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## **Professional development as learning in relationships**

The article presents a classification of selected leading conceptions within professional development, using socio-cultural perspective of learning in different relationships. Beside drawing on the classical social theory of learning through interactions with others, another dimensions of learning are added: related to the self, personal dimension of learning through professional identity development and societal dimension, where learning results from the ability to respond comprehensively to expectations for the undertaken professional role. All dimensions are illustrated with selected examples of studies on the professional identity development process. On the basis of theories combined with research outcomes, the following types of learning are distinguished: learning by practising, learning in a critical dialogue, learning as becoming, learning in the societal structure, learning from life history and learning as a dialectical process. All these learning types could be useful in professional learning or professional development, especially the within human services sector, including teaching, social work, career guidance and educational counsellor.

**Key words:** professional development, professional identity, social theory of learning, learning by experience, dialectical process of learning, socio-cultural context of learning, social construction of professions, social structure

### **Professional Development Research: Contexts and Inspirations**

Currently, social sciences focus on “becoming a professional,” which implies a certain process, rather than simply on “being a professional,” which posits people’s stable and inalienable status in the context of labour. In this paper, I want to address the process of learning, which makes up an essential part of professionalization and is bound up with “becoming.” The eponymous notion – learning in relationships – will be comprehended in a wide array of its meanings: firstly, as learning in relations with others (people, objects, content of learning, etc.); secondly, as learning in relations with oneself (i.e. with one’s subjective self, when, for example, in an inner reflection we come to realise something relevant); and thirdly, as learning in the sense of a subject’s being in a dialectical relationship with the societal environment

(context), its structure, etc. Before elaborating on this notion, I want to reflect on the purposes of studying how professionals learn their trade. Why we should study such learning processes cannot be easily answered in one sentence, and there are several reasons for that.

First of all, given the on-going changes affecting both the labour market and particular jobs and workplaces, people are compelled to update their professional knowledge and skills constantly. Along with developments in technology, new occupations and professions keep emerging, while the traditional ones keep transforming. Therefore, we are witnessing a new phenomenon of “adults’ continual involvement with education,” an attitude which seems to prevail in our society today. Caused by the market’s demand for ever better professional qualifications, it involves repeated re-engagement with or persistent, lifelong participation in the educational process: seeking new, attractive study majors, training schemes and/or various courses. It is, however, debatable if adults’ enhanced participation in education entails in fact their enhanced learning. An equally controversial issue is the quality of the educational offer, as well as its actual contribution to the learners’ personal development. As this falls beyond the scope of this paper, I will only conclude that, unfortunately, the increased access to education often goes hand in hand with its decreased quality and limited opportunities of monitoring its substance and operations. As education has become ubiquitously common and largely private, it is virtually impossible to keep track of the workings of the educational market. Consequently, instead of improving the quality of life of education participants, many educational practices in fact prove adverse to it.

Another reason why we should explore these issues (i.e. professional learning and development) is the discourse on the “essence” of professionalism, which actually dates back to modernism. As its impact does not seem to decline, the discourse contributes to generating, among others, expert-systems that assist us in our daily lives (Giddens, 2001) and increasingly mediate our once more spontaneous interpersonal relationships.

The development and standardisation of professions was indeed instrumental to the modernisation of society, yet the post-modernist critique of culture and technology, combined with the politically-flavoured bottom-up social movements, has since undermined the traditional, scientific approaches to professions and occupations. Similarly, the frameworks in which to investigate learning within profession/occupation have changed, departing from the once dominant theory of human capital, which ignored the role of the subject and life experiences in learning. Currently, in critical accounts, most professions can be examined as “politically” informed since they possess a certain “social monopoly” on expert knowledge and competencies. As such, they regulate access and determine the distribution of these competencies and knowledge across society, which spurs criticism today. The distribution, namely, is legitimated and mediated by the polarisation into low- or high-income vocations, depending on the certification of qualifications.

The criticism targeted at the ontological underpinnings of establishment and differentiation of professions, as well as at the continuing professionalization process within some of them (e.g. in the social, so-called human services, including counselling and guidance services), does not materially affect the situation: some professions still offer ready-made scenarios for people who engage with them and, thereby, sustain a certain *status quo*. Hence the issues of professionalization, acquisition of professional status and its social role continue to be an important object of scientific inquiry. They are dealt with, in particular, within frameworks that side by side with individuals' objective resources focus also on adult learners' social capital.

The reasons indicated above are, of course, only a sample of motivations behind research on professional learning. Multiple scholars have their own particular agendas, which contributes to the on-going popularity of the subject. In this article, my aim is to provide an account of approaches to learning processes observable within selected professionalization and professional development studies. I will focus on two out of a wide array of research models: the holistic approach in professionalization research proposed by Henning Salling Olesen and Kirsten Weber from Roskilde University and a more pragmatic approach focused on practical dimensions in professional development of teachers and educational counsellors, developed by Gaby Jacobs and Kary Vloet from the Netherlands' Fontys University.<sup>1</sup> I will explore the Dutch research as learning by doing (practice), learning in critical dialogue and learning as becoming. In the Danish researchers' studies, I will discuss learning in the context of societal macro-structures, learning from life history and learning in a dialectic process. I believe that all kinds of learning analysed below can shed light on professional learning within the human services sector, including a variety of counselling services.

### Learning by Practising

Professional development includes, crucially, professional knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies. These are not understood in normative terms as universally valid, because what kind of knowledge (in the sense of both substance and quality) will be required ultimately depends on the social context in which one performs one's profession. This holds true also for the expected competencies, including the strictly professional and clearly defined ones as well as those bound up with tacit knowledge, unrecognised and difficult to define. It is through everyday practice that professional development proceeds. This essentially involves the dimensions of knowledge, skills and competencies which tend to be overlooked in

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<sup>1</sup> The programme was described by the Dutch researchers during the "Horyzonty pomagania" ("Horizons of Helping") Counselling Seminar Cycle at the Faculty of Education, University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław and the "W kręgu poradnictwa kariery" ("Around Career Counselling") at the University of Lower Silesia's Klodzko Campus.

traditional analyses of professionalism even though they are prerequisites of professional performance. One reason why these dimensions are treated as irrelevant to professional development is that they often remain unrecognised in everyday professional practice and, hence, are difficult to capture in research.

Nevertheless, some researchers attempt to indicate the relevance of these “non-standard” competencies and to explore them. One of such reserachers is Gaby Jacobs of Fontys University, who applying the action research model (Jacobs, 2012) sought to initiate a process of moral development in professional educational counselling practitioners. In her approach, she drew on three concepts of professional development based on everyday practice. One of them was the craftsmanship concept proposed by Richard Sennett (Sennett, 2008), which posits that people turn professionals mainly through their knowledge which is derived from experience and acquired by repetition of certain activities at workplace. This knowledge tends to remain unrecognised, that is, we know what we should do even though we can neither explicate our actions nor identify the genealogy of “personal knowledge.” We acquire it in the process of converting personal experience into tacit knowledge, which becomes our “reservoir for action.” R. Sennett (2008) emphasises that to build this knowledge and develop professional skills, we must be embedded in practice. Hence the textbook-derived theoretical knowledge as such does not suffice for professional development; rather, permanent learning of the professional role is predicated upon difficulties and opportunities recognised in everyday practising.

Sennet underscores (2008, p. 289) that the maker/producer must remain in a relationship with his/her work/product in order to improve and perfect his/her skills in constant practice. Debatable as this insistence may be in case of a relationship with another person rather than with an object, Sennet’s observation urges us to develop sensibility and reflectivity in the professionalization process. Professional development unfolds in a series of questions about one’s own practice, responses to which point out the direction in which to head in the quest for craftsmanship and professional perfection. According to Jacobs, the three fundamental preconditions of craftsmanship include:

- ▶ localisation, that is activation of awareness by a problem situation; mindfulness, focusing on the problem and temporary suspension of action,
- ▶ interrogation, that is reflection on the situation and professional actions, questioning of one’s own approaches and conduct, especially when things fail to work the way they should,
- ▶ openness, that is looking for new ways of doing things based on intuitive choices, grasping opportunities, readiness to venture into the unknown.

These assumptions underlie one model of professional learning by practising, which focuses in particular of the “latent dimensions” of the process.

Jacobs builds also on the notion of the so-called tact of teaching developed by Max van Manen (1991), which is another interesting concept concerning the

development of non-standard competencies in professional practice. In his *The Tact of Teaching: Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness*, Van Manen calls for “practical pedagogy,” which takes as its starting point an assumption that relations among people form the basis of educational practice. These relations should be direct and largely based on intuitive knowledge. Tact, namely, is the matter of intuition rather than of conscious knowledge. Although it is significantly linked to unconscious knowledge, the pedagogical tact can be learnt. Developing it involves first of all perfecting the skill of “pedagogical sensibility” (noticing the educational potential of a situation) and, subsequently, the skill of understanding the situation observed and its meaning so as to ultimately make sense of it and achieve the desired outcomes. Van Manen (1991) claims that for an educational action to comply with the logic of the tact of teaching, four complex competencies are necessary:

1. Thoughtfulness, i.e. conscious attentiveness to a given situation,
2. Interpretive insight into thoughts, emotions, and desires, formed on the basis of gestures, postures, facial expressions and body talk (non-verbal communication),
3. Sensitivity to norms and limitations, which helps demarcate the possibilities of acting in a given situation,
4. Moral intuition, i.e. the sense of what is a right thing to do in given circumstances.

These non-measurable competencies are unfortunately bound up with all the risks inherent in subjective assessment, i.e. only a limited and relative possibility of identifying the quality of professional performance. Uncritical reliance on intuition and sensitivity of tacit professional knowledge do not always contribute to responding adequately to complex or unclear situations. Because (professional) knowledge is to be founded upon personal experience, values, desires and goals, they may at a certain moment produce so-called “defensive routines” (Argyris, Schon, 1974). Used as a protection against changes, they may effectively hamper not only professional action but also learning as such. However, despite some “risks” that it carries, the concept of “the tact of teaching” is more or less consciously utilised in professional practice and in the training of social services professionals.

Research on professional development draws also on Gert Biesta’s concept (Biesta, 2005), in which so-called “practical wisdom” is acquired in the context of professional development (of teachers/educators in this case). Similarly to earlier theories, it highlights the relational nature of the process. Biesta views education as a type of a social moral practice, because it always involves exerting influence upon others. For a learner, an educational relation is an aim in and by itself, being at the same time a means toward a higher end. In other words, education comprises both dimensions of the classical concept of development, i.e. *technē* and *praxis*. Consequently, it involves both the ability to engage in action based on instrumental knowledge (*technē*) and, more importantly, to utilise practical knowledge in executing action (*praxis*). While the former means application of certain fixed rules and

a simple ability to do something, the latter means applying skills in an appropriate, effective way. By G. Biesta (2005), practical knowledge is identified with Aristotelian *phronesis*, that is, in philosophical terms, it is a form of knowledge (cognition) identical with understanding of what is good in the autotelic terms. In this sense, *phronesis* is knowledge embedded in the practice of individual moral life as distinct from the purely theoretical knowledge. Therein G. Biesta is similar to Reginald Revans, who believes that all craftsmanship initially involves learning through routine execution (repetition) of activities over long intervals. He calls it *learning by doing*, which resembles action learning. The next step consists in analysing outcomes arrived at. This provides a source of knowledge, which consequently leads to the improvement of our skills and quality of our future performance (Revans, 1980; 1982; 1998).

All our actions should be informed by moral sensibility, profoundly questioning the nature, intention and kind of reactions that our activity suggests to us. This cannot be accomplished without critical reflection on our own professional performance, which is nevertheless difficult to engage in, especially if a particular action pertains to latent knowledge and makes up its part. These are so-called “blind spots,” apparently impossible to discern from one’s personal point of view and perspective. Hence, development as bound up with professional practice and learning is made possible by reflection triggered in meetings with other people. Mentioned above, G. Jacobs’s research (2010) shows that to recognise latent areas of knowledge and skills, we must study – and verify in critical dialogue with members of our (vocational) community of practice – both our intuition and moral sensibility as well as their impact on our professional life.

Although the three concepts of learning by practising presented in the foregoing – R. Sennets’ craftsmanship, G. Biesta’s practical wisdom, and M. van Manen’s tact of teaching – are underpinned by different learning tenets, they share a number of common features. One of them is that they refer to professional training of specialists employed in the social services sector, such as teachers, social workers, educators and counsellors. Moreover, they all discuss learning of new skills in relation to one’s own professional practice.

### **Learning in Critical Dialogue**

Paulo Freire’s concept of learning in critical dialogue (Freire, 1970; 1997) is a model example of learning in relationships with others. The Dutch scholar G. Jacobs believes that Freire’s concept is particularly poignant for the training of future counsellors. Through dialogue, which P. Freire considers both the foundation of knowledge construction and a method of teaching, learning becomes a social interaction involving human cooperation based on mutual responsibility. It is in this collaboration that new knowledge is produced. Emerging from the sharing and

simultaneous interpenetration of the forms of knowledge its participants individually possess (Lucio-Villegas, 2009). Characterised by openness and sensitivity to others, dialogue facilitates the emergence of new and shared meanings as well as creation of knowledge, self-reflection and learning. Such a relationship may have its pitfalls, however, since it may unfold in the context of conflict and imbalance of power between the teacher and the learner (Bohm, 1996). Hence, crucial narrative (or dialogical) activities, which importantly reduce power disparity and influence their participants' learning, include listening, suspension of judgment, asking open questions, searching for meanings in others' utterances, granting others free space (not interrupting), sharing experiences, feelings, and thoughts, explaining one's own point of view and values, supporting others' explanations and analysing before seeking solutions. What is more, all participants in a dialogue should identify the problem and jointly develop the questions aimed to critically interrogate notions and to generate important life themes (Freire, 1970). Assessment of the quality of the dialogue is also important (Burbules, 1993). The discussion should not pass over the issues of power relations, inclusion and marginalisation of other voices. In this way, dialogue may contribute to the development of professional identity and, in case of human services professions, it may also provide methodological knowledge useful in actual interventions.

Kary Vloet's account of a course for students at Fontys University exemplifies how critical dialogue can be applied as a teaching method in an institutional setting. One of the preparatory M.A. courses for a group of practitioners (teachers and educational counsellors) involved a participatory action research module: *'Research Programme of the Lectorate: Professional Values in Critical Dialogue'*. Stimulating the participants' professional identity through reflective participation in critical dialogue, the classroom discussions focused particularly on moral development, and specifically on learning key professional values. The research was based on a theoretical model which envisaged professional performance as comprised of three dimensions: professional values and personal engagement, professional knowledge and understanding of professional situations, and professional skills and capabilities. It is commonly known that all of them are interconnected and interact reciprocally. This complex interplay produces professional development, in which moral development is one of the supreme goals.

The coursework reaffirmed that the dialogical learning process in practitioners commenced already in classroom, when professional performance was observed and discussed. The learning process, however, was ambiguous and context-dependent, integrating professional knowing and action. Such learning can involve multilayered reflection, concerning individual, professional (vocational), organisational and social planes, as well as analysis that supports practitioners in their attempts at coping with changes both within their profession and outside it (Jacobs, 2010). The research carried out at Fontys University demonstrated that, in the research sample, important dimensions of professional development included

sensible self-confidence rooted in professional knowledge and examination of one's own practice, investigative reflexive attitude typified by a certain uncertainty in action, and communicative (relational) skills expressed in openness to others. The development within these three dimensions proceeded through reflective learning during student group meetings, in discussions on their own professional practice the students engaged in outside the university and/or in reflection triggered by the literature or other content, people or events relevant to the learners.

Studying learning in dialogue one may conclude that it offers opportunities of interaction and acquisition of new knowledge, similarly to perusal of literature, contact with other students and reflective attitude to one's own self. These are crucial for professions falling within the social services sector.

### **Learning as Becoming**

Learning in relationship with one's own self – defined here as “learning as becoming” – can be usefully illuminated by the latest research carried out by a group of Dutch scholars (Vloet and Van Swet, 2010; Vloet, Jacobs and Veugelers, 2012, forthcoming), who have explored professional identity in a group of students-practitioners (teachers and educational counsellors) enrolled in an M.A. programme. The research was underpinned by an identity concept which understood identity as a dynamic relational process and a construct changing in time. Identity was conceived in narrative terms as emerging from reinterpretation of meaningful experience from one's own biography, formal education, career or practice. It was assumed that identity construction is both a cognitive and an emotional process, and – as the research implied – simultaneously a situational one, because a person and his/her practice are always located in this or that socio-cultural context. Identity, thus, is not only a foundation: its construction is also the aim of the acting subject (agency) and, consequently, it is a “multi-voiced product” of diverse sub-identities integrated in one person. These preliminary tenets served as a basis for a conceptual model which provided the framework for the research.

In this framework, the biographically analysed relationship comprised the person and his/her meaningful cognitive and emotional experience rooted in a particular social context. Importantly, professional identity as a narrative constructed in the course of telling a life narrative (biography) was approached not only as embedded in a certain socio-cultural context, but also as unfolding or becoming at a moment of particular significance to the person. Examination of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of professional identity focused especially on the level of motivation for work, concept of tasks, self-concept (dialogical self), emotions involved in performing particular tasks and feelings toward oneself.

Empirical material analyses showed that individuals always search for self-definitions – i.e. learn how to develop their subjective identities (in the context of

professional role) – in relations with others. In becoming a teacher and/or a counselling professional, the important learning-related factors included core vocational competencies, such as care and responsibility for others (ensuing partly from people's own biographical experiences, including the needs and/or deficits experienced in childhood). Learning involved also developing the skill of keeping emotional distance and mental equilibrium, which entails also a suitable level of engagement in work, developing respect to oneself and one's practice, independence from others' opinions (independence from value-judgments), searching for effective work-related problem-solving strategies, focusing on them, self-direction, etc.

Even more emphatically than the previous studies, the research showed that professional identity development is not only a cognitive and emotional process, but also a relational one (based on negotiating self-concepts in particular circumstances), which unfolds in the dialogical process of learning. Hence, it is bound up with acquisition of competencies to practise, necessity to be involved in practice, "embedded" understanding, narrative skills, perceiving the space for negotiations, and so-called micro-political skills. The research confirmed also that professional learning importantly involves acquisition of appropriate knowledge and skills required in a given profession, which means that training for the profession is a significant factor in it. However, learning within the profession one performs, which is oriented toward everyday practice and execution of particular tasks, seems even more interesting.

To be able to manage in professional practice, employees learn new things (skills, competencies, etc.). This learning proceeds on both an intentional level and an unintentional one. In this way, the requirement of being able to function suitably in everyday practice is interconnected with the fundamental challenge to professional identity, demonstrating that awareness and experience of everyday practice are determined by personal engagement in a given professional learning situation. A person's identity affects his/her practice perceived as a process of on-going self-construction and learning. The process of learning "in" and "for" the professional role is of dialogical character, with the identity development proceeding in the context of the dialogical self.

In Hubert Herman's concept of dialogical self (2003), professional identity develops both in internal processes as well as in external processes. The former involve various I-positions and the self-changing in time – past, present, future – in relation to changes in life and general development. The latter involve identity changes in relationships with others, e.g. parents, students, colleagues as well as changes of the self in relationship to one's self-concepts, one's professional community, one's course, etc. In other words, the professional identity development is not only vertical, because it is continually constructed anew, but also horizontal (crosswise), because various qualities may emerge within its scope. Every professional enters diverse interpersonal relationships and, consequently, comes to possess varied, qualitatively differing types of identity. Although the situated self-dimensions comply

with meanings conferred upon them by the environment, the self-environment relationship is a bilateral one, and the influences of an individual and his/her environment are mutual and transferable. The dialectical nature of this relationship is even more effectively foregrounded in another concept of learning, i.e. learning in relationship with the totality of societal structures.

### **Learning in the Context of the Societal Macro-Structure**

In the following, I will discuss a very interesting concept of learning in relationships with broader social life processes as put forward by the Danish scholars Henning Salling Olesen and Kirsten Weber of Roskilde University. In their research, they seek to find out how various individuals develop their professional identities based on their own, individual experiences and personal life paths against the backdrop of the social processes of professionalization in their respective occupations. More specifically, they deal with the dialectic relationship between society's requirements and the ways in which they are responded to by subjects entangled in psychodynamic processes which take place in their professional learning. A characteristic feature of this learning is that everyday professional practice is largely bound up with common routine. We could even call it a "learnt" routine, because everyday job performance in conformity with a set of externally established rules is what people need to do daily at workplace. Common to nearly all professions, the imperative of practice makes the sustaining of this routine an actually less passive enterprise than it might perhaps seem: it is more of a permanent, active "editing" of the content of our perceptions and knowledge in accordance with the accepted, viable social practice. Hence, learning in macro-societal structures is in fact the broadest framework or extension of what I describe here as professional learning in relationships. In the perspective of the Danish research, analysis of learning, or non-learning, is essential in general social terms and, as such, it should not be overlooked in my account.

Let me start by emphasising that the formal education system plays a very important role in the personal development processes as well as in social construction of professions and occupations. Academic education and training are equally important for the agents involved in them, because they form a space in which their identities develop, as I have already mentioned citing the Dutch research. The social demand for professionalization entails first of all a certain mandatory set of competencies that practitioners of a given vocation need to master as well as a certain scope of profession-related knowledge they are supposed to acquire. This pertains to many professions and occupations which belong to the human services sector, and in particular to those which involve working in close contact with people, e.g. health care, childcare, social work and education. The curricula structuring the training of future professionals are informed by certain social expectations and convey clearly defined professional roles to be assumed by the students when they

complete their formal education. Individuals who engage with the education process are gradually made aware of them: they learn what is expected of them and what the correct performance of their professional role involves. Frequently, however, on engaging with this process, the individuals activate their prior experiences and emotions bound up with education and professional practice, which may consequently disturb the acquisition and/or development of qualifications, or even effectively interrupt it.

On the one hand, prior experience may support the process of professional development, overlap with and supplement knowledge acquired in formal education, and motivate to continue learning or qualification improvement. On the other hand, however, the already possessed professional knowledge may make an individual believe that what s/he has learnt so far is sufficient. This will work as a potentially powerful de-motivating factor, thwarting further professional development and learning. The subjective experience of discrepancy and inner contradiction of various educational contents might be thus seen as a progress or a regression (Weber, 2010b), depending on how it is defined subjectively and/or collectively. Non-learning or non-participation in a given educational situation (Wenger, 1998) in a way stabilises people performing jobs as practitioners (it sustains their already produced professional identity), but it does not enhance them as professionals. Research insights suggest that their world perception is limited: they fail to discern the complexity of phenomena, which comes to light when they chance upon new knowledge. Even though they successfully complete formal education, are aware of expectations toward their professional role and perform it duly at workplace, they will fail to learn and reconcile contradictions triggered by the new content, ignoring the ambivalences inherent in many professional situations and theoretical knowledge.

Importantly, not all situations which suggest that professional or life experience provides an opportunity for enhancing professional competencies actually offer such an opportunity. If improvement of qualifications does not offer anything beyond instrumental knowledge, the validity and relevance of the qualifying process might easily be contested or discredited. For the bodies involved in devising professional qualification frameworks and designing professional training curricula, it implies that learning or developing the skills of reflection should be part of vocational education. It also implies that the process of qualification acquisition should take into consideration also other dimensions of the educational situation such as embeddedness, perception horizon and social situation of people involved in the process. For the qualification acquisition and/or improvement is predicated upon the subject's prior experiences, which become available only when tested in a social situation. When an individual rejects the definition of a given social role, but for this or that reason still wants to persist in it, s/he may generate an instrumental strategy responding in some degree to the social expectations and, at the same time,

conforming with his/her own concept of the professional role and acceptable within a certain canon of professional practice.

Current research (Weber, 2010b; Hjort, 2000) into educators shows how important it is for subjects to make sense of and properly interpret situations which require learning and/or demand change. At the same time, research outcomes imply that the subjects have low motivation for learning when they perceive their profession as a temporary involvement only. That was also the case when they were convinced that the knowledge they were offered in coursework was of limited applicability in their professional practice. Although they highly assessed formal education, they did not deem it sufficient to provide them with concrete tools of intervention. In the research sample, the subjects did not even try to harmonise the discrepancies between knowledge derived from workplace and knowledge provided by formal education, which attests to their very limited and narrowed professional learning.

On the other hand, it shows also that education fails to provide adequate professional preparation because it does not address the demands posed by the practice of a given profession. Neither does it tie in the knowledge transmitted with individual experience, while the students' motivation for joining the social service sector and for professional identification is empirically diversified and subjectively complex in the process of learning. Social background, cultural or regional differences, gender and generational differences, all of which make up people's habitus, do not determine but may significantly complicate learning in a given situation as well as affect the educational potential of this situation. Empirical analyses of the emotional dimension, such as enthusiasm and criticism displayed by students, form only a surface layer indicative of the complexity of subjective experience, which may lead to reduced engagement with or withdrawal from professional training and, consequently, to non-learning.

If professionalization is perceived as a process dependent also on transformations of the labour market and within professions, it also seems interesting, in the context of learning, to investigate how – influenced by changes and growing social expectations – an individual mediates between subjective experiences, attitudes, anticipated results, representations or dreams about professional future on the one hand, and social pressures emerging in his/her environment on the other. And – how s/he will cope with this challenge, i.e. whether by learning new competencies or, rather, by consolidating the traditional professional identity.

Attempts at capturing the dynamics of the educational system's workings undertaken in reflection on professional learning indicate that the forming of professional identity is more complex than formal education processes or workplace operations. It involves inner interplays between formal education and practice on the one hand, and individual experiences that make up people's life histories on the other. It involves oscillating between recognition of reality and defensive lifelong education as well as daily active functioning called "everyday consciousness"

(Leithauser, 2012) of the role that the subject and life experience play in this process; in other words, it involves balancing between progress and regression.

### **Learning from Life History**

In this theoretical outline, I purposefully distinguish this particular perspective which, in my analysis, corresponds to learning from one's own biography. Although the category of life history is broader than the traditionally understood biography (which I argue below), similarly to biographical learning it comprises the macro-dimension I have already mentioned in the investigation of broader learning processes. I refer to it here also because the Danish scholars I cite apply this perspective in their research analyses.

In their research, they focus on the subject and his/her relationship with the social world, which makes them foreground an individual's general life history as the main point of reference for considering the subjective aspects of learning. Although, as already mentioned, the Danish researchers strongly emphasise biography and use it as an interpretive tool to analyse respondents' narratives, their actual approach is far from standard. In exploring subjectively experienced life as a certain whole, they resort to the notion of life history instead of biography, which rather than providing information about micro-social relations is a form of the subject's self-articulation, one of the ways in which s/he expresses him/herself. Relying on life history, thus, they do not see the subject's narrative self-construction as the only explanation of the subject to such an extent as is the case in the concept of "learning by becoming" through relationship with oneself. They assume that emergent reflection and experience are always immersed in the dynamics of subjective engagement in a practical situation, which is moulded equally by individual life story and by culture. It is in life history that social participation is reintegrated, redefining the constructive subjective effort invested in interpretation of everyday experience in the natural course of life (in the context of one's history) as well as in a broader context of collective experience of culture. All these contexts become important in understanding experience and learning processes, which although always subjectively determined are also always historically (culturally) situated (Salling Olesen, 2007).

Since experience is a condition of individual learning in the dialectical process of being-in-the-world, the Danish researchers suggest that this relation should be applied in the process of vocational experience. Their analyses focus primarily on interpretation of texts that convey a wide spectrum of individuals' actions and seek to understand the dynamics of (re)constructing subjective experience in the societal context, because in keeping with Wittgenstein's language game concept, they views professional knowledge as collectively produced social meanings liable to negotiation and change and always rooted in social practice. They are less

emphatic about the process of production of knowledge in human relations since they believe that knowledge on which professions are based is a kind of language game with the meanings already fixed within it to a large extent.

Individual experiences ensuing from professional practice and/or prior life history are neither communicated in it nor overlap with the dominant language game, but are manifest in the subjects' language. Language use permits an individual to mediate between individual sensual experience and meanings established by participation in a given culture's language games, practically embedded in social interaction. Hence interpretation of particular language use is a key to understanding, a line demarcating the dynamics of everyday meaning-making, of professional discourse and of professional practice.

The alternative of an unlived life, blocked in the course of passing through successive life stages, may now become a resource of knowledge for learning, which goes hand in hand with professional responsibility for formulating and enacting new ideas and goals in professional life. This basic insight – knowledge about the relationship between language use and life experience – can be developed in research on adult learning in general.

The traditional, sociological account of professional identity is founded upon the initial premise that an individual possesses homogeneous and confirmed (certified) basic, utilisable knowledge. The subjective conditioning of professionalization is in turn usually defined in terms of particular professionals' ethics, as a certain narrow group of people – who identify with this basic knowledge and possess similarly advanced competencies – assume responsibility for their own practice and for the practice of those they certify. The difference between the Danish approach and the remaining models lies in that the Danish researchers aim to develop the concept of professional identity which responds to the outcomes of empirical analyses of subjective professional development process in a group of individuals without imposing in advance a normative concept of professional ethics within many professions, including those of the social services sector.

### **Learning as a Dialectical Process**

The holistic perspective on learning in relations assumes that learning always proceeds based on a certain dialectical relationship between an individual and his/her social environment. Among all the concepts of learning in relationships I have outlined so far, it seems the most complex since it comprises many different types of learning (learning in relationship with oneself, learning in relationship with one's own practice, and learning in relationship with the social structure). The multidimensionality of relations is of course difficult to arrange in neat configurations and to describe systematically. At the same time, as the most complex and inclusive concept, it seems also the most interesting one. The perspective coherently reveals

mutual interconnections and relatedness of learning (based on psychodynamic mechanisms) that proceeds in the (critically assessed) individual-society relationship, learning understood as a self-insight (psychoanalysis) in the circumstances of practical interaction, in which various kinds of prior knowledge are confronted and verified, for example, while acquiring competencies at workplace structured by a particular culture of the organisation, the profession, etc.

To describe this concept, I must start from the assumption that professionals are as a rule conscious of the limits to their professional knowledge and competencies, and their sensibility relies on the more or less pronounced idea of their professional mission, i.e. on the socially sustained conviction that they are capable of performing rational and useful work. Still, everyday tasks and experiences, with their inherent meanings, which might be sometimes impenetrable to the individual practitioner, are not always fully communicable in the legitimate discourse of knowledge. In the professional monopoly of work-related knowledge, one's own discourse serves as a defensive measure, providing definitions of observable problems which make those problems comprehensible and solvable. On the one hand, this component of defence helps professionals stabilise their sense of having a certain practice even when they operate in conditions adverse and harmful to them. On the other hand, it implies that professionals attempt to adapt to requirements and learn, expressing in this way their willingness to take up a challenge and assume responsibility for a particular task. This psychodynamic process of alternating defence and identification may originate in conflicts one experiences in relation to professional ideas and challenges at workplace, but it may as well be bound up with one's prior life experiences.

The two Danish researchers focus on disturbances or interruptions that occur at the interface of the cognitive and emotional aspects of individual experience constructed in the course of social life and constituting, in their opinion, the source of lifelong professional learning. Their notions are informed by the idea that our perception is largely formed by prior experiences which combine emotional and cognitive dimensions, making up preconditions of understanding current situations. In turn, all meanings produced by the experiencing subject, emotions stirred by the current situation and self-perception as well as perception of the situation itself are always embedded in practical interaction.

Psychoanalytical interpretations help the Danish researchers understand the subject's individual responses and awareness. Yet the central aim of their research is to identify the common articulation of social and cultural reality. Analyses of learning within profession are effective here because, as the researchers believe (Salling Olesen, Weber, 2001), subjective engagement in work performance is not individual, actually, but social. They assume also that culture unfolds in the socially expressed meanings and symbols, which are as if attributed to the artefacts produced and then stabilised in social institutions. However, cultural meanings, which are re-made largely in unconscious modifications, may be reproduced only when they are

utilised by subjects. Thus, seeking to theorise the process of learning in its societal context, they draw on the concept of subjectivity embedded in a certain social structure interpreted in the framework of critical theory as proposed by Theodore Adorno and developed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (Negt, Kluge, 1993).

For them, subjectivity does not entail examining individuals as such. Neither do they focus on unravelling everyday realities in individual life courses. Instead, they are interested in a particular moment, in an individual's perspective as related (or opposed) to the social perspective, since they are convinced that the professionalization process proceeds in both directions (social and individual) and is dynamically dialectical.

This kind of approach seeks to go beyond contemporary theories of learning, in which learning is either participation in practice or construction of new knowledge. Even though such ideas open up possibilities of theorising learning, these approaches, according to the Danish scholars, tend to reproduce the old dichotomies: participation gravitates more or less explicitly toward adaptation, and the construction process narrows down to acts of cognition. Hence, they approach learning dialectically, viewing it as a general self-insight and acquisition of self-regulation capacity, that is subjective ability to build a realistic and effective relation to the real world.

One of theoretical models they have devised (Salling Olesen, 2007) suggests that individual experience, which contains learning and defensive reactions, may be seen as an outcome of mediation among three independent kinds of dynamics: the social context of the structure of work, the fundamental professional knowledge and the individual and collective subjectivities produced in a given profession.

Their theoretical and empirical interpretations draw also on psychoanalysis and Karl Marx's theories. Psychoanalysis provides individual, psychological explanations of subjectivity, while the idea of the social division of work, derived from Marx, helps conceptualise the notion of profession in modernist terms and include the social macro-structure dimension in analyses. Their studies on educators in the context of academic training (Weber, 2010b; Hjort, 2000), which I have already mentioned, show how positive emotions which emerge from prior successful learning-, teaching- and education experiences may hamper further professional learning. If one defines oneself as already competent in educating and teaching, one might forego opening to new knowledge, perceiving it as personally useless. Adult learning is essentially predicated upon the inner sense of discrepancy and tension between social expectations and individual knowledge and attitudes.

Other research<sup>2</sup> (Weber, 2010a) involving a group social educators highlights the role and relevance of learning-related negative emotions which emerge as a result of experiencing social status differences within the learner group. Negative

<sup>2</sup> The research was discussed by Professor H. Salling Olesen from Roskilde University, Denmark, during a seminar from the "Drogi Edukacji" ("Ways of Education") cycle organised by Ph.D. students of the Faculty of Education, University of Lower Silesia, Wrocław.

reactions to other course participants' social problems were triggered partly by the necessity to recognise less educated peers as professionals and partly by the paradoxical situation adults find themselves in on engaging with the formal education system (e.g. infantilisation and instrumentalisation). In this particular case, the education course participants were people marginalised in and excluded from traditional education; the social status of adult learners and external administrative regulation of the teaching profession (compulsory formal qualifications) produced a motivational conflict which concerned enrolment in qualifying education courses and was expressed in tensions and aggression.

Summing up, the Danish researchers' analyses illuminate learning by exposing complexities inherent in becoming a professional and insisting on inclusion in vocational education of emotions, biographical experiences, situational contexts and individual life situations, that is spheres which so far have frequently been neglected in learning processes. They also reveal the interplay of socio-cultural and individual (emotional) factors.

## Conclusion

Whether we focus on professionals (and their identities) or whether we study the process of learning, we always explore also the social nature of knowledge and conditions of its production and acquisition, because learning professionals are individuals who "embody" this dynamics (Salling Olesen, 2005). If professionalization processes, still including collective experience and practice, are conceived in such extended terms, learning employees may become key factors in improving the quality of service provision in some sectors (e.g. education, health care, day-care, counselling, etc.), contribute to democratisation of knowledge and affect equal distribution of control in society. The selected research and theoretical concepts discussed here approach learning in relationships as "learning through experiencing." In a way, it is learning from experience that can expose our earlier education. However, such learning much more frequently requires re-orientation and revision of the previously acquired knowledge and the initially developed understanding of the world. Each professional can learn in his/her professional practice, increasing thereby his/her individual professional performance capacity and gaining a general insight into his/her life. Analogically, knowledge derived from prior experiences will always affect professional training in an educational institution.

Formal education and practice are subjectively important spheres of experience. Professionals' identification with some well-defined academic knowledge and practical experience shows how the socially constructed discourse of professionalism may constitute subjects and their learning at workplace. As a result, professional identity is a subjective endeavour of lifelong learning and identification, which enable individuals, equipped with their subjective life histories, to fulfil properly

tasks already in place and to create their own professional practice and identity by somewhat expanding or altering the existing knowledge (Salling Olesen, 2001). In this perspective, professional identity combines the effort invested in learning (becoming a professional) and inner struggles and tensions generated by requirements bound up with professional performance integrated with one's own life experience. The final outcomes of this process can never be established in advance since it involves such factors as incapacity and inability to perform a particular task and the pressure to cope with doubts in ceaseless defence of one's subjectivity and learning. Indeed, this is the logic of our being-in-the-world: situated in a particular socio-cultural context, we are acting individuals who want to make sense of it in our own subjective ways. In this way, learning, similarly to identity, delineates the horizon of our being-in-the-world.

Professional learning always proceeds in relation to the environment and its expectations, which individuals need to respond to competently, as well as in relation with social macrostructures, when individuals reproduce or change the dominant discourse within a given profession. Hence, research into professional learning must go beyond formal education or workplace contexts and look into the totality of the dynamics in the individual-society interactions.

On the other hand, if processes unfolding at workplace or in society as such are not taken into account, it seems impossible to understand professional identity from an individual's point of view. Becoming a professional is a process in which learning the professional role in the socio-cultural environment and constructing professional identity take place in interactions with others. This "becoming" is understood as a permanent re-construction (triggered by new information) of one's professional identity and knowledge built on the basis of prior experiences. As years go by, the developments in an individual's life and in the discourse on professionalism are affected by economy, culture or changes in administration.

For example, current professionalization processes in the social services sector head toward ever greater mediation of relations, with new procedures being constantly introduced and the access to the professions growing more and more restricted. On the one hand, this may contribute to the improvement of standards and quality of service provision, but on the other it prioritises technical rationality in designing the services by introducing the so-called "culture of audit". This goes hand in hand with the imperative of certifying professional competencies while the very professions are specific in that they are based on human relationships. Those who merely possess technical knowledge are not and do not become professionals as professional work, in particular work that involves serving other people (e.g. medicine, education, counselling or social work), increasingly clearly requires so-called soft competencies, such as caring, empathy, communicative competence or – described in this article – the tact of teaching, practical wisdom and networking skills. Therefore, the dynamics of transformations in professionalism should work

also in the other direction, which may mean that expertisation of some professions should change and be socially redefined at least in terms of required competencies.

(Translated from Polish by Patrycja Poniadowska)

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