

Competence Development in the Public Sector: Development, or Dismantling of Professionalism?

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For more than a decade, competence development has been a key concept of modern management in both the private and the public sector, but to some extent its meaning and practice have been different in the two sectors. In the public sector in particular, competence development has been closely related to a number of other buzzwords characterizing dominant Neo-Liberal political conceptions, such as Lifelong Learning, New Public Management, Market Orientation and Decentralization. From an idealistic point of view, competence development is intended to promote professionalism, understood as knowledge creation, self-management and the ethical commitment of civil servants. However, the development has increasingly involved elements of supervision, declining flexibility and time consuming evaluation, which may have contributed to the de-qualification and de-motivation of civil servants. It is therefore a basic question as to whether the learning activities normally labelled as competence development are part of a developing or a dismantling process in relation to professionalism in the public sector. This paper seeks to deal with this question in so far as it relates to the case of Denmark, which is usually regarded as a significant example of the so-called Nordic Welfare State Model, implying the strong, democratic and service-minded role of the public sector.

Key words: competence development, Nordic Welfare State, lifelong learning, New Public Management, professionalising, floating signifiers

The Competence Development Discourse

The Danish Welfare State has undergone many reforms over the last 10 years. Like many other public welfare systems in the world, the Danish model, with free - or tax paid - access to education, health service and social security, has been criticised as being expensive and inefficient. The influence of global neo-liberal discourses has become increasingly visible, and the public service institutions have

been challenged by the implementation of market-like incentives based on new combinations of competition and political control (contract management). Welfare in Denmark is primarily financed by public money at present, but an increasing number of welfare institutions are being transformed into self-owned or private enterprises, and the fate of the welfare state is still unknown (Hjort, 2008).

The concept of competence development played an important role in these transformation processes. The concept has been adopted from international discourses and integrated in new ways of governing human service organisations, but it has also played an extremely significant role in the professionalising strategies of the Danish "semi-professions". Among nurses, teachers and social workers, for example, it has been widely assumed that competence

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development is the path to a better job, greater influence, higher wages and higher status. A great number of individuals have engaged in further education and research and development activities at public workplaces. Trade unions have incorporated competence development into their political strategies, and a number of collective agreements concerning competence development have been signed between civil servants and public employers. When it comes to practice, however, the concept of competence development has referred to everything from a three hour IT course to extensive, experimental development projects.

The first part of this article will analyse the construction and popularity of the concept of competence development in Denmark over the past 10 years as representing a number of holy and less holy alliances between at least three different strategic interests:

1. **Lifelong Learning** - new understandings of learning and new educational policies on the national and trans-national level (OECD, EU).
2. **New Public Management** - new government strategies implemented as part of the transformation of the public sector in Denmark and the other Nordic welfare states.
3. **Professionalising** - new labour market strategies among public servants in Denmark.

The second part of the article will link different understandings of competence development to different strategies for professionalising, and describe a process in which a wide variety of decentralised, self-administered and directly user-orientated competence development activities have changed into activities aimed at meeting narrow goals that are politically defined at a central level. The third part of the article will discuss the basic question of *whether the learning activities labelled as competence development are to be seen as part of a developing or a dismantling process in relation to professionalism* in the public sector in Denmark. We will consider the following questions: Have the competence development activities undertaken actually contributed to increased professionalism, understood as an extended scientific knowledge base, enlarged scope for decision-making and the greater social legitimacy of civil servants? (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001) Conversely, have the competence development activities – as parts of the general reform processes in the Danish public sector –

contributed to reducing the jurisdiction, the autonomy and the ethical commitment of “People working with People” within the welfare organisations or human service enterprises? Finally, the article raises the question of whether, in their choice of strategies, public servants themselves have been so focused on *professionalising*, understood as being part of increased social status and legitimacy, that they have ignored the risk of decreasing their own *professionalism*, their own ability to “do a good job” in relation to the human beings – patients, students, clients etc. - they encounter at work (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996).

Competence Development – A Floating Signifier?

From the theoretical perspective, the concept of competence development could be defined as a “floating signifier” - a term the discourse theorists Laclau and Mouffe (1985) took from Michel Foucault (1977). Like many other key concepts in the discourse concerning public transformation - modernisation, development, quality, learning, efficiency etc. - competence development may be understood as a phrase, the most important meaning of which is that it does not mean anything. More accurately, the concept’s “reference to reality” has not been fixed but is still floating. This characteristic has made it the ideal subject both for struggles about how to define the world and for alliances and compromises between many different parties, each of whom have wanted to inscribe it into *their* version of reality, *their* rationality, *their* perspective. The concept has been sufficiently vague or “empty” enough to act as a starting point for negotiations, in spite of - or merely because - the various stakeholders involved, not necessarily having the same understandings of the term or the same reasons for supporting it, at least as long as no side had conquered hegemony, i.e. had been able to freeze *their* definition, *their* discourse as the only valid and legitimate one, doxa. In this way, the existence of floating signifiers such as competence development may be understood as signalling the dynamic character of the power relations in the field during the period in question, i.e. the turn of the millennium. As already mentioned, at least three strategic interests, political, administrative and professional have been competing and cooperating.

Holy and Less Holy Alliances

At the turn of the millennium, competence development - regarded *both* as formalised adult education *and* as recognition of the informal learning in the lives of employees - was viewed as a method of strengthening the competitiveness of individuals, enterprises and nations in the global market. Within *educational policy*, competence development was viewed as a centre of motion in the strategy for lifelong learning and related to the new narrative of the knowledge society, which became - if not hegemonic - then at least dominant in Europe after the death of the great narratives and the fall of the Berlin Wall (European Commission, 1995, 2000). However, the idea of people learning through their own activities throughout life is not new. As is well known, its roots are in the European Enlightenment, and in the 20th century, the idea legitimised a diversity of liberation or self-regulation projects with very different political signatures (Weber, 2002). The present conceptualisation of lifelong learning appeared for the first time in 1972 in UNESCO's programme for social justice, local sustainability and literacy in the Third World. The OECD officially recommended lifelong learning in 1996, and in 2000, the European Union put lifelong learning and life-wide learning on the agenda in order to increase economic effectiveness, organisational flexibility and the employability of the workforce (Greenwood & Stuart, 2002). In Denmark, lifelong learning was formulated as a general policy of education, initially in 1998 by the private organisation, "The Competence Counsel", later on in 2003 by "The National Competence Accounts", set up by the Danish Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs.

In this way, competence development as a concept or phenomenon in the Danish public sector was part of very extensive strategic efforts, and not limited to educational policy but linked to overriding finance, industry and labour market policies. The standards for the competence development of the public employees were not only set by local or national agendas, but to an increasing extent by supranational objectives. A concrete example was the reform of the Adult Education System that contained new master's programmes for experienced adults, including the highly educated professionals and semi-professionals in the public sector - and incorporating the efforts towards a synchronisation or integration of the European systems of

education (The Bologna-process, 2001).

From a political perspective, competence development was a question of economic growth. From *an administration perspective*, competence development was rather a question of implementing new methods of management and control in the public sector. The New Public Management (NPM) trend in Denmark over the past 10 years can - as mentioned - be described as an attempt to readjust the big public sector wholly or partly to the market without surrendering political control. The core ambition in the currently dominant Contract Management System is to use the market or market-like economic incentives to implement politically established, centrally defined objectives. On the one hand, the single organisation (hospital, school etc.) must act as an independent strategic unit framed by broad regulations. On the other, it is obliged to give increasingly more detailed accounts of its results according to central standards (Bregm 1998; Klausen og Ståhlberg, 1998). Within this context, competence development has been a management tool, an integrated part of staff policy linked to the differentiation of wages in order to motivate each employee to deliver a work output that supports the organisation's main strategy and objectives. (Andersen et al., 2003; Evetts, 2004)

In Denmark, the trade unions of the employees in the public sector have chosen to be co-players in the transformation process from traditional welfare state government to quasi-market management. For this reason, the specific Danish model for public transformation has been labelled "negotiated modernisation" (Pedersen, 1998). For example, in 1997 CFU, the main trade union for public employees in Denmark, and the Danish Ministry of Finance entered into the first collective agreement on systematic and strategic competence development with the explicit objective of ensuring both the single organisation's needs for flexibility *and* each employee's need for professional and personal development. The specific content of the agreement, however, remains to be negotiated locally (Andersen et al., 2003).

From the perspective of the professionals or semi-professionals, competence development was a part of a changing labour market strategy - from wage labour politics to professionalising efforts. Caring for others is, as known, traditionally women's work. For one thing, a majority of women are employed. Secondly, the work consists to a great extent of tasks that historically have been taken care of by

the women in the families - if these tasks have been performed at all. In the light of history, it can be appreciated as obvious progress that “caring and developing work” in the Nordic Welfare State Model has been defined as paid work in public settings, i.e. as work that is not only undertaken out of love or as a vocation, but defined as work that gives entitlement to wages and acceptable work conditions. However, the result of the wage labour strategies of the semi-professionals in Denmark in the 1980s left many of the public servants themselves with a certain feeling of discomfort. To hold on tightly onto one's rights as a wage labourer chafed against both the specific character of the work and the fundamental values of the professions. The work supporting human life and learning processes is obviously, in principle or by nature unpredictable, uncontrollable and permanently alterable. The idea that the work initially is carried out for the good of “the other”, for the benefit of “one's neighbour” was, moreover, still a central element in the professional ethos, constituent for the internal field-discourse and professional identity, as well as for the external social legitimacy of the semi-professionals. Traditional wage labourer weapons such as strikes or “work to rule” therefore fundamentally contradicted their basis of legitimacy, however justified these fights might have appeared, considering the wage level and work pressure of the public servants (Hjort, 2005).

In Denmark, at the turn of the millennium, professionalising seemed to be a solution to these dilemmas: The “semi-professions” or “wannabe professions” wanted to be “real professions” just like the “classic professions”: clergymen, doctors and lawyers. They wanted to be recognised for their real knowledge, skills and ethics, and they wanted salary levels and status commensurate with their merit. More men had to enter the trades to avoid their stigmatisation as female occupations and competence development had to be emphasised (Bagøe Nielsen, 2003). From this point of departure, the public servants and their organisations entered the scene in order to influence and enter alliances with the strong competence development discourses represented in European policy and Danish Public Management.

However, how did the public servants interpret the term ‘competence development’ and how exactly did they understand the relationship between competence development and professionalising? What actually happened when the

idea of competence development had to be implemented at public workplaces in the welfare institutions?

Competence Development and Professionalising

The concept of competence development was able to function as a common denominator in the negotiations between the many diverse interests because initially it was kept floating. It was not defined precisely but “kept in the air” as an ambiguous term, and it could refer to a multitude of different forms of practice: on-the-job training, formal education, participation in research activities, ethical profiling, documentation projects aimed at making the work of public servants visible to the outside world etc. While the discursive landscape that the public employees and their professional organisations were to acquaint themselves with when they wished to join in the discussion was tense and a source of confusion, on the other hand it offered a wealth of opportunity for creating new positions by reframing, interconnecting and recreating discourses in a creative manner

The same could be said of the term ‘profession’. In connection with the strategies of public employees, many different understandings of professionalising have appeared which have hooked up to or been hooked up to different types of competence development activities. The inspiration came from an everyday understanding of professional work as well-paid or good work, but it was also obtained from the classic sociological theories of professions. It could be the more *profession-sceptical* theories which, with Max Weber, stress that the creation of a profession is a question of power relations and the strength to monopolize knowledge, education and occupational areas. However, it could also be the more “*profession-friendly*” theories which, with Talcott Parsons, emphasise the professions’ actual functions and social legitimacy in a highly specialised society. More recent theories about professionals’ learning and learning in professional practice have, however, gained particular popularity – both the *rationalistic* versions (Dale, 1989; Jarvis, 1999; D. H. Hargreaves, 2000) and the more *holistic* versions which, like Polanyi (1966) and Lave and Wenger (1991), stress practical or “tacit knowledge” and the collective, social and cultural aspects of learning and competence development (Illeris, 2004, 2007).

According to the choice of the framework for

Table 1
Perspectives on Professions and Understandings of Competence Development

External Perspectives On Professions		Internal Perspectives On Professions	
<i>Max Weber</i>	<i>Talcott Parsons</i>	<i>Polanyi/Rolf, Dreyfus & Dreyfus, Lawe & Wenger, Wacherhausen & Wacherhausen</i>	<i>Dale, Schön & Agyris Jarvis, D.H. Hargreaves</i>
<i>Professionalising:</i> Some workers have conquered access to and been able to monopolize a specific area of occupation based on a specific monopoly of knowledge linked to a specific education.	<i>Professionalising:</i> Some workers have acquired a specific function in society because they have developed specific expertise that makes them capable of performing certain difficult and important tasks.	<i>Professionalising:</i> Some workers have developed practical, bodily and social knowledge and a work place culture that enables them to make discretionary decisions in emergent situations.	<i>Professionalising:</i> Some workers have been able to account for the results of their work within a discourse that is accepted as legitimate by external stakeholders.
AUTHORISATION Focus on exclusion of others, high salary and social status.	AUTONOMY Focus on self-management, space for decisions and quality control among colleagues.	DISCRETION Focus on tacit, collective and culturally embedded knowledge and ethics.	DOCUMENTATION Focus on accreditation and accountability, efficiency and effectiveness.
<i>Social Closure</i>	<i>Social Contract</i>	<i>Social Trust</i>	<i>Social Legitimacy</i>
Competence development:	Competence development:	Competence development:	Competence development:
Increasing formal competences (degrees, ranks, grades).	Increasing real competences by education and scientification.	Increasing work quality by engaging in (trans-) professional development projects at the workplaces.	Increasing legitimacy by making work and work results visible.

understanding, competence development has thus, with Max Weber, been understood as a question about acquiring *formal competences* (degrees, titles, authorisations) with the purpose of strengthening the profession. On the other hand, competence development has also, with Parsons, been understood as a question of developing *real competences* in order to substantiate professional autonomy, the right to manage, plan, execute and evaluate own work, exercise professional discretion and exercise collegial self-management. Competence development activities have been *directed inwards* as (trans-) professional quality development projects in cooperation with the direct users of schools, health care etc., and they have been directed outwards, aiming at documenting and legitimising the civil servants' competences vis-à-vis the outside world: consumers, authorities, politicians, etc.

In other words, the picture of competence development and professionalising has been multifaceted:

From Broad to Narrow Definitions of Competence Development

In spite of the multi-faceted picture of competence development in the Danish public sector, it is possible to describe a process that has altered the concept over the past 10 years. It is obvious that the understanding of competence development through the years has narrowed from ambiguous and broad definitions to a steadily more unambiguous and narrow definition of what the term is to refer to (Drevsholt et al., 2001; This may be illustrated by two examples from 1997 and 2000, respectively:

Competence is understood as the individual

*person's knowledge and ability, motivation, commitment, will, learning and development potential, relations between employees and between employees and managers as well as organisational relationships. This means that competence development is the strengthening of the **abilities, opportunities and motivation** of employees and managers as well as the **development of organisational structures** in which employees and managers can use their competence.*

The Danish Health Authority, 1997 (stress added by KH)

In this definition by the Danish Health Authority 1997, competence development is understood broadly as the development of human resources and potentials, individually and collectively and as a question of arranging organisational structures that can support this development. The discourse may be characterised as *holistic or idealistic* based on metaphors of organic growth and on narratives that tell the story about development from force to freedom.

The next quote is from an agreement between the Danish Ministry of Finance and the Danish Central Federation of State Employees' Organisations. Competence development is here defined much more narrowly:

*Strategic Competence development means that the employees' development is anchored in the institution's daily and in particular future task solution (...) This means that initially **an overview of the institution's need for competence development** must be created. It is only when this has occurred that a decision can be made about which goals will be set up for the individual employee, i.e. which competences must be developed so the employee can contribute to the overall goal. This results in an appraisal interview where actual agreements are made about the competence development activities that are to take place in the future. In connection with the interview, **actual development goals for the individual employee** must be set up.*

The Danish Ministry of Finance 2000 (stress added by KH)

The discourse in this quote from the Ministry of Finance is quite different from the discourse of the Health Authorities three years before. The overall goal is defined as organisational effectiveness of the public organisation and the individual employee's competence development is

understood as the means to this goal. *Functionalism and rationalism* have taken the place of idealism and holism. The belief in organic growth into the realms of freedom and the future has been replaced by a technical-instrumental approach - the ambition of being able to manage in a chronically changing world.

Is competence development about creating broad human development opportunities or narrow, for the convenience of contracts or result to create easily digestible results for management? Should competence development be created from the bottom-up or managed from above? Does competence development involve individual or collective processes? Is competence development about imagination, creativity and innovation, or about rationalisation, standardisation and control? Are the clients to be defined as citizens participating in – and co-responsible for – quality improvement or as customers demanding service and guarantee certification? How can we measure competence development? Do we only value competence development if it is exactly measurable here and now?

These have been the two outermost poles in the Danish competence development debate, but if a winner is to be identified in the battles which have been conducted over the last 10 years in regards to defining the term competence development, then this is clearly the Danish Ministry of Finance and its narrow - or precise – definition of competence development. Correspondingly, the losers are the broader competence development concepts based on local development work conducted in cooperation between professionals and clients. In the same movement, the understanding of professionalising has shrunk from being a question concerning the development of employees and organisation, individually and collectively, to a question that first and foremost is about how public employees, via formal merit and (more or less) scientific documentation, can generate evidence to prove the effect of their work and thus legitimise themselves (Hjort, 2008).

Professionalising or De-professionalising?

To explain the process of the movement from broad to narrow understandings of competence development, the last years' general political development must be taken into consideration. The process has been embedded in important

contextual, cultural and societal changes. During the years in which competence development has been popular, a number of decisive professional and political changes have occurred in Denmark as well as in the rest of Europe. These changes have placed a new form of re-centralisation or re-bureaucratisation on the agenda as a supplement to or replacement for the decentralisation strategy on which the reform projects in the welfare states were initially based. The “openings” related to the idea of decentralisation or self-administration have been replaced by new forms of central control, influenced by the current neo-liberal/neo-conservative government alliance in Denmark, but not only confined to this.

First of all, the traditionally broad “success criteria” of the welfare state (better education, health and social support for *all* without regard to standing), and the traditional public ethos based on universalistic and, in principle, client oriented standards, have been challenged by new criteria defining success as effectiveness and efficiency and new standards related to “objective”, i.e. measurable, quality goals. The combination of more market surveys and strengthened contract and performance management has meant that the public organisations, to an increasing degree, have been caught in the cross-fire between daily, practical and economic operational necessities on the one hand, and political legitimating efforts on the other. Despite all formulated intentions about independent profiling and consideration for local stakeholders, it has become increasingly difficult for the organisations to manoeuvre independently, including determining their own competence development policy. In step with this, the opportunities for public employees to impose *their own* fingerprint on the decentralised agreements have been reduced. In this context, a new kind of practical reasoning has been introduced, new internal and external necessities that have caused all parties - including the public servants and their trade unions - not to see competence development in terms of the locally self-administered and development oriented variety, but to view the formalised and standardised version as the most serviceable, the most easily adapted, or the lesser evil. Apparently, the power relations in and around the public institutions have been such that it might gradually have appeared more and more reasonable or “natural” to all involved to regard the questions of learning and competence development as a question of adapting strictly to the market

and the new forms of public governance. Foucault may possibly argue that new government regimes, new management techniques and new practices of self-management have been developed and installed. This is a process actively involving the civil servants themselves (Rose, 1999; Foucault, 1997).

Empirically, the consequences of this process cannot simply be described as professionalising – interpreted as expanded knowledge, increased professional autonomy and higher ethical standards. It can equally be described as de-professionalising, i.e. in the form of polarisation between A) employees with opportunities for new management and development tasks, and B) employees whose jobs to an increasing extent are de-qualified, intensified and de-personalized. This process has had major (unintended and unexpected?) consequences - at least seen from the point of view of the majority of the public servants themselves. For example, absence due to illness has increased tremendously and today it is very difficult to recruit employees for jobs within the health sector. The process has correspondingly given rise to extreme dissatisfaction amongst the users of the public services in Denmark, even though there is no political agreement about whether it is the new forms of political control and exposure to the market that are the *reasons* for the problems in the welfare institutions or the *solution* to the problems within welfare in Denmark (Hjort, 2004, 2008).

Dismantling the Welfare State?

The last question to be raised here is the extent to which the public employees within the Danish welfare institutions, through their choice of labour market strategies, including competence development strategies, have actively contributed to their own de-professionalisation.

From one point of view it can be claimed that individuals’ and organisations’ enormous focus on formalised individual merit in the further/higher education system – in a context where individual payment or the institution’s co-financing plays an increasing role – has strongly contributed to the increased A/ B polarisation. Some employees have the family or institution-linked network resources that are necessary to gain access to more education and thereby – potentially - new career paths, whilst others do not have such opportunities. Some employees have got a chance to

obtain new knowledge monopolies and new forms of influence and decision-making competence in this way. However, to an increasing degree, the work of others is reduced to unskilled or low qualified routine work which is executed according to “manuals”, directed and evaluated by others. Viewed in this light, the competence development engagement has proactively contributed to the increasing hierarchisation and tailorisation of human services.

Correspondingly, it could be claimed, that in their eagerness to legitimise themselves and their own work through documentation activities, reports and accounts – and other forms of confessions – the public employees have willingly supplied the upper layer in the contract control pyramids with all the information that is necessary to develop new *management sciences* and *managerial technologies*: evaluations and impact measurements, benchmarking systems, contract management agreements, etc. They have thereby actively contributed to the reduction of their relative professional autonomy and this way personally contributed to the rationalisation, intensifying and streamlining of their own work!

From another perspective, it might be asked what could have happened if the public employees, via their professionalising efforts and commitment in competence development had *not* tried to *oppose* some of the negative consequences of the transformation of the Danish Welfare State? If they had not focused on education and documenting the effect of their work, how could they have safeguarded themselves against being disqualified and potentially made superfluous, in step with the remorseless advance of change? This includes safeguarding themselves against a scenario where work with people is reduced to “serving customers, who are always right”, i.e. work not performed by trained and experienced professionals, but by “servants”.

If the positive aspects and the potential benefits are examined, it may be claimed that by focusing on competence development on a large scale, the public employees have succeeded in legitimising their own professionalising efforts by – creatively – joining the powerful international discourses within New Public Management and Lifelong Learning. By taking the knowledge and competence term at its word, the Danish public employees and their professional organisations have been able to position themselves so strongly that they have

succeeded in foiling the intentions of “removing the professionals from the helm”, which was formulated at the start of the public reform project (Dich, 1973). In line with the transformation of the Danish Welfare State, teachers, nurses and social workers etc. have become increasingly more important agents in the economy. If the Danish economy is going to depend – not on agriculture or industry – but on knowledge and services, the groups of workers within these areas must be of growing importance and potential societal influence.

From a third perspective, the question posed about the (semi-) professionals’ contribution to their own de-professionalising can be answered not with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ but with a ‘both/and’ or a ‘neither/nor’. With Foucault as a guiding hand, it could be claimed that precisely by subjecting themselves to new government strategies, the professionals are subjected in new ways. By exposing themselves to new forms of government regimes such as team work and contract management, by using new government technologies, such as electronic calendars, and by engaging in new self-management activities like personal career planning, they also obtain opportunities to construct and position themselves in ways that represent new power relations – and thus new possibilities for knowledge creation about “work with people” and its conditions in “expanding modernity”.

Whether this form of knowledge creation will come to represent a key political perspective, a profession perspective – or perhaps simply different perspectives on how different people’s needs for help, care, support, teaching, healing, etc. can best be accommodated in various ways – is still unclear or, more correctly, a question of power relations and the power of definition.

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Received January 23, 2008

Revision received February 18, 2008

Accepted February 24, 2008