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Balancing Freedom and Commitment

Making Higher Education Matter to Working Life

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SAMMENDRAG

I dagens debatt innenfor høyere utdanning er sammenhengen mellom utdanning og arbeidsliv et stadig tilbakevendende tema. I denne artikkelen utforsker vi dette samspillet basert på intervjuer med studenter på et tverrfaglig masterprogram. Vi finner at sammenhengen og relevansen mellom den utdanningen studentene deltar på og pågående eller senere arbeidssituasjon ikke kun er noe som etableres etterpå, men er noe som produseres og reproduseres av alle involverte aktører gjennom hele studieløpet. Med utgangspunkt i det empiriske materialet og et sosiokulturelt rammeverk, utvikler vi tre kategorier som har betydning for dette samspillet: *gi arbeidserfaring betydning, legge til rette for involvering og forpliktelse, og kultivere genuine interesser*. Vi konkluderer med at et godt og holdbart samspill mellom utdanning og arbeidsliv handler om å finne en balanse mellom *både* å gi studentene muligheter for frihet, *og* stille krav til studentenes forpliktelse, når man legger til rette for læring.

Nøkkelord

arbeid, høyere utdanning, livslang læring, relevans, samspill

ABSTRACT

Within contemporary discussions on higher education the question of how student participation interacts with other practices in everyday life is often addressed. Particularly, the connection to working life is highlighted, which could easily be noted by catchwords such as 'employability' and 'societal relevance'. In the present article, we explore the relationship between higher education and job positions by describing some students' experiences within an interdisciplinary master's programme in Norway. This programme does not offer any internship possibilities, instead the link between education and work is considered a dynamic interplay of everyday social interactions – something constantly produced and reproduced by the involved actors. Drawing upon


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interviews with four students and using a socio-cultural framework, we present three themes when discussing this interplay: *making work experience matter*, *facilitating involvement and commitment*, and *cultivating genuine interests*.

We conclude that to establish sustainable links between higher education and working life in terms of opportunities for learning, a main concern is to find an adequate balance between students' freedom and commitment when designing teaching and learning situations.

Keywords

higher education, interplay, lifelong learning, relevance, work

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, as well as in any formal education, a main question is: How does student participation interact with other practices in everyday life? Indeed, the question is of an eternal pedagogical nature and has no obvious answer. However, it probably works like a trigger for lecturers when designing teaching and learning situations, as well as when engaging with students to enable the development of knowledge and skills that may be useful within various practices. Located within the discourse of lifelong and life-wide learning, the opening question also becomes accentuated since adult learning and competences generally seem to have been treated as solutions to a wide range of current and future societal challenges (e.g. Biesta, 2006; Edwards & Usher, 2001; Rubenson, 2009). The lifelong and life-wide distinctions of the concept may rather redirect focus to other spaces than formal education by depicting learning as something people do from the cradle to the grave, in all walks of life. As such, learning emerges in a myriad of activities, interactions and processes taking place across manifold settings and situations within as well as outside of education. Hence, even though education and learning may overlap and converge, there is still reason to acknowledge how such a definition of learning transcends the institutionalised sense of the phenomenon (e.g. Billett, 2010; Jarvis, 2009).

In the present article, we take the point of departure in higher education to address how institutionalised learning may interact with various work life practices. In particular, we will highlight some students' experiences from participating in a master's programme in relation to their current and future job positions.

Within contemporary learning debates, education is often considered to play a crucial role, not least by the expectation that educational institutions will create well-educated, flexible individuals capable of meeting society's current and future needs (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Sipos Zackrisson & Assarsson, 2008). A pre-supposed relationship between education and working life may also be noted by such catchwords as 'employability', 'entrepreneurship', and 'adaptability' (e.g. European Union, 2010). Strategies for 'employment' and 'education' seemingly need to intersect to be able to deal successfully with societal

demands. Moreover, in line with the ambition to establish and to consolidate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area, students' learning outcomes are mainly articulated in terms of knowledge, skills, and general competences (European Higher Education Area, 2014; Ministry of Education and Research, 2008, 2011). Such rationales are also used to define and to legitimise the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, all claimed to stimulate lifelong learning.

To empirically explore how higher education may interact with various work life practices, we conducted interviews with students from the Master's programme in Adult Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). This research-based and interdisciplinary master's programme was launched in 2008, and consists of 120 credits. Students may take on a full-time course load during a two-year period, or in a more flexible form, a part-time course load that can extend over several years. The master's programme is designed in terms of compulsory gatherings of at least four full weeks on the university campus each semester. In addition, teaching and learning is accomplished through a digital learning platform consisting of, for instance, written assignments, seminar preparations, and academic discussions. The exams mainly take the form of essays on a given or – within a particular framing – an optional topic. Generally, the master's programme aims at providing an education in adult learning and competences that may be valuable to various people, but are also useful to diverse organisations and institutions in society (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2014).

As part of the educational framework, lecturers, supervisors, and students attend several arranged meetings to critically discuss and evaluate the teaching and learning processes. Drawing upon such conversations, the interest to establish and consolidate a master's programme that is relevant, in its widest sense, to society, but also to the students themselves, appears to be shared. Moreover, one could note how the programme seems to connect to students' work experiences and commitments during their education, yet without providing any possibilities for internship. Accordingly, contrary to considering higher education and working life merely in terms of final learning outcomes, we will in the present article deal with the same subject in terms of a dynamic interplay all along. Consequently, education and work are to be seen as distinct practices, even though interaction appears to be present during the students' participation in the master's programme. With these perspectives serving as a background, we explore: What happens within the educational framework that makes the students depict what goes on as useful for their present and future work?

DESIGNING FOR LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Within the lifelong and life-wide perspective, learning appears as a continuous activity taking place during one's whole lifespan (e.g. Jarvis, 2009, 2010; Usher & Edwards, 2007). As such, learning exceeds formal initiatives, which

implies that there is reason to take notice of various forms of learning. The distinctions of formal, non-formal, and informal learning become relevant by attending to whether activities take place in education, in the workplace, or in any other social space in everyday life. It has, however, convincingly been pointed out that such clear-cut categories are hard to distinguish as they, in fact, tend to blend together when located in particular contexts (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2003). At any rate, the shift in focus implies that the relationship between education and learning is far from self-evident (e.g. Billett, 2010). First, it should be common sense that people learn by participating in various situations in everyday life, inside as well as outside of education. Second, indeed, people do not automatically learn by attending formal education courses, despite clear and high ambitions to accomplish this from the providers' point of view. Third, people also learn other things than were intended in formal teaching and learning processes, probably for better and for worse. Thus, there seem to be reasons to further explore participants' perspectives and give students the option to describe how they really make use of their education in everyday life.

Manifold perspectives are available that suggest how learning should be understood. Despite preferences for distinct epistemological stances, there seems to be a certain agreement on how learning involves change in some way (e.g. Ellström, Gustavsson & Larsson, 1996; Jarvis, 2009, 2010; Marton & Booth, 2000). However, in this article, we make no claim of providing a colourful palette of contemporary discussions on learning in its full complexity. Rather, we draw upon some concepts taken from a socio-cultural framework to conceptualise learning and, accordingly, to emphasise social interplay, communication, and participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000). Within the socio-cultural perspective, knowledge is considered relational, situated in specific spaces and places, and working as a resource or tool toward adequate understanding of and dealing with various situations. Simply put, to learn is to simultaneously participate in, to shape, and to consolidate what is held as knowledge and "true" within a particular social practice. In fact, it also means that what is considered good, valuable, and useful within a particular learning site will be promoted, while what appears to be inadequate will be marginalised, and even ruled out (e.g. Foucault, 1980). Therefore, it is of principal concern to focus on social practices in terms of producing and reproducing learning cultures, or how practices are shaped, established, and changed in the dynamic interplay between actions, events, and consequences (Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2007). Thus, by accentuating the social, cultural, and situated character of learning, the main issue for educators is to facilitate the evolution of such processes.

When organising and designing a situation aimed at adult learning, the significance of recognising the participants' point of view is often emphasised. Moreover, when it comes to formal education and learning, it has been claimed that, in particular, three aspects may be considered: relevance, authenticity, and challenge (Larsson, 1996). First, relevance refers to how the presented know-

ledge might be managed as a useful tool in various settings and situations that are otherwise problematic. Second, authenticity points to the interest in, and probably also dedication to, developing knowledge and skills that are connected to, and make sense in, everyday practices. Third, challenge can be described as revealing distinct experiences and stances, and letting them confront each other. It should thus be noted that neither of the aspects are to be understood as clear-cut individual responsibilities. Although they are assumed to be an object for a professional educator to manage, they rather point to the social interplay in the setting and the importance of connecting with various views and perspectives. Taken together, the aspects described might contribute to change or at least modify the established patterns in everyday life, and they are seemingly in line with the contemporary ambitions of lifelong and life-wide learning.

CONTEXT OF STUDY AND RESEARCH METHODS

We conducted qualitative interviews with students who had completed the Master's programme in Adult Learning. Such an approach is well suited for investigating the participants' experiences of a phenomenon (Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2001), which in this case means to explore how the students experience the study programme in relation to their current and future work. Approximately nine to twelve students attend every year, which today means there are about thirty-three active students in the programme and ten who have already finished (as of May 2014). Taken together, the group of students consists of twenty-eight women and five men, with an average age of forty, who mainly live in Norway, although some of them were born and raised in other countries. About half of the students in the group have full-time course loads, and the other half have part-time, more flexible loads. The students have different educational backgrounds and work experience: their jobs are in the areas of education, administration, health, HR management, culture, and counselling, to mention a few.

We contacted four students to participate in the interview study: two students from one of the first classes and two from one of the most recent classes, who had jobs during their participation in the programme. The students were all willing to contribute, and, accordingly, were informed about the purpose of the study, the volunteer nature of their participation, and their option to withdraw at any time. To establish an informal, conversational climate, we chose to interview them in groups (two students and two interviewers at a time), where the students knew each other and were comfortable with sharing and discussing experiences with each other. Due to anonymity reasons, the students are presented with fictitious names in the analyses. Also, quotations have been translated into English.

The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours each and were conducted in November 2013. They were based on an interview guide with several

open themes about the students' experiences in the master's programme. However, we mainly focused on the interplay between education and work, and we tried to illuminate this from different angles. To prompt discussion and to contribute to as detailed a description as possible, we also explicitly referred to distinct courses, curricula, seminars, assignments, and exams that were part of the master's programme.

Beyond appearing as interviewers and authors, we are also involved in the teaching and development of the master's programme. On the one hand, this equipped us with relevant knowledge and insight for accomplishing the study, and we were easily able to gain access to the interviewees. On the other hand, it was also possible that we would be 'blind' to different perspectives since we were part of the field under study. In addition, it was possible that the interviewees would feel obliged to bring forward only the positive aspects of their participation, as they were fully aware of our involvement in the programme. However, as far as we could tell, the interviewees appeared to speak freely, and since they already had completed the programme, there were no longer any formal dependencies between us. We had also taken care to keep an open mind to different viewpoints, as it was in our interest to learn more about the students' experiences to further develop the programme. Although we have to admit that we were overwhelmed by the enthusiasm they expressed in various ways, it should be noted that none of the students were entirely positive or negative regarding what the master's programme offered them.

In the analysis, we first studied the interviews independently. Then we discussed emerging themes, patterns, and perspectives in several meetings throughout the writing process, including the theoretical perspectives that guided the analysis later on. It should be clear that the empirical material represents a small pilot study aimed at exploring some students' experiences, and therefore has obvious limitations. Also, the fact that the study has been conducted 'from within' accentuates some questions regarding our own presuppositions when conducting the analysis. However, we make no claim to present the full complexity of the students' experiences, as our intentions with this article are not to represent an evaluation of the programme. Rather, the analytical focus is directed towards the interplay between education and working life, which we would argue could be relevant to students and lecturers in other settings.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WORK

Drawing upon the interviews, we developed three categories to discuss the students' experiences with the master's programme and, in particular, to highlight the interplay between higher education and work. The categories are concerned with the students' descriptions of how work experience mattered to the teaching and learning processes, how involvement and commitment were facilitated, and how their genuine interests were cultivated within the programme.

MAKING WORK EXPERIENCE MATTER

All the interviewed students had recently been in jobs or were still in jobs during the time they participated in the master's programme. When entering higher education, they expected to be approached as competent adults with relevant experiences; however, these expectations were met in varying degrees. Students from one of the first classes indicate that they were not always treated as they preferred, at least not at the beginning. Instead they recall a feeling of being positioned within a school context with little or no involvement in the lectures and seminars. The student Mette describes her feelings as follows:

About getting started . . . coming straight from working life: at work, you get things done differently than when you're a student. Now you're supposed to learn how to study again. And, when you then find yourself being part of what appears to be a lesson like the ones you had many years ago in high school, and we just sit down and take notes and things are very theoretical, not made relevant for everyday life in any way . . . and when you only work by yourself with very few discussions – very few conversations at all – between students who have the full package of resources to approach the theory, it's not inspiring in any way. . . . I thought it was hard to relate the theories to [my life] . . . I was unable to find out where I was within that framing, I think, I just got stupid. . . . Any resource that I brought with me – I [felt] like, *this* is a new world, *that* is *there* and *this* is something else.

Thus, for Mette, the beginning of the programme seemed to have a rather restricted relevance to current jobs or to helping her acquire a new job position. However, the students also emphasise how this dynamic definitely improved later on, not least when working on the master's thesis. To work on a project, under supervision, in which one chooses a research topic that may be connected to prior or current work experiences, is seen as highly relevant. Mette also let us know that her master's thesis was her ticket to another work position, and, as she puts it, she uses it 'all the time' in her current job.

Other interviewed students had a more positive experience with their first encounters with the programme. They say that they quickly became part of a student group who were in constant dialogue with each other and with the lecturers. In particular, the students emphasise how they were acknowledged and invited to use their experiences as resources in discussions, and how they felt that they were treated as adults making valuable contributions to the lectures and seminars. Kristin describes her experiences as follows:

Kristin: We had so many discussions during those meeting weeks at the university, I mean we talked so incredibly much. . . . And there were so many of us who had varied experiences and could give relevant examples of this and that. . . . So we shared many different opinions, no doubt about that.

Interviewer: How do you think such things may contribute to what is supposed to be learnt?

Kristin: Well . . . it's about . . . it has something to do with the experience. . . . It is something about relating it all to things you have experienced. Actually, this is precisely what you taught us, you know, experiential learning and everything in that way. But anyway . . . it gets very concrete what we learn. We have learnt it ourselves by participating in the master's studies. And I talk about that a lot in the groups that I teach today [in the workplace] too. I tell them that what you have – your experiences – are really important. And, also, the experience of being involved.

According to the interviewed students, they experience the study forms, content, and theoretical perspectives during the educational process as highly relevant. The relevance was shaped and established all along, not least by the students themselves bringing in themes and sharing knowledge from their various work and life contexts within the educational framing. Because of this, there seems to be a constant interplay between education and work produced and reproduced, which accordingly becomes an essential part of the master's programme. The students Kristin and Magnus emphasise the importance of making the content useful through dialogue:

Kristin: Oh yes, I think that's what I did all the time. And that concerned the discussions we had. Everything that we talked about . . . well, not everything, but in many of the dialogues . . . we talked about our jobs. So, it was clearly relevant to work, all the way through.

Magnus: Yes, we could relate to what we were doing. That's really great.

The interviews, then, illustrate how the connections between education and work take the form of a dynamic process. The students give what may be seen as several examples of how relevance and authenticity were produced and reproduced by drawing upon various resources (Larsson, 1996). The stance taken within the master's programme, which is to make space for the students to reveal, to share, and to discuss their various experiences in relation to the curriculum, is undoubtedly essential. The students clearly acknowledge how they were encouraged to engage in, and to shape the practice of, sharing experiences, using theoretical perspectives to manage and to understand everyday life, and, also, to acknowledge and to exchange distinct opinions (Hodkinson et al., 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000). As such, they seem to have equipped themselves with valuable knowledge within the master's programme. Apparently, the students' learning experiences move beyond the educational setting: they also emerge as tools in relation to their work and life positions, and may thus potentially change such practices.

Facilitating Involvement and Commitment

The interviewed students have various experiences with their involvement in the master's programme. As already mentioned, in the beginning, some of the students felt a lack of involvement. However, later on in the programme the dynamic improved within the student group, and also in relation to the lecturers. The students explain how they were invited to participate more actively, and they say that they understood clearly the expectations and demands of individual and group-based assignments throughout each semester. This is considered positive for the learning process and learning outcomes. In fact, the students repeatedly highlight the importance of assignments, mainly in the sense of being required to work by themselves or in groups before, during and after seminars, or between the compulsory gatherings at the university. The assignments also have the effect of breaking down complex content into more digestible pieces, something the students experience as crucial to making sure that they adequately progress. Kristin elaborates on this:

I have to admit that I'm very fond of work assignments. Like I said before, otherwise it easily slips into a situation where I just go to work, and then, oh, I'm a student . . . and suddenly it is Christmas and time for the exams. I was not the one working with my master's studies every evening, so what I really learnt from – learnt a lot by doing – was to engage in progress towards the assignments or the exams. And to write the essays too. . . . It was then that I looked things up in the books and found out about this and that.

For students who were in jobs during the educational process, the assignments between the compulsory gatherings were also relevant to help them make some space for their studies, given the busy nature of their everyday lives. They describe how they were under a lot of pressure trying to handle work and family in addition to pursuing their education. Sometimes they also needed to make it known to their employers that participating in a master's programme actually implied work throughout the semester, not just during the compulsory gatherings or examination periods. Because of this, the assignments legitimised their ambition to take up the role of a master's student. Moreover, the fact that the students were expected to be active participants contributed to a feeling of commitment. Being committed to their studies was related both to the content and to the lecturers, but still, first and foremost, to each other. In particular, the students point out how individual contributions to the study group really had something to say for the learning processes and performances:

Magnus: The fact that we were working so closely [together] . . . it turned out to be a kind of commitment. We were ready to accomplish this now – we, us, together, not me by myself.

Kristin: Yes.

Magnus: Before, when I was in one of the other study programmes, I was one in a group of like 50–100 students. . . . I just faded out in a way. But that would have been so much harder in a situation like this . . . with close working relationships with lecturers and to the supervisors and to the study group and . . .

Kristin: Like, ‘You can’t quit now!’

Magnus: Exactly, that would have been really stupid.

According to the interviewed students, then, facilitating involvement and commitment is essential if they are to attain a sense of attachment to, as well as progress within, the educational framework. To become a member of a group engaging in various learning activities emerges as a key issue, and may be seen as a way to create and sustain authenticity (Larsson, 1996). In and through such collaborations the students appear to develop a concern for certain questions, tasks, and perspectives that they explore together, and the evolving knowledge is dealt with as relevant. This is also said to be important when it comes to keeping up their engagement over several years of quite difficult studying, and not least to enable them to complete the programme. Within that realm, the students articulate that support is important to balance the challenges they meet. Being a student implies taking up a particular role in a specific practice, and they need “guidance” in relation to prevailing expectations at different phases of the master’s programme, to be able to perform adequately (Hodkinson et al., 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000). Although they were experienced adults from education, work, and other societal arenas, they needed to learn, for instance, how to write texts in an academic genre or how to properly prepare for a seminar. Thus, the students express a feeling of being taken good care of, and in particular, they emphasise what they call ‘a low threshold’ for contacting lecturers and administrative staff at the department.

Cultivating Genuine Interests

As mentioned earlier, all the interviewed students had recently been in jobs or were still in jobs during the period in which they participated in the master’s programme. In addition, they had different types and degrees of education beforehand, and they expressed a desire for something relevant, either for their current job or in order to acquire a new job. Before applying to this programme, they considered several alternatives but found the particular focus on adult learning most interesting in their current situations. In the interviews, the students describe how they expected the curriculum to be concerned with perspectives on learning as distinct from what was traditionally found in, for instance, educational programmes where often children and school are given primary focus. Robert says that it was important for him to participate in a master’s programme that could lead him in a different job direction:

For me it was about getting away from my work at school. So actually that's my motivation. Well, I took a look at what the university had to offer, and then I found this master's programme and thought, "That would be interesting!" . . . Something different – something close to what I've done before, but at the same time something else – what I wanted was just a small twist.

The students also highlight the fact that they were excited to find a master's programme that was interdisciplinary and research-based and, in addition, was concerned with topics relevant to various practices, arenas, and levels in society. In one of the interviews, Magnus describes how he had been a student in at least two other programmes before but had unfortunately dropped out. He recalls how he became very enthusiastic when he suddenly found this master's programme:

I started on a master[’s degree] earlier on, within another programme, and came to the point where I was supposed to start writing the master's thesis, but I was flooded with work. Everything else should be prioritised, so I thought that it might be too late. But *then* [laughs], this master's in adult learning just popped up. Really, of course, if I had been super motivated before, I'm sure I would have managed. But, the heavy focus on children and that kind of pedagogical stuff, well it just didn't work for me. So, if it would have been the case that I could keep my focus on adults in that other master's programme, well that would have been something else. But, as I found out about this master's programme on adult learning instead I thought: This is... *this* has to be *now!* [laughs] . . . It's not only because it's valuable for my work position, you know, I'm dedicated – I'm a political human being, and that way to approach learning, competence, and education, to me, that's a good thing.

Although the students describe themselves as highly motivated when entering the master's programme, they apparently found some of the courses less interesting than others. However, the interviews reveal how the preferences seem to vary from person to person: there is no clear agreement on what was the most or least relevant element. Furthermore, to some extent, there were possibilities for the students to cultivate their individual interests during the educational process, for instance, by writing assignments on a preferred theme, by making some choices of literature relevant for a work context, or by challenging themselves by developing a research question out of their everyday experiences. The students emphasise such stances, taken to provide meaningful learning, as necessary, to maintain adequate study progression during their education. Magnus, for example, elaborates on how he, when possible, chose literature that he found particularly interesting, which clearly motivated him:

Yes, I really appreciate being part of a master's programme where you can choose some of the literature yourself, and where you can discuss [with the lecturers and supervisors] what you're *supposed* to read, what you *should*

read, and yes . . . that's one important thing in relation to work, or the career that you have. . . . But, I also think that such things made me more motivated to actually go through with the master's programme. . . . I could see myself that I was on my way towards a master's thesis.

The students describe how the educational design seemed to invite them to engage in the research field of adult learning, and, moreover, to attach themselves to the idea of how to specialise in and through the writing process of a master's thesis. Simultaneously, they emphasise how being challenged to engage in distinct topics, questions, and perspectives within the research field of adult learning is needed, since the risk otherwise would be to become too absorbed in their own particular interests. On this matter, Kristin articulates the following:

Well, you can get a bit limited in what you think you want to learn. But it's also something about having a goal. I had some smaller parts that I could use simultaneously, as I have learnt many things that contributed by offering other perspectives, and those things widen your interest. I mean, we actually talked about it yesterday, people here [in the workplace] are studying for a master's degree, but have no clue of how to use it or, or what their master's thesis should really deal with. . . . Well, it's been a great help, at least for me, to have a kind of system. . . . Then, of course, it concerns finding alternative perspectives, too. . . . Sure, I'm an adult and I'm independent, but I'm quite a novice when it comes to this. You know, just to be challenged to give some thoughts on "In what way may this knowledge be useful to you?"

According to the interviewed students, then, making arrangements where it is possible to formulate, to establish, and to cultivate a genuine interest within a particular research field seemed to work as a challenging invitation to develop what may be seen as authentic connections to present or future work positions (Larsson, 1996). As illustrated, to communicate the 'goal' – the master's thesis itself – early on in the programme is a main concern. Moreover, to facilitate this through seminars where the students are expected to present and critically discuss their ideas for a potential thesis and a preliminary research design, and, also, to make it possible to relate some assignments to the thesis, were experienced as highly valuable. The continuous work throughout the programme, and the ordering of when new levels of challenge were introduced, adequately prepared the students for the master's thesis, which is often experienced as the most challenging project in a master's programme. Taken together, what emerged is a particular practice, and learning culture, where the interplay between education and working life is continuously established and shaped by the involved participants (Hodkinson et al., 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, we explore what happens within an educational framework that could be considered meaningful to present and future jobs. It is important to note that the particular master's programme that we closely studied does not provide any possibilities for internships. Accordingly, the potential interplay between education and work is produced and reproduced by the involved actors initiating and drawing upon various resources during the educational course. Our analyses of the interviews brought forward three main themes that we will discuss in this final section of the article: *making work experience matter*, *facilitating involvement and commitment*, and finally, *cultivating genuine interests*. As we take the point of departure in a socio-cultural perspective, to investigate learning is to take a closer look at the possibilities and conditions created and established within and between particular social practices, where what holds for being knowledge and 'truth' are shaped and consolidated in everyday interactions (Hodkinson et al., 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000). The situated and relational character of learning is accentuated, which positions education as a space where we organise and facilitate such processes' evolution.

Drawing upon the interviews, arrangements such as inviting the students to reveal, to share, and to discuss their work experiences in relation to the curriculum emerge as valuable. However, the invitation does not work *per se*, but has to be confirmed by the students so that they really work on how to uncover and to systematise their various experiences in relation to distinct research questions or academic themes. In addition, those experiences are supposed to be dealt with as they really matter, for instance, by connecting them to assignments, essays, and cases, or to group performances. Although the stance to make such things possible is taken by the educators, the students have to confirm and to fill the invitation with content. The evolving knowledge, then, may be exemplified, acknowledged, and challenged by the manifold experiences the master's students bring into the learning situation. Non-formal and informal experiences blend together and are used as resources in the formal situation, which seems to be essential for dialogue and progress (Colley et al., 2003; Jarvis, 2010). Because of this, the curriculum presented within the master's programme is made relevant, not least by the students' contributions to construe authentic and valuable knowledge to spaces and places beyond their participation in education (Larsson, 1996).

However, this also reveals how the students themselves condition the possible connections between education and work, which implies that the emerging patterns would differ between study groups. As the conditions and possibilities for learning may be claimed to depend, at least in this matter, rather heavily on the student group, it turned out to be a point to critically and carefully consider more closely. In particular, we need to look into the details of the social norms for what tends to be shaped and established as "adequate" experience and knowledge in contrast to what perhaps is not, thereby attending to emerging power relations within the setting (e.g. Assarsson Aarsand, 2009; Foucault,

1980). These insights create clear demands of us as lecturers, not least when facilitating discussions and the sharing of experiences within the group, for instance by making sure that multiple voices are being heard.

Being involved and committed, first and foremost to the study group, appear to be essential in how the students create a relevant relationship between education and work. In particular, the students point to how the compulsory assignments that were accomplished individually or in groups that emerged regularly during their education were useful resources in that they made claims on them to bring forward their identity as master's students. That demand was impossible to negotiate and seems to highlight that being a member of an educational practice means to read, to write, and to reflect on certain research matters regularly and in particular ways (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Säljö, 2000). Such aspects appear to be necessary in their busy everyday lives where they, as adults, are constantly on the move between the arenas of education, work, and family. The assignments also become a useful resource when negotiating adequate time and space required to accomplish the educational course, not least in relation to their working life. Thus, perhaps a bit paradoxically, a dynamic emerges, where being able to engage adequately in higher education, taking into account how to make the curriculum relevant for working life in a wider sense, also requires some distance from the students' current job situations.

In the interviews, the students emphasise how they enjoyed the possibilities of cultivating their own research interests within the educational framework. They undoubtedly presented various interests and also made use of the potential to 'specialise' within the area of adult learning. In particular, concerning the master's thesis, they refined their initial interest over the course of study into an adequate research topic suitable for a thesis – and here work experience was a main source. As such, it seems possible for the students to in fact deal with what appears to be relevant and experienced 'real-life' problems, and, furthermore, to develop knowledge that could make a difference for current or future work. Accordingly, the students seem to equip themselves with expertise that they consider important to various arenas in society. In addition, they bring forward another aspect of cultivating their own interests, as such possibilities also motivated them to complete their education.

Taking the findings together, this article depicts the interplay between *higher education* and *working life* in terms of a *dynamic process* rather than a final outcome. Thereby a slightly different way to examine a current, yet eternal subject is being offered, at least compared to the rationale usually dominating contemporary national and international debates. The interviews illustrate how the connections are constantly produced and reproduced during the educational course, mainly by the students themselves when accepting the educators' invitation to contribute. By listening more closely to the students' voices, what matters may be described in terms of finding an adequate balance between freedom and commitment.

On the one hand, *freedom* appears to be of main concern for the students when it comes to, for instance, being able to choose at least some literature, or to academic questions and topics within the research area of adult learning, as well as to pick what they consider to be the most valuable content. Such aspects seem to attract the students to a particular research interest that would be a possibility for them to specialise in, which gives them a clear sense of relevance. On the other hand, *commitment* concerns the programmes' claim on the students to do compulsory assignments, take part in discussions and write essays, which highlights the process of becoming and being a member in a particular group. Such systems also required the students to stay on a particular course throughout their education, which is said to be necessary. In fact, an adequate balance between freedom and commitment is probably a key issue for developing competence that is useful for multiple societal arenas, which clearly requires active involvement from lecturers and supervisors as well as students. Perhaps this may be a fruitful way to conceptualise, to discuss, and, not least, to critically reflect upon what may be considered a sustainable interplay between higher education and working life, to accomplish lifelong and life-wide learning.

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