

**Working life education as an activity system**  
—on experiences and challenges from a cultural historical activity perspective—

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**Abstract**

The current changes in society and working life demands pose considerable challenges to curricular responses from all educational levels including higher education. This article focuses in the development of the university subject working life education at Örebro University, Sweden. Contextualizing aspects of this work are the ongoing process of globalization of the work forces, the emergence of a knowledge base society and the transition in the occupational sector from manufacturing to service oriented economies. In this context competences such as multi-skilling, technological literacy and social and intercultural competence are considered key aspects.

In the specific case of Sweden there has been for about two decades a growing demand for higher education to offer courses in areas with relevance for working life. This new courses are expected to have learning outcomes different to what skill oriented or managerial oriented courses offers. This article analyses the development of the subject working life education at Örebro University using activity theory. In more specific terms the cycle of expansive development research first developed by Yrjö Engeström is used as theoretical and methodological framework. The overall intention is to gain a deeper understanding of the subject's constituency which is expected to serve as springboard for the expected developments

**Why (not) working life education? – setting the context and the problem**

Shaping scientific knowledge, knowledge as “episteme”, or what we in everyday terms refer to as “theory” (Gustavsson, 2002) is a recurrent theme within higher education. University subjects, such as philosophy, history and mathematics, are well established both within higher education and “society” as scientific subjects. This means that they are considered “important” in a general sense, but not necessarily “useful” in terms of working life. When it comes to learning outcomes of courses such as management, organizational theory and leadership training it seemed, in the context of our study, that there was still a vacuum in relation to holistic understanding of the various problems in the workplace context. Also within the context of higher education traditional and well-known theoretical (university) subjects are challenged by subjects such as “health”, “coaching” and “media”. It is possible to argue that the relation between higher education as in “theory” and society as in “reality” emerges in the shaping of university subjects such as, in our case, working life education. The university subject Education at the School of Humanities, Education and Social sciences at Örebro University encompasses three profiles: Education as a science, Special needs education and Working life education. This means that relations to “society” is shaped in relation to how questions and demands are interpreted as related to “science/research”, “special educational needs” or “working life”. As it follows, courses offered within the profile of “working life” are directed to people who, in the widest sense, have a vocational education, and who are involved in working life. The main focus of the courses offered is to explore possible meanings of a pedagogical perspective on working life. Some years ago, the number of students who applied to working life education courses declined dramatically. A main reason turned out to be that working life conditions had changed and as a consequence our target students chose to educate themselves in other contexts

than higher education. Soon we were facing a situation where the alternatives were to “close down”, and risking teaching as well as research within the subject area of working life, or to do “something else”. We chose the latter alternative. In terms of teaching methods, this meant to re-think teaching as face-to-face and to explore the possibilities of distance education.

An immediate result was that the number of students who registered increased by remarkably doubling figures of earlier enrolment. We also learnt that teaching on-line does not mean teaching face-to-face at a distance. Initially, we asked questions like: What does “teaching on the web” mean to me as a teacher? How can I adjust my teaching style to a web platform like Blackboard? Does teaching on-line mean that I’ll be working 24 hours a day? Facing the situation we found ourselves we discussed these questions in working teams and over time “old” questions were answered and “new” questions emerged. The overall question in our on-going discussion is to explore possible meanings of our “case”, that is to say development of the subject working life education. More concretely: How do we understand the need for change in Swedish Working life education? What are the past and the future of Swedish Working life education? What can we learn from transforming face-to-face teaching to on-line teaching? These questions were phrased in the local context of working life education at Örebro University and that is also the socio-cultural context in which our case study is shaped. These various questionings are embedded, and at the core of the research question

*What justifies the subject working life education from a cultural historical activity perspective and from society expectations?*

In the next section, we place the case study theoretically and methodologically. This is followed by telling the story of working life education at Örebro University as it emerges between the past and the present. This is done using the cycle of expansive developmental (Engeström, 1987) as a reference. The story also provides the empirical ground for the analysis. Finally, we put the result of our analysis at risk, and in doing so, direct the attention to future enquires.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

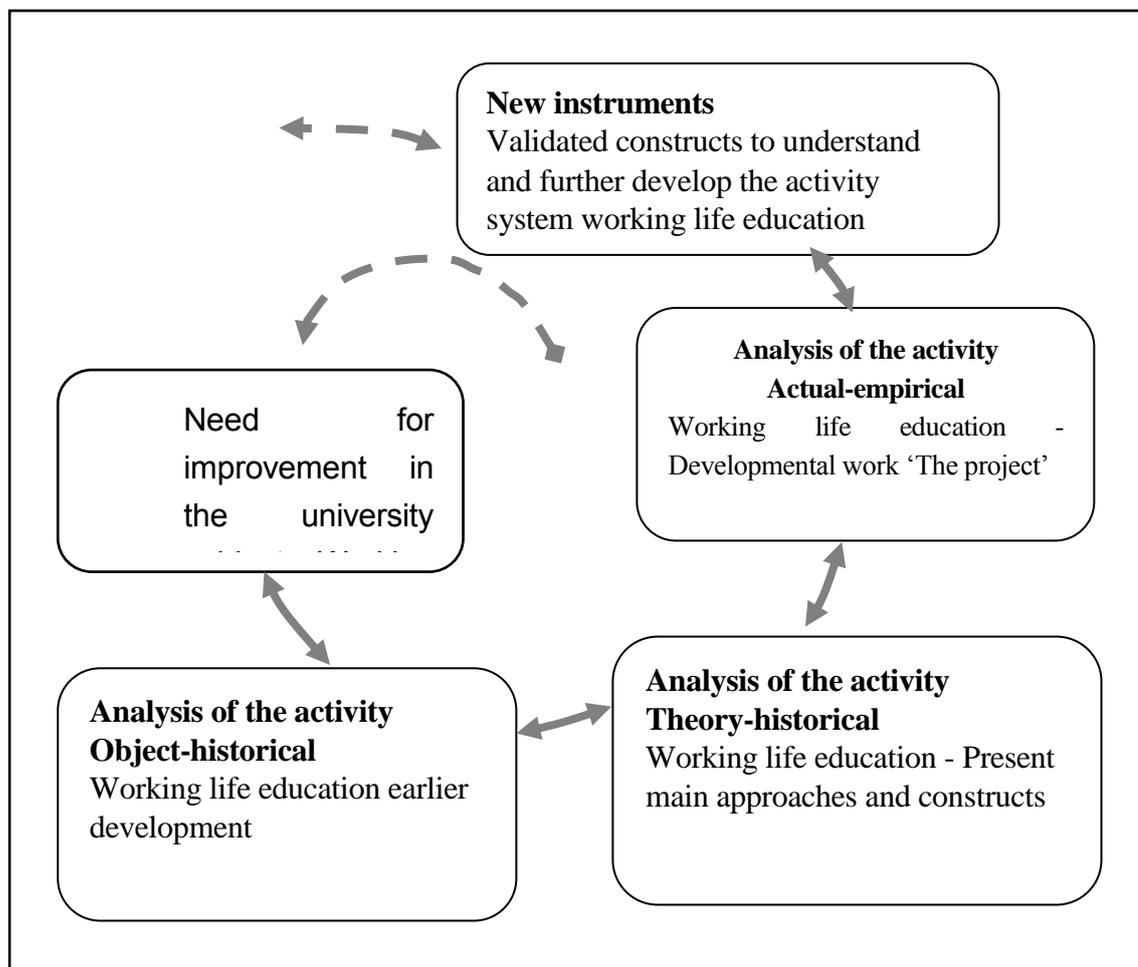
Cultural historical activity theory, and in particular the so called cycle of expansive developmental research (cf, Engeström, 1987, Engeström, 2005)<sup>1</sup>, serves as theoretical foundation and framework of analysis of the experiences and developmental work presented and discussed in this article. The use of the cycle of expansive developmental research in the analysis of the development of the subject working life education is very much inspired by an earlier successful use of this model by one of the authors of this article (cf, Moreno Herrera, 1998). In this study the methodology developed by Engeström around learning processes has been operationalized and used as a methodological framework applied to the analysis of the subject working life education. We did not intend to make a whole interpretation in the original terms of the theory. As already clarified when one of the authors first used this model (cf. Moreno Herrera, 1998), the cycle of expansive developmental research, as any other methodological framework, could be to a great extent critically discussed. In this case, as in the previous one, it was, however, the most suitable “tool” for the purposes of the study. Working life education is in this study assumed to be a well-delineated activity system with clearly identified features and a stated need, i.e., the need for improvement in its practice as the main way to fulfil expectations earlier mentioned in this article. In order to contribute to meeting the already mentioned needs, a rigorous analysis of the activity system is required. This analysis is divided into three parts: (a) object-historical analysis, (b) theory-historical analysis and (c) actual-empirical analysis as illustrated in Figure 1; the various sections of this article forms, in an operationalised mode, these analyses.

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<sup>1</sup> The cycle of expansive developmental research was originally developed by Yrjö Engeström on the basis of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical methodology (cf. Engeström 1987, pp. 318-337; Engeström, 2005).

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The mentioned analyses are followed by a stage of formation of new instruments, resulting in the arising of qualitatively new models<sup>2</sup> (Engeström 1987, pp. 328-329). According to the methodological operationalization developed for this study, the new models and constructs do not emerge independently, but as a result of the empirical analysis and on the grounds of the historical analyses. There is, however, a need for a stage of in-depth reflection, a concise summary, where a final shape and a reflective accounting for the contributions and bases which allow a transformation of the new models into new forms of practice are given.



*Figure 1:* Model for an evolutionary approach to the activity system Working life education (after Moreno Herrera, 1998, p. 17).

One of the main tenets within expansive developmental research establishes that the ‘new’ models should be evaluated with the help of results of the historical analyses (Engeström 1987, p. 327). In this study the new models and constructs are assessed considering meaningful aspects arising in the three historical analyses. The new models are assumed to be an important contribution to and basis for an expected qualitative overlap in the development of the activity system working life education. Their practical application depends, however, on normative elements, e.g. general departmental strategy about course offer, which are far beyond the scope of

<sup>2</sup> In this study as in the previous one where we used this model the expression new models (also new constructs, new instruments) is directly related to Engeström’s methodological concepts (1987). An important question at issue here is, how do we understand the term new in the context of education? From a semantic point of view, new, in relation to models, is supposed to fulfill the condition of being other than the former or before (Webster’s, 1975, p. 773). The stand-point of the present study assumes the term from a dialectic perspective where the above condition is observed, but at the same time it is admitted that the models or constructs are closely related and built on earlier developments.

this study.

### **Working life education – The activity system unfolded**

In the following the different analysis are presented. We first focus on the presentation of the methodological grounds of the analysis and proceed by presenting key aspects related to working life education as subject/activity system.

#### ***Object-historical analysis. Working life education: earlier development***

Object-historical analysis, as operationalized in this study, implies the uncovering and analysis of the main roots, the process of shaping and the successive development of the activity system working life education. The purpose of the object-historical analysis is not only an account of events, but also the uncovering of background factors that allowed a process of fusion leading to the appearance of the activity system and its transition from one developmental phase to another (Engeström, 1987). In this article the object historical analysis of the subject working life education is considered essential for understanding how the system has come about in its present form. At the same time this understanding is assumed to be a meaningful contribution for establishing the grounds for further development of the activity system.

The object-historical analysis intends to cover the main issues related to the development of the activity system working life education at Örebro University in Sweden. It is an activity system where the past is intertwined with the question of “to be or not to be” in terms of existing as an educational subject and consequently, a part of the courses offered at the department of Education. During the ten year long history of Örebro university enthusiastic teachers and researchers with a special interest in the field of working life education have fought for “their” courses to be a part of the courses offered in education. From a cultural historical theoretical perspective these activities can be understood as an expression of a Swedish academic tradition where the relevance of a scientific knowledge is valued in terms of undergraduate as well as graduate courses. In the case of working life education at Örebro University a general agreement was made between teachers, researchers and the university management saying that ‘working life-courses’ are to be offered as long as they do not cause ‘great’ financial cost to the university.

This agreement challenges the prevailing academic tradition. It means that relevance in the sense of scientific knowledge is put at risk and money is put into play. In other words, in historical terms, socio-economic factors appear to play an important role in the shaping of the activity system since money is one of the tenets for what is possible within the activity system working life education. In economically strained times, working life education as an educational profile within Örebro university has recurrently been questioned, mainly on financial grounds. In the year 2006 teachers and researchers found themselves in a situation where they were demanded to “do something”, if they wanted courses within the field of working life education to be part the courses to be offered the following year. The ‘ultimatum’ was seen as a possibility by the staff as well as by the university management who economically supported a project aimed at developing course content as well as teaching methods.

An implication of this structural change of the activity system working life education was an animated discussion between teachers and researchers on possible meanings of this university subject. In concrete terms, the knowledge-base of the university subject as well as the research problems dealt with were inquired into and analyzed. This article is written within this context and it is one out of two reports this far that aim at documenting and analyzing the outcomes of the project. This development can to a great extent be related to a vision of the development of the activity system working life education as a process of academic establishment (Goodson, 1988, pp. 184-196) where the socio-cultural, and even political, components play an important role.

***Theory-historical analysis - Working life education present main approaches and constructs***

The theory-historical analysis is a necessary condition for the improvement of the activity system working life education. It is justified by the fact that the activity system at any of its developmental stages shares the same set of secondary artefacts, i.e., concepts, theories, models and constructs (Engeström, 1987, p. 326). In other words, the theory-historical analysis provides an insight into the present stage of theories and methodological constructs in the subject field as they are shaped within the activity system (cf. Moreno Herrera, 1998).

At present working life education is one out of three subject profiles that shape the university subject education at an undergraduate level at Örebro University (Pedagogik, 2009). The courses offered are named: Educational perspectives on Working Life; Leadership in Organization and Working Life Contexts, Education for Project Management, and Coping with Conflicts within Working Life Contexts. From a cultural historical perspective it could be argued that the courses are acknowledged by the activity system working life education only to a limited extent. In this sense they have appeared within the system as a result of the tension between the past, as in the object-historical analysis, and the future as it takes shape in the actual-empirical analysis (see below). What is essential here, from a theoretical point of view, is that the courses are seen as partly constructed within the central activity of the system or connected with it, that is they are all related to the teaching and learning processes (Engeström, 1987).

All courses within the university subject working life education are currently offered at basic and intermediate levels. They are also web-based and offered as part-time courses. This is to challenge work and studies as separated activities. In terms of a cultural historical theoretical understanding, this description aims at pointing to the wide variety of interacting aspects that emerge when the university subject working life education is understood as an activity system. Secondary artefacts, like forms of teaching are more acknowledged in the practice of the subject and also have a closer relationship to the present developmental trends in within education. In terms of figures, the present is shaped as 200 part-time students, and three teachers working full time within the field of working life education.

In this article the theory-historical analysis is intended to acknowledge theoretical and theory-based practical instruments which are within the activity system working life education, but also those instruments externally linked to it in terms of national and international experiences. More concretely, communication between teachers and students using computers as a pedagogical tool. It includes teaching content, teaching methods as well as teachers and students within a prevailing teaching tradition. Tensions within the activity system, as well as between the system and other activity systems in this context, means that recurrent cultural historical activities and acts are being challenged. In the words of Jean Lave and E Wenger:

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of a broader system of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which in part of systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 53)

***Actual-empirical analysis. Working life education - Developmental work 'The project'***

The object-historical analysis, as well as the theory-historical analysis, is necessary conditions to provide a basis for further improvement of the activity system working life education. However, they are not sufficient. As a main condition they need to be complemented by an actual-empirical analysis (Engeström, 1987, p. 326). In cultural historical terms an activity system needs to be studied through an interventive experience. Also the empirical-historical analysis provides a ground for validating possible contributions and findings from both the

object-historical analysis and the theory-historical analysis. This means that the empirical study, in the following referred to as 'the project', opens for an insight into contradictions and complex processes taking place within the activity system working life education.

The actual-empirical analysis focuses on teachers as actors within the activity system working life education. It includes actors and artefacts as well as relations between actors and actors and artefacts. In the project, there were six researchers and teachers working together. The aim of the project was to revise relevant course syllabuses and to re-build all "working life-courses" into distance education courses. "New" course syllabuses and an updated web-platform for teaching the university subject working life education was defined as concrete outcomes. This meant an approach which included both theoretical and methodological considerations. Teachers and researchers met once a month during one academic year. The project leader was responsible for announcing, chairing and documenting the meetings, and the documentation of past meetings was used as a "ground" to direct the work with towards the aim of the project. This strategy also proved to be a driving force for a transition from teachers and researchers "individual" participation towards collective (group) work. At the center of the meeting room there was a computer and a projector. As it turned out, the use of the computer directed the attention of the project members towards the projector screen and what was said and done was immediately related to what it could mean in terms of "the computer". Building the web-platform as well as phrasing syllabus texts was equally done by using the computer during the project meetings. As a consequence, discussions between actors not only focused on teaching content, but also related to the actual use of computers and how the use of computers and the web-platform could be understood as a mediator of teaching content.

From a cultural historical perspective it could be argued that communication between students as well as between students and teachers was rephrased from a question of how to teach into a question of what subject content was to be taught and why. An implication of these activities was that teachers and researchers could verbally phrase their function as teachers not only as mediators of information or examiners, but as "persons" who pay attention to the students' questions, needs and worries. Understanding teaching (and learning) as communication within an activity system means that actors negotiate possible meanings in interaction with other people at a specific place and time. This implies that whatever we experience within an activity system always relate to the past, in terms of what has (already) been experienced, and challenges the future by opening for new experiences.

### **Concluding remarks**

As earlier acknowledged the analysis of the subject working life education using the cycle of expansive developmental research as methodological frame work is complex indeed. We face this complexity along the process of analysis even though the intentions were to make an operationalization of its general concepts. Still at this point we feel that it has been a valuable methodological framework to understand what 'has happened' in the development of the subject so far. Of equal valuable is its contributions to a more sound development of new construct and overall improvement of what we defined here as activity system working life education.

The object-historical analysis intended to cover the main issues related to the development of the activity system working life education at Örebro University in Sweden. What comes from this analysis is what we can consider two 'engines' starting the development. On the one hand, teachers and researchers who 'fought' for establishment of the subject. On the other hand, a framework of development, a newly founded university, in which there was a place to some how challenge what 'traditionally' was considered area of concern for the subject education at undergraduate level. Theory-historical analysis – shortly presented current shapes of working life education, with specific focus in its content constituency. From a curriculum theory perspective (cf.

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Goodson, 1998) the analysis presents to some extent the stage in which a canon was created about what the content of the subject should be. The question of how to move forward, what kind of changes are due, is what expects to arise from actual-empirical analysis. The developmental work done by a group of teachers and researchers forms the basis for further development of the activity system

The current changes in society and working life demands pose considerable challenges to curricular responses from all educational levels including higher education (cf. Moreno Herrera, 2000). In terms of working life education this means a transition from vocational education (learning technical skill required within a certain trade) to research based adult education (learning to critically examine, to reflect, to relate to "practical" problems, to theoretical concepts). In order to face these complex challenges there is a need for multifaceted research, interdisciplinary approaches to research problems. A new attitude towards education is needed; it is not any longer a set of narrowly profiled high skills that is demanded, but a holistic formation which could be integrated and expressed in an efficient performance (cf. Suojanen, 1999). For higher education this means a tension between research and teaching, where students ask for courses that will improve their skills in relation to the labour market while researchers pose questions which direct attention to the complexity of the field. Other important aspect emerging from our study relates to what Robertson (1991) calls a needs emerging from a globalized context where individuals and national societies are increasingly exposed internally to problems of heterogeneity and diversity. Within education, there are strong global tendencies toward homogeneity and the same time as national differences tend to be more visible (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). Teaching and learning are discussed in terms of universal approaches while diversity and differences are dealt with at a local level.

From a methodological point of view we have since an early stage in this article explicitly 'embraced' the cycle of expansive development research as originally presented by Yrjö Engeström in *Learning by Expanding* (1987). Later research by Engeström and other authors has come just to add 'credibility' and reaffirm the value of the original contribution (cf. Engeström, 1999; Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen, 2004). New and creative use of the ground of the cycle of expansive developmental research is visible in what Engeström calls "Expansive visibilization of work" (1999). Even in comparative analysis of collaborative approaches to learning the value of using activity theory, as in Engeström's works, has been highly regarded (cf. Doyle, 2003). This is also the case in studies that consider cultural-historical activity theory as 'practical theory' (Foot, 2001). In short, there is no scarcity of powerful arguments for different attempt to use the cycle of expansive developmental research. This is also the case when pursuing to analyse the development a university subject such as working life education.

The various dimensions that emerge from this articles are complex enough to be analysed in 'isolated' manner. How could then we, researchers and teachers, go on developing a subject which appears to be needed from a societal point of view? Activity theory, and the cycle of expansive developmental research, as it has been operationalized here seems to be at least one of the 'safe' path to follow. This approach allows us to move further in the complex developmental work having a comprehensive understanding of the entire historical constituency of the subject. More is to be said! So far this article is a first approximation to the problem, an attempt to lay the grounds for the future work; in that sense we feel our aims fulfilled!

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