Becoming a construction worker
A study of vocational learning in school and work life

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Title
Becoming a construction worker. A study of vocational learning in school and work life.

Abstract
This thesis describes and analyses vocational learning in school and workplaces, particularly the vocational learning involved in becoming a construction worker in Sweden. This includes learning the trade in upper secondary school education and a subsequent apprenticeship. An underlying argument is that activities in these contexts enable a diverse vocational learning outcome. However, there are potential tensions and contradictions, especially between production- and education-oriented aspects of the learning activities in these settings. To address these and associated issues, two research questions were posed. First, how do work-based activities enable vocational learning? Second, what forms of learning are enabled in school and work life settings and how are these forms of learning constituted? These questions were addressed using information drawn from observations, interviews and a survey. Analyses of the data, using a theoretical framework based on activity and forms of learning theory, show that the school and workplace settings enable different types of learning that form a joint constructed object. Further, the contexts provide diverse tasks that, with guidance from more experienced persons, can enhance the learning outcomes. So, vocational learning is enabled through tensions in the activity systems that form a learning outcome. In project-based vocational education and training (PBVET) provided in upper secondary school, vocational learning is enabled through basic training and opportunities to learn key techniques. In subsequent apprenticeships, the transformation of basic knowledge into specialized knowledge is enabled through close guidance and by the apprentices performing complex tasks. There are also clear differences in the freedom allowed in the performance of tasks between the PBVET and apprenticeships. The PBVET does not allow students to develop and apply their own solutions, while apprentices are encouraged to discover and implement solutions that enhance the performance of tasks. So, different forms of learning are enabled in the two contexts; the PBVET largely promotes reproductive learning and the apprenticeships largely promote productive learning. Scope for improvement was detected, as the PBVET does not appear to provide knowledge that fully meets criteria in the syllabuses, and the apprenticeship does not fully meet the learners’ educational needs. However, the settings provide complementary vocational learning opportunities. Thus, tensions and contradictions can be identified in the activity systems in the school and workplace settings that collectively form the boundaries of a learning outcome that largely corresponds to what the learners need to know and (hence) become construction workers.

Keywords
Vocational education and training (VET), upper secondary school, post-secondary apprenticeship, activity theory, levels of learning, apprenticeship curriculum, woodworker, construction programme

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