ABSTRACT

In this article the author will analyse professional learning of pastors. Pastors can be an example of a value-oriented profession being both a keeper of traditions and an innovator facing the challenges of globalization and secularization. The analysis of pastor networks is therefore an interesting case of professional learning in a changing society. The author presents an ethnographic study of five pastors from the Church of Norway doing their everyday work. The author asks: What characterize the professional learning networks of pastors between blackboxing and unfolding? The analytical perspectives of Actor-Network Theory and Bruno Latour (1987) are employed, as the author argues that professional learning is a process of moving between “blackboxing” and “unfolding”. Thus, the author brings a socio-material perspective into the value-oriented field of education. The case of pastors can contribute to elaborate the tools for analysing professional learning. The findings illuminate the challenges many professionals have today, namely to handle different modes of learning.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Education, Knowledge Society, Professionalism, Socio-Material Approach, Workplace Learning

INTRODUCTION

The professions dominate our world. They heal our bodies, measure our profits, save our souls. (Andrew Abbott)

Professional learning is considered to be among the most important factors in a changing knowledge society (Jensen, Lahn, & Nerland, 2012). Being a professional does not necessarily mean to be in control of an expert domain or to be competitive in a market (Freidson, 2001; Friedmann & Phillips, 2004; Jensen et al., 2012; Mulchahy, 2012). To many professionals, learning is more than acquiring standards or developing individual and cognitive achievements. Instead, professionals have to handle and negotiate challenges in a materially and socially complex everyday life. They often work in networks across expert fields. However, these networks create different conditions for knowledge construction and learning. In some situations it means to frame existing knowledge, like for instance developing standards and routines. In other situations it means to handle the innovative and new. Professional learning,
then, can be seen as network processes between what I will call “blackboxing” and “unfolding”.

In this article I will examine professional learning using the case of pastors from the Church of Norway (CoN). Pastors attracted me because pastors in Norway play a specific role in the welfare system for a large part of the population (Kulturdepartementet, 2013; Slagstad, 2011). Pastors baptize a large part of the children, conduct funerals and they are often part of a public crisis team. Many congregations offer the churches as a shelter for illegal immigrants, making pastors take part in both political and interreligious dialogues. Through centuries pastors have had an established role with a public “license” to deal with life and death (Freidson, 1994; Hughes, 1993). In times of extraordinary events and accidents, the churches function as a public gathering place. Even though the church has got this central place in the Norwegian society, very few of the population actually attend weekly church services (3%). A changing knowledge society and new ways of collaborating seems to challenge former practices with secularization and diversified roles of church and religion (Afdal, 2013; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Facing people in extraordinary situations is part of their daily tasks, as well as communicating with believers as well as “less-believers” and non-believers. Pastors have ended up with a status of being “in-between” – and professional learning might be at the core of their challenges.

Research within the church context often sees professional pastor learning as individual processes of a reflective practitioner and knowing-in-action (Burns & Cervero, 2002; Campbell-Reed & Sharen, 2011; Olson, 2009). Many studies describe learning of pastors also as entering communities of practice (Hess, 2007; Mercer, 2006; Naidoo, 2010) An analysis of Norwegian and Dutch curricula explores three different learning approaches to learning in protestant pastor education (Reite, In press) showing how some courses allow a triangulating “network” of knowledge sources, actors and sites and facilitate learning new knowledge. An ethnographic socio-material analysis of pastor learning, however, has not been conducted before.

Professional learning seen as networks is a vast field of largely diverse approaches within research. “Professionalism” will here be seen as a cultural phenomenon, not as essential characteristics (Freidson, 1983; Iedema, Degeling, Braithwaite, & White, 2004; Larson, 1977). Learning among pastors can then not be seen as straightforward processes into becoming “a professional”, but must be seen as negotiations conditioned by interchanging social and historical frames (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008, p. 366). In this context “learning” is not about education, but about how professionals develop and cope through work. The question is what kind of learning processes pastors and their networks go through. The last decade education and learning has been an emerging field of Science, technology and society (STS) and in particular Actor-Network Theory (ANT). An increasing number of ANT accounts address matters such as professional learning and change (Ceulemans, Simons, & Struyf, 2012; Fenwick & Edwards, 2012b; Fenwick & Landri, 2012; Fox, 2005; Gherardi, 2006; Hamilton, 2012; Mulchahy, 2012).

The socio-material approach and ANT makes the starting point for analysing professional learning networks in this article. ANT perspectives bring in two important attributes to the understanding of learning: One the one hand, an ANT approach does not conceive learning as individual attributes or “in the head” of people. Neither is it a process just between people. On the contrary, ANT approaches stress that things and people involved in practices must be studied together. These form “heterogeneous networks”. Networks are complex clusters of space and time. The material is embedded with social meanings and functions (Nespor 1994, p. 15). This does not mean that humans and non-humans are not different. However, it can be hard to divide the human and the material in analysing interactions and the effect of relations (Nespor, 2012, p. 2). Human subjects,
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