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# **A situated approach to student's reflection processes**

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## **Abstract**

This paper connects with the conference themes “Vocational Education, Labour Markets and Learning”.

In Denmark the social and health care education is part of the Vocational Education System, which combines school attendance and trainee service in the social and health care sector. Throughout the education, the students are required to reflect upon their own learning processes, and how to combine theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The students are required to document their reflection processes in two formats: 1) log writing and 2) self-evaluation according to a list of endpoint work skills. The log and the list of work skills play a central role as entry point in the teachers' and supervisors' formal learning dialogues with the students.

Based upon an ethnographic field study at a social and health care college, and at the workplaces where students work as trainees, I have observed that some students find it difficult to use the two formats as reflection tools. Based on Lave and Wengers concept of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), different reflection formats are analyzed as “boundary objects” (Engeström, 2003), which support or restrict the students' learning trajectories into the community of the social and health care practice. When the students reject to use some formats or express confusion, the teachers and supervisors conclude that the students' abilities to reflect are insufficient or even missing. Other possible understandings are unfolded in this paper through an analysis. It seems that school-like reflection formats and examination-like settings cause uncertainty, and thus restricts the students' reflection processes. In everyday contexts, the students spontaneously initiate reflection processes using other types of boundary objects. These contexts and boundary objects are characterized by informality, emotional experiences and aesthetic modes of expression. Based on an analysis of these situations, I discuss and argue that a main educator skill is to recognize students' diverse expressions of confusion, curiosity and commitment as situated starting points of reflection.

## **Introduction**

The social and health care sector in Denmark, like many other public organization in Western countries, meet demands for improved efficiency combined with increased complexity in job tasks and a reduced budget (Ellström, Ekholm and Ellström, 2008). Organizational changes, new procedures as well as new technologies are an everyday occurrence according to leaders and employees in the social and health care sector.

Social and health care students face these challenges, as a major part of their training is taking place at elder care homes, and in home help divisions combined with school attendance. Several didactical and organizational actions are undertaken to facilitate the students' learning trajectories across organizational boundaries. Reflective practice is one of them, and the students are required to combine practical experiences and theoretical knowledge by means of reflection. In recent literature on reflection in health care professions, reflection processes are regarded as an integral part of the learning and building a professional identity, integrating theory and the practice from the outset (Mann, Gordon and MacLeod, 2009).

A key requirement in the Danish social and health care education is that the students reflect upon their own learning processes, their learning style, and how to combine theoretical knowledge and practical skills. To enhance reflection skills students are mainly offered two formats; 1) log writing and, 2) a list of work skills which should be reached by the end of the educational program. Furthermore, the students are throughout their education frequently by their teachers and supervisors asked to reflect.

As shown in Danish research on assessment in vocational education (Tanggaard and Elmholdt, 2008), requirements for the students' reflection and the formats to support the reflection processes, places the learning process within the individual. Excluding the social context from the student's reflection processes, places any inadequate reflection within the student as a consequence, and the students are subsequently categorized as more or less skilled or motivated for reflection.

I will here argue that a situated perspective is a more productive and supportive unit of analysis, in order to understand the students' reflection processes. From a situated perspective, reflection is not just an individual skill to be improved. Reflection is a situated practice, which can be supported by "being 'made visible' and a part of the official language and agenda of working life" (Elström, 2006, p. 51). Elström notes, that a number of studies have shown, that there is substantial creativity and space for reflective activities in many kinds of work processes. However, many organizations tend to drive out reflection processes from the official arena and into a 'shadow system' of the organization, or even outside the workplace itself.

From a situated perspective, following the aspect of visibility, the research questions asked in this paper is:

What kinds of reflection processes are visible at the social and health care college, and in care work?

Which elements are present at students' reflection processes?

Is which ways do these elements restrict or promote students' reflection processes?

## **Literature review**

In the 1980s, the research literature closely linked reflection to action in everyday workplace settings and in education. Schön published *The reflective practitioner* (1983) and Kolb integrated the notion of reflection in a cyclic model of experiential learning based on Dewey, Lewin and Piaget (Kolb, 1984). Although these theories involve the individual's interaction with the environment, the perspectives are primary individualistic (Højrup and Elkjær, 2006).

Lave and Wenger's book *Situated learning* (1991) provided the research field on practice-based learning with the analytical concepts of "legitimate peripheral participation" and "communities-of-practice". These concepts emphasizes that learning is socially constructed interactive processes inseparable from working. From a situated learning perspective, reflection is mainly a matter of interpreting the

cultural norms and codes, in order to develop a professional identity, and less a matter of applying theory to practice.

Looking for reflection processes as an integrated part of everyday work and teaching, the analytical concepts of “boundary crossing” and “boundary objects” are suitable as well. The students transfer knowledge and skills while crossing organizational boundaries between school, the workplaces, and their private lives, and “the very process of such transfer involves active interpreting, modifying and reconstructing the skills and knowledge.” (Engeström and Tuomi-Gröhn, 2003, p. 4).

In Denmark the theories of situated and practice-based learning, boundary crossing and boundary objects are in particular applied and developed in research on vocational education. Vocational students are crossing organizational boundaries between school and the workplaces during their education. From a situated perspective, this boundary crossing is not (just) a question of transferring theoretically knowledge from school to practical work tasks at the workplace. It is mainly a question of different forms of participation, cultures and identity work (Tanggaard, 2007). Boud (2003) has asserted that the growing emphasis on reflection in education, acknowledges that the development of a professional identity is part of students’ learning throughout the courses of their study. Regarding reflection as a key element in building a professional identity, reflection is aimed at (much) more than imposing theory to an actual task or recognizing your own learning style.

A literature review on reflective practice in health care professions note, that despite reflection being a main topic in health care education, the research literature is dispersed over several fields, including education, nursing and psychology. Furthermore, the evidence to support curricular interventions concerning reflection remains largely theoretical (Mann, Gordon and MacLeod, 2009, p. 596). The conclusions of the review are (p. 608):

“Across all of the diverse settings and methods, it appears that the most influential elements in enabling the development of reflection and reflective practice are a supportive environment, both intellectually and emotionally; an authentic context; accommodation for individual differences in learning style; mentoring; group discussion; support; and, free expression of opinion.”

Recent studies on reflection stress the importance of seeking a better understanding of how reflection and developmental learning takes place in practice. Another key research task is to seek a better understanding of how reflective practices can be supported (Ellström, 2010).

The present study should therefore be regarded as a contribution to empirical based knowledge on ‘visible’ reflection with an emphasis on actual and potential supportive elements, regarding the reflection situation as a whole.

### **Research method**

The study’s overall research theme is restrictive and enabling elements in reflection in the field of social and health care education. The study is carried out as an ethnographic field study, combined with semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The fieldwork was situated at a social and health care college, and at

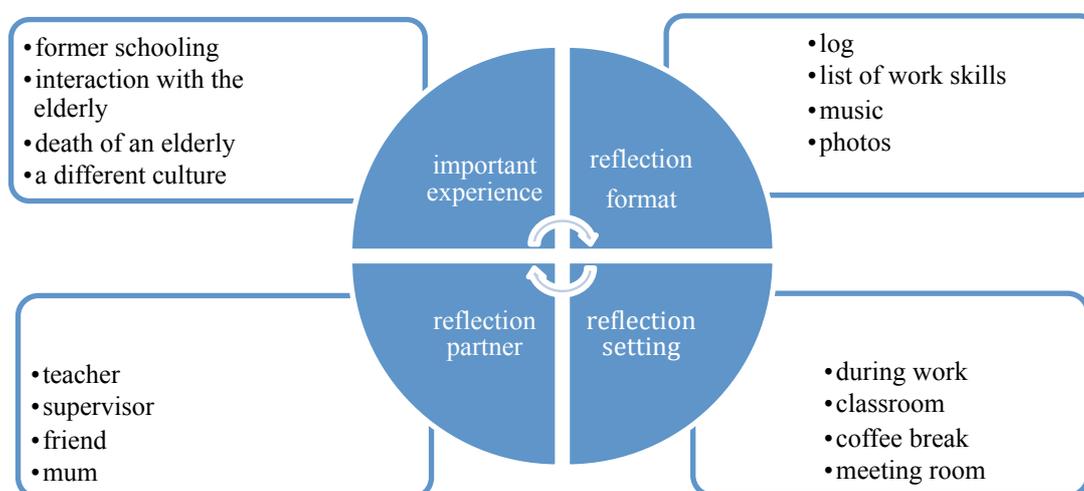
workplaces, where students worked as trainees.

The transcribed interviews and the field notes were analyzed using a Grounded Theory-approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) evolved Grounded Theory as a methodology to systematically generate theory from empirical data. From a Grounded Theory-point-of-view, the researcher is looking for patterns, processes, and interaction and accordingly pays less attention to individuals (Willig, 2001). Thus, the analysis presented in this paper is based on 'situations', as the units of analysis and not the single student and his or her ability or disability to reflect. Comparing a variety of situations in a specific field, Grounded Theory aims to conceptualize what is going on in the data. The theory building emerges during the research process as a product of continuously interaction between data generation and analysis (Goulding, 2002). According to Grounded Theory, a theory is always provisory and linked to a specific empirical field. The 'theory' in Grounded Theory is a set of probability statements, or an integrated set of conceptual hypotheses developed from empirical data. Existing theories are important elements, which serve to sensitize the researcher to patterns and categories in the empirical data. According to this strategy, the data collection continues on for a year, alternated with periods of literature studies and analysis. Presently, I have conducted field studies approximately once a week for eight month, and more field studies are planned in the months to come.

A preliminary 'open coding' of the empirical data as prescribed in the Grounded Theory-methodology, showed extensive discourses and activities concerning reflection. These findings led to further coding processes on different categories of reflection situations along with literature studies on reflection in educational as well as in workplace contexts.

## Findings and discussions

The empirical findings are categorized into four elements as illustrated below. The figure indicates that all four elements are present at all observed reflection processes. The four elements do not occur in a fixed order, and some elements are more prominent than others, differing in each situation. The following analysis unfolds the four elements by the means of the empirical findings.



### *Important experiences*

The students, who find it difficult to reflect in the required ways, are telling almost identical stories about their former schooling. Conflicts with teachers and feelings of social or academic insufficiency play a leading role in the stories. A teacher at the social and health care college puts it this way:

They are skilled at telling stories about their skill deficiencies.

The social and health care education is a turning point to some of these students. The teacher at the college notice a qualitative change in student's self image after the first internship period:

If it turns out well and they do not drop out, they come back to school with more self-esteem. They get so much from the interaction with the elderly. Of course they are good at something, and they learn to tell a different story about themselves.

Experiences of being good at something do not imply that the students always know how to handle the situations, and the students express several concerns of "doing the right thing". These concerns can be understood as reflective starting points, focusing mainly on the interaction with the care recipient and the actual work task. One especially important issue to the students is death of an elderly. The following statement from a student illustrates this theme very well:

I asked my teacher at school if we could talk about death prior to internship, but my teacher said: it almost never happens. Then after one week together with my supervisor, I am turning over an elderly lady in her bed, and then she died, just like that! My supervisor told me to go outside and get some fresh air and collect myself. I had never seen a dead person before, and I was scared doing something wrong. To the relatives it just happens once. It can't be undone.

The student's important experience is told at an intermediate meeting for all the students in the district, arranged by the municipality educational unit. It can be interpreted as a starting point for a mutual reflection process, but the reflection format is an on-by-one inquiry, and no one volunteers as a reflection partner.

If students do not have important experiences to enable a reflection process, they often seek them out. A teacher encourages students to visit different kinds of workplaces, and to talk with specialists during the project work at school. Alternatively, she invites specialists to the classes, or makes the students exchange experiences with each other.

### *Reflection format*

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, log writing and a list of endpoint work skills are the main reflection format offered the students. Students are not introduced to log writing during classes, and the supervisors at the workplaces have different opinions on the log. This dialogue at an introductory meeting illustrates the ambiguity of the log:

Supervisor: Then there is the log writing (laughs). How do you feel about it?  
Student: Fine.  
Supervisor: Are you doing log writing?  
Student: (Pause) No.

Supervisor: I don't insist that you do it because there is so much writing to do in your weekly assignments. But you can write something about an elderly, what is good and bad, and why it is so.

Student: Yes. I have a hard time with the log, because it's not a dairy.

It seems that this conversation does not initiate the student's log writing, as the supervisor is not convinced of its utility and do not know how to inspire the student.

The list of endpoint work skills is part of the official curriculum, and therefore not a discussion topic like the log. The students must meet all requirements on the list to pass, and the list defines the intermediate and the final interviews with the student during internship. However, the list is to some degree also associated with uncertainty. A workplace supervisor puts it this way:

Our workdays are busy, and the tasks changes all the time. It is difficult to know if the student has been through it all. Sometimes I feel; wow, it's a lot.

The supervisor finds it difficult to interpret some phrases on the list, and asks rhetorically: What do they *mean*? A majority of the students ask the same. A student at his introductory meeting is asked about his expectations:

Of course, I expect to pass all the 47 learning objectives (flips the folder at random)

In fact, there are nine learning objectives, which he is fully aware of. His statement can be interpreted as an ironically attitude towards the quantity of paper that piles up. Later the same day, he shows me the documents he has received during his first two weeks of internship:

I guess there are two kilograms. I haven't read any of it, except the municipal organization chart, 'cause it helps me where to look for a job.

A supervisor tells me, that she has never met a student who liked the log. She compares the log with the assessment interviews, and the problem is, that the students feel trapped:

They feel that once they have written it, they must defend it and be able to explain. It's just like the assessment interviews; they are so focused on doing it right. But, it is about reflection, it's not about wrong or right, it's not about what *I* want from them.

One very effective way to liberate the student from the feeling that they must account for everything they say or write is to focus on other reflections formats. These formats pops up all the time, and are characterized by experiments and aesthetic means of expressions. The students take pictures with their mobile phones, they find songs that capture a specific feeling, and some of them even paint or record songs themselves. A teacher notes:

One of my students did her internship in England, and there she got a badge and a diploma, which I circulated in the class. And then, we talked about conditions for elder people in England, and what you get from meeting a different culture.

Another teacher often plays music at class as a means to involve emotions, and the students are inspired by the reflection format:

We have had this subject on psychiatry and the next day one of my student brought a cd with Gnags [a famous Danish band]. He told me that the subject reminded him of this song and he had printed the lyrics for me. It complemented the subject perfectly! And of course I put it on at once, and we all listened to the song and talked about the lyrics.

The teachers are aware that these students' are sharing important experiences, and jump to reflection opportunities involving everyone in the classroom. The aesthetic expressions are not considered arbitrary or private, but are taken to the core of the subject at class and didactically used. Another main effect is that the students are appreciated for their contribution, and they respond by being more inclined to go beyond the right-or-wrong-dichotomy.

### *Reflection setting*

As analyzed in the previous parts reflection processes are often initiated in settings characterized by informality, where the reflection intention is not explicitly verbalized. In fact a formal setting can restrict reflection. Once during internship a teacher from school visits the workplace and meet with the student and the supervisor. Once in a while the student does not thrive, and a teacher finds it difficult to spot:

I just wonder why the students don't say anything until the meeting is over. Sometimes they are completely mute. The students don't dare touching it. They believe that they must get along with their supervisor or they will not pass. They do everything they can to fit in and don't ask for too much.

However, formal meetings can be fruitful settings for reflection. A manager views the student's and the employee's reflection as integrated. She is inspired by Tom Kitwood's concept of person-centered care, which highlights the importance of the person with dementia rather than the disease process itself. She organizes the staff meetings as mutual reflections processes within a framework of person-centered care, asking questions such as: What is best for the elderly in your group? How can we understand this specific elderly who cries all the time? Kitwood's concept has framed all staff meetings for more than a year now:

The students attend these meetings as well. I don't require anything except from attendance. My intensions are that they become curious along the way, because this concept is useful everywhere.

A formal educational setting can enhance reflection as well. A student, who has just attended an optional course on conflict resolution tells, that she especially benefitted from the forum theatre; an interactive style of theatre offering the participant to explore the possibilities, and share stories in a supportive environment:

Maybe one third of our training is about facts, and the rest is personal judgments. Working with people, conflicts arise all the time. I have read about communication, but the hands-on-course gave me a much deeper understanding of my interaction with colleges and the elderly. The drama exercises offered us the opportunity to test different expressions prior to real interactions.

At the beginning of the course, she was very shy and rejected to participate. The teacher told her that it was okay, but after a while she couldn't resist taking part because she really wanted to contribute. She stresses the voluntary aspect, and the fact that there were no right and wrong.

### *Reflection partner*

As analyzed above, some students associate the teacher and the work place supervisor with ambiguity. Students are required to ask questions and "wonder", but throughout my observations it remains unclear who is going to facilitate the students' wonderings. Some supervisors themselves find it difficult to account for their actions, and are anxious to do everything "right" just like the students. They often express their concerns about the student reaching all the learning objectives, and they feel they are in a hurry. Reflection processes in the student-supervisor-interaction often occur during work tasks if a student for instance feels uncomfortable and asks the supervisor if they can try something else. A supervisor reflects on her role as reflection partner:

It is not enough just to show the student how to make the bed, or help the elderly to the toilet. I must ask the student questions, and pay attention to learning opportunities all the time. Questions that initiate learning processes could be: How can I make use of the elderly's own resources? How can I talk to the elderly while doing the care work?

One of the most effective reflection partners is in fact the situation and the care recipient. A teacher notes:

In practical work tasks, the students get directly feedback from what they see. When they measure blood glucose and it is too high, they simultaneously observe that the elderly feels very bad.

Though the situation and the elderly offer instant feedback, is it not enough to facilitate reflection. Students often use reflection partners from outside the educational context when feelings of insecurity or loneliness occur. A young student tells me:

I've been taking care of her for several weeks and she was getting worse every day. One day she suddenly grabbed my wrist and said: "Out". I was so scarred. I talked to my mum and she said: "Maybe she meant that she wanted to get out of her life. You wouldn't know. But don't take it personal."

### *Reflection on being a learner or on becoming a professional*

Reflection aimed at the student as a learner seems to be the less inspiring theme to the students, and to the supervisors and managers at the workplaces as well. A manager at a nursing home criticizes the requirements for student's reflection skills for being too abstract:

The demands are either too high or too low. The students are supposed to specify their own learning style. Nobody can do that! Nor are they able to set their own learning objectives. Who is able to do that anyway? You can't set yourself to challenging learning objectives in the midst of your training. Somebody with an overview must do that for you.

According to this manager, the student's reflection processes should focus on work tasks and communication:

What is really demanding is reflection in the sense of being curious, critical, looking from different angles, and asking questions. These kinds of reflection skills should be trained. If you reflect in that sense, then you are able to really *see* the needs of the elderly.

Learning styles and learning objectives are abstract ideas detached from daily work

tasks at the nursing home. The main learning objective focuses on the care recipient. The field observations support this point-of-view. During the first weeks of internship, a compulsory introductory meeting is held with the student and the workplace supervisor. Some of the obligate themes at these meetings are the student's favorite learning style, her expectations, and her learning objectives of the internship course. At all the observed meetings the students reply, in different terms, that they just want to get started.

A student tells me that she qualifies for a job as a nurse assistant, and after that "her life can get started". Others tell me that if they ever pass this exam they "will never attend any training again". In general the students do not associate self-reflection with being learners, and the learning discourse does not facilitate reflection, as there is no important experience to initiate it. However, most of the students emphasize self-reflection as a key competency, and they do associate self-reflection with their development towards a professional identity and of being competent.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of this paper was to examine students' reflection processes at the social and health care college and at the workplaces, by the means of the situation as a unit of analysis. Looking at both formal and informal reflection settings and formats, it is argued that reflection is not just an individual skill to be trained. The analysis shows that four central elements are present at all the observed reflection processes. Reflection opportunities are present in many different situations at school and at the workplace, and could be initiated by an important experience, by a reflection partner, using different formats and taking place in different settings. The important experience can be unintended as a sudden death of an elderly, or it can be intentionally sought out. Teachers and supervisors are important reflection partners with the power to restrict or promote the students' reflection. Moreover, a reflection partners can be an elderly or somebody from outside the formal learning context as a friend or parent. Equally the reflection formats at hand, e.g. the mobile phone or a piece of music is mediating the reflection process, as well as formal formats as the log. The reflection process is often supposed to take place in formal settings as a meeting room, and that do happen once in a while. However students quite often associate the formal formats and the formal settings with a test situation and turn to a right-or-wrong-dichotomy. Thus the informal settings and formats support a more experimental and free approach in the students' interaction with the learning contents. Looking for reflection opportunities as an integral part of everyday life at school and the at the workplaces reflection is placed outside the individual and enables the teachers, supervisors and managers to consider themselves reflection partners in diverse settings, using diverse reflection formats and drawing on or seeking out important experiences.

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