Translation of work experience into a Diploma of Public Administration, BA

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Translation of work experience into a Diploma in Public Administration, BA

The paper presents a case where an autodidact applicant is awarded a certificate for a complete diploma degree programme in public administration. This is a supplementary education at BA level. The case represents a rare occurrence in Danish validation of prior learning practice, although legislation opened for the possibility of recognising competences corresponding to a complete degree as early as in 2008. As it were, the validation of prior learning (VPL) sent shockwaves through the environment surrounding the degree programme, and attracted huge attention among administrative workers when the validation was mentioned in their professional journal.

It would therefore be fair to ask, how did an applicant manage to get a degree certificate at BA level through a VPL? I would like to address this question by analysing the case through an actor–network approach, including following the applicant through the VPL, looking at the actor–networks that were in evidence, and pointing out significant transformations in the process, including in particular the applicant’s translation of work experience into academic standards.

The discussion paper is based on the insight I gained through my participation as student counsellor, conversations with other people involved at VIA University College Supplementary and Further Education (hereafter VIA), who conducted the validation, and a paper about the experience with the VPL written by the applicant immediately after the validation process.

The case
"For 15-20 years, I have been walking around saying that I was autodidact. Now, I suddenly have a diploma degree." (The applicant quoted in the professional journal HK-Kommunalbladet on 21 April 2016)

In a brief paper, My experience with validation of prior learning, the applicant writes: "My VPL started with conversations with my boss and my trade union representative. They recommended that I have a VPL carried out to have my work experience assessed against a degree programme." The reason was that he was unable to get the salary that corresponded to the job he was actually doing, because this salary level required an academic education in accordance with the collective agreement.

The applicant looked for information on the Internet and contacted the student counsellor at the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration at VIA. He explained that he worked as an administrative officer in a municipal administration. His job was to prepare strategy proposals and proposals for the political decision-making process, management discussions and projects, for instance implementation of financial management systems. He was interested in hearing about the possibilities of VPL.

Asked about his background, he mentioned that after completing upper secondary school with a focus on maths and science, he started studying physics, but abandoned the course, as he wanted to do something else. He worked for about a year in a discount store and then attended a daytime folk high school, where, among other
things, he participated in a writers' workshop. Following a period with unemployment and subsidised work – this was in the 1980s where employment rates were high – he got a job as an office assistant at a private treatment centre for severely overweight people.

After working five months at the centre, he was made deputy director. The centre was successful in their treatments. He handled PR tasks and collaboration with public institutions, prepared presentations and was seconded for a while to hospitals in Norway, where he taught staff and assisted with the development of treatment options. However, due to failing treatment subsidies, the centre went bankrupt. He then applied for work in the public sector and, as he says, "Had to start from the bottom, as I didn't have an education" (conversation with student counsellor).

The student counsellor noticed, among other things, that he handled analytical tasks and communicated in writing, and that he was quickly given responsible functions. In other words, these were signs that he had some of the competences that are acquired at the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration, and that people around him considered him competent. The study counsellor therefore supported the applicant's request for a VPL in relation to the degree programme.

VIA has a procedure for validation of prior learning. Providers of supplementary and further education in Denmark are required to have this. In the main, the procedure follows the European Guidelines. (European Guidelines, 2015, p 14) Step 1 in VIA's procedure is a screening of the applicant. If the screening indicates that the applicant has sufficient competences, you move on to Step 2, where the applicant documents his competences in relation to the learning targets for the degree programme, and Step 3, the assessment of the applicant's competences, aiming at Step 4, where the applicant is awarded a degree certificate.

The applicant passed all four steps. In the end, this took more than a year, because the applicant was busy with a project at work, and because it was difficult to find time for meetings. In reality, the transition between the first three steps is vague. The assessment and compilation of documentation began as early as at the first contact with the student counsellor.

Before I unravel the case further, I will briefly introduce some of the key concepts in the actor–network approach. (Readers who are familiar with actor–network theory can skip the following section.)

**Actor–network approach**

In the actor–network theory, 'actor' denotes something that creates a change (Latour, 2005, p 71). 'Actors' can be both human and non-human (ibid, p 107), and the 'actor' emerges by virtue of relations to other actors (ibid, p 46), hence the designation actor–network. As an example, the Act on Recognition of Prior Learning can be considered an 'actor' in the same way as an 'actant' in a play. In very simplified terms, the Act on Recognition of Prior Learning ends up playing a part in the case because the applicant's boss and trade union representative suggest a VPL as a possibility, and because the applicant and VIA are willing to pursue this. In this way, the Act makes a dramatic difference: The applicant changes from being autodidact to having status as a qualified professional. And he gets paid a higher salary. The Act clearly becomes a non-human actor. This is a simplification because naturally, many other actors are in play in order for the Act to have this role. The interesting thing in this connection is firstly that the actor–network theory offers an analysis strategy in which not only humans, organisations or interest groupings can play a part, but also material things, concepts and rules. Language and texts are also taken into account in an actor–network approach; the applicant's narrative, for instance, becomes a very important part of the basis for the assessment during the screening phase. The narrative is expanded, and new points are highlighted when the applicant retells it again in the
course of the process, and it is transformed when the applicant breaks it up and writes it into more fixed documentation formats, such as a CV. Language, text or social relations, however do not have precedence in an actor–network perspective. The question of what is included in an actor–network must be examined in the concrete network. Thus, it is decided empirically what forms part of the relations that constitute an actor. Secondly, the actor–network perspective has a keen eye for the changes that take place. The applicant gains new status and the narrative is rephrased when it becomes part of new relations. This is designated translations or displacements (ibid p 108). Considerable concept development has taken in relation to the actor–network theory, but the above will suffice in this context. In addition, I will just mention that actor–network theory does not operate with different analysis levels. Instead, it looks at how different planes are intertwined (ibid 177, Hernes, 2008, p 68), for instance, how the applicant's competences are recognised partly by virtue of legislative relations and VIA's organisation, which in other traditions would be divided into an individual, an organisational and a societal analysis level. Finally, I will stress that the ontology of the actor–network theory is processual, and the dynamic formation happens relationally (ibid, p 60).

I will now follow the applicant through the VPL.

The applicant
The applicant worked in a place where the manager and the trade union representative knew about the possibility of validation of prior learning. This is far from being the case everywhere, but in this case, it is probably significant that his work place was employment services department, and that the trade union HK, which backs the applicant and the trade union representative, pays great attention to VPL. And not least the fact that salaries at the workplace were laid down in collective agreements where education was decisive for the salary level. In other words, the actors in the applicant's workplace had special prerequisites for proposing a VPL. Here, we see how the concrete actor–networks in the workplace are of importance to the use of the VPL. Furthermore the human actors were strengthened by involving the VPL, in the sense that it expanded the boss' managerial capacity, enabling her to retain a competent employee, and VPL improved the trade union representative's possibility of securing a salary increase for his union member.

At VIA, an institutional set-up around VPL met the applicant. I will get back to that. He writes: "I experienced that the entire process appeared clear and relatively straightforward." The process included guidance, an introductory meeting and a screening interview, for which the applicant had prepared himself, preparation of documentation: in addition to an ordinary CV, a description of competences as compared to educational targets, and a synopsis based on an issue of his own choosing that was relevant in relation to the degree programme, and finally, an assessment interview taking its starting point in his synopsis. The applicant has this to say about the written documentation:

"Working with the [the description of my competences] meant that I spent a lot of time reflecting on and documenting my current work and previous employment, and placing them in an education-related framework. It was very valuable to me to see my previous jobs and the tasks I have handled there in perspective."

This is not merely a question of the work with prior learning documentation adding value due to the understanding that work experience can be exchanged (Andersson and Fejes, 2005, p 90), as it is translated to fit in in relation to an education. The applicant stresses that, "Overall, I think the process... has been exciting and personally developing." His experience corresponds to what we know from others who have documented their prior learning, i.e. that the perception of oneself changes. However, it
is still worth noticing that the sense of undergoing personal development comes from reflection on the translation. The applicant writes that it was a relatively clear process. When considered as a VPL process, it is quite an extensive course, during which he presented layer upon layer of documentation. Initially, he presented his CV in the form of a life story narrative, which was then unfolded through conversations focusing on selected work fields, and supplemented by the applicant showing written products that he had made earlier. In the second phase, he produced written documentation and had this assessed. In the course of the series of meetings, new participants were added from VIA, first the prior learning coordinator, and for the assessment, also a specialist from the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration, and a person with particular knowledge about prior learning.

One element in the guidance was the review of the learning targets for the degree programme, as the applicant had to document that he was able to meet these. Among other things, the graduate must have knowledge about social science methodology and be able to assess theory and methodology on a scientific theoretical basis. Before the initial meeting, the applicant had therefore read a book on the theory of science and acquainted himself with a number of studies of the employment field, which he presented on his own initiative. Encouraged by guidance and questions at the meetings, the applicant enhanced his self-presentation and documentation by referring to the different places where he had worked, products he had produced, literature he had read.

He was also given another hint: "We want to see if you are able to reflect." He caught on to that and considered the contexts he had been in, consequences of initiatives, and his own actions. In this way, he added further meaning to his narratives. During the first part of the course, an expansion thus takes place in what the applicant brings to the assessment, while at the same time, VIA expands the number of assessing views. However, an adaptation also takes place. The applicant says in his paper:

"The greatest challenge in connection with the VPL was the preparation of a synopsis... After many years in the labour market doing mainly practical work, I think it has been hard to write a synopsis. I have been used to writing for politicians and citizens, where the purpose has been to write complicated cases in a way that could be understood by laymen. It was therefore a great challenge to have to write an 'academic' paper."

The applicant intimates that he was met by a requirement to write an academic paper. To the best of my knowledge, this was not phrased as a requirement, but it is probably implied by the term 'synopsis'. This is interesting in at least two respects: Partly, he has to demonstrate a competence he does not experience that he has, or at least does not use in everyday life; in other words, he has to convert, or to use an actor–network approach concept: translate or displace his competences. Partly, this calls into question whether this is actually a case of an equivalence assessment of competences, or whether it is rather a dynamic meeting of competence forms. In his synopsis, he summarised the Danish employment effort in an economic perspective and described a comprehensive analysis project that he had conducted in the municipality. In order to write the synopsis, he had obtained knowledge about employment policy, read theoretical literature to a certain extent and received some, if limited, guidance from the student counsellor. Working with the synopsis can therefore be compared to writing an assignment during a study programme. This indicates that the applicant did not 'only' undergo personal, but also academic development.

Before I describe the final assessment, I will outline the actor–networks that work with prior learning and the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration, respectively.
The VPL is well established in VIA supplementary and further education, and can be considered a very strong actor–network. There is a well-established practice concerning VPL for access to the educational programmes that constitute the main activity at VIA, and VPLs are regularly conducted for certificates corresponding to modules within diploma degree programmes. As mentioned, procedures have been outlined for the assessments. Shortly after the legislation about VPL had been passed, VIA set up a coordinator function in order to guarantee a qualified handling of the VPLs. VIA is also host to the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning, which is involved in national and international projects and has close relations to the Ministry of Higher Education and Science. The student counsellors who handle the access assessments, among other things, are or have been affiliated with the knowledge centre. This means that activities related to VPL make up a major or minor part of a dozen academic staff members’ and a couple of administrative partners’ work – i.e. human actors. VIA is under a legal obligation to conduct VPLs. However, the access assessments also bring in students who would otherwise not have been able to enrol in the educational programmes, and thus, they contribute to VIA's finances, and the projects contribute to VIA's research. They can therefore be seen as non-human actors that contribute to stabilising the prior learning actor–network because the access assessments and the projects are in line with the rationales within VIA's business and research management groups.

It was this network of human and non-human prior learning actors, anchored in VIA, but with national and international branches qua the knowledge centre, that the applicant met when he contacted VIA. The reaction to the enquiry from the applicant, who appeared to have competences that were probably equivalent to a diploma degree, can be summarised as follows: We will give this a go, and we will do it properly and 'right'. In other words, strengthen VIA's competences as regards the validation of prior learning and, without saying so, maybe also VIA's reputation. The coordinator made enquiries to the ministry about the validation, brought the case up for discussion at the national forum of professionals who work with VPL, and of course at the knowledge centre, and then organised the documentation and validation process. In this way, she built legitimacy around this special VPL, and in general terms, she strengthened and stabilised the actor–network through internal and external alliances.

However, VIA is first and foremost an educational institution, and a decision about launching a VPL that could lead to the awarding of a degree certificate also involved the relevant heads of programmes, and in particular the head of the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration. It would be fair to expect that, presented with the prospect of an applicant gaining a degree certificate for an entire degree programme without completing the actual programme, a head of such a programme might react with some degree of scepticism, because this questions the validity of the educational programme as the way to achieving specific competences, and maybe also some of the potential students. This was also the immediate reaction at VIA. The same reaction can be expected from teachers, particularly if they have spent all their working lives developing and teaching within the programme. And there were actually critical reactions from the teachers at the educational institution that had originally set up the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration, when it became known that an applicant had been awarded a degree certificate through the validation of prior learning.

However, the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration was relatively new at VIA and characterised by a certain pioneer spirit and a will to try different
approaches. The risk of losing students in the future because they would apply for a degree certificate seems very small. The staff at the programme had the necessary professional capabilities to conduct a sound assessment, and the head of programme was prepared to give it a try. The general programme management group was familiar with VPL and had confidence in the academic staff that worked with prior learning at VIA. And of course, it was fully understood that VIA has a legal obligation to conduct VPLs, also when these concern degree certificates. Considered together as an actor–network, the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration at VIA was thus open to conducting the VPL.

The validation process
As has already been said, documentation and assessment are carried out throughout the process – the applicant is assessed by his boss and trade union representative, and he assesses himself, while the student counsellor and coordinator assess during the screening process. One displacement or translation after another happen in the experience of the applicant's competences, including in his own experience. However, there was also a formally staged and decisive assessment. This was the professional specialist's assessment of the applicant based on his written synopsis, accompanied by the prior learning description and an interview. The professional specialist, who had been in charge of developing the degree programme at VIA and had taught at several of the courses, was to assess the compliance with the learning targets. He was assisted by a person from the knowledge centre who had insight into prior learning and the diploma degree programme in general.

It is worth mentioning here that all of the documentation that the applicant presented at the initial meetings and the screening meeting was now out of the picture. In other words, an almost complete transformation takes place in the validation actor–network, both of human actors and of the documentation, which must be considered a non-human actor. Only the applicant and the student counsellor were consistent, but no more consistent than that they both gained considerable more insight along the way. In such a dynamic process, the concepts of reliability and validity, which are stressed as decisive for the VPL's legitimacy in the official Danish guidelines (the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2008, p 23), cannot be applied meaningfully in their common positivist sense. Reliability in the sense that measurements can be repeated with the same result is not possible, because the applicant learns from one conversation to the next, and validity is construed and re-construed throughout the process:

The screening and the final assessment interview are conducted with two different sets of documentation, and the criteria are specified during conversations between those who are involved in the assessment, because they gain new experience, and because new people are involved.

The overall criterion was equivalence, i.e. that the applicant with a given competence can accomplish what corresponds to the learning targets prescribed for the degree programme. More specifically, three criteria were phrased: 1) That the applicant can use concepts and theory, relate to theory in a scientific theoretical perspective, and analyse. 2) That the applicant has insight into key subject areas that form part of the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration, i.e. administrative law, social science methodology, management and a chosen specialisation field, which in the applicant's case was financial management, and 3) that the applicant is able to reflect. The last criterion is only mentioned sporadically in the academic regulations, but in the communities of practice concerning the diploma degree programmes, reflection competence is considered an essential competence that sums up the other general competences. During the conversations, equivalence was taken to mean that the applicant did not need to know the scientific theoretical approaches that formed part of the curricula, but he needed to understand theoretical perspectivism. However, as the
applicant had read a book about the theory of science for this occasion, it became a question of how he would integrate his insight into his analyses. During the discussions of the criteria, the professional specialist expressed that he had reconsidered his entire view of the degree programme and the competence requirements in connection with the validation process. This comment was made on the basis of the fact that over the previous years, he had actually been deeply involved in the competence requirements for the entire degree programme in connection with the development of the programme at VIA. This indicates that not only the criteria, but also the people who conducted the assessment changed their views along the way. In other words, translations and displacements happen over and over again throughout the process, and the relations that constitute the actor–network in which the assessment takes place become widely ramified. This ranges from communities of practice concerning the diploma degree programmes, over academic regulations to relations to concrete financial management methods.

From autodidact to diploma graduate
With a classic concept from the actor–network theory, ‘black box’ (Latour, 2005, p 50), autodidact can be considered a black box, i.e. you do not consider what an applicant has learnt, you merely note that he is autodidact and that this means he can do his job competently. Similarly, a diploma degree programme in public administration is a ‘black box’; when it has been completed, you simply have a diploma degree. With the VPL, the black box ‘autodidact’ is opened, and countless translations and displacements happen when the applicant comes into contact with VIA and describes his competences. When the VPL is completed, everything is figuratively speaking closed down into a new black box: he has a diploma degree. It is, however, possible to prod at the lid. This happened, for instance, when the professional environment at another provider of the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration questioned whether it was actually possible to assess something so comprehensive. However, the discussion quickly died away. If there had been a large number of applicants who appeared to have equally as strong competences as the applicant in the case, the discussion would undoubtedly have continued, and it is likely that the actor–network about prior learning for degree certificates would be developed with descriptions of procedures, convincing cases, research projects etc.

Conclusion
How was it possible to secure a certificate for a degree at BA level through the validation of prior learning?
This can be described as connections between, expansion of, and translation of actor–networks: The applicant was able to compile extensive documentation, partly by unfolding and reflecting on his life history narrative, presenting products and referring to profiled contexts that he had worked in, partly by demonstrating his ability to familiarise himself with texts at diploma level, partly by describing his competences and writing a synopsis and discussing it. In his own words, he underwent personal development and applied academic means. This was done on the basis of a workplace where both the boss and the trade union representative were familiar with VPL and were able to see VPL as a tool to resolving a salary issue, which is probably not a common case. He applied to VIA, which has a strong VPL actor-network with an extensive practice, as well as research and development activities, and national and international relations, where a VPL for a degree certificate constituted an interesting extension of practice. In addition to this, the management group behind the Diploma Degree Programme in Public Administration was open to the VPL. This is not a simple conjunction of a clever applicant and three willing organisations. It is a process where all involved actor–networks are related to each other and change
each other along the way. Most remarkably, the applicant changes status and at closer inspection develops by seeing his working life in new ways and integrating academic methodology. This happens in relation to documentation requirements and through conversations with VIA’s prior learning people who, on their part, also develop validation criteria. At the same time, they strengthen VIA’s organisation about prior learning, and displace the views of what the competences for a diploma degree in public administration can be. It is not a permanent set-up; several of the people involved, human actors, are no longer at VIA. It is a course of events that is retained in descriptions and, not least, in the degree certificate that resulted from it.

Shortly after, an applicant went through a VPL at VIA, and was awarded a degree certificate for a Diploma Degree in Project Management.

Literature


