

## Low skilled work, Work Life experiences and Learner identity

Kondrup, Sissel

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# Working Life and Learning

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Sissel Kondrup, PhD student,  
Graduate School in Lifelong Learning  
Institute for Psychology and Educational Science  
Roskilde University, Denmark

## Low skilled work, Work Life experiences and Learner identity

The paper builds on my ongoing PhD project. The overall research question forming my dissertation is: What challenges the fulfilment of the Danish national strategy on 'Lifelong Learning and Qualification for All'? In developing my research questions and design I have been inspired by amongst other Fejes' (2006) findings that the discourse on lifelong learning demands everyone to position themselves as lifelong learners and individualize the responsibility for lifelong learning, and Paldanius' (2002) conclusion that the politics on lifelong learning is based on an educational optimism not necessarily shared by the target groups. I therefore want to examine how an unskilled work life<sup>1</sup> conditions the experience of a need for and possibility to participate in different kind of formal, informal and non-formal learning activities related to the job, and how this constitutes a certain learner identity. By conducting narrative interviews with 23 employees in 6 different small and medium sized private manufacturing companies in Denmark, I have focused on peoples work life stories, how they entered the labour market, what kind of jobs and tasks they have undertaken, how their jobs have developed and how they have obtained the skills required in their jobs. I have thus examined the specific work life experiences of people working in unskilled jobs, most likely to be marginalised in a labour market characterised by skill bias, and how these experiences constitutes a certain learner identity, understood as orientation towards participation in different kind of learning activities. This use of a concept of learner identity is inspired by Antikainens (2005) research based on symbolic interaktionisme focusing on the importance of significant others. But during my research I have found the need to broaden the concept to be able to capture and understand the experiences of the unskilled work as harmful and threatening for the physical and mental wellbeing, the significance of the experiences of one's own capacity to do a 'good job', and how to build this capacity, and how the formulation of a demand for participation in formal vocational education and training always takes place in a specific societal, social and historical context characterised by

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<sup>1</sup> Work with no requirements for vocational education.

ambitendencies, with certain conditions for and consequences of the choice not of the employees own making.

## Lifelong learning as a requisite for welfare

The curiosity forming my research interest was a wandering about why people in the most vulnerable positions in the Danish labour market are less likely than others to participate in adult education and training, and thereby develop qualifications securing their future employability in a labour market, characterised by skill-bias, a decrease in jobs demanding low levels of qualifications and an increasing demand for higher qualified labour. In Denmark these tendencies has been documented in details by the research groups providing the foundation for the three partite committee on Adult Vocational Education formed in 2004 (Trepartsudvalget 2006). The same cross-national tendencies are documented in international research on the distribution of Adult Education and Training i.e. in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), The Adult Literacy and Life skills Survey (ALLS) and Eurobarometer on lifelong learning (Bélanger og Tuijnman 1997, Desjardins et al 2006, Boeren et al 2010)

The emphasis on lifelong learning may be seen in the context of the development of a knowledge economy or a learning society, where learning and development of new qualification is the mean for maintaining and developing individual and societal welfare and wealth (Field 2006). As learning becomes the vehicle of welfare and prosperity the access to learning becomes crucial for economic and social inclusion (Desjardins et al 2006:19). Whether the knowledge economy and learning society are facts or phantasms constructed to legitimize certain political decisions is not a discussion I will engage in here. The point to be made is that if we accept the renewal and development of qualifications as the foundation of societal and individual welfare the access to learning activities and the distribution of education and training becomes crucial.

The increased value ascribed to education in order to meet societal changes and challenges is a international 'hyper-trend', and cross-national organizations plays a major role in defining and promoting the concept of Lifelong learning and education (Biesta 2006, Field 2006, Rubenson 2004, Rubenson and Salling Olesen 2007). I do not intend to discuss the development in the international discourse or the relation between transnational strategies promoted by UNESCO, OECD and EU and the national strategies, but just shortly refer that the trend in the political discourse is that lifelong learning is perceived as the main mean in developing competitive knowledge economies, that everybody today is perceived as educable subjects (Fejes 2006) obliged to take responsibility for keeping up with the demands of the global economy (Biesta 2006) and low knowledge-skilled learners are not only constructed as at risk but also the risk in the knowledge society (Brine 2006).

In Denmark the promotion of lifelong learning is embraced of both government and the social partners (Jørgensen and Warring 2006:186), thus education and training is a central theme in the labour market agreements (Due et al 2004) and in 2007 the government formulated a national strategy for lifelong learning and qualification for all, as a part of the ratification of the Lisbon declaration. The significance of learning and education for securing future welfare can also be seen in the conceptual change in relation to the Danish labour market model. The praised Danish model of *flexicurity* is changing in to a model of *mobication*. The first defines a labour market model combining flexibility and security; the state provides income security during unemployment in order to make workers accept low job security and hereby promote the flexibility of labour. The new model combines mobility and education; employees should

obtain employment security by developing qualifications demanded by the labour market enabling them to move between jobs when demand for labour changes. Education becomes the mean to generate a dynamic labour market and obtain employment (Andersen and Pedersen 2010). A lot could be said about this shift from flexicurity to mobication and its implication<sup>2</sup>, but it is not the purpose of this paper. I choose the example to show how the importance of lifelong learning and education manifests across policy sectors in Denmark, becoming a central issue in both educational, labour market and social policies.

Even though education and training is defined as the key to employability and hereby to societal integration in a realm where wage labour is crucial for individual and societal reproduction and identity formation and recognition, currently lifelong learning is contributing to the social stratification (Field 2006). The distribution of learning possibilities both when it comes to formal and non-formal learning is characterized by a Matthew effect. It is well documented that the chances for participation in formal adult education and training is dependent of the long arm of the family, the long arm of the job and the long arm of welfare system (Desjardins et al 2006, Boeren et al 2010), and also the chances for engaging in non-formal learning activities is dependent on peoples position in the labour market (Desjardins et al 2006, Illeris 2004).

### Understanding patterns of participation

The emphasis on lifelong learning as a mean to economical and social integration and the enhanced public expenses used on adult education and training has increased the interest among policymakers and researchers on how to legitimize the investments by documenting the individual and societal benefits and in how to ensure an efficient use of the resources (Desjardins 2009). It has become a central issue how to increase the participation in adult education and training. Internationally this has been a core interest of the previous mentioned surveys. Their purpose has been to explore; who participates in what kind of adult education to what extent in order to determine what influences peoples chances to participate, (Desjardins et al 2006, Boeren et al 2010).

Both the international comparative data on participation in adult education and the dominant theoretical perspectives within economics of education and adult education have been dominated by individualistic approaches, with severe consequences for how the inequality in participation patterns are understood and for how the obstacles in supporting lifelong learning for all are addressed (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007). The international surveys concentrate on the situational and institutional obstacles, downplaying the psychological attitudinal hurdles, and hereby overlooking how the former kind of obstacles can be seen as an expression for the value people ascribe to education and training (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007: 7). Referring to Field Rubenson and Salling-Olesen emphasize the need to evaluate the subjective perspective of learners in order to understand why non-participation can be seen as rational or positive (see also Paldanius 2002). Theoretically research on participation has been informed by social-psychology in order to understand what motivates people to participate in education and training. Cross' theory of Chain-of-Response has played a central role, defining participation as dependent on dispositional, situational and structural barriers, but it fails to address how the main constructs in the model relates to and interact with broader structural and cultural contexts (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:12). Human capital theory dominating in economics of education, explain participation as an effect of decisions based on rational (more or less bounded) cost-benefit analysis of the value of engaging in education and training. Thus

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Desjardins 2009

reducing the explanation of social phenomenon to individual behaviour, and thereby ignoring the matter of social structures on both micro and macro level (Rubenson and Salling Olesen 2007). Neither one of the perspectives unfold how participation in learning plays a role in peoples life history (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:12).

The dominant approaches to explain participation in adult education and training can be defined as a taking a hindrance/barrier perspective, where people are seen as having an inner motivation to learn, which can be blocked by certain hindrances and barriers (Ahl 2004), but this assumption of an inherent interest for formal education and training has been questioned and problematised (Paldanius 2002, Ahl 2004, 2006). It presupposes that the question of what motivates people is meaningful to the informants and that motivation is an individual attribution which can be understood out of context. Evidence about participation resting on survey data, gives little or no knowledge of the consequences or meaning of participation (Field 2006:130). In order to understand how people perceive the meaning of formal adult education and training, and the need and possibility of participation a qualitative approach may be applied.

Our way of defining the question of participation and motivation is not neutral (Ahl 2006). Based on an analysis of theories of motivation, Ahl shows how the concepts of motivation are developed in order to shape and control the conduct of those who should be motivated. Why motivation, instead of an individual attribute, may be understood as a theoretical construction developed to control human behaviour; *'a euphemism for direction and control'* (Ahl 2006: 402). Ahl's analysis illuminates how the definition of motivation condition the perception of the target groups of educational policies and strategies, and at the same time hides the power relations between those in position to formulate problems and concepts and those defined by it. This analysis conducted by Helene Ahl can be seen as an example of the post structuralistic 'turn' in research of adult learning and education, bringing the relation between research, knowledge, policy discourse, distribution of power and inclusion/exclusion of certain perspective and subject positions to the centre of concern. By illuminating how our concepts in research and policy, not neutral or natural but results of a specific historical development, determines what counts as legitimate positions and knowledge, it has contributed the field of critical research in adult education and training. But pointing to the social construction of legitimate subject positions (Fejes 2006) the post structural accounts leaves the question of why some people and groups are more likely to position themselves as what Fejes (2006) defines as *'adult educable subjects'* than others open. It is my ambition during my project to examine how the unskilled work life can be understood as a specific learning context with specific conditions for experience building conditioning the way workers engage in lifelong learning.

## Understanding the meaning of lifelong learning

By applying a life history approach it is possible to widening the understanding of participation and illuminate *"the interplay between participation, structural factors, institutional settings and life history understandings of motives for learning"* (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:2). Rubenson and Salling-Olesen argue for an approach where individuals have a degree of agency in their learning behaviour *"but this is always bounded by structures and contexts and by features of the self that constrain choices. These structures and contexts are always mediated by the subjective understanding and interpretations by the individual"* (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:12). In this perspective *"practice is always embedded in a complex of individual life experience, cultural framework of interpretation and conscious as well as unconscious life prospects"* (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:12). They argue that learning attitudes must

be seen as a part of a dialectic identity process, conditioned by earlier experiences and the historical and societal specific context, where motivation to participate and the direction and content of learning results *“from changes in everyday life and are mediated by collective cultural orientations and norms, discourses, and elements or structure including authority and power, which moderate access to and distribution of resources and learning opportunities”* (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:13). The dialectical concept of identity stems from the critical theory developed in the Frankfurt School, where consciousness is seen as produced by and presupposed in social practice; *“Consciousness is being produced as well as presupposed in social practice of everyday life, which means it is a situated and embodied experience, but also that it is structurally determined as societal history (in this case by the development of societal labour)”* (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:14).

According to my previous comment on the limitations of post structural analysis when wanting to understand participation in lifelong learning, I will apply an approach, inspired by critical theory rooted in the traditions from the Frankfurt School, enabling me to grasp the dialectic nature of *identity* and *learning attitudes*. I thus agree with the statement made by Rubenson and Salling-Olesen, on the challenge for critical research; *“concerned adult educators have to go further than just provide critical discourse analyses. What is called for is the construction of understandings of participation that can inform a counter hegemonic struggle aimed at affecting policies on lifelong learning for all”* (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007:1). By departing in the concept of work life experiences outlined by Rubenson and Salling-Olesen I understand subjectivity and what Antikainen defines as *learner identity* (Antikainen 2005) as constructed in a dialectic relation between a the subject and the societal, historical work life forming the horizon for their possible experiences of need and possibility to engage in learning activities. Antikainen applies a concept of learner identity borrowed from Weil, defining learner identity as the value and belief ascribed to different kind of learning activities and their outcome; *“Learner identity suggests the emergence or affirmation of values and beliefs about ‘learning,’ ‘schooling’ and ‘knowledge”* (Weil quoted in Antikainen 2005:7). This has lead me to the following research question; how does work life experiences influences the formation of a learner identity, defined as the way people perceive participation in different kind of learning activities? In order to grasp the complexity of unskilled work as the context for the development of a learner identity, I have been inspired by Archers stratified concept of reality. She illuminates how identity formation takes place in the involvement in a situation causing emotions connected to our concerns on three different levels; the natural level referring to the bodily being of humans, the practical level referring to our necessary engagement with material culture and the social level referring to the fact that our actions always will be judged according to the contemporary set of social norms (Archer 2000). In order to cope with the complex and sometimes antagonistic concerns people has to developing a modus vivendi prioritising what is their ultimate concern. To understand why people develop a certain learner identity it is necessary to examine how the experiences from an unskilled work life form specific concerns, and how participation in different kind of learning activities is perceived as a mean to realise the workers modus vivendi.

So in order to answer the research question; What challenge the fulfilment of the Danish national strategy on ‘Lifelong Learning and Qualification for All’? With a specific focus on people working in low skilled jobs in SMEs. I will examine how the work life experiences from a career in low skilled work constitute certain conditions for developing the kind of learner identity demanded by the strategy of lifelong learning for all, where everybody is subjected as educable subjects obliged to sustain their employability by lifelong learning and upgrading.

In the remaining part of this paper I will concentrate on one of the work life histories I gathered as a part of my project, and what preliminary conclusions it leads me to.

### The work life story of Marie

Marie is a 50 year old woman. She has been working in factories the last 30 as an unskilled worker primary packing the products. She tells how she ended up in the occupation by accident. After leaving school she worked one year as domestic help trying to figure out what to do in her life. When the year ended she got a job for the summer working in a factory packing the product, she tells, *"when you are the vacation replacement, you do not think that much about it. It was just for a period, you think you should pursue something. I just did not know what that something should be, right"*. When the job ended she still didn't know what to do and when meeting the man, later to become her husband, she got a job at his workplace where they needed employees. Her job consisted of packing and occasionally driving a forklift truck; *"I just couldn't figure out where to start. Then I meet John, he worked at [a food factory], they needed someone for a shorter period of time, and well, then you start to earn good money, so I just never get started on anything"*. Marie kept working in the factory for 21 years.

During the story, Marie tells that she always has wanted to work with people, and that the dream maybe has been strengthen by the fact that factory work is hard and straining. When the company laid off the workers, moving the production to the other end of the country, Marie and her colleagues were offered the opportunity to get vocational education during the resignation period. And she grasped the chance to realise the dream of changing trade. She started in vocational training to become a dental assistant but when the first school term ended she and the majority of her class couldn't get an apprenticeship. Instead she returned to the company for the remaining period of resignation. A week before the company closed down Marie got a job in another factory, producing plastic packaging. Marie starts work in the section printing the packaging. Her job consisted in loading the machines, refilling the ink and controlling the quality of the print. The division of labour between the industrial operators and the staff packing was clear, but Marie tells how she over time obtained some kind of familiarity with the machines making it possible for her to correct minor errors and keeping the production running, and how this contributed to her work satisfaction; *"there was a difference, some people wants to keep it running. I am probably the generation, when I am there, I want to do something, make it work, try to do something on my own. I never stood behind the door, always been open to new challenges, right. You could say, the more you are able to do, the more exiting it gets, and, well, I can sort out this out myself, instead of calling a technician"*. At a time the company decided to up skill some of the staff packing to be more involved in operation the machines, she tells that the production is to limited to offer full skilling to become an industrial operator, instead Marie and a few colleagues attended a one week course but afterwards the work was too busy, so they newer transformed the theoretical knowledge obtained at the course in practice, which she regrets.

When Marie started in the company it was owed by a pharmaceutical company, who were one of their main purchasers, at that time more than 200 peoples were employed in the company. But after some years the company was sold to two private owners, and since then there has been a severe decrease in production and staff. Today the printing section is closed almost down, only employing two workers. Marie has been transferred to the production, where they are 10 workers left, one part time electrician, three industrial operators and six employees packing the products. The work is organized in tree-shift patterns, from Monday morning until Saturday, with three and sometimes only two workers on the shift. Marie

works shifting hours one week day, one week night and one week evening, which entails that she is constantly adjusting her circadian rhythm. She tells how exhausting it is to constantly adapt the body and eat and sleep at changing hours, and how the shifting hours are limiting her opportunities to participate in leisure activities. Marie tells that an active private life is important to her and her husband, friends, family, sports and cultural activities like going to the movie or the theatre is crucial for her life quality. She also spends a lot of time working for the local labour union. She explicitly mentions that life is more than work and television, why she find it depressing that the hard factory work and the three-shift work constrains her possibility to live out an active life.

The development in the business has implied a change in the customer base. The pharmaceutical company and the other major costumers have found other providers, primarily foreign companies in low cost countries, and the remaining costumers are primarily placing minor orders. This has increased the uncertainty. Marie tells that that when finishing the orders to be delivered the next week she doesn't know if there will be any new orders. The economic situation of the workplace is critical, sometimes they have to stop the production due to of lack of supplies and sometimes they run out of coffee; *"But, the most frustration part is, we don't know anything, really. Our economy is not really good. Sometimes we need supplies. Sometimes we also need coffee beans. I know coffee beans are just a minor issue, right. But it can be frustrating. And when you don't know anything. When you by the end of the month are wondering if the pay check is coming, and there is no money to maintain the machinery either"*. Marie tells how the bad economic situation and the reduction of staff only leaving just enough employees to keep the production going implies that the employees have to make an extra effort. If they call in sick it will cause an extra work load to the remaining colleague, cause a reduction in productivity risk to delay the order and displeasing costumers. And sometimes they have to come in during time off to get the orders done in time. Marie tells that the uncertainty means that she has to take one day or one week at a time, but it sometimes can be difficult to be optimistic. She tells how the uncertainty produces a bad atmosphere between the workers and a lot of gossip at the workplace and in town. She therefore requests the managers to be more informative since it is obvious for everybody that the situation is critical. She is kind of convinced it is only a matter of time before the job will disappear, she hopes for the best, but says that it is up hill at the moment, and ends up concluding that it at least is important to be able to say that she did what she could to maintain her job; *"I don't know, and again. I take one week at a time. Well, if it closes, it closes. Then you can only say; I tried to do what I could. I've started it when it stopped and was flexible"*.

Marie tells that most of her dismissed colleagues are unemployed. There has been a major decrease in especially unskilled jobs in the area, and she sees the possibility for up skilling to another trade as limited, and even if there is a chance for retraining it will not necessarily lead to employment. Marie tells that if the company close down she might try to realise the dream of working with people by becoming a health care worker, but she worries if she will be able to get a job and if she can meet the demands caused by stressful working conditions in the nursing sector.

Marie tells how overwhelming it is to be a newcomer in a factory, before getting the routine and the familiarity with the pace of the machines the workload seems incessant. Over time you obtain the necessary sense of the work enabling you to keep abreast. Until then you have to compensate for the lack of routine by running between the machines. She tells that one of the important skills is to keep abreast of the work, avoiding the extra worked caused when the you don't change the cardboard boxes in time and by



thinking ahead and ... She tells that the skill comes from life experience, it's the same experience she use in the house work, because it's too late to do the laundry when you are out of clean close. She tells that some people will never learn it because they just aren't minded to work in a factory. Marie tells that they don't use substitutes in the factory because it would do more harm than good to bring in someone not familiar with the work, so even though the work doesn't require any formal qualification, it take some routine to become skilled.

Marie tells that the colleagues try to minimize the strain of the work by taking turns at the different machines, since some are better, in al slower pace than others. She also tells that it is crucial that the quality of the work is obtained. If there someone sent on defected products, it will create unnecessary extra work for the colleague next in line, or causing trouble for the users of the product.

The social environment at the work is important to Marie and she appreciates a good relationship to her colleagues. But she tells how the current work place is definitely not a social workplace, most people mind their own business and the development in the workplace makes it difficult for the colleagues to interact while working, since they work in opposite ends of the floor. She also reports a history of an adverse culture in the factory where some of the workers are self-centred taking all the good cardboards for themselves, leaving the defect ones for their colleagues, sending defect products from the production to the printing section, or avoiding performing the common task of emptying the containers when full, by hiding their rubbish back until someone else has done the work. She said that this has inflicted on the reputation of the company, while people in town say it is the last place they would want to work. Marie tells have she has come to terms with this, no other job opportunities around, and the factory placed just around the corner from her home.

### **Preliminary findings**

The story of Marie shows how the experience from an unskilled work life leads to diverse and contradictory concerns. It also shows how the formation of a learner identity is closely related to a modus vivendi, the attempt to form liveable balance between the concerns, in a situation not of her own making, and how this process is full of ambivalences leading to severe frustrations, as a result of having to form a liveable balance in an unbearable situation only left to choose between adverse alternatives.

Some of the concerns stems from the experience of the physical consequences of the heavy work and the shifting hours. These imply a prevailing concern of degeneration, and how to protect oneself from the straining elements of the work. It also indicate an incompatibility between the exhausting three-shift work and her desire of living an active private life, causing frustration saying it can't be right that life is no more than working, eating, sleeping.

Other concerns stems from the experience of what contribute to a satisfying work life. For Marie work satisfaction is associated with; conduction a good job and being sure the quality of the products is good; being able to fix minor problems herself, beyond her formal tasks and good relationships to colleagues.

A third source of concerns is related to the importance of retaining employment. With an extensive reduction in the amount of low skilled job in the local and regional labour market and hereby a minor chance for alternative employment if the current workplace closes down, it becomes essential to sustain the current job in order to stay employed. So the absence of alternative job openings and the doubt that

even retraining will lead to employment, causes her to fight to sustain her current job, even though it forces her to compromise almost all other concerns.

The critical economic situation of the workplace is a source of uncertainty and oppressive atmosphere amongst the employees. Marie reports how it enforces her to live one day at a time, and to do everything she can to keep the production going...

The ultimate concern about sustaining the workplace in order to retain employment has consequences for her experience of the need and possibility to participate in learning activities, and hereby for her development of a learner identity.

The limited need of qualifications in the current job make the possibility to participate in different form of learning activities in relation to the job irrelevant. The work conditions with only enough employees to keep the production going preclude the possibility of participating in formal education during work hours and the shifting hours makes it almost impossible for her to attend education in her spare time. It's a general experience in many of the conducted interviews, that the possibility to participate in formal education is quite limited working in a small company. Especially during the last decade the increased economic pressure and international competition from low wage countries has resulted in a reduction of employees, leaving only just enough employees necessary to keep the production going. Absence resulting from sickness or education will imply a risk of reducing or even stop the production, exceeding the schedule and dissatisfy the remaining costumers. So claiming ones contractual rights for formal education will undermine the possibility to keep the current job.

Finally the work life story of Marie shows, how the experience of inability to influence her situation in any pivotal way has major personal effect. She can make sure the orders are done in time, but she can do nothing to increase the demand for the products and for her labour. Perceiving the factors determining the fulfilment of her ultimate concern (future employment) out of reach and therefore being unable to influence and control the circumstances in any critical way, results in feelings of powerlessness, frustration and even despair.

According to the work life experiences of Marie and her current situation the position of being a lifelong learner, taking responsibility for her own learning will not be the mean to fulfil her ultimate concerns, actually an insistence on her formal rights to education could undermine her possibility of staying employed.

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