no matter where the learning has taken place. Here, our focus has been to analyze an in-service training programme where carers' prior learning has been assessed in relation to the health-care programme. The process has been carried out in a close relationship between the workplace and the educational providers. Assessment of prior learning has been combined with additional educational activities. Our interest has been directed towards understanding what role prior learning is assigned in such a process and problematising the relation between experiences, learning and recognition.

As has been illustrated, the participants in the project have many experiences from all their years working as carers. According to the teachers carrying out the assessment, it has been possible to identify and assess these experiences in the process. In relation to some of the courses, such assessment has been possible merely by having a couple of group discussions with the participants. Thus, the participants are constructed as people who have prior experience, which also means that they have certain knowledge that can be 'ticked off' on the list of courses, or part of courses, and then added to by means of new learning. However, we have argued that the new learning is not only constructed through the educational processes following the recognition process. But also, through the lens of a constructivist perspective on learning, the recognition process most likely produces new learning, which is included in what is being assessed. As in the study reported by Scott (2007), those with prior experiences from the area might perceive learning even if they could already be expected to have relevant knowledge. This must not only be understood in terms of developing different knowledge through practical experience and through an educational process, it must also be understood in terms of learning from experience in the educational process. That is, the reason why the perceived learning among those with experience is higher than expected could be that their experience makes it possible for them to learn more – through reflection upon this experience – than those without experience.

From the findings here, it seems that the discussion about RPL needs to include an understanding about what the recognizing/assessment process in itself produces. Not only does it produce a documentation/grade or a ticking off of a course, but it also gives the opportunity for new learning (e.g. the development of the carer's ability to think critically). These issues have, as we illustrated in our overview of previous research, often been neglected. Having a focus on the participants' prior learning and experiences, using it in the learning and assessment process, is something that could also be beneficial in regular educational activities. In one way, the in-service training studied in this article could be seen as adapting 'classical'

pedagogical ideals promoted in adult learning theory (cf. Brookfield 1987; Knowles 1989; Mezirow 1991). However, as we have illustrated in this article, such processes are not without problem. The teacher needs to acknowledge the students anxiety and frustration when they encounter knowledge that had previously not been available to them (Giroux 1988, Shor and Freire 1987). Thus, it is important to recognize issues of power in such a political practice as care work.

Consequently, issues of power are an important complement to constructivist theories of learning upon which we base the major part of our analysis. This is important as constructivist theories of learning neglect issues of power. For example, Michelson (1996) argues that a focus on reflection about experience is dualistic (body/mind) and that it disregards relations of power. She points to how the process of prior learning assessment makes the body invisible where reflection and experience are seen as two separate processes – i.e. the reflection of the mind is in the foreground and the bodily experience invisibly present in the background. Similarly, Fenwick (2003) holds that experience and the knowledge-making process (reflection) are construed as two separate elements. She says: ‘reflection itself is experienced, and experience as event cannot be separated from our imaginative interpretation and re-interpretation of the event’ (Fenwick 2003, p. 126). Thus, she argues that one cannot separate experience from reflection and knowledge.

We can to some extent agree with this critique since experience, reflection, learning and knowledge cannot be truly separated – all aspects of the lived experience are integrated in the process of real life. However, different perspectives on experience, learning and knowledge help us understand different aspects of, for example, a process of recognising prior learning. We have employed a constructivist perspective to identify certain aspects of such a process. Our analysis shows how ‘classical’ ideas of adult education are enacted. Experience, prior learning and new learning interact in a way that is not always the case in the practice of adult education. This and other studies focusing on ‘rpl’ rather than ‘RPL’ (cf. Breier 2005) contribute to new perspectives on what adult education could mean. A change of educational processes based on experiential learning, and particularly the recognition of participants’ prior learning, connects the first two ‘villages’ of experiential learning identified by Warner Weil and McGill (1989). Furthermore, when this education is organised as in-service training more or less situated in the workplace, the need for cultural change in the workplace (cf. Davies 1999) to enhance learning and development is more likely to be fulfilled.

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