

From care worker to assistant nurse - Recognition of prior learning in the health care sector

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This paper focuses on recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the health care sector. The study follows fourteen participants involved in an education program initiated by the municipality in a semi-large city in Sweden. The RPL-process in the educational program is the focus of the study. Observations and interviews following a Habermasian inspired interactive research approach are used. The analysis draws attention to the idea of a caring I (Skeggs, 1999) and aspects of the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984). The result shows that a caring rationality built on Skeggs notion of a caring I can be made visible in the RPL-process. To care for the patients in an empathetic way and being nice, kind and intuitively understand them is important aspects creating the caring I. 'Human knowledge' is an important characteristic which is gained in practice and connected to personality, and which cannot be gained through education. The participants are also given examples (movies, articles) of how not to do in the RPL-process. This is referred to as the non-caring other as scarecrow. The caring rationality makes visible how the whole education system is maintained. Further, From a Habermasian perspective, the RPL-process seems to balance between system and lifeworld. For instance the participants engage in non supervised communicative group processes which can be seen as communicative rational. In these group processes the participants can share their experiences and be critical of the RPL-process. On the other hand the participants, for instance in assessment interviews, become cue-seekers trying to understand what is demanded from them. The caring rationality can finally be compared to Habermas idea of instrumental rationality, even though this kind of theoretical discussion needs to be further developed.

Keywords: RPL, health care sector, assistant nurse, Skeggs, Habermas, caring I, Caring rationality, system and lifeworld, communicative action

Introduction

In Sweden recognition of prior learning (RPL) was introduced in the mid 90's. Especially adult education has been significantly influenced by RPL and in Sweden adult education and RPL is intimately linked together. During the end of the 1990's and the beginning of 2000 two official reports were written (SOU 1998:165; SOU 2001:78) on recognition of prior competence. During 2003 until the 2007 a National Commission on Validation was working to develop RPL.

Even though RPL has not been researched to a great extent more and more research is conducted. One recent feature is the re-theorization of RPL offered by Andersson and Harris (2006). This book puts forward a wide range of theoretical perspectives on RPL such as sociology of education, post-structuralism and symbolic interactionism.

RPL in the health care sector has previously been discussed from a Foucauldian perspective by Fejes (2008) studying the idea of reflection in nursing practice taking departure in a project aimed at recognizing health care assistant's prior learning. Further Fejes & Andersson (2008) discuss RPL in the health care sector integrated in learning processes, for instance discussing the idea of RPL with lower-case letters (rpl) from the idea of Breier (2005). Fearfull (1997; 1998) discusses vocational training (NVQ) in the health care sector in UK. The idea was to study how NVQ could enhance the quality of work in a context where the health care assistants lacked knowledge in several of their work assignments. In a former paper by Sandberg & Andersson (2008) a first step towards a Habermasian perspective on RPL was introduced, to my knowledge not before offered. In this paper a Habermasian perspective on RPL is progressed with Beverly Skeggs (1999) notion of a caring I.

Interactive research and Habermas idea of a virtual actor serve as the primary ideas on which my role as a researcher is built. According to Svensson & Nielsen (2006) interactive research strives towards a process with high involvement between researcher and participant. In interactive research less focus is put on the researcher's role as responsible for the development. Instead the joint learning process is emphasized (Svensson et al, 2007.) Habermas' idea of the social researcher as a *virtual actor* can be interwoven with the ideas in interactive research (Habermas, 1984). This thought has been developed in an earlier paper by Sandberg (2008). Habermas' suggest that we as social scientists are forced to participate in the process of gaining mutual understanding, a process we also wish to describe (Ibid.). My intention in the study has been to try to become a virtual actor and further use some aspects in interactive research. However, there are limitations which must be addressed due to the context researched. Firstly, I have not been able to be communicative in all of the language processes. The main reason for this is that some of the processes were well structured and there was not enough time for me to get involved. In the end of the research process I will however bring the analysis of the process back and present it to the participants in a mutual analysis seminar (Sandberg, 2008). Here the participants, as promoted in interactive research, will be able to contribute to the theoretical outcomes of the research. This should also be in line with Habermas' idea of a virtual actor, trying to find a way of putting your understandings and analysis as a researcher into a common communicative language process. The analysis of the material has been conducted from the ideas in hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969/1977). The idea has been to try to (mutually) understand the RPL-process from the perspectives of Skeggs and Habermas. Some themes from this analysis are outlined.

The paper starts out with a short summary of the study. Further the theoretical framework is being discussed. After this the analysis is put forward. The paper ends with summary and discussion.

The study

The empirical work is based on an education program initiated by the municipality giving health care workers the opportunity to become assistant nurses. The study took (takes) place in a semi-

large Swedish city. The overall aim of the study is to describe and analyze the RPL-process in the education program. The participants attending the education program have been working for some up to twenty years as care workers within different fields of the health sector. Focus is put on the beginning of the program, where the care workers' prior learning is recognized. The education program is based on courses in the upper secondary school level and the criteria for assessment are based on the Swedish National Agency for Education. The data was collected between February and June of 2008, but the empirical work will further advance in the autumn of 2008. Nine interviews were conducted before the actual education process started. Further observations and two group interviews has been carried out during the RPL-process. During the observations over ten hours of different processes has been tape recorded. Ethical considerations were fulfilled by using the guidelines of the Swedish research council, putting focus on such issues as confidentiality and informed consent. The RPL-process and empirical investigations can roughly be described in the following figure.

Figure 1. RPL-process and study

<p>Week 1 Info meeting An info meeting is held by the teachers and project managers. I introduce my research to the participants and book interviews with 9 of the participants</p>	<p>Week 2 Research interviews I I conduct interviews with 9 out of 14 participants. The interviews are carried out at the work-place of the participants. The interviews last between 10 and 20 minutes. All but one interview is recorded on tape.</p>	<p>Week 3 Introductory week During the introductory week the participants are introduced to the education program. They engage in group learning processes and participate in assessment (of RPL) interviews. I observed and tape-recorded a variety of the processes.</p>
<p>Week 4-6 The RPL-process continue once a week The participants return to their ordinary work-place. One day each week they continue the RPL-process at the school. I conduct observations and two group interviews. The group interviews are recorded.</p>	<p>Week 7-12 RPL – practice All participants are designated a new work-place. Here their practical skills are assessed and developed together with a supervisor. The teachers visit the participants and supervisors and conduct interviews. Further, the participants visit the school at 3 occasions for follow up on the more theoretical aspects in the courses. I observe 6 interviews and 3 are recorded on tape. I also visited all the theoretical follow ups.</p>	<p>Week 13-17 Research interviews II and analyze seminar (to be continued...) Here deep interviews with all participants and teachers will be conducted. When all material is analyzed the participants will be invited to a analyze seminar. The results will then be presented and discussed with the participants</p>

Theoretical framework

Beverly Skeggs (1999) notion of a caring I and some aspects of Habermas (1984; 1987) theory of communicative action create the theoretical grounds in the analysis in this paper.

According to Skeggs a caring I is characterized as a mix of taking care of and care for. Another important aspect is that the Caring I is practical, useful and responsible in contrast to being smart and cultivated. The competence produced in the education program Skeggs study is related to the women's personality. They are intuitively caring I's and to care for is to feel good and become a morally superior. To show unselfishness is according to Skeggs very important in

the production of their caring I's. The women are there to be used by others. Skeggs also describe how the women watch movies and work with cases and how they here are presented with how 'other' care workers fail to be caring. Another aspect from Skeggs study is that the women's ability to question the curriculum becomes even more limited as caring I's. To question would then indirectly become a questioning of the self.

Skeggs study took place in a context that differs a lot from that in which this study has been made. The women in Skeggs study are unemployed when they attend a care work education program. In my study the women are all employed before the education program and maintain full salary throughout the whole process. Another difference is that even though the practical is clearly more important than the theoretical in my study, Skeggs study indicates a much stronger deviation from the theoretical and academic.

Further in the analysis Habermas discussion of system and lifeworld and some aspects of communicative action will be used. *Systems* can be seen as bureaucracies in the welfare state or the economy acting as systems regulating human relations through the medium of power and money (Habermas, 1984; 1987). Money and power therefore become key mediums for the establishing of what Habermas refers to as instrumental rationality. As Habermas' sees it, the problem is that these systems now are starting to move into the everyday life, colonizing the lifeworld and disturbing what is called communicative rationality.

The *lifeworld* is where social integration occurs. Culture, society and personality can be seen as the components in which the Habermasian lifeworld is based. For Habermas' language has become the key medium for understanding, coordination of actions and socialization of individuals. Language therefore serves as the medium for cultural re-production, social integration and socialization (Habermas, 1987). The lifeworld can be seen as the horizon of experiences each human being has at a given time (Ibid). When referring to a system in the study I refer to the education system in which the RPL-process take place. Such subjects as assessment, strategic and instrumental actions and rules which the system produces and which are non-negotiable are important. But also what I will refer to as the caring rationality, inspired by Skeggs can be seen as part of how the education system works and is reproduced. The lifeworld is referred to primarily as the participant's horizon of experiences.

In communicative action the actors, with the lifeworld as a horizon, can use language as a medium. From this actors can negotiate and find ways of gaining a mutual definition of a situation (Habermas, 1984). Habermas states that, in a communicative speech act, the actors can raise validity claims based on truth, normative rightness and truthfulness or sincerity (Habermas, 1995). On the other hand three worlds; the objective, expressive and social, can be used to dismiss, approve or convince a statement. Habermas says that that the relations hold between a statement and: The objective, social and subjective worlds (Ibid). The idea is that you need to refer to all the above mentioned worlds to be able to establish communicative rationality. You require an aim or goal; a normative consensus and finally each individual must be able to express her-, himself in a more subjective manner. If these rules or validity claims are maintained properly, an ideal speech situation may be established. Communicative actions cannot be maintained when individuals act strategic or instrumental, i.e. striving to pursue own goals instrumentally.

Findings

With the use of Beverly Skeggs notion of a caring I and some aspects of Habermas' idea of communicative action the analysis of the study in this part will be presented. The analysis must be seen as work in progress!

Findings in relation to Skeggs

Three themes are outlined from Skeggs perspective of a caring I. The caring for is primarily built on having competence related to personality and practical experience. Further the caring I is strengthened in the RPL-process by giving examples of how not to be caring – referred to as the non-caring other as scarecrow. Finally the care of and for is related to the whole education system, where everybody is taking care of and cares for everyone. I refer to it as a caring rationality.

Caring for as a competence related to personality and experience

When it comes to human knowledge you [as care worker] are better and worse. Some are better. When you see them [patients] you notice if they are feeling good or bad (I1 [interviewee1]).

R (researcher): What would you say is the most important knowledge which you gained in your work? I6: How you treat people. How you help people. And care for them. Listen and just be there for them.

We act in different situations and you need to be adjustable. This cannot be learned in school. You meet so many people and you will not be able to sum this up in a course. This must be experienced in reality (I6).

In interviews and observations in the study the caring I manifests itself as the highest quality as care worker. Frequently the participants use examples of how 'others' may not have this quality but then have 'other' qualities. These other qualities, often described as rather strict, are nevertheless not highly ranked among the participants. The idea of working with people, often elderly, is closely connected to characteristics which have been developed through years of experience. The caring I is further closely connected to a specific personality, i.e. a quality which cannot be learned or acquired through education – the practical is focused. One important aspect made visible in the study is the idea of having 'human knowledge'. This kind of knowledge is associated with a specific personality, a knowledge some care workers have and some not. It's also related to experience, something you learn in 'reality' and which cannot be acquired in education. The idea of being adjustable can further be related to Skeggs idea of being unselfish (1999). As a care worker you are there for others constantly adjusting yourself to fulfill the need of those being taken care of.

The non-caring other as scarecrow

Skeggs (1999) points out that the women in her study already are intuitively caring I's and that the education program they attend only teach them what they already know. This aspect can further be related to the empirical work in this paper. An important aspect is that the women many times are given examples of what not to do, how not to act. In the following observation this will be revealed: During the fourth day of the introductory week all of the participants are gathered to watch a short-movie. The movie is about a care worker's first day at work. Her workplace is situated in the patient's home and her assignment is to assist the patient during breakfast and morning rituals. She is doing everything wrong and during the movie the participants through face expressions and verbal utterances clearly show how terrible they think the care worker is at

her job. It is noticeable that the participant's wants to make clear that they don't approve this kind of behavior. The movie seem to have the purpose of telling the students how not to do things. When they identify the wrong do's they are identified as caring and morally superior care workers.

Throughout the RPL-process movies and articles of dreadful caring are being used, similar to that Skeggs describes in her study. The problem is that those 'non-caring' people are never present. They are so to say in a way fictional. They are just playing the role of strengthening the importance of being a caring person - the fictional non-caring other as scarecrow.

The caring of and for – establishing the caring rationality

It is clear that those characteristics connected to the participant's personality and which you are unable to gain in an education context is seen as most important. As been discussed above the caring I is practical, unselfish, and adjustable and have human knowledge which cannot be gained through education – it's rather a part of a certain personality. To care for the patients in an empathetic way and being nice, kind and intuitively understand them is important aspects creating the caring I.

In addition the teachers caring for the participants were of major importance. The teachers often approached the participants as though they needed to be cared for in a sensitive way. Interviews and group meetings often started with a kind of therapeutic feel good process often ending up in laughter. Here the teachers clearly showed that they cared for the participants, that there was nothing to be nervous about and that everything would be alright. I refer to it as the creation of what I call the *wellbeing sphere*. At first glance this can be seen as a good and honorable didactic strategy and teachers may well think they are just being good and empathetic teachers. But the the wellbeing sphere also represses and limit criticism and don't approve of conflict.

The caring for was further even more evident as the following example shows. At an observation taking place at a network meeting concerned with RPL I was introduced to one of the principals at the school where the study is being conducted. The purpose of the meeting was to plan a RPL-conference. During the meeting it was suggested that I and the teachers in the study were to carry out a mutual session at the conference giving both a teacher and research perspective on the RPL-process. The principal immediately turned down the idea, describing the teachers as fragile and not able to take criticism from a researcher. I was perplexed by the principal's reaction! This observation suggests that taking care of is something more complex than just a didactic strategy. The caring for can be perhaps even be seen as an operational ideology, the caring ideology, working within the educational system where the RPL-process is arranged. I will refer to it as a *caring rationality*. The caring rationality can be seen as a significant aspect of what characterizes the education system and RPL-process. It is a system where the most significant features are: the teachers care for the participant, the principal's care for the teachers and where the most important character among the participant's uplifted in the system is the participant's caring I's.

Findings in relation to Habermas

Three themes came out of the Habermasian analysis. The most significant theme is that of the participants cue-seeking for what the system demand. For instance the purpose of the assessment interviews where hard to grasp for many of the participants. The RPL-process seems to aim at integrating learning and RPL, as Breier points out RPL with small letter 'rpl'. However the RPL-process indicates that what is actually recognized are primarily the more personal properties among the participants. The actual knowledge required in each course is taught by the teachers. The process is in many cases are hard to grasp for the participants; here the un-supervised group process becomes a safe haven actually indicating a communicative action. Here the participants

can mutually scrutinize and discuss the RPL-process more critical, creating confidence and social integration.

Cue-seeking and lifeworld colonization

There is something I haven't said. I can still feel that, there is something I should have said. [. . .] (G11[group interview])

They've should focus more on what we actually think about these interviews, more guidance that is[. . .] Now it was more like: can you tell me how it is? (G11)

And you easily move away in your thoughts distancing yourself from the actual subject [. . .] I have written that in my reflection diary: What is it they want? What is it they are out to get from me in the interview? (G11)

I was the first to be interviewed and I had no clue what so ever [. . .] I was totally blocked [. . .] yes, blocked, disturbed (G12)

I agree on that phenomenon that you sit and talk at same time as you search in your memory for something else. That is how I felt [. . .] I also had that feeling [. . .] what can it be, that's how I felt? (G11)

The idea of a 'hidden curriculum' becomes evident. Many of the participants were also perplexed by the assessment interviews where they tried to grasp what the teachers actually wanted them to say. This can be compared to a study by Andersson (2000) on assessment, having a Habermasian perspective. Here Andersson describe how students try to figure out what is demanded from them to get a high grade. The students become cue seekers searching for what the system demand – the lifeworld is colonized (Ibid). This aligns with many of the participants statements during group interviews and observations. The participants does not seem to be afraid of being assessed¹, they are rather confused by what the teachers actually want them to say (they want clarity). Many of the participants actually wanted to get more direct questions and became puzzled by the demand to freely talk about their work experience in a monologues way. The teacher's idea of giving opportunity for the participants to freely talk about their experiences seems to backlash in many of the assessment interviews. The RPL-process seems to stress the importance of giving the participants the opportunity to tell 'the story' of their prior work experiences. This can be related to a caring rationality putting the participants in what is supposed to be a therapeutic process, where they are to express their innermost self (caring I's) which is (at all times) approved by the teachers. The education system here becomes rather instrumental, not giving the participant's a chance to mutual discuss and understand the process.

'RPL' becomes 'rpl' and then 'rp' - strategic actions as didactic strategy

Another extra ordinary example is the theoretical follow ups which were carried through with the teachers and all participants. Often these events ended up with the teachers conducting monologues; instead of actually giving the participants the opportunity to mutual discuss different topics from the courses (Here an opportunity for communicative action processes actually seems ideal). The later, mutual discussions, seemed to be the purpose, but were not fulfilled. The teacher's monologues can be characterized as putting 'the truth on the table'. Since the participants were not given the opportunity to discuss different topics between themselves, communicative action could not occur. It was also hard to grasp where the line between learning and RPL goes. Giving the participant more opportunity for mutual discussions would probably align more with actually recognizing prior knowledge. One idea could be that the teachers

¹ In the interviews prior to the actual start of the RPL-process only one participant clearly saw assessment as something negative.

actually don't think the participants have the knowledge required to pass the courses. The teachers instead recognize the caring more informal abilities (as in the assessment interviews), and throughout the RPL-process teach what they actually need to know to be able to live up to the goals in the courses. With this said one wonders how much of the participant's prior knowledge is at all recognized.

In the assessment interviews the participants, as discussed above, are perplexed by the idea of freely talking about their experiences and would much rather have more direct questions. When there is actually opportunity to mutual and free discussions in the theoretical follow ups, the teachers does not support it. Instead the teachers actually 'teach' the participants, performing long monologues, almost turning into ordinary lectures. The didactic strategy turns into strategic actions, where the teachers act rather instrumental and non-communicative action oriented. My analysis would from this point of view come to the following conclusion:

- What is recognized in the RPL-process is foremost the personal properties of the participant's - their caring I's. And this is done by a system operating as a caring rationality.
- The formal knowledge, which can be seen in the criteria for what you have to know to pass a course, the participant more or less have to learn. The teachers fulfill this by putting 'the truth on the table', actually teaching the students.

The authentic recognition of the participant's prior knowledge according to the goals in the courses to some extent seems to disappear. RPL become rpl and then rpl.

Unsupervised group processes – the safe haven

We both talk and listen [. . .] I think everyone has been involved [. . .] you bring experiences from work here and discuss it from another angle. You learn by listening to each other and then you grow as a person (GP2)

Even though the education system can be seen as instrumental from the standing point of a caring rationality, there seem to be a movement between system and lifeworld. The RPL-process consists of processes where the participant's lifeworld experiences are being acknowledged. In assessment, mapping and guidance interviews the participant are engaged in a more subjective procedure. One interesting remark is how the participants worked during the unsupervised more intersubjective group processes. Especially one group at times actually seemed to reach communicative action. They were able to follow a more communicative rationality inserting truth, normative rightness and sincerity into the language process (Habermas, 1995). There are so to say a safe haven in the unsupervised groups, were the RPL-process can be scrutinized mutually between the participants. In these group processes the participants can share their experiences and reach consensus, creating self confidence and social integration without the teachers interrupting them, putting the truth on the table. It was also during group process without the teachers where mutual conversations could be used to try to understand and be critical of the RPL-process.

Summary and discussion

The caring I is closely connected to a specific personality, i.e. a quality which cannot be learned or acquired through education. One important aspect made visible in the study is further the idea of having 'human knowledge', gained in practice and which cannot be acquired in education. Being adjustable and unselfish can further be seen in the empirical findings, connected to Skeggs idea of a caring I. Another aspect is the fictional non-caring other as scarecrow, strengthening the caring I. Further it seems as the whole educational system from participant to teacher, teacher to

principal all are acting to take care of each other, avoiding conflict and criticism. I refer to this as a system built on a caring rationality. One more aspect of the caring rationality is the teacher's creation of the wellbeing sphere.

From a Habermasian perspective the participants become cue seekers strategically searching for what the system demand and their life worlds therefore are colonized. In the unsupervised group processes the participants can share their experiences and reach consensus, creating self confidence and social integration without the teachers interrupting them, putting the truth on the table. During these group processes mutual conversations are being used to try to understand and be critical of the RPL-process.

The caring rationality can be compared to Habermas idea of instrumental rationality. The caring rationality and the creation of a wellbeing sphere can be seen as parts of an instrumental education system. We are then referring to a system which is more or less self-regulated. The reason for this is that it's very hard for the participants to express criticism, since conflict is repressed. As Skeggs puts it, the participants would only argue against themselves if they were to be critical. It could result in being seen as not caring (become the scarecrow) and/or disturb the wellbeing sphere.

The criterion for assessing prior learning is clearly stated in the curriculum. Each course has a clear goal and the different levels of grades clearly confirm quite formal what is demanded by the participant. It does not say that you have to be a caring kind person. It instead demands specific rather formal knowledge, the opposite from the caring I which is rather built on personality. And here a big problem occurs since the most important quality throughout the whole RPL-process is a quality which will not be recognized by the RPL and educational systems! The process put more focus on enhancing the personal properties of the participants than actually recognizing their prior knowledge according to the goals in the courses. My argument is therefore that what are recognized in the RPL-process are foremost the participant's personal properties - their caring I's. And this is done by a system operating as a caring rationality. The actual content in the courses, the formal knowledge, the participant more or less have to learn.

This paper has started a discussion concerned with RPL in the health care sector. The study will further advance during the winter of 2008. Deep interviews with all participants and teachers will be carried through and a mutual analyze seminar following the ideas in interactive research will be held in the end of the process. Further Skeggs Foucauldian analysis and Habermas' theory of communicative action does not align on a theoretical level. However, in the future their relationship will be discussed in relation to further findings in the study. Fejes (2008) put forward that Foucault has been criticized for not presenting any tools on how to resist results in the discourse analyzed, in this case the caring I and caring rationality. Can the participants be given tools to resist and criticize the caring rationality or and caring I? Fejes (2008) come to the conclusion that this requires a move from the discursive level to the reality of what actually happens. This is however a question to be pondered upon in the future. Can a foucauldian analysis be brought back into the "reality" and trough Habermas ideas of communicative action create a critical examination of the caring I and caring rationality? In what ways could this enhance and create positive changes in the RPL-process? Is it possible on a theoretical level to argue for this?

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