

Title: Problem-oriented project learning (PPL) and the construction of ‘the student’ in a contemporary educational policy and learning theoretical perspective

Introduction: Dialoguing PPL with current debates on student learning

Servant-Miklos and Spliid suggest that “*hardly anything has been written about the historical development of problem-oriented approaches and their impact on student learning and the teaching professions*” and they continue to argue for the relevance of further research concerning PPL in “*a time when the cracks of the ‘New Public Management’ credo are turning into gaping educational holes.*” (Servant-Miklos and Spliid 2017:808).

This project sets out to remedy this research gap in two ways: First, the aim is to take a closer look at the concept of Problem-oriented Project Learning (PPL) by excavating and retracing its theoretical and philosophical conceptualization with a specific interest in the position of ‘the student’. Secondly, PPL and its construction of ‘the student’ is connected to contemporary discussions on ‘student learning’ and specifically a growing trend in learning theory in Higher Education; the focus on ‘student-orientation’ or ‘student-centred learning’ (Mckenna 2013, Macfarlane 2017, Macfarlane and Tomlinson 2017). It is hoped that greater knowledge of the concept of PPL and its ideas can bring fruitful perspectives to contemporary educational policy and theoretical debates on student learning.

What is Problem-oriented Project Learning?

A glance at the results of a preliminary search in research databases shows that the term ‘Problem-oriented Project Learning’ is often connected to the pedagogical approach at Roskilde University (RUC) and Aalborg University (AUC) incorporated since the 70’s. Therefore, I looked to literature concerning PPL at RUC and AUC, where I found the following quote on ‘what PPL is’:

“I think it makes sense to say that it’s not ideas that have been developed, it’s practices that have been developed and adopted ideas.” (Interview with Henning Salling Olesen in Servant-Miklos and Spliid 2017:799)

The quote is from one of the locomotives in the creation of Roskilde University (seen by Servant-Miklos and Spliid 2017 as the birthplace of PPL), Henning Salling Olesen, a former student activist and later adult education theorist (Servant-Miklos and Spliid 2017:799). He suggests that PPL evolved out of practice and incorporated convenient ideas and theories from a pragmatic stand point. This is also the starting point for this project – that PPL did not evolve as a rational, continuous set of ideas, but rather ‘grew’ out of practice making PPL a nebulous theoretical patchwork. In my theoretical understanding of PPL as a ‘concept’ I draw on Foucault’s ‘archaeology’ that he explains the following way; “*an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted*” (Foucault 1973xxi).” (Prado 1995:153). In this way I see PPL as a form of knowledge, or a system of knowledge, that is a contingent historical construct or what Foucault calls *a local discursivity* (Prado 1995:154). The archaeology approach is explained further under ‘Methodology’.

If we take a brief look at what Servant-Miklos and Spliid write about the ‘foundations’ of PPL, they point to Knud Illeris and his dissertation (in Danish) “*Problemløserorientering og deltagerstyring*” from 1974 to be instrumental in the way PPL was conceived at RUC and AUC (Servant-Miklos and Spliid 2017:798-799). Arguing that the major disciplines ‘critical education theory’ and ‘psychological education theory’ were main influences at the time, Servant-Miklos and Spliid, show how Illeris’ conceptual framework is a very composite set of ideas:

“*Indeed, Problemløserorientering og Deltagerstyring attempted the seemingly impossible synthesis of Critical School ideas, Deweyan pedagogy, Piagetian cognitive psychology and a few other sources of education inspiration, prominent among which were Carl Rogers and Jerome Bruner.*” (Servant-Miklos and Spliid 2017:799)

Reading through the article of Servant-Miklos and Spliid (2017) a great deal of theoreticians are being drawn upon in Illeris’ works (including Lev Vygotsky). Taking Illeris as an example in many of the blurriness of the theoretical framework of PPL, and how it

came to be 'a concept', I call for a need for a comprehensive analysis. A starting point could be a thorough analysis of the so-called 'foundational texts' of PPL and the theoretical texts they drawn upon. This approach is further described under 'Methodology'.

Contemporary challenges to student learning

Here I want to connect the analysis of PPL and its constructions of the student with contemporary challenges related to student learning. In the literature on student learning and PPL, quite a few challenges are mentioned; students not understanding the problem-based part of PPL and therefore doing projects that aren't problem-oriented (Knudsen 2014), students not being able to 'read' the tacit expectations of the 'hidden curriculum' in PPL (Ulriksen 2014), neoliberal policy discourses influencing students to become more strategic and assessment-minded in their education instead of being driven by a will to explore and learn (Blasco and Tackney 2013, Madsen 2015, Sarauw and Madsen 2016), and finally how a recent growth in 'student-oriented' approaches, arguing from the basis a humanistic Problem-based Learning (PBL) perspective, are colonized by dominant policy discourses valuing performance and management of learning (Mckenna 2013, Macfarlane 2017, Macfarlane and Tomlinson 2017).

In this project my main analytical interest concerns the latter: student-orientation approaches that seemingly draw upon notions from PPL and PBL, but where this connection becomes 'disturbed' by managerial discourses valuing control and certainty instead of other discourses concerned with democratic and emancipatory experiences for students in higher education.

This project sets out to further investigate the nebulous conceptions of PPL and how – in the theoretical underpinnings and inspirations - the student is constructed as a (learning) subject in different ways. This investigation is put to discussion the contemporary conceptualizations of 'student-orientation' in learning theory and educational policy discourse.

I propose the follow research question:

How can contemporary conceptualizations of 'Student-orientation' in learning theory and policy discourse be understood and put to conversation with the constructions of 'the student' and 'student learning' in the historically contingent concept of PPL?

Methodology and empirical approach

For the scope of the analysis at hand I am inspired by 'Archaeology' as it is put forward by the philosopher and Foucault reader and writer C. G. Prado (1995). Prado explains archaeology in many ways, but I draw on the following understanding:

"...what archaeology most directly maps, are not ideas or events but concepts. Witness the priority Foucault gives to concepts in defining disciplinary knowledge, the main subject of archaeology, as in part a dynamic discursive context or 'field of coordination and subordination of statements in which concepts ... are defined, applied and transformed' (Foucault 1972:182-83)." (Prado 1995:154)

I follow the above understanding of archaeology as a way of 'mapping' disciplinary knowledge and how it is defined, applied and transformed. Here, the disciplinary knowledge is the concept of PPL, and I see my aim - in the words of Prado - *"less to trace the chronological development of something" that to "unearth, articulate and grasp a totality..."* (Prado 1995:159). It is a part of the project to further develop the methodological inspirations from Foucault in investigating PPL.

Concretely, Foucault's studies looked at a comprehensive corpus of texts of several kinds (Heede 1992). The empirical approach in this project will also concern itself with texts using the method of document analysis as defined by Annula Linders (Linders 2008). The overall onto-epistemological framework in the project is constructionist and for analysis I draw on Linders description of document analysis:

“What all constructionist projects share is a commitment to documenting how some aspect of reality is constructed through the efforts of social actors; that is, to trace the process whereby some element of social life— meanings, institutions, identities, norms, problems, routines, and all other conceivable aspects of social reality— comes into being, emerges, takes shape, becomes understandable, acquires visible and meaningful boundaries, and takes on constraining and/or facilitating characteristics.” (Linders 2008:468)

Moving on to the specific texts for analysis it is not the intention (yet) to have a fixed corpus of documents, but to be surprised and inspired by my investigation. A preliminary text corpus for analysis is thought to include:

- The dissertation “Problemorientering og deltagerstyring” (1974) by Illeris. This text is a starting point to look further into the theories drawn upon:
- The ideas of John Dewey, Oskar Negt, Carl Rogers, Jean Piaget, C. Wright Mills
- Apart from the above ‘theoretical texts’ so-called ‘foundational texts’ for PPL like ‘The Roskilde Model’ (Andersen og Heilesen 2015).
- When connecting PPL to contemporary discourses of student learning I will be including both theoretical texts and policy texts

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