Unskilled work and learner identity

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UNSKILLED WORK AND LEARNER IDENTITY

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Abstract

The main argument in this paper is: In order to comprehend the 'invisible' conditions for forming motivation to participate in different kinds of learning activities (formal, non-formal and informal) in relation to work-life it is crucial to develop a dialectic concept of *learner identity*. A concept enabling researcher in the field of work and learning to examine how the orientation toward learning activities are situated in and conditioned by specific work-life experiences.
Based on a qualitative research-project (Kondrup 2012) the paper outlines how unskilled work forms a specific condition for engaging in learning. The aim of the project was to examine the challenges in order to fulfil the Danish national strategy on Lifelong learning and training for all. Danish as well as international research reveals that low skilled workers and workers in small and medium sized private companies tend to be least likely to participate in VET, and the long arm of education has significant influence on how people perceive adult education.. The aim of the project was to examine how an unskilled work-life present certain conditions for the formation, maintenance and transformation of a learner identity, enabling workers to position themselves as educable subjects, as demanded by the strategy on lifelong learning.

The Obligation to be Educable, Motivated and Engaged in Lifelong Learning

It is a widespread consensus amongst politicians and researchers, that lifelong learning and training is a prerequisite for the transformation from industrial to knowledge-based societies (Brine 2006, Biesta 2006), and for the development of a competitive economy that promotes both individual and societal prosperity and welfare. The requirement for continuing learning is substantiated by intensified global competition, demographical and technological change, industrial transformation and new forms of organisations, increasing the demand for (formally) qualified labour (Bélanger & Tuijnman 1997). The pace of change means that the value of knowledge and skills is temporary - they quickly become obsolete. Therefore qualification through education no longer can be isolated to particular life-phases, childhood and youth, rather it becomes an on-going demand throughout life. It also implies that everybody should engage in lifelong learning, not just a minority of skilled workers or specialists, but the whole workforce (Field 2006). I am referring to a widespread but not absolute consensus. There are a growing number of exceptions: researchers pointing to underemployment (e.g. Livingstone 2000) and questioning the presumption that an increased level of formal education will increase the supply of high skilled jobs (e.g. Brown 2003). But even though contested, the educational optimism, proclaiming education to be the locus for future welfare and prosperity forms the hegemonic consensus in both national and transnational policy documents and most research on lifelong learning (Desjardins 2009).

The discourse forming international and Danish policies on lifelong learning positions everybody as educable subjects (Fejes 2006) obliged to engage in formal learning in order to develop formal qualifications to remain employable (Kondrup 2012). People

not participating are defined as a double risk. They risk being marginalised in a labour market with an increased demand for formal qualifications and they become a societal liability for the development of a competitive knowledge economy (Brine 2006:657).

Regardless of whether lifelong learning is considered a reality or a political vision it is a politicum. The way it is conceptualised and the way the challenges it has to overcome are defined constitute what become possible answers and solutions (Salling-Olesen 2002). Through her analysis of the concept of motivation applied in research on adult education, the Swedish social scientist Helene Ahl reveals a tendency to a) formulate the problem of non-participation as a question of lack of motivation, b) to define motivation as an individual attribute and to 3) apply a concept of motivation originally developed to discipline workers, increase productivity and prevent labour resistance (Ahl 2006). This way of conceptualising the problem has certain (problematic) implications: When defining motivation as an individual attribute, lack of motivation can be resolved by individual approaches or techniques such as therapy. And by individualising motivation, the responsibility for a well-functioning society is placed on the individual instead of the societal institutions and structures the individual becomes both the reason for and the answer to the problem. And at last the way of defining motivation has a tendency to disguise the power relations and the fact that motivation is a relational phenomenon: lack of motivation is a problem only when somebody does not act the way somebody else wants them to. By focusing on those defined as not being motivated there is a tendency to overlook those in positions to define the problem (Ahl 2006). The discourse forming the policies and the research in the field is not innocuous. It defines what kind of knowledge and skills are considered valuable and who is perceived as educable subjects, just as it defines who has the responsibility to ensure the necessary learning to take place.

Participations in VET – A Research Field

The consensus that everybody must engage in lifelong learning and training has fostered an interest in examining the distribution of adult education and training and for explaining different patterns of participation (Boeren et al 2010, Desjardins et al 2006), especially why groups most at risk – people working in unskilled and low skilled jobs – tend to be least likely to participate.

Within research on participation in adult education several different traditions can be identified (Rubenson 2011). One tradition builds on the ambition of developing heuristic models for understanding participation as an interaction between specific subjects and their context. Two of the significant contributions within this tradition, prevalent in current research, are Cross' *Chain-response-model* and Rubenson's *Expectancy-valence-model* (e.g. Boeren et al 2010, Hefler 2010). Both illustrate that motivation and attitudes towards adult education are situated and that participation is a result of interactions between the individual and his or her specific context (Rubenson 2011). But even though they emphasise the situated conditions for developing attitudes, forming motivation and for participation they tend to overlook how peoples' self-perception and their current situation are situated in a broader societal context (Rubenson and Salling-Olesen 2007).

Another tradition is preoccupied with how participation and non-participation can be understood from the perspective of different target groups. The arguments forming this tradition posits that orientations toward adult education and training must be

researched as an element in specific life-histories or biographies, where certain habitual dispositions (Paldanius 2002, Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004) significant learning activities (Antikainen 2006) and changing value contexts (Lynch 2008) constitutes how people perceive adult education.

While pointing to the necessity of understanding participation as a result of the interaction between a specific subject and their situation, and to the importance of understanding the meaning of education from the perspective of the target-group, neither of the referred approaches has explicitly addressed how work and especially unskilled work pose specific conditions for the formation, maintenance or transformation of a learner identity and for meeting the demand for positioning one's self as an educable subject. Furthermore the approaches tend to overlook the ambiguity and potential conflicts both in peoples' experiences and in their actual situation.

Learner Identity
To examine how unskilled work forms certain 'invisible' conditions for workers to meet the obligation to position themselves as educable subjects and engage in lifelong learning, it is necessary to develop a framework able to capture the relation between work-life experiences and how workers perceive their needs and possibilities to engage in different learning activities: their *learner identity*.
My initial inspiration for applying the concept of learner identity comes from Antikainen (2006). He used the concept to examine the changing meaning of education and learning in Finland in the post-World-War II era. Antikainen developed his concept inspired by social interactionism and examined where significant learning experiences occur and what significant others influence these experiences. Like many other researchers preoccupied with education he pays only a limited attention to the specific work-life of his informants, and his concept is neither sensitive to the practical and physical engagement in work nor to the ambiguity in everyday-life.
In order to comprehend the relation between work-life and the formation, maintenance or transformation of a learner identity it is critical to apply a theoretical framework sensitive to the relation between work and identity (Kondrup 2012).
Several traditions in social science and humanities are explicitly preoccupied with the relation between work and identity. I have chosen to include two different perspectives, both of which define the identity process as dialectic, in my attempt to develop a concept of Learner Identity sensitive to the subjects' engagement in a specific work-life. The first perspective is a life-historical approach rooted in critical theory (Salling-Olesen 2007, 2002). The second perspective is Archer's (2000, 2002) critical realistic approach and her concepts of natural, practical and social concerns.

Identity processes and experience
According to the life-history approach the formation, maintenance or transformation of subjectivity or identity must be conceptualised as an on-going experience-process. It is crucial to underline that the concept of experience differs from the everyday notion, which in this tradition is captured in the concept of immediate experience. Experience is a phenomenon with three modalities, relatively independent but mediated through each other; immediate experience, life (historical) experience and objectified experience (cultural knowledge) (Salling-Olesen 2007). Identity is neither static nor essential, but an on-going result of a dialectic process, where the subject is continuously engaged in certain practices in specific social and historical situations

giving rise to certain immediate experiences. Through this engagement the subject builds consciousness and internalises a certain version of the cultural knowledge (e.g. language, concepts, believes, techniques and norms). Therefore the subject is per se both historical and social (Salling-Olesen 2002). In order to understand a certain identity -- how the subject perceives themself, the situation and their possibilities to act in it -- it is necessary to apply an approach sensitive to the specific process of experience constituting the formation of identity.

Identity and concerns
According to Archer identity is developed in a dialectic process of an on-going engagement in the three orders of reality: the natural, the practical and the social order. The differentiated reality entails that engagement gives rise to natural (bodily), practical (performative) and social emotions and concerns. The human embodiment confers concerns about physical well-being. The performative concerns are unavoidable due to the necessary engagement in practical activities in the world of material culture (Archer 2000). The social concerns are linked to the social judgement of approval or disapproval. According to Archer our most important social concern is the self-worth vested in different projects "It is because we have invested ourselves in these social projects that we are susceptible to emotionality in relation to society's normative evaluation of our performance in those roles" (Archer 2002:16).
The presence of simultaneously diverse (and potential conflicting) concerns force people to form a modus vivendi and prioritise their ultimate concerns through inner conversation. The personal way of prioritising these concerns is what gives people their personal identity (Archer 2000). The situations, in which people find themselves and develop their modus vivendi are not of their own making. On the contrary humans are born into a socially structured and stratified society, where different groups have different possibilities and find themselves in different situations giving rise to different concerns that need to be taken into account.

Combining the two perspectives
The commonalities between the two perspectives are the claim of humanism, the ambition of bringing the subject to the forefront of social science and insisting on the identity process as a dialectical process that emphasises the significance of the historical, social and material context. This been said, there are substantial differences. But this paper is not the time and place for a substantial account of the discrepancies between the two approaches. I will shortly mention one of the most crucial ones in order to clarify my concept of learner identity and then outline how I have combined concepts from the two perspectives.
The main difference is the perception of the social nature of humans. Archer argues that humans can't be reduced to society's being and that people, due to their ability of being reflexive (one of the personal emergent properties), they can reflect on and change societal structures and culture. The critical theoretical approach agrees that humans can't be reduced to trägers of societal structures. Humans have needs and potentials depending on certain conditions in order to be realised, but there is no pre-social or non-social spaces for (private) reflections on these needs or potentials. According to the life-historical approach the perception of the situation and thus the reflections about immediate experiences and concerns are mediated by consciousness. And consciousness is established through socialisation. Perception (and reflexivity) is always mediated through life-historical experiences (conscious as

well as unconscious) and the version of the cultural knowledge internalised through socialisation.

I define learner identity as peoples' perceived need and possibility to engage in different learning activities in order to comply with their concerns in the given situation. It is formed, maintained or transformed in an on-going (work-life) experience-process constituted through engagement in a specific historical and social (work-) life.

Learner identity must be analysed as a dialectic phenomenon, established, maintained and transformed by subjects continuously and actively engaged in specific situations giving rise to immediate experiences and specific concerns. The perception of these experiences and of the opportunity to meet the concerns will be mediated by previous life-historical experiences (conscious or unconscious and potentially ambivalent) and the cultural knowledge internalised through socialisation.

Archer's concepts of the differentiated reality can discern the concept of immediate experience, by emphasising how the involvement in the specific situation always implies natural, practical and social engagement. Why we as researchers must be aware of natural, practical and social concerns when trying to understand how people conduct their life.
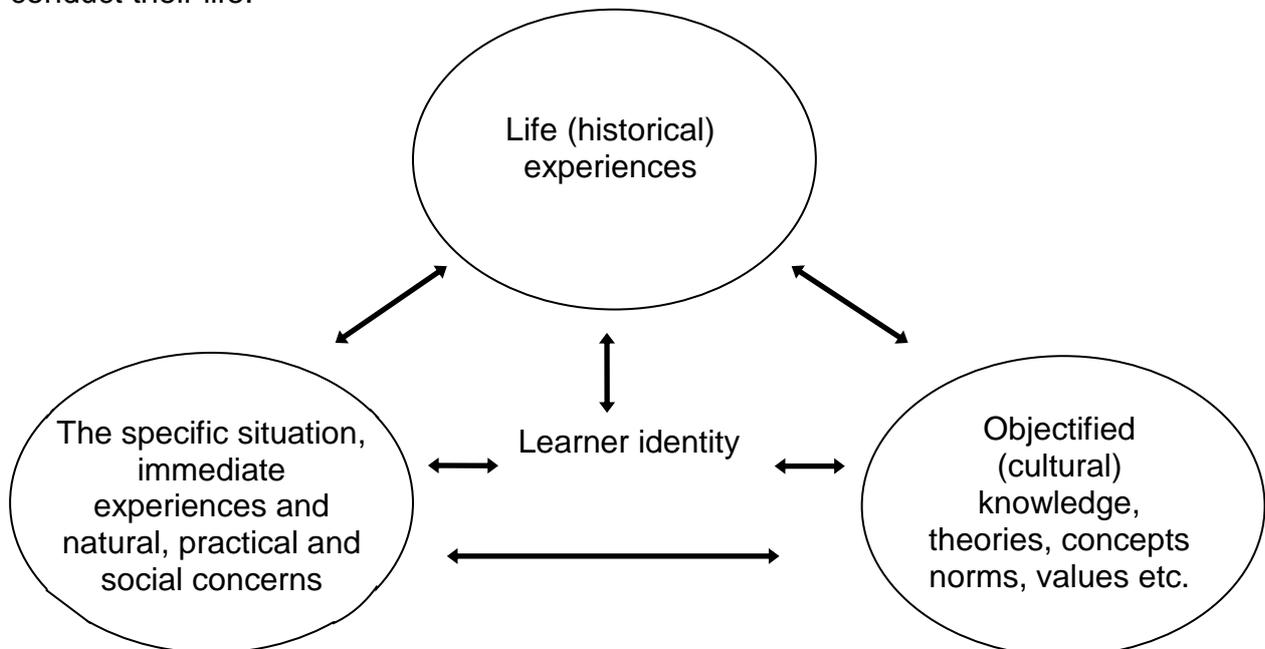
Examining Learner Identity

In order to capture the complexity and ambiguity in everyday work-life presenting the immediate context for the identity process, it is necessary to apply a method sensitive to how people perceive their everyday life: their concerns and how they perceive their opportunities to handle these concerns, based on their life-historical experiences. To understand how the learner identity is formed by specific work-life experiences it is necessary to examine how workers perceive participation in different kinds of learning activities as a means to deal with their specific concerns.

In order to examine how the unskilled work-life poses certain conditions for the establishment of learner identity I have conducted a qualitative study based on work-life history interviews. 24 workers employed in unskilled jobs in 6 different small and medium-sized private companies have told their work-life stories. These stories

describe a) their work trajectory: how they entered the labour market and what kind of jobs and tasks they have undertaken, b) their learning trajectories: how they have learned to perform their tasks and what kind of learning activities they have participtated in during their work-life. C) The story of the development in their current job and how the demand for qualifications and their opportunity to apply different skills has changed. And finally d) the story of their expected future work-life.

The analysis examines how the engagement in unskilled work causes a multitude of natural, practical and social concerns; how the workers perceive their possibilities to handle these concerns, what they define as their primary concerns and how they perceive their need and opportunity to engage in different learning activities – formal, informal and non-formal – in order to deal with these concerns.

Unskilled Work-lives: Diverse Work and Learning Trajectories
The work-life stories reveal very different work trajectories. Some respondents had many some had few different jobs during their career, and a majority had been through or tried to change their trade. They also had very different learning trajectories. Some have been skilled in other trades before ending up in an unskilled job, and some have been working as unskilled workers their entire work-life. All of them have participated in formal education during their work-life, primarily to obtain statutory certificates (driving a forklift, ISO), and some in literacy training e.g. IT or reading and writing. The latter took place in periods of decline in production where training was used to avoid redundancy.

Diverse and Ambiguous Concerns in Unskilled Work
The work-life stories reveal that engagement in an unskilled work-life give rise to diverse and sometimes conflicting concerns, some of which seems impossible to remedy in the current situation.

Natural concerns
The most prevalent natural concern expressed in the work-life-stories is the concern of physical disabilities. It is a widespread experience that degeneration is a risk caused by work as a consequence of heavy manual labour, shift working and a combination of hard work and ageing. It is a general story that workers have to tackle the concern of physical strain by developing individual and sometimes collective strategies.

Practical concerns
The work-life stories reveal different kinds of practical or performative concerns; A concern for the quality *of* the work, for the quality *in* the work and a concern for being able to apply knowledge and skills in the job. The performative concerns are closely intertwined, they emphasise different dimensions of the practical engagement in work and how the practical engagement are substantial for the subjective meaning of work.

Quality of work relates to the concern about the use-value of the product of their work. This concern is evident in stories about the satisfaction connected with seeing the products taken into use. And in the stories about the necessity of performing a good job in order contribute to something useful and satisfy/not cause troubles for the consumer. It is a general story that it is important to see the result of one's work thus

the subjective meaning of work is closely connected to contributing to something useful for somebody else. The concern of the quality of the work is closely related to a concern about how their individual performance affect and contribute to the production process as a whole.

The concern of the *quality in work* concerns the performing of a good job and being good at the tasks. This is evident in stories about the satisfaction and the pride that comes from obtaining experience enabling them to perform well. It is also evident in the stories about knowing more about the production process than the formal job description prescribes in order to keep the production running and to be able to fix unexpected problems. Finally the *opportunity to use skills and knowledge* in the job is a common practical concern. This is evident in the stories about the experience of loss when the work changes and the opportunity to utilise one's knowledge and skills decrease

These practical concerns appear in different variants in all the work-life stories. This emphasises that the workers are definitely not indifferent toward their own performance. On the contrary both their performance, their opportunity to perform and the outcome of this performance is significant to the subjective meaning of work.

Social concerns

The work-life stories reveal a multitude of social concerns: maintaining employment, obtaining waged labour, getting recognition from superiors, having good relations with colleagues, and that there is more to life than just work.

The importance of *maintaining employment* is evident in stories about periods of unemployment, and about how frustrating it is to stay at home "not doing anything". Equally it is evident in stories about the necessity to adjust and compromise in order to maintain employment. These stories reveal that employment has a value in itself, and is considered as a per se useful activity in opposition to home-work. Another concern is about *economic security* and the need to obtain employment in order to pay the mortgage. The third concern is about *getting recognition* from superiors. This concern is expressed both in positive and negative stories. E.g. stories about the pride and satisfaction gained from getting credit when performing a god job. And stories about the frustration caused when their efforts and struggles to keep production running despite worn down production machinery and understaffing are not appreciated or ignored. The fourth concern is about having *good relations with colleagues*. It is emphasised how having a good time with colleagues (partly) can make up for an otherwise unsatisfactory work-life; how helping out less experienced colleagues contributes to the subjective meaning of work, and how frustrating it is to work in a work-place where people oppose each other, and where opportunities for social interaction are restricted. The last concern found in the work-life stories is the concern about *there being more to life than work*. This concern is evident in the stories about how exhaustion caused by work and shift work limits opportunities to engage in leisure activities both sports, political activities and night classes.

Ultimate concerns

The work-life stories reveal how an unskilled work-life gives rise to a multitude of different and sometimes contradictory concerns. Therefore it becomes necessary to compromise and prioritise the (temporary) ultimate concern. The stories also reveal how maintaining employment is the ultimate concern, implying that other concerns have to be subordinated, adjusted or even compromised in order to maintain employment.

The work-life-stories all narrate the experience that it is necessary to be flexible and adjust in order to obtain employment (e.g. by changing jobs or trades when the demand for labour changes, and by adjusting to changes at the work-place). But despite the prevalent story of individual responsibility to adapt, the informants expressed a feeling of limited control over their own employability, both in the current job and in the future labour-marked.

The necessity of compromising and neglecting natural, practical and social concerns, and enduring uncertainty and limited control of one's work-situation is a common experience, expressed in the work-life histories. But the necessity to compromise on one's concerns implies significant subjective costs. Thus the interviews reveal that uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence are experienced as unavoidable conditions in the unskilled work-life.

The Unskilled Work as a Condition for Forming a Learner Identity
It is evident in the interviews, that learning – acquiring new knowledge and skills – are central to tackle the concerns experienced in the unskilled work-life.

Learning as a mean to cope with concerns
In order to cope with the natural concern of degeneration caused by straining work it is necessary to learn how to protect the body and avoid unnecessary strain. This is accomplished by developing routines, getting a feeling for the machines and adjusting to their pace and by learning how to share the burdens. Sometimes it is not enough to adjust in order to avoid strain, and change of job or even trade is mentioned as a means to deal with the concern for physical degeneration caused by straining work. This implies a demand for learning e.g. to interact with new colleagues, behave in new company cultures and undertake new tasks.

Learning is also essential in order to cope with the practical concerns. Quality in and of the work entails gaining knowledge of how their specific tasks contribute to and form part of the total production-process as well as the end product. For instance by drawing on knowledge gained from being a consumer/user of similar products. Furthermore the informants tell that it is necessary to learn to solve problems outside their formal job description in order to keep production running, but also because it increases the subjective value of the work. *'The more you can do on you own, without having to wait for the smith to fix it, the more interesting it gets'*. It is common in the work-life-stories that the opportunity to use knowledge and skills in the work, both in the performance of the job and in peer-to-peer training of less experience colleagues, is essential to the subjective meaning of work. And it is presented as a loss when changes in the content or organisation of work decrease their opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills.

Learning is also told to be a key factor in order to deal with the social concerns. It is necessary to learn to perform new task and take on new assignments in order to obtain employment and thus obtain paid labour. And learning is essential for being careful and skilful and thus to accomplish acknowledgment in the work.

The meaning of different kind of learning
When examining what kind of learning the informants consider most valuable in order to comply with their concerns, they perceive the most valuable knowledge and skills come from gaining experience. Primarily knowledge and skills gained through informal and non-formal learning are applied in their everyday work.

And they all experience very limited possibilities to apply theoretical or formal qualifications at work. It is a general story that the perspectives for usage of more or new formal qualifications are blurred, ambivalent or even non-existent. The informant tells that the opportunities for job-development in their current workplace that will lead to the use of more formal skills, are very restricted if not absent. Additionally they describe a lack of or restricted opportunities to put to use some of the formal skills they already possess.

On qualifying for a new job or towards the future demand for labour, the informant expresses a great deal of uncertainty. They question alternative job-openings due to the financial crisis and the high degree of unemployment. They express an uncertainty on the future demand for labour enhanced by changing and contradictory statements from employers' organisations and politicians.

Regarding formal learning they also tell a story about conflicts between short and long term interests. Reduction in labour, which has been a general tendency for companies, implies that there are only enough employees left to keep the production running. Absence due to participation in education implies a risk of decrease in (if not a stop of) production. So even though formal learning can be a means to meet future demand for qualified labour, participation in formal education implies a risk of losing the current job. Thus they experience an inconsistency between the formal rights (given by labour market agreements) and the actual opportunity to participate in formal learning activities.

The perceived lack of alternative employment and the uncertain future demand for labour indicates that maintenance of and adaption to their current job seems to be the most obvious way to stay employed.

The workers comply with the rationale in the discourse on lifelong learning: on-going learning is a necessity in order to be employable (e.g. learning to undertake new tasks, handle new machines, work with new colleagues, change workplace and even trade) when demand for labour changes. Their learner identity is characterized by a primarily instrumental orientation towards participation in different learning activities. Skills and knowledge must be practicable in their work-life in order to be considered meaningful. But this is not the same as an indifferent orientation towards learning. The work-life stories show how the opportunity to gain and apply knowledge and skills is relevant to the subjective meaning of work and thus contributes to a meaningful work-life.

Conclusion
The analysis shows how the experiences from unskilled work-life form invisible conditions germane to the formation, maintenance or transformation of a learner identity that complies with the rationales and demands formulated in the strategy for lifelong learning for all. It shows how learner identities are conditioned by previous experience, perceptions of the current situation and expectations for the future. Therefore the experience of being able to use experience, skills and knowledge while conducting work is essential to the learner identity. Equally important is the experience of what kinds of learning activities contribute to practicable knowledge and skills. The content and organisation of work, and the expectations to the development in the current workplace and the local and regional labour market also plays a significant role for the learner identity.

The study reveals how the workers experience continuous learning as a necessity and how their learner identity is characterised by an orientation towards the indispensability of knowledge and skills. It also shows that the perceived need and opportunity to obtain formal skills related to their current job is restricted by the specific content and organisation of work. Similarly the perceived opportunity to qualify for alternative employment is restricted by uncertainty about future demand for labour and by the situation in their current workplace. The experienced absence of alternative jobs makes the orientation toward the current job and its requirement the most meaningful strategy in order to obtain employment.

In order to conclude the initial research question – what challenges the fulfilment of Danish strategy for lifelong learning for all, one answer will be: the mismatch between the rationales and assumptions forming the strategy and the work-life experiences of the target group. The strategy is based on the assumption that the use of VET can be qualified by more demand driven supply. This implies accordance between the qualifications needed by the workers, as individuals and groups, the companies and society, and between short- and long term interests. This contradicts the experiences articulated in the work-life stories, about ambiguity and potential conflicts between the different needs. The strategy also relies on the assumption that employability is obtained through formal qualifications. This contradicts the work-life experiences about not always being able to apply formal qualifications in the work and about the qualifications practicable in the current job mostly are achieved through non-formal and informal learning. The strategy suggests that everybody position themselves as educable and orientated toward the future demand for qualified labour. This contradicts the work-life experiences of an unpredictable future, and of the need and opportunity for learning being other-determined. Just as it contradicts the prevalent experience of conflict between participation in formal education and obtaining employment, where the absence due to education will reduce production and thus endanger current employment.

The study concludes that people working in unskilled jobs share the rationality of the policies: that employment is the ultimate concern. But according to their work-life experiences formal education is not the means to maintain employment within their current situation. On the contrary, in their current situation insistence on participation in formal education seems counter-productive for staying employed.

The study demonstrates how the application of a dialectic concept of learner identity formed, maintained or transformed through involvement in a specific (work) life can widen our understanding of the unskilled work as a certain condition for engaging in lifelong learning. By being sensitive to the concerns in the unskilled work-life and how workers perceive their opportunities to cope with these concerns, it can widen our understanding of how and why workers in unskilled jobs ascribe formal learning activities certain meaning in their specific situations. And thus make some of the invisible conditions for the formation, maintenance and transformation of a specific learner identity visible.

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