# Boundary stories

# Constructing the Validation Centre in West Sweden

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**Abstract**
The role of stories in organizing has traditionally been examined within the context of specific organizations, communities of practice, or social worlds. The study reported here describes the establishment in West Sweden of a centre for developing methods that allow for the recognition of prior learning in people seeking employment. In the report, we highlight the role of stories and storytelling in coordination and organizing between and among organizations, but also between and among social worlds. We refer to such stories as boundary stories, and argue that they are not only the means for creating a shared understanding and facilitating joint actions among a number of public and private organizations, but that they also help to hide potential conflicts, paradoxes, and contradictions among actors.

**Sammanfattning**
I den här artikeln presenteras en studie av etableringen av ett västsvenskt validerings-centrum. Syftet med etableringen var att utveckla metoder för att synliggöra och do-kumentera tidigare erfarenheter hos människor som söker arbete. I studien visar vi hur vissa berättelser blir betydelsefulla för de inblandade organisationernas möjligheter att koordinera och organisera det gemensamma arbetet med valideringscentret. Den typen av berättelser har vi valt att kalla "boundary stories" eftersom de uppmärksammar gränserna mellan de inblandade organisationerna. Dessa berättelser fungera inte bara som verktyg för att åstadkomma gemensam förståelse och göra det möjligt för organi-sationer att agera gemensamt, utan de kan också bidra till att dölja paradoxer, motsätt-ningar och konflikter mellan de olika aktörerna.

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## Introduction

The importance of the narrative form of knowledge for organizing has been acknowledged by an increasing number of researchers (see e.g. Martin, 1982; Weick and Browning, 1986; Goody, 1986; Boland, 1989; Boje, 1991; Orr, 1996; Czarniawska, 1997; 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Sims, 2003; Special Issue on Sensemaking, Organising and Storytelling in Human Relations, forthcoming). Studying reforms in the Swedish public sector, Czarniawska (1997: 28) demonstrated the role of narrative knowledge as a means of sensemaking in everyday organizing – sensemaking for the actors involved in organizing processes and sensemaking for others, including the researchers. Using the work of Julian Orr (1990) as an example, Brown and Duguid (1991) highlighted the role of narratives as devices for making sense of the problems that one could encounter in everyday work practice, and as repositories of knowledge embedded in such practice.

Although the role of narratives in the process of sensemaking and in management control attempts has been widely acknowledged, their role as a means of coordination of interorganizational processes has received less attention. In this paper, we show how stories of future organizing shared among representatives of different organizations help to organize when little else is in place – when plans and visions have not yet materialised into routines, practices, or organizations. We show this coordinating role of narratives using an ethnography-inspired study of the establishment of a new organization: the Validation Centre in West Sweden. The centre has been created in order to develop methods for assessing lifelong learning (validering in Swedish, which translates to "validation" in English) and to create new ones.

Soon after our study had begun, we discovered sizeable differences in the accounts of organizational representatives involved in such work activities as determining how validation activities should be organized and controlled; how the practice and activities of the Validation Centre should be designed and conducted; and why validation should even be seen as a good and useful practice. Yet in spite of the inconsistencies, paradoxes, and contradictions in these various accounts of (future) validation, the representatives managed to translate an abstract notion of validation into a fully operational organization with employees, offices, and budgets. This organization did work with developing validation methods.

Although we realize that narratives alone cannot accomplish the coordination of many and varied collective actions, we argue that narratives perform a crucial coordinating role by connecting different social realities and competing interests, thereby enabling and coordinating joint action across social worlds.

Boundary objects are one of the concepts used to examine collective actions transgressing various formal and informal boundaries (Star and Griesemer, 1989). In their study of the founding of Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Star and Griesemer discovered that although representatives of various groups and organizations perceived the museum objects differently, their very material existence helped them to reunite their efforts and construct the museum. During our study, we realized, however, that the concept of boundary objects did not fully capture the boundary-spanning mechanisms we observed, as there were

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no stabilizing objects or even quasi-objects such as routines present in the establishment of the organization we studied.[1] What we did observe was a number of continually changing and developing stories held together by a common or at least a similar logic. Because these stories – intended by the storytellers or not – generated coherence among and within the different social worlds, we called them boundary stories.

In what follows, we first present a brief overview of narrative approaches in organization studies, focusing in particular on the topic of coordination and organizing across boundaries. We further specify connections between and differences in our concept and that of boundary objects. Next, we use this concept to interpret and analyse the use of stories in the coordination of actions across organizational boundaries. This interpretation and analysis is then used for the formulation of a framework that can be used for understanding stories as devices for coordination. Thus we extend insights from the literature on communities of practice, which have documented the role of storytelling in the coordination of work activities within a community of practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991) by demonstrating the use of stories as a coordination device for actions undertaken across organizational boundaries and communities of practice. Our study suggests that stories used in such coordination follow what Czarniawska (2001) called the logic of representation, which differs from the logic of theory and the logic of practice.

## Stories, organizing, and coordination

In his ethnographic study of Xerox technicians, Julian Orr (1990; 1996) has famously demonstrated how storytelling helped the technicians to solve problems with copy machines. Orr explained that their anecdotes – what he referred to as "war stories" – served as a "vehicle of community memory" for that group of technicians. By means of stories, the repair technicians made sense of their everyday work and shared vital information with other members of their community who had not had the same experiences. Brown and Duguid (1991) highlighted the role of Orr's work in providing an understanding of the way stories aid organizational learning. The focus was on an exchange of information, experience, and learning, but because the Xerox technicians worked alone, there was no interest in coordination.

Before we move to the role of stories as a means of coordination, we must state that it is useful for our purposes to distinguish between narratives and stories. This is a traditional distinction, followed by Czarniawska, for example; she wrote that "a narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected", whereas a story is a narrative that has been emplotted (2004: 16), and in this way made into a coherent whole. The stories we were told – and, what is more important, the stories the organizers of the Centre told one another – were emplotted narratives. Far from being merely a list of future actions, they contained descriptions of a setting and a chain of past and future actions connected a way that made sense. As different as they were, they contained a similar set of rhetorical devices, typical of the logic of representation.

In what way did these stories resemble what Star and Griesemer (1989) called boundary objects? It has been said that boundary objects are used to inscribe and share meanings across different local contexts (see e.g. Carlile, 2002; Bechky, 2003). It has also been argued that boundary objects work as a knowledge integration mechanism and as a mediation mechanism among different communities of practice, thus permitting coordination of their actions (Trompette and Vinck, 2009; 2010). This is possible because boundary objects reveal hidden differences across boundaries and provide an understanding of their dependencies (Carlile, 2002; Sapsed and Salter, 2004; Kellogg et al., 2006).

If we were to apply this concept directly to our case, the boundary objects would be a human equivalent: a marginalized people, usually immigrants. Whereas coordination in the case of the founding of a museum assumes that the objects will participate only passively (Star and Griesemer, 1989), persons to be "validated" try actively to manage their identities and therefore their position within the boundaries; they also attempt to join in the construction of the boundary. Objects with multiple memberships do not change themselves reflexively. People do. In both cases, however, different commitments and perceptions of objects and humans are resolved into representations containing "… at every stage the traces of multiple viewpoints, translations and incomplete battles" (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 413).

A related concept, boundary procedures (Lindberg 2002, Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006), shares the characteristics of boundary objects, by serving as a means for sharing meaning across borders and among different social worlds. This is done through a set of stabilized procedures and ordered actions, however, rather than via an object. They are "procedures that acquire different meaning for different actors while they themselves remaining unchanged" (Lindberg and Czarniawska, 2006). In this sense, they can be seen as quasi-objects (Czarniawska and Mouritsen, 2009). Our study revealed yet another means of connecting and aligning actions across diverse communities of practice and across different organizations, but less object-like: stories.

## The field study

A total of 73 interviews were conducted between 2005 and 2008 with representatives from various municipal, state, and private organizations working with validation: the Municipal Administration of Gothenburg, the municipal administrations of other towns and cities in West Sweden, the Public Employment Service, the Municipal Adult Education Department, the Social Security Services, public and private educational service providers, the National Commission for Validation, and trade union and employer representatives. The interviews were open-ended (Silverman, 1993; Kvale, 1996), recorded on minidiscs, and then transcribed in full.

We also observed project meetings intended to facilitate collaboration among participating organizations, which provided us with the opportunity to listen to the way project participants talked in groups about and made sense of their work with validation. Field notes were taken throughout; they included comments made by participants during the meetings as well as the researcher's

comments regarding the setting and organizing of the meetings. These field notes later formed the basis of the field stories presented here.

During conversations and interviews, the project's participants described events that had occurred before our arrival on the scene, as well as the experiences of co-workers that had not been observed by us. Various types of documents – government reports and statistics, cooperation agreements, memoranda, web pages, e-mails, and letters – enabled the identification and analysis of a number of these events.

The field material allowed us to identify narratives concerning the validation phenomenon, sometimes competing and sometimes paradoxical. Following the advice given by Czarniawska (1997), we did not attempt to resolve these paradoxes. Rather we have tried to understand how they arose and the role they played.

## Some notes on the setting

It is necessary at the outset to provide some information about the context in which the Validation Centre was created. It is commonly assumed within the European Union that education and training systems can be organized more effectively if prior lifelong learning is better recognized.[2] Methods of recognition have subsequently come to be viewed as a legitimate organizing activity. It is in this spirit that validation grew in significance in Sweden (Andersson et al., 2004; Hult and Andersson, 2008). The concept was introduced as part of kunskapslyftet – the Adult Education Initiative – an elaborate programme conducted between 1997 and 2002 under the auspices of the Swedish Ministry for Education, which saw the programme as crucial to the restructuring of Sweden's adult education system (Swedish Govt. Official Reports 1997: 158). The purpose of the programme was to use adult education as a means for creating a labour force better adapted to the "knowledge economy", decreasing Swedish unemployment rates and increasing the country's international competitiveness. The Adult Education Initiative was formulated in rhetoric of equality. Its purpose was to raise the knowledge and skills level of the group of adults with the greatest need for education – the group that had previously received the least of society's educational resources. The first target group was unemployed persons who lacked all or part of a secondary education. Even employed persons were considered eligible, however.

One of the regions given the task of developing validation methods was West Sweden. The task started truly from scratch, as one education specialist remembered:

> At that point nothing was ready, nothing at all – only a short description stating that it was necessary to find methods for validating people. And even the concept of validating – it wasn't clear either what that stood for. (EA070314: 2)[3]

This ambiguity was later removed when the government offered its own definition of validation:

> Validation is a process that involves a structured assessment, valuation, documentation and acknowledgement of knowledge and competence that a person possesses independent of how they were acquired.
> (Ds 2003: 23, p. 19)

But the first concretization occurred in 1998, when the Swedish Ministry for Education commissioned the establishment of the regional Validation Centre. It was to be the largest of the ten centres commissioned in Sweden and was described as being located in the forefront of development of methods and tools for validating the skills and competencies of individuals (Tursell, 2005). By 2008, the centre had nine employees, administrators, and method developers.

Many of our interlocutors claimed that the work of establishing validation in Gothenburg, the capital of the region, was characterized from the start by a high degree of cooperation between the public administration and other partners – the so-called Gothenburg spirit – and by a strong focus on "qualification requirements other than those expressed in more traditional educational settings" (Tursell, 2005). A steering group consisting of representatives from all the parties headed the project; it was given a significant role in providing advice on issues concerning the development and level of sophistication of the project. Its members were also seen as key links between the project and all other networks in the region with interest in the project. But above all, the steering group was described as fulfilling a critical role in legitimating the Validation Centre project in the eyes of trade and industry. In 2008, the group included representatives from the Public Employment Services, Business Region Göteborg (BRG), the (now defunct) County Labour Board, Sweden's most powerful trade unions, employer representatives, and the Göteborg Region Association of Local Authorities (GR), the Gothenburg Municipal Council, and the University of Gothenburg.

## The four-times-told story

Once in the field, we soon discovered that stories of how work with validation was to be organized differed among representatives of the various parties participating in the validation project. The differences concerned ideas about the organization and control of the jointly established Validation Centre, the design and implementation of the practice and activities of the organization, and even why validation should be seen as a good and useful practice. Thus the process of organizing of validation was not grounded in a common understanding of what the validation was supposed to be or what it would do and could achieve in the future. The stories were not pitted against one another, however. Instead, all stories promoting development of the abstract notion of validation towards materialization into an organization called Validation Centre were accepted and seen as beneficial, regardless of their consistency and regardless of the parallel and competing versions produced by other representatives in the consortium.

We now present the four stories that we saw as having the greatest spread: the efficient-education story, the improved-labour-market story, the labour-sourcing story, and the individual-development story. We composed these stories from interviews, field notes, and other field material, partly summarizing them,

and partly quoting the original utterances. Our aim was to reconstruct them in the version that was most spread.

## The efficient-education story

According to the efficient-education story, validation arrived in Gothenburg in 1997 as part of the Adult Education Initiative. The local Adult Education Department was given the responsibility of developing and implementing methods for validating competencies and skills. The Adult Education Initiative sought to strengthen adult education in Sweden and make the country more competitive, as required by the transformation of an industrial society into a post-industrial society. This required a shift in perspective: learning was no longer to be seen as occurring solely in formal settings, but was to be expanded to include lifelong learning, which was the basic tenet of this new view. They do not know everything they need to know, however; therefore they need supplementary training or education, which can be provided through the adult education system.

> Adult education is intended to assist people who may have an outdated primary education, or those who need different types of supplementary training in order to increase their competitiveness in the labour market. For example, if someone has worked as an assistant nurse for ten years and now wants to become a nurse, supplementary education is necessary. But it must be remembered that the idea wasn't to provide persons who didn't have good grades in their primary education with an opportunity to improve their grades within the adult education system, and thereby enable them to apply for college or university. (KA070405: 1)

In order to know what a person knows, and the size of the gap between what the person knows and what a person needs to know in a given aspired-to profession, some method must be applied. Validation, understood as the structured assessment and documentation of knowledge, independent of where or how it has been acquired, is such a method. Thus validation promised a more efficient educational system. A caseworker recalled:

> Gothenburg Municipality ran an educational programme within the health care sector for their employees with insufficient formal education. Everyone had to participate in the training programme, irrespective of the number of years they'd worked in the organization. And then as other people saw how validation was further developed and saw that very soon one would be able to use validation on a large scale, they added some pressure to make it a reality, because they wanted to use it for their employees as well. So, every training programme from 2001 onwards should be preceded by validation. No one would be able to participate in a whole programme purely out of habit. Instead, the candidates' existing competencies would be validated, and they would then enter the part of the programme supplying only those competencies that they lacked. (AD061127: 1)

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The efficient-education story was embedded in the ideas of the Adult Education Initiative, aimed at strengthening adult education in Sweden by making it available to larger groups of people who otherwise stood outside the established educational system. Validation was the magic wand that would turn the education system into a more effective one.

## The labour-sourcing story

The labour-sourcing story started with the premise that everyone possesses skills and knowledge, not all of which are documented. Such skills could include those acquired in the workplace over long periods, as well as skills possessed by immigrants who arrived in Sweden with work experience from abroad. If these persons were to become sensibly employed, their skills must be documented.

When the work with validation began in various localities in Sweden in the mid-1990s, it was primarily organizations within the adult education sector that were given the task of developing and implementing the methods of assessing and documenting work competencies. In Gothenburg, the Municipal Adult Education Department was to develop validation methods within the health care sector. These methods were based on the existing course syllabi of the secondary school system.

Validating the competencies of health care sector employees with insufficient formal education plays a key role in the municipality's human resource management, as one senior municipal official explained:

> Previously I worked here in the municipal offices with a large project aimed at developing new strategies for the municipality labour sourcing. That was towards the end of the 1990s. At that time, we could see that we lacked teachers, we lacked personnel to care for the elderly, we lacked nursery school personnel… there were a number of areas in which we needed to recruit people. And then this project started to look at these issues from a more long-term perspective – to try to prognosticate and develop a strategy for how to get people to work within the public sector and to meet our demands for labour. That's when I made contact with validation. (PB070314: 6)

Towards the end of the 1990s, employer representatives from other sectors and industries, such as the Confederation of Swedish Enterprises, argued for the importance of validation from a user (employer) perspective. They expected validation, if implemented and used in a "correct" manner, to first and foremost make it easier for employers to identify and assess potential employees. In their eyes, validation was seen as being oriented primarily towards the type of practical skills and competence demanded by employers in contemporary work life, and less concerned with the traditional curriculum of the public school system. The employer and branch representatives judged the educational sector as incapable of documenting these skills, suggesting that the educational system did not know and understand the requirements of the business world:

> The adult education we've had in Sweden has been based on the structure of the secondary school system, which doesn't prepare pu-

pils for a concrete occupation. This means that young people leaving secondary school often need a certain period of work as an apprentice or something like that, before they can say that they're carpenters or construction workers. Although the upper secondary school system has given these young people the basics, they then need to spend some time working within an occupation before they can call themselves plumbers or carpenters. For many of the adult students who've worked for 15 or 20 years in a certain occupation…that's my opinion at least… their upper secondary school grades, if anything, degraded their competencies. (EN071114: 2)

Because of their profound inside knowledge of the respective fields, the various branches of trade and industry knew best how to translate the skills and competencies acquired on the job into meaningful documents for employers. In this sense, the labour-sourcing story competed with the efficient-education story.

## The individual-development story

The individual-development story usually started with a premise that most people know much more than they think they know. The idea was that many of the skills and much of the knowledge people acquire through lifelong learning remain untapped because people are not given the opportunity to reflect upon everything they know. By reflecting on their skills and knowledge and by mapping them, they can increase their motivation and develop as human beings.

Since the mid-1990s, our interlocutors told us, the focus of the validation work has increasingly shifted from "structured assessment" and "valuation"[4] to reflection and documentation. Education service providers in particular promoted this perspective, based upon ideas about the knowledge society and lifelong learning. They had previously worked with various validation methods aimed at coaching people in ways that would reflect upon their lifelong learning and document their competence. One education service provider described the purpose of validation in the following way on the company's home page:

The purpose is to make visible, and thereafter reflect upon and document learning and development, and to make people aware that learning continues throughout life. In this way, the self-esteem of these people will be strengthened, and they will acquire insights about their own responsibility for learning and development.

A well-prepared qualification portfolio should contain an individual's skills and competencies, acquired in formal and informal contexts, and be up to date. It should also contain an occupational identification and indicate which competencies can be validated. Course participants will prepare their own, personal portfolios. (Education service provider's website)

Validation was thus a knight in shining armour that could emancipate people to become responsible for their own individual development. The "qualification portfolio" is aimed at making visible and documenting a person's knowledge and competence from a holistic perspective, and collecting these documents in a portfolio to be used when applying for work. This was a ten-week, daily course

run by the education service provider participating in the project. The course started with two weeks of computer training. Over the remaining 8 weeks, 6 to 12 pupils listened to lectures on the Swedish labour market, attended job-search activities, reflected on their experiences, and documented their competence through the assistance of a coach. One validation expert explained:

> Rather than simply writing down what they have done, people preparing such a portfolio should reflect over what they have done, how they have done it, and why they have done it, in order to see what they have learned from the process – from what they have done – so the presentation will become much broader, much more complete. And apart from looking at working life only, or at formal education only, the point is to take a look at more general competencies. They should ask themselves: "What kind of person am I?" The Ministry of Education came up with a list of ten general competencies, and they should be accounted for as well. After all, we all have these ten competencies, but not all in the same degree. And in the process of doing all this, when people write it all down, document it, they are forced to reflect on themselves. And this is extremely important, because it strengthens their self-esteem. It truly does. (AF061114: 3)

The individual-development story competed in some ways with the laboursourcing story and the efficient-education story, because there had been no goal of documenting and legitimating skills and competence in the form of grades or certificates. Its focus lay instead with what "happens inside the person", making it difficult to link to employers' demands or supplementary training activities.

## The flexible-labour-market story

The flexible labour market story also departed from the assumption that all people possess skills and competence, but that their skills and competence alone were not sufficient for employment. Adequate methods for matching job seekers with job opportunities on the labour market were missing.

For the Public Employment Service (PES), for example, validation was mainly a tool for stimulating labour mobility and increasing labour market efficiency. According to PES representatives, people possess knowledge and skills; what was lacking was the right tools for matching them on the labour market. One senior PES employee argued, for example, for the importance of validation by recounting an earlier experience:

> When I learned about the validation instrument and what they wanted to achieve with it, I thought: "Just imagine if I had had this in Bengtsfors (a small town in West Sweden) in 1999 when I worked there." Imagine a factory with 900 workers. You have to realize that in that part of the country… many people were hobby farmers, in other words they were very handy: built their own houses, fished and hunted, and worked in the forests. In other words, they lived a double life. They had a lot of knowledge…that wasn't documented. And we had a huge labour market just across the border in Norway, where

they built the huge airport. They were searching for as many builders as possible. If we could have had the validation of construction workers in Bengtsfors at that time, we could have given all those guys…even girls, of course, but there were mostly guys, a certificate outlining everything they could do… Because they knew how to work within construction, they knew how to build and they knew how to lay a foundation…I mean, they had learnt all this stuff. Many others actually come from farming families… they've farmed for generations. Still, they don't have documents for this, though they possess the knowledge. And that's what I think is one of validation's big merits…in the future, I believe, its utility. Its utility in this kind of situation, where there's a lot of knowledge that's unverified…(BK061211: 1)

The more that was known about the job seekers, the easier it was to match them with adequate employment on the labour market. Validation was of particular interest to PES, because it represented a potential solution for groups of unemployed people who were experiencing difficulty gaining access to the labour market: people with little formal education, persons in need of rehabilitation, and immigrants – especially refugees.

With its explicit focus on methods for efficiently documenting informal competence gained through lifelong learning as an extension of PES's methods of inquiring into a person's competencies and skills, the flexible-labour-market story competed in some ways with the individual-development story.

In summary, public and private organizations, unions, and state agencies – partners in the project – increasingly regarded validation as positive and useful, but any attempts at implementing validation methods more widely did not pass without debate. There was a special focus on questions related to the standardisation of validation and quality control of the methods. At one stage, the Swedish ombudsman against discrimination highlighted the potential problems of narrowing the question of validation to immigrants only. This could mean, the ombudsman argued, that validation would run the risk of promoting stigmatisation and discrimination by claiming that it can be applied to one group. And, the ombudsman asked, who should be entrusted with conducting the validation? How and by whom are the content of and the forms for evaluation to be decided? How and by whom should validation activities be monitored and controlled? We are not sure if those doubts were raised because of the multiplicity of the justification stories, or in spite of them.

## The stories meet

The creation of a validation system was not the result of many representatives coming to an understanding about the nature of the validation system or what it would do and could achieve in the future. Rather, the stories have been circulated – at seminars, conferences, workshops, and other meetings. In 2006, for instance, a regional conference focusing on validation as a means for successfully integrating newly arrived immigrants attracted heads of departments, caseworkers, representatives of education providers[5] and officials from state authorities.

Various speakers presented their ideas on validation and discussed their shared experiences. Although their stories were inconsistent, they had one thing in common: validation was presented as a good thing and as the solution to a critical problem.

At one point, a vocational expert presented the validation process within the construction sector. He had worked since the mid-1990s developing validation methods for construction workers and painters, and had validated people on the basis of the curriculum of the upper secondary educational system on a regional level. After a successful validation, the participant was issued the same certificate as a person who had completed the vocational training programme for becoming a construction worker or a painter.

The expert said that some 60-80 persons out of 150 had been judged as possessing the required competence and had received their certificates after being validated. He also said that he had attended a meeting on validation the previous day, in which the 20 largest companies in Western Sweden had participated in order that they could learn more about the methods and have the opportunity to contact persons eligible for validation and possible future employment. Validation, he said, had an excellent reputation among these companies. People who had been validated and were subsequently employed by these companies were greatly appreciated, because the joint training boards established by social partners at the industry level set tough formal criteria for skills and competence within the construction sector. The expert's presentation and the discussions that followed outlined the formal requirements needed to gain an occupational identity as a builder or painter in Sweden.

The next speaker worked for one of the education providers, but spoke in his capacity as a trade union representative. He underlined the concrete rules and regulations for assessing a person's qualifications to be called a carpenter or a construction builder. He also noted the importance of the standardised documentation developed in cooperation with the social partners and representing the shared understanding among them that "this is the way we want to present our occupation".

This picture of validation as a highly formalized process was in stark contrast to the picture presented by the next speaker, who was a coach from one of the larger education providers. He participated in the conference to present the qualification portfolio, a ten-week course aimed at "making visible and documenting a person's skills and knowledge from a holistic perspective" and collecting them in a portfolio to be used when applying for work. His story about validation differed from the previous ones. He stressed that the qualification portfolio required participants to reflect upon and document their skills and competence. The value of validation lay, in his opinion, in triggering processes "inside the person" participating in the course. The activities under the guidance of the coach had had a motivating effect on the participants in the past, giving them a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

The first two speakers at the conference subscribed to a version of the labour-sourcing story; they saw validation as an improved version of the PES caseworkers' mapping, as it was based on expert and formal authority (see also

Miller & Rose, 2008: 106). The last speaker presented the individual-development story, in which validation was not aimed at documenting and legitimating skills and competence in the form of grades or certificates, and did not rely on expert authority. Its focus lay instead with what "happens inside the person", making it difficult to link to employers' demands or supplementary training activities. Yet nobody pointed out this discrepancy – a nonconfrontational response that we often witnessed to stories. Inconsistencies among the stories remained invisible, not only during this regional conference, but also throughout the project.

Our comparison of these four stories reveals several differences and discrepancies, which are especially obvious in explanations about the importance and goodness of validation, and in descriptions of its expected results. The expectation in the labour-sourcing story was that validation would be a useful tool for employers. It was seen as a method for evaluating experiences, skills, and knowledge relevant to a particular industry, production system, or workplace where it is presumed that the validated persons will work. It was in the close connection between the focus of the validation activities and a particular work context that the advantages of validation become most obvious and distinct. Validation was seen as documenting work experience within a relevant and familiar context, and supporting employers' efforts to identify employee workers with relevant skills and experiences – not as a method of formalising knowledge.

This is a plot that does not fit well with the effective-education story, in which validation is seen as a tool for identifying, documenting, and formalising knowledge, skills, and knowledge in a manner that connects to the standards, norms, and criteria used within the public education system. It was described as a practice that translated informal knowledge into formal education. Furthermore, validation was seen here as a tool, not only for identifying knowledge, but equally important, as a tool for identifying knowledge gaps – gaps to be filled by public education.

To complicate the situation further, the flexible-labour-market story borrows some elements from the labour-sourcing story and the effective-education story. Even here, however, there is a very different explanation for why validation is a good thing. In the flexible-labour-market story, validation becomes a tool for stimulating labour mobility, for increasing the efficiency and matching function of the labour market, and as a method for supporting unemployed persons experiencing difficulty in gaining access to the labour market: persons with little formal education, persons in need of rehabilitation, and immigrants. Validation is seen as a useful technique for identifying, categorising, and classifying a person's full set of skills, experiences, and knowledge. Such a detailed, systematic, and generic classification system is desirable for creating opportunities to match potential employees against as many job openings as possible, thereby strengthening their position in the labour market.

Aiming for such a broad and complete description of a person's skills, experiences, and knowledge placed this view of validation in conflict with both the effective-education story and the labour-sourcing story. It would be counterproductive to limit the scope of validation to those competencies that could be captured within a description of formal education. It would be equally problematic,

however, to see a person's capabilities from the contextualised and narrow view of a specific industry, organization, or workplace. The fourth story of validation, the individual-development story, reveals paradoxes similar to those in the other stories. Here validation carries expectations of individual development; it is seen as a method of empowering workers by recognizing their competence and skills, which, in turn, is expected to raise their internal and external status, to increase their ability to change their employer or their workplace, and to improve their bargaining power. Furthermore, the individual-development story includes an idealistic aspect, in which the totality of a person's abilities is seen as important, valuable, and worthy of documentation, as a source for enriching a person's life and as a principle of equality. This view of validation collides with other stories, all of which define the importance of validation instrumentally – either as increasing the effectiveness of the public education system or as better answering the demands of the labour market or the needs of employers.

Given the different and at times contradictory descriptions of the usefulness of validation techniques, it becomes apparent that organizing a system for validation was not the result of the participants' common understanding of what validation was supposed to be, what it would do, and what it could achieve in the future. Rather, all stories aiding the translation of the abstract notion of validation in the material form of the Validation Centre were welcome. The existence of parallel and competing versions produced by other representatives in the consortium was not a problem. To the contrary, it seems that any effort to strive for consensus and a shared and detailed understanding of what a validation centre should do would be counter-productive and could potentially jeopardise the project. It would take time, consume resources, reveal potential conflicts, and thereby undermine efforts to establish the centre. In spite of the inconsistencies, paradoxes, and contradictions in their views on validation, the representatives managed to coordinate their actions and translate an abstract notion of validation into a fully operational organization with employees, offices, and budgets, as they prepared to start developing validation methods. How was that possible?

## Four stories, but one centre: How the logic of representation reconciles them all

Studying the ways various organizational accounts were built, Czarniawska (2001) contrasted the logic of representation with the logic of theory and the logic of practice. (The logic of theory is not relevant in this context). "Logic" here does not denote formal logic; rather it indicates ways of making a story coherent and convincing, by using emplotment and other rhetorical elements (White, 1979/2010). The stories using the logic of representation are abstract, although hypothetical examples are often used. This is in contrast to the logic of practice, which involves concrete events and actions situated in time and place. Such events can always be contested ("this is not how it went") in the way abstract stories and hypothetical examples cannot. Stories using the logic of representation are also more accomplished rhetorically ("embellished" may be the right word), whereas stories from practice, unless they are often retold and rehearsed, are usually relatively rough. The logic of representation goes well with

such narrative skills as reference to distinct genres, borrowing from the legitimate repertoire of plots, and the introduction of hero-like characters; the logic of practice often uses an unplotted narrative that merely tells what has happened and where and when it has happened. The main means of emplotment within the logic of representation is formal rationality: purpose–means–effects.

In this sense, there was some consensus among the four stories; purpose-means-effect worked as a meta-plot that, when flanked by other elements of the logic of representation, helps to hide or disguise potential problems, paradoxes, and conflicts. This meta-plot could be summarized as: "People's experiences, skills, and competencies are not always visible. They should be made explicit, and validation is the way to do it. The results would benefit everybody". Now, what validation is going to be is a matter for the future – for the time being, it is enough to agree that it is a process by which someone or something is evaluated, and a process that needs to be developed and made more sophisticated ("this is an object that can be exhibited in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology "). Accordingly, people need to be assessed, assessors need to be paid, assessment methods need to be developed, and organizations need to cooperate. Furthermore, once validation practices are established, the result and documentation of these practices must be widely accepted in society as a legitimate way of formalizing a person's skills, competencies, and experiences. Thus validation works as a synecdoche – standing for the means to all noble purposes and desirable ends (White, 1979/2010), around which the meta-plot evolves.

This meta-plot and its central synecdoche reconcile all four stories; the differing details lose their importance. Thus all four stories, held together by a common logic of representation, could be used for boundary-spanning coordination (Kellogg et al., 2006), which is necessary for the establishment of the Validation Centre. There were no boundary objects nor, as yet, any boundary routines present during the establishment of the Validation Centre – only a number of continually changing and developing stories, held together by their common logic. These stories and their meta-plot helped to generate coherence within and among the different social worlds. Such boundary stories provided the means of coordinating and sharing meaning among the various worlds when little else had yet materialized – before an organization appeared in time and space, populated by employees, loaded with material resources, and defined by its everyday activities. Future stories, following the logic of practice, may create and reveal more conflicts and confrontations. Indeed, Baier et al. (1986), who have made similar observations in the context of policy making, suggested that "the ambiguity of policy increases the chance of its adoption, but at the cost of creating administrative complications (p.207). But it is more than just ambiguity; speaking unclear is not enough. What we are demonstrating here is that constructing stories using the logic of representation is a rhetorical achievement. It should be added, however, that while the logic of representation offers excellent prescriptions for constructing quasi-objects, it may not work that well when constructing physical objects.

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## Notes

[1] See Czarniawska and Mouritsen (2009) on the role of quasi-objects in management.

[2] See, for example, *Communication on Lifelong Learning* (2001); the Education Council Decision *Concrete future objectives for European education and training systems* (2002); *the Copenhagen Declaration* (2002); ETUC (2002); European Commission (2004).

[3] All translations in the text are the authors'.

[4] To validate" means 1) Make or declare legally valid; confirm the validity of (…); legalize, 2) Lend force or validity to; confirm; ratify; substantiate (*The New Shorter Oxford*, 1993: 3541). In France, validation is carried out in conjunction with university and college degrees. In Sweden, validation is carried out only vis-à-vis some occupations (e.g. nursing, carpentry). In most occupations, the focus is on validating informal competence gained from lifelong learning and does not lead to documented grades.

[5] Education providers in Sweden can be public – the municipal adult education centers (*Komvux*) or the high schools, for instance. Alternatively, they can be private, such as *Lernia* or *Eductus* – companies that have been accredited by the state authorities to deliver various types of educational services such as courses, validation, and vocational programmes. They may also teach courses in secretarial skills, for example, or provide programmes on construction work endorsed by the social partners within the construction industry and leading to a certificate.