

studien zur berufs- und weiterbildung
studies in vocational and continuing education
band / vol. 1

**social competences
in vocational and
continuing education**

antony lindgren &
anja heikkinen (eds)

peter lang

Introduction

The Revival of the Social in Vocational and Continuing Education

The publication you are holding in your hand is the joint result of the annual meeting of the Vocational Education and Culture research network. Most of the texts have their origin in the conference held in Arvidsjaur, in the northern Sweden, during August 16-18, 2001. The working title of the conference was Social Competence and Learning: a Relation Causing Many Questions.

In 2001 social competence was strongly making its entry into educational discourse and policies in most European countries. One could have anticipated the upcoming of the term by randomly glimpsing management magazines like *Head-hunter*, *Timejob*, *Finans Tidningen* (Lindgren 1999) at airports, when moving in the environment of the business people. The agenda of educational debates in 2001 was much more about life-long learning than about social competence. One could hesitate, whether the discussion on social competence would be just an ephemeral phenomenon or something more long lasting. However, the concept had raised that much interest in our network that it was chosen as the theme for the conference in Arvidsjaur.

Social competences did have a crucial role in the international search of generic, over-arching skills, key qualifications and core competences in vocational education and work research already in the 1970s. By the end of 1990s, with the active intervention bodies like the EU, discussion on social competence gained new momentum also from the objectives of social cohesion and integration, because of their importance for the functioning of globalising market economy and industries. In addition, the closer connection to the concept of social

capital tended to transform the previous meanings of social competences in educational discourse.

Why the term social competence is considered so important? In order to question, why did it happen now and not earlier and who are the advocates of the term, we may need to specify, what is meant by it. We may take the concept of social competence as representing something real or consider it to be rhetoric. Taking it as real, we may go on asking, why it is important, but the question of who is advocating it becomes marginal and uninteresting. Being sceptical about the concept, we may go directly to asking, where it comes from and who are propagating it, and jump over the question about what is meant by it, because in a critical perspective it is not so interesting.

In the context of research, which is focusing on social phenomena, reflections on concept like social competences inevitably link to fundamental questions about the nature of such research itself. For a sceptical social scientist, social competence is one of the obvious terms, which every now and then become suddenly reinvented. Have people not always been socially competent and is not 'the social' the fundament of social sciences? To imagine people not being social and a society where they need not be socially competent, leads to "contradictio in adjecto" – a self-contradicting definition, which is not a sign of a good research.

The dominant interpretations of social competences, however, seem in fact to be derivatives of the concept of social capital in economics and economical theory, where 'the social' functions as an instrument in the individual life politics in the same way as it does in the global markets. Accordingly, individuals engage with externally given society, which provides them with resources and experiences. Their optimising choices lead to their own personal evolution and as an aggregated outcome also to the evolution of the society. 'The social' as solidarity, caring and ethical concern and respect for equality and difference do not belong to the competences of the enterprising self.

The importance of social competences as social phenomena may not lie in their being real or not, but on the real consequences they have. The tendency of researchers in education and social sciences to adopt a pragmatic view to social competence allows them to leave more fundamental questions dealing with the sociology of knowledge

aside. This means to exclude, even before the investigation has started, important aspects of the topic, which would give clues to understanding ‘the social’ more widely.

Being faithful to the spirit of the VET and culture research network, instead of committing to a single right view of social competences, we have wished to keep the discussion alive. Therefore, if you are critical about the concept, you may be interested in hearing about the different definitions given to it, because it helps you better to locate their advocates and understand the reasons for their propagation. On the other hand, if you are positive about it, you may get new ideas about the constitution of the concept and improve the epistemological basis of your research and for your attempts to define it.

In the first chapter of Antony Lindgren, based on his introduction to the conference, the shortcomings of a strictly pedagogical perspective on VET – even by the progressive pedagogues – is discussed. This has to do with the inherent vague character of pedagogy as a social science, easily making it an instrument in changing society, without reflecting on society. It is a sociological critique of pedagogy but as well a critique of sociology in the shape of – primarily but not exclusively – American pragmatism, of taking society as given. His point of view is that pedagogues and sociologists of education should instead make society “a problem” by asking: what is a good society? In that way we still can be progressive VET researchers.

In 2003, one could be astonished about the sudden entry of social competence into educational discourse. Lorenz Lassnigg suggests in his contribution that the OECD introduced the concept in 1976. Maybe this is one of the success stories of the OECD? It is not long ago it had succeeded in establishing learning instead of education as the prime agenda of educational policy in the western countries and in twisting the concept of life-long learning, firstly introduced by the UN in 1967 (Harney et al. 2002) into learning in a context of employability, which was one of the priorities of the Lisbon meeting of the EU in 2000.

In his contribution Matthias Vonken traces the meaning of the concept competence back to Schleiermacher and other German philosophers of education in the 18th century and suggests ability to represent its core meaning. While social competence is a notoriously

vague concept having multitude of definitions, Vonken's contribution leads one to question about the possibility of finding a permanent core meaning of the concept. Would a post-modern counter-argument be that it is always contextually defined?

Beatrice Niemeyer is showing in her chapter that the talk about social competence and key qualifications is contextually, socially over-determined. E.g. men have, at least in Germany, been considered skilled while women's key qualifications, like being social or having social competences, have been character attributes. Thus in the spirit of radical feminism of the 1970s, one could ask, whether the demand of social competence is in fact an expression of the feminisation of working life and of the changed contract between family and labour.

Liv Mjelde turns to these questions in her chapter, which discusses women printers and how they have become successful due to the change of technology. Thus she is challenging the theses of the feminist research and Harry Braverman about the de-skilling of industrial work.

The chapter of Håkon Hoest and Svein Michelsen is also dealing with gender, when they discuss the transformations in education for nursing occupations. They show how the training of auxiliary nurses used for long to be contextualised to the occupational and wider cultural context, and when it was decontextualized, problems started to occur. While earlier auxiliary nurses used to be recruited from housewives or experienced practitioners of the lower middle classes, adult education became a well-functioning solution. After the unifying reforms of the upper secondary vocational education and training in Norway in 1994, in names of equality, lots of turbulence and recruitment problems have emerged in the new programmes. The expectations of the new, young students are conditioned by success in general education and in this education they experience a loss of status. The question to all of us is then: who will nurse us in our old age?

Rudolf Husemann is also concerned of the age, when discussing the future of adult education within the German context. While in the beginning of the 1970s, being old indicated 55 years of age, nowadays it is 45-50. At the same time the provision of adult education has been focussing on the economic and professional aspects of life, and the older people prioritising *Bildung* in their choice of courses are slowly

driven out of the adult education. In connection to life-long learning, Husemann discusses Schleiermacher's critique of dualisms, like individual and her/his environment, and his favouring of procedural education as well as Humboldt's focus on education through life course. These notions indicate that social competences, related to 'the social' may remain important and constructive for people in all ages.

While most papers focus on single countries Philipp Gonon tries in his chapter to get a grip of the convergence in the vocational systems in Europe, by discussing Switzerland and England as cases. Based on interviews of educational-policy makers, he starts by noticing that the reforms in vocational education in both countries are based on similar concerns – e.g. the gap between general and vocational education. This shows that there is a convergence at least in the rhetoric, where Europe functions as a common reference, acting like a mirror. Even if according to Maastricht agreement there is no need to do this, both countries attempt to comply the guidelines of the EU commission. Europe works as an instrument in tracing common problems and supporting the convergence.

The chapter of Katrin Kraus may show the link between discussion on social competences and convergence of vocational education and training: the fundamental role of employability. She shows how the discourse of employability is related to changes in working life, the demise of taylorism and the ascendance of post-fordism. Even if in this new less structured working life the employees are expected to be more self-directed, management does not want to loose control over them. Therefore virtues become important as controlling device. By controlling the quality of your personality e.g. making yourself into an entrepreneur of your own labour it is possible to establish a generic control of people in the working life.

Through description of Austrian reforms in vocational education and training, Lorenz Lassnigg is discussing the role of new concepts like social competence and social capital in relation to the reforms. By distinguishing between human capital as an individual feature and social capital as a result of the collective he reflects on the role of schools in the forming of social capital. Schools as central social institutions might generate social capital by promoting social competence as one of the necessary key competences – beside self-competence

and technical competence – of the individuals in the future society. Reflecting against the Austrian background Lassnigg says this means social capital, which does not emerge at the community level, as perceived before, but which develops in the institutional setting led by the state. His conclusion is that this will rather lead to more bureaucratic and managerial conceptions in developing educational systems than to alternative views of the competences needed.

In the next chapter a case study at a Swedish upper-secondary school is presented. Here the way a vocational teacher perceives vocational skills is studied: how s/he views the relationship between theory and practice in IVET. It turns out to be a limited view on “theory” – as work technique – theory integrated in the context of work. The significance of school is also stressed in promoting the social competence of the pupils.

In her chapter Anja Heikkinen brings together many of the themes discussed by others. She discusses primarily occupations and vocational education in relation to social capital, employability and gender. In recent reforms of vocational education and training and related discourse, social competence is perceived as individual social capital, and economically defined. This goes together with the working – life becoming increasingly de-occupationalised. Instead of occupational skills, the main focus of vocational education has moved to generic skills, like social competences. At the same time gender is redefined in a post-modern way leading to an ideal of a hybrid portfolio identity, which combines the traditionally conceived social competence of the women – now for the organization family – with the instrumental rational masculinity. In a historical view on industrial relations this corresponds to transformation of competences and skills as marketable attributes of flexible characters in a market based society. Anja Heikkinen brings the threads together in picturing the self-contradictory society of today being less social than before: thus, does the world continue to become Americanised – a society where your only value and right to exist depends on your market value?

As editors we also want to make a remark on the style of this publication. The chapters are based on oral presentations, intended for debate and discussion and this shows in them to a different degree. Many of them have revised and turned more into individual literary products.

Still some have a striking oral character. Take this into account when you read them. Furthermore, the all authors speak from their experience as researchers and as citizens of their countries. The reader may well make comparisons between and generalizations from the national characterizations, but a fundamental principle of the VET and culture network is not to promote convergence into a common opinion and policy.

We like to thank all the networkers for the patience they have shown during the editing process, which took so long because of our academic and other duties. Thanks to the sponsors The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary foundation and to the people of Arvidsjaur, who seemed all to be mobilised to make the atmosphere of the conference most friendly and supportive. And lastly we hope you will have a good time in reading.

Baktsjaur and Orivesi, November 2003

References

- Harney, K. & Heikkinen, A. & Rahn, S. & Schemmann, M. (eds.) 2002. *Life-long learning: one focus, different systems*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Lindgren, A. 1999. *Om samhällstillståndet 1999*. Sociologiska småskrifter. Arbetsvetenskap. Luleå tekniska universitet.