



## Learning conditions and phases in career guidance and counselling

**How is learning facilitated in career guidance and coaching sessions and how is learning integrated in career choice and decision-making processes? Based upon his doctoral thesis Christer Langström invites us to reflect upon learning conditions and phases in career guidance, counselling and coaching conversations.**

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The empirical data in the doctoral thesis “Learning in professional conversation” is based on qualitative interviews with long-term jobseekers who participated in two municipal labor market projects. Learning is defined as an ongoing interaction between content, motivators and the ability to interact, based upon Knud Illeris’ theory of learning.

Career guidance and counseling (CGC) can be regarded as facilitation of an integrated learning and decision-making process referring to clients’ career narratives. Several researchers in the Nordic context, namely Ingela Bergmo-Prvulovic, Åsa Sundelin and Christer Langström, have in recent years raised the issue of learning in CGC. Overall the issues can be summarized as whether and how career guidance professionals need to develop both their understanding of learning processes in CGC and the professional language regarding learning. This implies that theoretical and methodological perspectives on learning dimensions need to be strengthened in the field of CGC. These learning dimensions are described below as conditions for learning which generate different phases in the conversational process, either positive or negative

learning processes. Small steps in CGC conversation rewrite former experiences that help participants sort the past, the present and the future. The emotional experience of the counseling sessions is a highly motivational force for learning

### Conditions for learning

Three types of conditions for learning could be identified from the empirical data of the study: Pre-existing conditions, organizational conditions and counseling-related conditions. The pre-existing conditions in the individual's life, and in the outside world prior to the counseling sessions, are divided into personal and social conditions. Organizational conditions relate to how the professional conversation has been organized and structured. These conditions include time available, continuity, and context. The counseling-related conditions refer to the professional conversation, and to everything that makes learning possible. These are in positive terms: recognition, relationship, participation, and influence. It is, however, also possible that misrecognition, contempt, and resistance can cause negative conditions.

The pre-existing and organizational conditions are thus affected by how the participants perceive the way the professionals recognize them. Built upon Martin Buber's reasoning of I-You relationships, that the quality of recognition opens for such relationships, the next step would lead to participation, and I-That relationships. This, then, can either exert more influence over the whole process or only over the I-That relationship, which causes resistance. These relationships, in turn, predict what the outcome will be. Thus, it depends on whether the participant can reconstruct his or her biographicity identity shaped by the individual's life story, according to Alheit and Dausien. In other words, the participant's perceived ability to learn and rewrite his or her story according to the present situation. This can affect the way they perceive their future, which could be of significant benefit for the individual's career development.

### Different phases in the conversational process

Participants' experiences of support relate to different phases of the conversation, which generate different learning conditions. Furthermore, Honneth's and Voswinkel's concepts of no recognition, non-recognition and misrecognition, are used to further problematize and distinguish between positive and negative emotional experiences. According to Ikäheimo and Laitinen, recognition can be monological or dialogical, and they emphasize the importance of dialogical recognition because this has significance for the interpersonal relationship pursuant to Buber. It is also within these phases of the conversational meeting that the personal and social conditions emerge or not, which then determines whether the learning process takes a positive or negative direction. The interpersonal relationships and dialogue are favored or hampered (ea.). The conversation is favored when the relationship is open to shifting between discovering personal, social, and societal situations and discussing them without feeling threatened.

### Positive and negative learning processes

Based on these phases and conditions, positive and negative learning processes emerge in CGC. This shows that learning conditions are formed in the conversation itself, where the participant's conditions and other external conditions surrounding the conversation determine the outcome of the learning process. In turn, continued career development depends on these different learning conditions. In the positive learning process, the

participant's narrative influence on these learning conditions is strong. Here, the counselor helps participants to reconstruct their biographicity. Therefore the participants can begin to expand their horizons and envision a different career than the one they previously had in mind. The negative learning process is characterized by unchanged learning conditions, lack of ability to act and thus no career development. Here, pre-existing and organizational conditions govern professional support, thereby ignoring the personal conditions of the participant. This inhibits the reconstruction of their biographicity, and instead they develop resistance or struggle for their personal conditions.

#### Small steps rewrite former experiences and create new meaning

From the learning processes identified above, learning takes place in small steps. The participants' learning largely depends on their previous experiences. These experiences have resulted in low self-esteem, and they are hesitant to participate in societal programs. The participants describe this as progress in small steps, where the next step depends on the previous one so that learning builds on previous learning. This depends on what is added (opportunities or new obstacles), removed or transformed (obstacles or new opportunities). Moreover, learning takes place in relation to the current experiences, situations, and conditions of the participants. That is, the participants' opportunity to describe their perceived situation and the conversation leaders' ability to accept that story. Learning, in this context, is a movement where participants rewrite their former experiences and create new meaning. Experiences that participants earlier considered as obstacles to finding their way in life transform into an opportunity to understand something in a new way, and thereby more likely enable them to move towards the future. The ability to reflect upon one's past, present and future brings about movement in this direction.

#### The past, the present and the future

The past links with understanding their life story and being understood by the guidance counselor or coach. The present links with managing their current situation. The future links with creativity, initiating thought/emotion towards something new. The learning processes are influenced by the tensions between, on one hand, the participant's self-image, and societal demands on the outcome of the conversations on the other. The learning process thus largely depends on how the professionals handle these conflicting demands in the conversation. The professional's attitude towards the participants appears to be important for the learning process, since it affects the participants' confidence in or skepticism towards the professional, especially if the participant feels listened to and taken seriously. This attitude influences the working alliance between the two, opening or closing the possibilities for participation and influence, and it has an impact on the conversation, both in the sense of what is discussed, and how it is discussed. This approach appears to be particularly crucial at the beginning of the process. In addition, the professional attitude needs to be upheld throughout the process of the professional conversation, so the sense of influence and participation can be maintained.

#### Emotional experiences of the counseling sessions – a motivational force for learning

How the participants emotionally experience the counseling sessions is an important motivating force in the learning process. Negative feelings appear to halt the learning process. Minor factors in the professional's attitude appear to be crucial for the direction of the learning process. An increasingly positive feeling on the part of the participants is a good motivator for learning. Positivity increases when the participants feel they are taken

seriously, treated as equal citizens of society, able to tell their personal history, and given the opportunity to describe themselves and the situation they are in, in their own words. The opposite feelings, such as being categorized, evaluated, or judged, is something the participants have experienced from previous encounters with professionals and authorities during the time they were jobseekers. The emotional links to previous experiences of unemployment are a fragile factor for participants, which the professional counselor needs to deal with. These emotional links appear to be dependent on the tension between participants' views about their situation and society's rules and requirements. According to Illeri's theory, learning is seen as an ongoing interaction between content, emotions, and the ability to interact and dedicate oneself to the processes of learning. The emotional dimension, which includes motivators and the interaction dimension, seems to be central to the direction of the learning process.

### Implications for guidance

The conclusion strongly suggest that certain pre-existing conditions highly influence the participants' experiences of professional career guidance support. Personal conditions are participants' previous experiences, not least their previous participation in different types of societal measures. How previous societal actions were carried out also has impact on the learning process. Furthermore, the participants' experiences of support relate to different phases of the conversations, and these phases are dependent on relational aspects, which, in turn, create different conditions for learning. This has an impact on how participants take on their continued career process. However, this first requires professionals to consider the conditions related to the conversation, so that the career process really develops in that direction. Second, it is necessary that pre-existing conditions allow development, and are handled based on the participants' perspective. Third, organizational aspects need to be adjustable to the current needs of the participants.

*Guest editor Dr. Ingela Bergmo Prvulovic, Ass. Professor in Education at the School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Sweden, processes and edits the theoretical texts.*

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**Christer Langström**, Dr. in Education, is an educator and researcher at Stockholm University. He teaches mainly in the study and career counselor program and the principal program as well as teacher programs in group processes and professional conversations. He also works as a process supervisor for professional educators. His main research interest is directed towards interpersonal communication and how this communication enables or hinders learning, especially in study- and career guidance conversations.

**Knud Illeris'** theory of learning consists of three dimensions (content, emotions and interaction) which are connected by two processes, defined as acquisition and interaction processes.

**Martin Buber** describes I-You relationships as unusual. They are characterized by mutual dialogue and an acceptance of the other in an interaction, including a presence that is open to what we can do for the other regardless of our own gain. I-It relationships on the other hand are very common. We observe, examine and assess in order to take advantage of the other. Others become objects for us, and we become objects for them.

**Peter Alheit and Bettina Dausien** explain biograficity as individuals constantly reinterpreting their lives in the social contexts where they create new experiences and linking these new experiences to their existing self-image. The biography is thus constantly reinterpreted, and life is experienced as dynamic and "malleable".