

## HOW WAS IT AT WORK?

### AFFECTIVE ASPECTS OF ON-THE-JOB LEARNING

Keywords: *on-the-job learning, affective experiences, visual research methods*

Niina Nyyssölä, Research Centre for Vocational Education University of Tampere, Finland.

**ABSTRACT:** This paper is an introduction to an ongoing PhD research project which focuses on examining the on-the-job learning experiences from the viewpoint of students, who are studying a vocational qualification in social and health care. One of the research topics handles with the affective experiences of on-the-job learning. In this paper, the preliminary results from the first round of data acquisition are presented. The data was collected by individual interviews which were enriched with collages the students produced after their first on-the-job learning period. According to the data, most of the affective experiences are connected to one's own skills and knowledge.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is first to generally introduce an ongoing PhD project and second to present more specifically the preliminary findings from the first data collection phase in January 2009. The PhD project, which is at the stage of data collection, focuses on studying the experiences of on-the-job learning from the viewpoint of the students who are studying their vocational qualifications in social and health care, according to the national system of vocational education in Finland. These students will be graduating as practical nurses and their average age is from 16 to 19 years old. The goal of the research project is to generate new knowledge about on-the-job learning organized in institute-based system. The general topic of the research is formulated as follows: how do students experience their first contact with working life in the framework of on-the-job learning? There are three major research questions: 1) *How do students describe their first experiences of on-the-job learning?*, 2) *What kinds of categories these experiences form?* and 3) *What kind of topics and phenomena students describe with affective expressions?* By focusing on these questions I want to add a new dimension to the discussion about professional growth and its early stages. The presupposition is that on-the-job learning should be perceived as the first steps on the path of professional growth: studying in authentic working environments is more than just practising previously learnt skills or applying theoretical knowledge in practical working life tasks. It is also acquainting the student with the conventions and working environments typical for the profession the student is pursuing. This viewpoint is close to the social theories of learning and the socio-cultural research of learning in general. (Wenger 1999; Eteläpelto 2007). Additionally, on-the-job learning could also be understood as an important stage in the formation of professional identity. On-the-job learning could be seen as participating in the communities of practice, which is an essential element in the process of identity formation, as the later theories of situated learning suggest (Eteläpelto 2007, 101-102).

The aim of this conference paper is to present the preliminary results of the data collection, focusing on the third research question *What kinds of topics and phenomena the student describe with affective expressions?* The paper concentrates on one group of student nurses who participated in the research as interviewees in January 2009. The group consisted of 11 interviewees, all of them female.

## 2. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

### *Vocational education in Finland*

This study concentrates on Finnish vocational education and training (VET) on the initial upper secondary vocational education, which aims to provide the student with vocational competence and basic skills needed to enter the labour market and for self-employment and entrepreneurship. There are a total of 119 study programmes leading to 53 different vocational qualifications (Finnish National Board of Education 2008b). In Finnish education system the upper secondary vocational education, together with general upper secondary education, forms the next education level after the nine-year basic education. Completion of upper secondary education is considered as a minimum requirement for participating in the working life and continuing studying in later phases of life. The vocational education in the upper secondary level differs from the vocational adult education and training, which is mainly taken through competence-based qualifications. The majority of students in the upper secondary level have graduated recently from comprehensive school, but about a fifth of VET provision is intended for adults who have prior knowledge and work experience. VET is mostly provided by educational institutions, but apprenticeship training is also increasingly popular. This study focuses on education provided in institutions. (Ministry of Education 2006; Finnish National Board of Education 2008a) In year 2007 altogether 32 100 students graduated from VET institutes. The number of institutes providing the VET qualifications was 171. (Finnish National Board of Education 2008b).

The Finnish vocational education has been strongly school-centred and it has been distant from working life (Virtanen & Collin 2007, 217). There has been some co-operation between the working life and educational institutes e.g. in the form of practical training, but it has become stronger not until the end of 1990s when all the vocational qualifications and their curricula were renewed and the minimum amount of 20 credits of on-the-job learning were integrated to them. The background for this addition was in the need to ensure that the contents of the education were in parallel with the working life demands. The largest component in the vocational qualification is vocational studies. The overall extent of the qualification is 120 credits, comprising of 90 credits of vocational studies, 20 credits of general core subjects and 10 credits of free-choice studies. All vocational qualifications include at least 20 credits of on-the job learning. One credit is equivalent to 40 hours of work, including both instruction at school and independent study. The vocational qualification usually takes three years.

### *On-the-job learning*

In this study, the concept of on-the-job learning is used to separate this special studying arrangement from workplace learning which is the general theoretical concept used to describe the learning related to work activities in work communities and work

organizations (Tynjälä 2008). According to Hager (1998), as cited in Tynjälä (2008), workplace learning is often understood as informal, unplanned and implicit activity with unpredictable outcomes. On the contrary, on-the-job learning is situated in the context of formal education and seen as organized, planned and explicit activity and its outcomes are often predictable. On-the-job learning has inspired researchers and several development projects. Thus far, academic investigations have only observed on-the-job learning as a studying arrangement from the viewpoint of education providers and working life representatives whereas the voice of the students has been absent. Furthermore, the research has tended to focus more on organizing on-the-job learning rather than on the student experiences from this kind of studying arrangement. Although considerable effort has been devoted to define the theoretical foundations behind the Finnish model of organizing on-the-job learning, less attention has been paid to theoretically explicating the actual learning experiences gained from on-the-job learning.

### *Emotions and affects*

The definitions of emotions and affects in this research need some clarifying. According to Fineman (2003, 8-9), there is little consensus when defining emotions, moods, feelings or affects, and these terms are being used sometimes interchangeably. According to Fineman, feelings and emotions are short-term and they originate from certain objects. Their intensity may vary and they may be ambivalent and mixed. Fineman distinguishes feelings and emotions by the elements of subjectivity and display: *feeling* is what we feel and *emotion* is what we show. What we feel is, according to Fineman, our private and subjective experience. On the contrary, what we show is our emotional performance, heavily loaded with social conventions and aimed for communicating outside to other people. Compared to emotions and feelings, moods are feelings which linger and fluctuate and their source is more difficult to recognize. The fourth expression, which is known in the literature, is affect. It has an extensive and all-encompassing character, suitable for describing all the emotional or emotionalized activity. In this study, affect is the most convenient expression because of its extensive nature.

The emotional dimensions of work have been recognized since 1970s especially in the studies of Hochschild (Hochschild 1979; 2003; Bierema 2008) in which she studied the concept of emotion work or emotion labour. She was interested in the management of emotions as the core dimension of the work in the service sector professions, such as the profession of air hostess. In the 1990s, the interest in the research of feelings at work developed around the concept of emotional intelligence by Salovey and Mayer (1990), which was further elaborated by Goleman (1995). Emotional intelligence, the ability to manage one's own emotions and interpret the emotions of others, is a new essential competence in interpersonal relationships (Bierema 2008) However, research on the emotional elements of work has focused more on later stages of professional growth, not on the studying phase. The affective aspect of learning in the field of vocational education has been studied from the viewpoint of professional development and especially the role of self-regulatory processes in it (e.g. Ruohotie 2000), but scientific literature on the first experiences of students visiting in authentic working environments during their studies is scarce. On the other hand, since the 1990s, the learning theories, and especially the identity theories, have recognized the importance of social and emotional elements in learning processes. (Eteläpelto 2007). Utilising the theoretical

frameworks about identity formation, could possibly support the research on early stages of professional growth.

### 3. THE PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

#### *Visual research methods*

To answer to the research question, *What kinds of topics and phenomena the student describe with affective expressions*, acquiring the data closely connected with the experiences was needed. Visual research methods were applied in this study for enriching the student interviews and gaining more reflected data than could be acquired using traditional interview techniques. According to Banks (2007, 59), the application of visual methods in data collection should be understood as adding a visual dimension to the standard methods of data collection. Thus, enriching the interviews with self-generated visual artefacts does not represent any revolutionary or genuinely novel method when compared to more conventional methods of collecting data. In this study the visual research method, together with interview discussion, was opted for deepening the interviews, reducing the potential artificiality of the interview situation between the student and the unknown researcher and enabling the interviewees to be better prepared for the interview situation by reflecting their experiences already in the phase of collage-making. The method applied in this study is close to the ideas of David Gauntlett (2007;2005;2004) about creative visual methods. Although the research of Gauntlett has focused more on the field of media research and especially on the audience research, the creative visual methods are transferable to the other contexts of social sciences. According to Gauntlett (2004), most research methods in social sciences require the participants to produce instant responses for example during the interview conversations. Those methods do not necessarily enable the interviewees to spend enough time for reflecting the question asked. Creative visual methods are based on the idea that giving enough time for the reflection and pondering of the questions might produce deeper and more mature answers to the questions than during the normal interview procedure. Creative visual research methods are based on creative processes during which the participants produce artefacts which can be anything from films and Lego models to drawings and collages. In addition to the time-related element, there exists also a bodily component in the research processes that utilizes creative visual research methods. According to Gauntlett (2005, 154-155), one of the strengths of creative visual methods lies in the inclusion of bodily movement in the research process and not restricting the reflection to occur only in thinking. In this study, the making of collages was applied as a creative visual research method. Collages were expected to stimulate the interview conversations and raise topics under discussion. Some ideas for the implementation of the method were derived from the PhD theses of Awan (2007) and Horsley (2005) who both used collages in their research projects in media studies.

#### *Interviews*

I chose semi-structural thematic individual interviews, enriched with collages, as the method of data collection. This means that all the interviews covered the same main topic, i.e. the experiences of the on-the-job learning, but the formulation of interview questions and the sequence of the questions alternated during every individual interview. (Tiittula&Ruusuvuori 2005, 11; Kvale 1996, 127) Using focus groups was

Niina Nyssölä, University of Tampere, Finland, Research Centre for Vocational Education, P.O.Box 229, 13101 Hämeenlinna. Tel.: +358 50 4055 206, e-mail: [niina.nyssola@uta.fi](mailto:niina.nyssola@uta.fi), fax:+358 3 3551 3611.

considered as an alternative for individual interviews because of its capabilities in studying experiences, opinions and attitudes to a certain topic. (Barbour&Kitzinger 1999). During a previous pilot project I noticed that the disadvantage of applying focus group interviews is the fact that the results of the interview might be over-represented by one or two dominant student voices. The acquired results do not necessarily reflect the collective voice of the interviewed group. There are techniques which the moderator could apply for encouraging the silent participants to speak in a group situation (Smithson 2000), but considering anew the goal (describing the individual experiences of on-the-job learning) and the process of generating the collages (individually, not in the group), the option of using focus groups was abandoned.

### ***Data acquisition***

The group which participated in the research consisted of 11 female students who had started their studies in autumn 2008 for qualifying as practical nurses. Their first on-the-job learning period belonged to the *Nursing and Care* study module. All the students carried out their on-the-job learning period in nursing homes for old people. The studied group differed from the other groups participating in the research because all of them had completed some previous studies or acquired work experience after comprehensive school. The collage-making and interviews took place in the third day after returning back to school from the on-the-job learning period which had lasted four and a half weeks. The making of collages took two hours. In the beginning of the collage-making session I introduced myself and briefly presented the aim of my study and the role of the students in it. I projected the short instruction for the collage-making on the screen during the classes. The instruction was as follows: How was it to work for the first time in the job of a practical nurse? What kinds of affective experiences did you have?

The material consisted of approximately 60 magazines and organization papers which had been garnered from libraries and the trade unions of practical nurses. The magazines included women's magazines, magazines targeted for special groups such as lifestyle magazines for senior citizens and childcare magazines for parents, and some fitness magazines. I selected the magazines with the help of librarians in autumn 2008. The criteria for the selection of the magazines were simple: they should be abundant in images and they should also include attractive headings and other text clips. Also the magazines had to thematically touch the contentual topics of the on-the-job learning periods and the student groups participating in the research. On-the-job learning periods were mostly performed in daycare centres and nursing homes for elderly people, which led me to choose magazines covering the themes familiar in those environments. In addition, one of the groups participating in the study was specializing in sports and physical education and, therefore, the magazines included also fitness magazines. All the magazines were of quite recent volume, most of the issues were from years 2006-2008. The other material necessary for collage-making consisted of blank paper sheets, glue, scissors and pens.

In the beginning of each interview session I asked the student for a permission to tape the interview. For profiling the interviewees each student was asked the similar basic questions during the interview: year of birth, previous experience from the work of practical nurse, the workplace during the on-the-job learning and the expectations for it. In addition to helping with profiling the interviewees, I asked the basic questions also to relax the atmosphere and lead the discussion towards the themes of the study. After the

basic questions I asked each student to share why she had chosen those particular images and text clips to the collage for describing her experiences of the on-the-job learning period. The students highlighted images and texts in no predetermined order and proceeded through the whole collage. I asked some specifying questions during the collage presentation but the pace of the presentation was set by the student. The interviews were later transcribed.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed according to the phenomenological model of analysis which includes elements of the model created by Giorgi (1975) (adapted in Åstedt-Kurki & Nieminen 1997). The phases of the analysis were

- 1) Constituting an overall picture of the data: reading through the interviews, specifically paying attention to those parts of interviews which described expressions of experiences,
- 2) separating the expressions from the individual interviews concerning the phenomenon under study,
- 3) recognising the essential aspects from the expressions, formulating colloquial language to scientific concepts and
- 4) combining the found meaning units as representations of the experiences of the interviewees.

As Åstedt-Kurki and Nieminen (1997) note, phenomenological analysis should not be understood as a rigid performance of a technical operation, always followed step by step in every research project. Instead of strictly obeying the set rules, the phenomenological analysis should be adapted during a research project, noticing the special features of the research context. In this study, the analysis started by reading through the interview transcriptions to form an overview of the acquired data. During the next round attention was paid especially to those parts of the interview conversations which dealt with the produced collages. The phenomena and topics that were depicted with affective elements were extracted from the text and sorted under thematic categories. Surprisingly, when further combining the categories to larger units, it resulted in only one category with affective topics. Contrary to expectations, the students did not describe their everyday duties or the inhabitants of nursing homes with images or text clips which had affective contents. During the interview, most of the students told that they had had negative expectations towards on-the-job learning either because they had antipathies to nursing homes in general or they did not have earlier experiences with communicating or working with elderly people. However, all the students who had had the negative prejudices to their on-the-job learning period in nursing homes told that the reality proved to be different: working in a nursing home had been a positive experience and some of the interviewed students had even been recruited there as temporary staff. In their collages the students had extensively observed their working environment and the people living there, as well as the profession of a practical nurse and, but these notions were mostly of remarks, not any utterances of affective nature. The sole category including affective experiences, both positive and slightly negative ones, dealt with one's own skills and knowledge. According to the students, on-the-job learning caused them the affects of uncertainty and contradiction. The feelings of uncertainty

derived from unawareness of how to behave with the inhabitants of nursing home and the permanent staff and how one did appear as a young student in a new workplace. The following excerpt is an example of these kinds of experiences.

*“This image shows that I had during the whole period the feeling like all the nurses there think that I am too young there, and not only the nurses but also the residents think it, that I am too young for that department. This is how I felt.”*

The contradictory affects arose from the expectations concerning the skills of the student. In some situations the students were expected by the permanent staff to master a given task which they actually did not know how to do, and in other situations the nurses did not give the opportunity to perform a task because they expected that the student did not have enough skills to do it. This caused mixed feelings, as the following excerpt shows:

*“This text clip ‘Do – do not do’ means that they said, don’t you know how to do this - -and sometimes it was like they said, don’t do it, you aren’t able to do it anyway. So I felt sometimes like I was air.”*

The students also felt that they needed to prove their skills. They were eager to get down to work to show that they are capable and to meet the expectations. There were also expectations from the residents of the nursing home. One student told that all the residents in the nursing home did not know that some students worked there and they assumed all to have a similar responsibility in taking care of the duties. This also caused mixed feelings.

The more positive affects concerning one’s own skills and knowledge were related to the feelings of relief, the general notions of one’s own strengths and the experience of being able to share the latest knowledge in workplaces. The students were happy to notice that they made it through the first on-the-job learning period. They described on-the-job learning as the ‘opening moves’ and ‘victories’.

The first on-the-job learning also confirmed to one student that she had chosen the right career path. The students also noticed during the on-the-job learning that they had strengths such as being good listeners or being open-minded and interested in new things. In the following excerpt the student uses the image of a dog as a metaphor in describing her notion of her own capabilities.

*“Then I chose this dog, because I thought it is, like, interested and it is close to the camera and it wants to know and like that. I am just like that dog, I want to know things and want to try everything new.”*

Quite many students from the interviewed group also noted that the permanent staff in the workplace were interested in finding out how some treatments were taught nowadays at school. The students were happy to share their knowledge.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

These preliminary results of the study may indicate that, in the beginning of their studies, students react affectively to the issues connected with their own skills and knowledge. The other elements closely related to on-the-job learning such as managing

with everyday duties or working in authentic environment with colleagues and customers did not appear to be major affective issues. However, these results need to be interpreted with caution because of the early phase of the research project. Further work with other student groups is required to ensure that these findings could be transferable. The next phase of the research could be to interview the same student group anew after they have carried more of the on-the-job learning periods to examine, if their affective experiences have focused on other topics.

## REFERENCES

Awan, F. (2007). *Young people, Identity and the Media. A Study of Conceptions of Self-Identity Among Youth in Southern England*. Doctoral thesis. Bournemouth University. Retrieved August 4<sup>th</sup> 2008 from <http://www.artlab.org.uk>.

Banks, M. (2007). *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research. The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit*. SAGE Publications.

Barbour, R.S. & Kitzinger, J. (1999), Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups. In R.S. Barbour & J.Kitzinger, (eds.), *Developing Focus Group Research. Politics, Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications.

Bierema, L.L. (2008). Adult learning in the workplace: Emotion work or emotion learning? *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*. Winter 2008, Issue 120, pp. 55-64.

Eteläpelto, A. (2007), Työidentiteetti ja subjektiiviset rakenteiden ja toimijuuden ristiaallokossa. In A. Eteläpelto, K. Collin, & J. Saarinen (eds.), *Työ, identiteetti ja oppiminen*. WSOY, Helsinki. pp. 90-142.

Fineman, S. (2003). *Understanding Emotion at Work*. SAGE Publications, London, Great Britain.

Finnish National Board of Education. (2008a) *VET in Finland 2008*. Retrieved June 5<sup>th</sup> 2008 from <http://www.oph.fi/page.asp?path=1,439,3118,84006>.

Finnish National Board of Education. (2008b) Koulutuksen määrälliset indikaattorit. Retrieved March 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 from <http://www.oph.fi/info/tilastot/INDI2008.pdf>.

Gauntlett, D. (2004). *Using new creative visual research methods to understand the place of popular media in people's lives*. Paper for IAMCR 2004, Audience and reception studies section. Retrieved in September 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 from <http://www.artlab.org.uk/iamcr2004.htm>.

Gauntlett, D. (2005). *Moving experiences. Media effects and beyond*. Second edition. John Libbey Publishing. United Kingdom.

Gauntlett, D. (2007). *Creative Explorations. New Approaches to Identities and Audiences*. Routledge, Great Britain.

Giorgi, A. (1975). An application of phenomenological method in psychology. In A.Giorgi, Fischer, C. & Murrari, E. (eds), *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology*. Vol.II. Humanities Press, New Jersey. pp. 82-103.



- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Bantam Books: New York, USA.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1979). Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85, no.3. pp.551-575.
- Hochschild, A.R. (2003). *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. With a New Afterword*. University of California Press, USA.
- Horsley, R. (2005). *Men's Lifestyle Magazines and the Construction of Male Identity*. Doctoral thesis. The University of Leeds, Institute of Communications Studies. Retrieved October 27<sup>th</sup> 2008 from <http://www.artlab.org.uk/horsley-phd.pdf>.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, USA.
- Ministry of Education. (2006) *Education and science in Finland*. Publications nr. 15/2006. Retrieved March 7<sup>th</sup> 2009 from [http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2006/liitteet/eng\\_opm15.pdf?lang=en](http://www.minedu.fi/export/sites/default/OPM/Julkaisut/2006/liitteet/eng_opm15.pdf?lang=en).
- Ruohotie, P. Conative constructs in Learning. In P.R. Pintrich, & P. Ruohotie (eds), *Conative constructs and self-regulated learning*. University of Tampere, Hämeenlinna, Finland.
- Salovey, P. & Mayer, J. (1990). Emotional Intelligence.” In: *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, Vol. 9 (3), pp. 185–211.
- Smithson, Janet (2000). Using and Analysing focus groups: limitations and possibilities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. Vol. 3, nro 2. s.103-119.
- Tiittula, L. & Ruusuvuori, J. (2005). Johdanto. In J. Ruusuvuori & L. Tiittula (eds.), *Haastattelu, tutkimus, tilanteet ja vuorovaikutus*. pp. 9-21. Vastapaino, Tampere, Finland.
- Tynjälä, P. (2008). Perspectives into learning at the workplace. *Educational Research Review*, Nr.3. pp.130-154. Retrieved March 13<sup>th</sup> 2009 from <http://www.elsevier.com>.
- Virtanen, A. & Collin, K. (2007). Työssäoppiminen ammatillisessa peruskoulutuksessa. In A. Eteläpelto, K., Collin, & J. Saarinen (eds.), *Työ, identiteetti ja oppiminen*. WSOY, Helsinki. pp. 216-235.
- Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.
- Åstedt-Kurki, P. & Nieminen, H. (1997). Fenomenologisen tutkimuksen perusteet hoitotieteessä. In M. Paunonen & K. Vehviläinen-Julkunen (eds.), *Hoitotieteen tutkimusmetodiikka*. WSOY, Helsinki.