

Us and SME

When we were invited to participate in this conference, we were not aware of the SME aspect. We cannot contribute that much with experiences with SME, or that is with experience with employees within SME. Our experience with SME is somewhat different, as I will tell you about later. In spite of the focus we choose to participate anyway in this conference – mainly because we would like to know more about VPL in Holland and the SME perspective in order to be able to inform our network at home and to develop new ideas. We hope that this will be acceptable for everybody.

Who are we?

Danish Adult Education Association (DAEA) - in Danish DFS

DFS is a non-profit association for the liberal adult education organisations and other associations within the concept of liberal adult education. The council distributes government grants to study associations and schools and follows up and evaluates the activities. The council also surveys liberal adult education's policy and coordinates international contacts.

At the moment the council priorities are: citizenship/democracy and realcompetences.

In Denmark lifelong learning is divided into:

- The qualifying and formal system, where the students get an exam.
- The non-qualifying or non-formal education.

Liberal adult education belongs to the last group.

I'm a boardmember of DFS and is working as head of secretary in the Day Highschool Organisation, which organises about 40 Day High Schools. I also participate in a Nordic network working with evaluation methods and finally but not the least I participate in a group within the DFS, where we work with realcompetences. I will now tell you about the experiences within this group.

Experience within VPL

DFS has during the last year been working with realcompetences, that is: what you are capable of - not only VPL but the whole process towards validation/recognition. Approximately 20 people from our member organisations have cooperated in developing strategies to make non-formal and in-formal learning visible in the context of liberal adult learning and other non-formal learning arenas. Due to this work the liberal adult learning has obtained a keyrole in the policy paper made by the Danish Government concerning "Recognition of Prior Learning within the education system". I'm the chairman of a

governmental group, whose aim is to develop a standard for documentation of non formal and in formal learning. This work must be completed within a year.

In the field of liberal adult education we focus broadly on realcompetences/prior learning. Validation is a perspective, that we as a whole do not deal with. Our strength lies in being in the arena of non formal learning. That means that we can focus on the perspective of the participants. We can prepare our courses considering the perspective of the participants, the individual needs of learning and learning methods, because we are not tied up by curriculums or defined goals of learning. This is our contribution to lifelong learning. Therefore it is essential to us that we maintain the non-formal aspect within our organisations.

As we see it, the following aspects are all relevant in the context of Realcompetences:

- Personal consciousness-raising
- Description/making visible
- Informal/personal recognition
- Documentation
- Tests
- Validation/formal recognition towards objectives of formal education

Within the context of liberal adult education we look upon realcompetences as lying in the field between personal consciousness- raising and documentation, where as validation/formal recognition are perspectives, we only relate to as an opportunity for our participants.

In our context the perspective in relationship to self consciousness as a human being and citizen and in relation to SME and other sorts of enterprise, are as relevant as the perspective in relationship to the formal educational system.

In our opinion validation is to take place outside our system. In DFS we think it would be best to have these validation/recognition centres as independent centres. In the governmental plan I told you about before, the plan is to let schools within the formal system take care of the validation. We fear that this can lead to problems with objectivity (don't let rabbits carry carrots). We prefer independent centres that can use the experts from the formal system.

The member organisations within DFS have some experience which are relevant to prior learning and SME's, but no experience, when it comes to dealing with recognition of realcompetences in relationship to employees of SME's. The relevant examples we have deal with longer courses on day-highschools and similar projects where the aim is to get people jobs. Typically we talk about unemployed people, who are made conscious of their competences during a course and afterwards are able to use the competences acquired in the nonformal or informal learning arena in their job.

Some examples

This example is from a course in the western part of Jutland – in a day-highschool for immigrants (most of these immigrants come from countries outside Europe). All the immigrants had considerable working experiences from their homeland or from DK, but had also been unemployed for a long period previous to this school stay.

The course was organized with an opening part, one or several practical experiences with follow ups in the school and hereafter an ordinary job or a supported job (jobs where the employers are subventioned by the government) with promises to get an unsupported job after the subvention period. The majority got ordinary work after the first period of practical experience, because of the network created to the SME's during the practical period. For some they had to try several times.

The leader of the course used a document of realcompetences, developed within the framework of Liberal Adult education in Norway, as starting point for the description of the realcompetences of these participants (we don't call them pupils or students). We are talking about an internet based document, which contains a variety of supportable questions. The participants were very delighted with this process and grew conscious of competences, that they did not see valuable before. Many participants returned more than once to this document to add things that they've gotten conscious of, or just to improve the description of their competences.

The leader supplied for the training place and functioned as a consultant to the participants. He very much used the knowledge of his participants, which he received from their documents, to match the potential applicants and employers and to "sell" the potential applicant to relevant SME's.

The leader experienced that the SME's were very reluctant in matters of even seeing the documents, I mentioned before. Only to a very narrow extent they were interested. The most successful documentation consisted in two pictures. An Iranian engineer, who had taken two pictures, had for a period been working as a mechanic in Turkey, and the pictures represented a car that he had repaired from A to Z - from wreck to a suitable car. His whole jobinterview related to these two pictures, that proved him to be a skilled craftsman, and he got the job.

Some of the folk high schools have similar experiences with projects describing competences. As part of the project they have asked selected "buyers" – SME's and formal educational systems – about their wishes as to descriptions and documentations of realcompetences. The answers from the SME's were clear: 'we are interested in knowing about the competences of the applicant and how he/she can describe them concretely with examples'. But they are definitively not interested in more paper.

This is interesting. In relation to SME's the issue is not about loads of documentation. It can be useful, as my story about the engineer tells us, to use a few number of documents, that make the competences, which are relevant to the job, visible (the pictures of the car before and after). The selection of documents are as important as the collection of documentation. A job applicant must be able to choose the right documentation for the

right job interview – to select between a variety of documents. It is necessary to distinguish between a workportfolio and a portfolio made for presentation.

Description and documentation can on the other hand be used in a process of reflection, which enlarges the consciousness of the individual and the ability to describe own competences. A portfolio can therefore be of significant value in a job situation, as a fundament and background for the applicant.

Another examples

A day highschool in the northern part of Jutland practices an opening description of realcompetences, when the participants start their course. The participants in this course are refugees, who have been in Denmark for maximum 3 years. The course consists of opening classes in Danish, and society related subjects together with a description of the realcompetences of each individual. In the light of the description of the realcompetences the participant attend training places in one of the 10 SME's, with which the school have a regular agreement of providing training places. The training is organized in a way, so that it considers the description of realcompetences of each participant and those are afterwards being evaluated, with the purpose of strengthening and varying the description. The refugee normally has the opportunity to have several training places, that contributes to the strengthening of the description of realcompetences in several ways – in a Danish context. In the light of their course, the description of realcompetences and the training places, an individual plan of learning is issued together with the participant. The plan of learning aims at strengthening the possibilities for the refugee to start a formal education or a job. The description of realcompetences functions both as a basis of realcompetences and documentation (on the level of references) in a Danish context and as basis of a learning process. The experiences from this course are quite good in the aspects of integration both into the community and into the jobmarket.