

Specific resistance to learning by course instructors

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Abstract

The following article highlights results from an empirical analysis that examines learning processes and resistance to learning by course instructors. The first section of the article presents the basic elements of the empirical analysis. At the same time, Holzkamp's theory of learning will be explained. As a partial result of the empirical analysis, the second part of the article will illustrate two examples of resistance to learning and indicate plausible reasons. Finally the article will explain why the resistance to learning is specific to course instructors.

1. When course instructors learn: structure and content of the empirical analysis

This article examines selected results of a completed dissertation (see Schepers 2014). Resistance to learning by course instructors on professional development courses is investigated. What types of resistance to learning by course instructors (on professional development courses) can occur? What are the structures and aspects typical of the profession that play a role with regard to resistance to learning? These questions lie at the heart of the study. In this context, learning is understood as a vital component of the professional development of course instructors, as training is considered "a part of the strategy to foster professionalism" (Tippelt/von Hippel 2007, p. 120). The condition is that learning does actually take place in personal development courses.

Therefore, the first chapter of the study described here categorises the issue regarding research conducted on the profession. Terms such as professions, professionalisation and professionalism are briefly defined first (these are listed in detail in the first section of the study). To achieve a further rapprochement vis à vis professionalism, the profession-theory approaches taken by Schütze (1996), Oevermann (1996) and Stichweh (1996) are illustrated. Secondly, aspects such as "knowledge", "interaction and communication between clients and professionals", "reflection", "client autonomy" and the "working alliance" are extracted from these approaches and categorised as relevant to defining professionalism. The aspects relevant to professionalism for course instructors as a profession are then categorised. It becomes clear that previous research on the professionalism of course instructors tended to refer to individual categories, such as for example personal concepts of education (see Kade 1989) and professional self-perception (see Hof 1999 and Schepers 2014, p. 34 cf.). The focus above all is placed on the professional self-perception of course instructors, in other words the question of how course instructors see their professional mission (see Kade 1989; Bastian 1997; Hof 1999/2001; Fuchs 2004; Harmeier 2009). The question of assessing individual categories with regard to professionalism will be looked at again in the final section and discussed critically as regards individual professionalism development (see Schepers 2014, pp. 186 and 205).

In order to highlight learning as a core element of the development of professionalism, it is vital to grapple with a suitable theory of learning. The theoretical foundation is based on Klaus Holzkamp's theory of learning from the standpoint of the subject (1995). This is where the concept of resistance to learning stems from and which is described as a "contradictory mixture of learning and refusing to learn" (Holzkamp 1995, p. 193). Subjects who resist learning do not do so due to any defensive motivation, but because obstructive effects of learning are not fully reflected on. As a result they become stuck in a learning process and perceive this entanglement itself as obstructive. Section 2 describes how accurately the resistance to learning described here manifested itself in the underlying study.

The methodological procedure follows one of qualitative research design. A qualitative form of research design was created because the research is from the standpoint of the subject and (resistant) learning processes are the focus. To generate data, six qualitative interviews were linked with a process of participatory observation. The participatory observation process (see Friebertshäuser/Panagiotopoulou 2010) was carried out during paid educational leave when eight course instructors learnt about “People and their behaviour in the group”. By triangulating the data from the interviews and from the observation, it was possible to process the very narrow research field in more depth. The data analysis is based on the grounded theory (see Strauss/Corbin 1996) and relates to three axes of analysis: resistance to learning by the course instructors, their professional self-perception and the participants’ inclinations in the course analysed. As a result, the resistance to learning shown in this article stems from the first analysis axis, which is shown in figure 1 with all the categories.

The following section will explain the basics of Holzkamp’s theory of learning in order to better classify and understand the selected results on the specific resistance to learning by course instructors.

2. Learning and resistance to learning

As the founder of critical psychology, Klaus Holzkamp (1995) created a theory of learning which focuses on learning from the standpoint of the subject and the subject’s reasons. Learning is considered an action for which subjective reasons exist and is therefore detached from the idea that learning is only possible when actually taught. In particular, Holzkamp stresses that learning allows us to broaden our options in terms of the experience we have and life we lead and developed the concepts of “defensive” and “expansive learning” to create clearer definitions of why people learn (see Holzkamp 1995, p. 190 cf).

The concept of “resistance to learning” is firmly rooted in this theory of learning (see Holzkamp 1987). Holzkamp focuses on an ambivalence between learning processes with positive connotations, as well as negative experiences with learning. Learning processes as tools to broaden horizons and create subjective development are called “expansive learning” (see the same source p. 190). Learning that has to be carried out using disciplinary means and institutes has a compulsory nature. This is what is called “defensive learning” (ibid, p. 191). “Defensive learning” is all about “preventing an imminent loss of quality of life by the powers that be by learning” (ibid, p. 192). Learning is continued until the threat has been averted. In this type of area of conflict the objects of, processes involved with and access to learning can be afflicted by various hierarchical interests. The reason is that initially no reflection is allowed during which the people learning could develop resistance (ibid, p. 6). As a result, the learning process is impaired and the subject area not (fully) grasped (see Holzkamp 1987, p. 6 cf.).

Typical of Holzkamp’s concept of resistance is that it is not active resistance forced by the subject that is assumed, but that resistance itself inhibits the subject and reflection on the part of the subject is obstructed initially.

What could be the reasons for resistance to learning? As regards the freedoms of “defensive” and “expansive” learning processes, reasons and the importance of learning are what count (see Faulstich 2006, p. 22). Reasons for learning, or not learning can also be the result of structures immanent to the system. If the subject perceives certain structures by the institutional organisation, the learning set-up or their own biographical background as obstructive, these could turn into reasons for resistance to learning (ibid, p. 19). Resistance to learning can also be associated with the subject area and its relevance, for example to people’s jobs. Subject areas are also embedded in certain structures and can therefore lead to conflicts of interest on the part of the subject (see Grotlüschen 2006, p. 77 cf.). If the subject area places demands that run contrary to the interest of the person concerned, resistance can arise (same source).

The following section will illustrate two cases of resistance to learning which are specific to course instructors in the sample group examined. On the one hand the examples show how the course instructors were entangled in their learning process and on the other plausible reasoning structures are indicated which highlight the characteristics of resistance to learning.

2.1 Resistance to learning by course instructors: selected results

Various cases of resistance to learning were found in the underlying data (see below). Verbal examples of resistance to learning from the interviews were extracted and shown, as well as examples which materialised while observing those taking part in paid educational leave. As regards resistance that emerged in the interviews, a differentiation must be made between resistance that the interviewees reported directly and resistance, which was indicated verbally because of nervousness in an interview situation. This second group of resistance was defined in the analysis of the interviews.

The underlying reasoning structures are always relevant to resistance to learning because they provide an explanation of the character of the resistance and possible ways of surmounting it. The following figure 1 shows the first “resistance to learning” analysis axis with all the categories stated. In addition to the cases of resistance to learning, this analysis axis also examines the underlying reasons and ways in which it appears.

The “Involvement in the learning process: defensive learning” is the main category which, as the theoretical anchor, combines Holzkamp’s “contradictory mixture of learning and refusing to learn” (Holzkamp 1995, p. 193).

The second category contains different resistance phenomena (see Schepers 2014, p. 126). The third category “Learning despite resistance” is different. It indicates that despite resistance to learning, learning can be achieved nevertheless (ibid p. 131). And finally, particular attention is paid to the category of a “potential reasoning structure” (ibid, p. 133).

The following section will focus on sub-categories belonging to the first category, namely “The link between expansively motivated learning and defensive learning conditions” and “Learning by chance” as specific resistance to learning by course instructors (see Schepers 2014, p. 120 cf. and 123 cf). These two types of resistance were defined through verbal comments in the interviews.

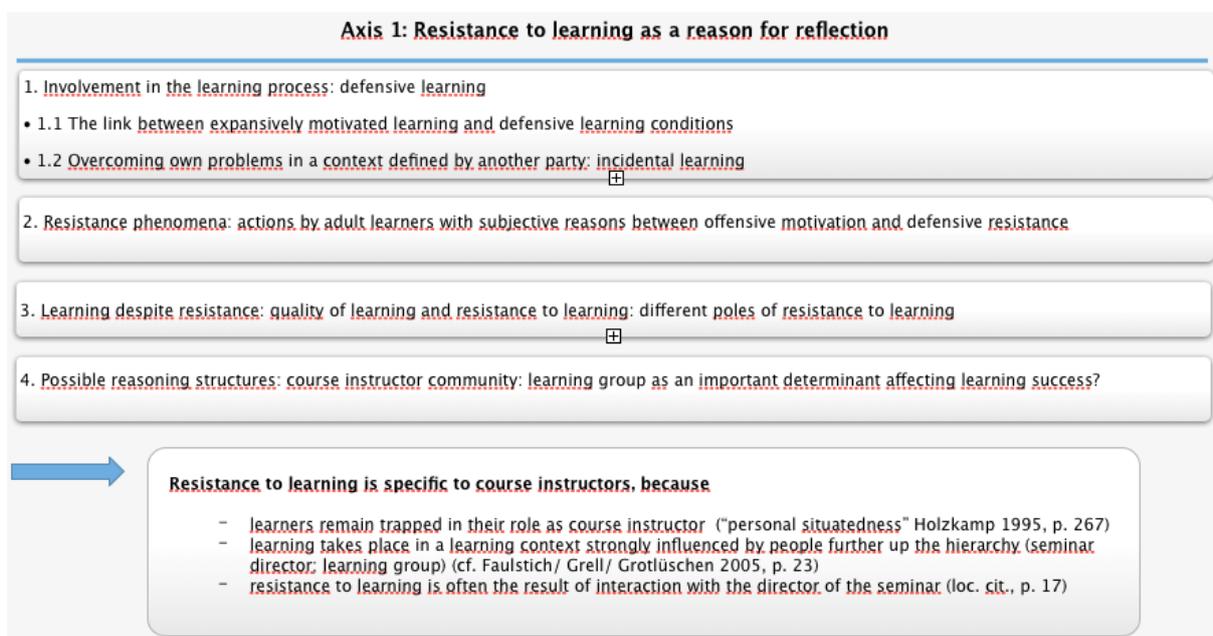


Figure 1: Initial analysis axis of the empirical analysis

2.1.1 The link between expansive learning and defensive learning conditions

The following case of resistance to learning was taken from the interview material. In this case, an interviewee describes a confrontation between the seminar director of the course. In parallel with the course under paid educational leave, the interviewee developed her own seminar concept that she wanted to discuss with the seminar director. In the interview she comments as follows:

“On the penultimate day I gave him my plan of what I would be doing the next week and he started to scribble about on it. I realised that on the one hand I wanted him to look at it and hear what he said. And on the other hand I thought it was odd that he was scribbling on it and telling me how to go about it (she laughs). I didn’t like that at all”. (IP 4)

In this example, the contradictory nature of the action taken by the person learning is clearly shown: The interviewee shows a seminar concept she has developed herself to the seminar director in order to gain feedback. The feedback involves the seminar director scribbling around in the seminar concept. This makes the interviewee feel uncomfortable. At the same time it should be mentioned that this type of resistance to learning was not apparent in the situation itself. Merely the comment by the interviewee makes clear that in the learning processes she experiences a “contradictory mix of learning and refusal to learn” (Holzkamp 1995, p. 193): On the one hand she wants feedback because she needs it to overcome her own personal problems with learning. On the other hand she says that she “doesn’t like” the feedback.

Why does she feel so uneasy? A possible explanation could be the way that feedback is given here: The course instructor is not asked why the concept was drawn up in this way, but is shown that she was apparently wrong in some places. The way in which people giving seminars provide feedback to the students is definitely important. If the feedback is giving with good intentions and is worded more in the form of an offer than a sanction, people learning benefit more from it. They retain control over their actions because they can decide whether to accept or reject the feedback (see Grotlüschen 2003, p. 296). In another quote, the interviewee even says that this type of feedback does not really help her much.

“... I won’t do it like he suggests anyway. Why is he scribbling around on it and wanting me to do it like he does? After all I’ve already accepted and incorporated these things now already. (IP 4).

The interviewee obviously finds herself in a situation that isn’t adequately transparent for her. She does have the expansive learning desire to develop her own seminar concept based on new things she has learnt during the paid educational leave course. However, she feels that she needs the “success of what has been learnt” (creating the concept) verified by a control body (the director of the seminar) – a pattern of taking action based on defensive reasons (see Holzkamp 1995, p. 192). She does say that she “doesn’t want to do it like he does”, but she still turns to him and admits that she has “absorbed and integrated these things as far as possible”. Holzkamp says that the conflict between “expansive learning” and “defensive learning conditions” indicates forms of resistance to learning (see also same source p. 193).

In order to contain the above-mentioned resistance to learning in terms of its reasoning logic, further quotes from the same interviewee are used to show why the subject resisted learning. However, this is not the only reasoning structure possible, but a plausible one, which

was drawn from the interview material. Holzkamp believes that types of resistance to learning occur “when I’m not aware of the defensive character of learning, in other words the pressure to learn placed on me by external sources” (ibid). The following comment shows that she was aware of the defensive learning conditions while she was learning.

“You had a few critical questions and if you hadn’t asked them I would have perhaps have done so, although I was aware that my own seminar was only a week away and the lecturer is virtually my boss. And that was not such an easy situation as if it had been someone from outside where you can ask more critical questions. So I thought, ‘Ok you want to leave a good impression here, so be prepared to accept what he’s saying” (IP 4).

The interviewee explains that the seminar director of the paid leave course is her own boss. Consequently, she is in an extremely defensive learning situation. She is aware of this fact, but was not able to fully predict the impact on her own learning process while the course was taking place. The presence of her boss, or learning from her own boss, automatically creates an area of conflict in which learning by the interviewee takes place. The comments show that a) certain learning processes are not given high priority, in other words critical questions are not asked, or not initiated in the first place and b) that resistant learning processes took place.

The interview that these comments come from was conducted two weeks after the course took place. So at the time the interview was conducted the interviewee had already had time to reflect on what had happened. The interviewee did know before and during the course that she would have to “learn from her own boss”. However, during the process she was still unaware that the magnitude of these learning conditions would impair her own learning process, or the ability to develop her own expansive learning objectives. Therefore, in this case there is a very specific contradictory structure of learning conditions, which the interviewee was also unable to resolve on her own.

2.1.2 Overcoming own problems with the help of a context defined by another party: incidental learning?

The following comment reveals the “contradictory mixture of learning and refusal to learn” (Holzkamp 1995, p. 193) through the language used in the interview (see Schepers 2014, p. 123 cf.). The interview that these comments are taken from was conducted during the course held as part of training leave, in other words directly after a seminar meeting. This could be one reason why personal learning processes, or the action taken in the seminar, are not reflected on adequately. Therefore it means that the subject does not yet know whether new skills have been obtained, or in other words learning has taken place, or whether the goal can be achieved through this learning loop. The following quote is taken from an interview in which the interviewee talks about what he thinks is particularly important in this course and what he would like to learn. He comments as follows:

“So the cases I illustrated here were what I call my hard-core cases, the two cases that I solved to some extent”. (IP1)

The interviewee seems to be seeking some kind of guidance: On the one hand he was able to illustrate two cases from his day-to-day working life, which delivered the reasons for him wanting to learn. He describes them as hard-core cases and would like to tackle them in the seminar. The fact that he says he “solved them to some extent” also indicates that the problems have not yet actually been fully solved, in other words that the subject area has not yet been fully grasped (see Holzkamp 1995, p. 218). The potential subject area is part of a social context and is determined by the subject, but only certain dimensions of it can be learnt by the subject (ibid). So to what extent are the dimensions and the subject area themselves

generated independently by the subject undergoing the learning process? The paid training leave did include practical examples from the course instructors, but the solution of the problems is provided by outside sources, in other words third parties. Therefore, the reason for learning regarding this type of problem is initially a hard-core case from the person's own professional life. The interviewee presents the case to the seminar because he recognises a certain problem that he would like to deal with. But it is no longer up to the interviewee to exclude a (potential) subject area: the problems he has presented independently are deliberately placed in a context defined by third parties. The following comments emphasis this:

“As I said, if I can contribute a problem myself, which is also a coincidence, I'm not sure if it's appropriate. If it's not appropriate I wouldn't mention it. Then I'd see if the others have a case that I can compare mine with. And then that's sufficient. Then I'll just listen closely“. (IP 1)

In other words in a professional capacity the interviewee experiences his own problems that he includes in the seminar. Therefore, he experiences a discrepancy that he would like to solve. He does not initiate learning himself, but hopes that a similar case will be looked at which he believes will help to overcome his own problems. In this case the interviewee appears to be independently and deliberately adopting his own defensive pattern of a learning process and allows the successful outcome to depend on learning conditions specified by third parties. At the same time he accepts that it is possible that his problems cannot be solved in the seminar. This is a case of ambivalence in terms of personal determination of learning. The interviewee describes very exactly what he would like to learn and where actual problems lie. Nevertheless he revokes some of his learning process himself and subsumes it under contexts specified by third parties. He hopes that he will (perhaps imperceptibly) be able to learn incidentally anyway in order to gain new job skills.

Even as regards the above-mentioned resistance to learning, a possible and plausible reasoning structure is to be achieved. In the following quote the same interviewee accurately describes what he has already learnt and where he could still learn more:

“Well what we just experienced as a group is something I'd like to continue with because these sorts of phenomena occur relatively often. And the question is we've now clarified and have some idea about how we should go about this in Orientation Phase I. But it would be exciting to see, because there are sometimes very experienced and adventurous groups and we look at what they did and resolve to try that in Orientation Phase II, or in the mid-way phase. Or we start again at the beginning. Therefore I think it would be exciting because I tend to think that that's the way it is. I tend to be negative and think that it's baby stuff that they're doing there and I can't be bothered to take any action now and would just like to leave them to stew in their own juice. No, the question would now be how can we do it better?“ (IP 1)

Why does he not finish learning until he has overcome his problems by learning? The first two quotes show that he leaves tackling problems to chance. When the “others have a case”, he looks to see whether he can overcome his own problems himself in this way. The ambivalence of his autonomy in the learning process can also be interpreted as a quest: The fact that he has very definite ideas of what he would like to learn, but does not contribute these fully himself to the seminar, means he renounces responsibility for deciding what content is important for him as a professional person to learn. This can be logical if the search for orientation in his own professional role is not yet completed and what's more, from a subjective standpoint the director of the seminar is skilled enough that learning from him is possible.

A plausible reason can be in the learning group, for example as a determining factor for the person's own learning processes. If the person's own problems are included in the course, the person who is learning can provide information on their own professional procedures and disclose possible problems in day-to-day working lives. If people have had a negative experience in this respect, then it is clearly logical that they will be careful about revealing their own problems because it makes them vulnerable. Another quote from the person shows that this could be a plausible reason:

“You can encounter a group of lecturers or other pedagogues who don't open up, or the others think that just one of them is an idiot who's had problems there”. (IP1).

The interviewee initially generalises his comment and does not apparently specify any actual situation that he has experienced. Nevertheless, the language he chooses is not fully objective: “One was an idiot who had problems”. This comment or the underlying experience could be a reason for resisting learning processes in another situation. It is however important to note that everyone deals with this type of experience differently, or draws different conclusions from it. Resistance to learning can therefore be one of the consequences, but it is not an inevitable one. Further quotes from other interviewees show that a negative experience with a group of fellow learners is not an isolated case. It is understandable that it is unpleasant to open up to a group about problems. It is then also discouraging to notice that the group does not deal with getting to grips with the problem professionally. We also have to ask whether this unprofessional way of dealing with problems has an impact on day-to-day professional lives. Is there a community of course instructors in a particular town or state? How big or small is such a community and how close-knit is it? Consequently, how confidential are problems dealt with in training courses for course instructors? In a small German state it is likely that a community of course instructors will cross paths often and frequently encounter one another in training courses too. A quote from another interviewee stating that “... some of them chatter too much afterwards”, shows that disclosing problems to a learning group is problematic. Therefore, it could be a good idea for course instructors participating in training courses to wait and see who is taking part and how open and professional the learning atmosphere is before they talk about their problems and attempt to overcome these as part of the learning process.

3. Specific resistance to learning by course instructors

What are the reasons for the resistance to learning illustrated here? Why is this resistance to learning specific to course instructors? Figure 2 gives an overview of all the categories of experience, which are related to specific resistance to learning by course instructors.

Categories of experience

What types of resistance to learning by course instructors (on professional development courses) can occur?

Specific resistance to learning by course instructors:

- ambivalence in terms of personal determination of learning (personal problems with learning vs. problems with learning specified by third parties):
- result of interaction with the director of the seminar (cf. Faulstich/ Grell/ Grotlüschen 2005, p. 17): Do course instructors remain consistent in their roles? Do they stick to what they promise? Is it worth learning from them?

What structures and aspects typical of the profession play a role with regard to resistance to learning (and learning)?

- Basic conditions for learning:
- the group of co-learners as a "barrier to learning" (loc. cit., p. 23)
- the "working alliance" between course instructor and participants: teacher as "shepherd" (cf. Jochim/ Schimpf 2010)
- the teaching-learning short-circuit: the panacea (cf. Holzkamp 1995, p. 395)
- the presence of a boss during a course (loc. cit., p. 192, defensive learning)

Figure 2. Specific resistance to learning by course instructors

Specific resistance to learning is on the one hand the result of the course instructors being trapped in their professional role. On the other hand the characteristics of this sort of resistance to learning are very strongly connected with this narrow context analysed. For example the learning context of the paid training leave looked at here is strongly influenced by people further up the hierarchy. Section 2.1.1 showed that there was a link between the learning conditions and the structural parameters: The seminar director was the boss of at least one person. As a result, this person was confronted with defensive learning conditions, which led to a resistance to learning. An analysis of the types of resistance to learning (see Schepers 2014, p. 126 cf.) also showed that the resistance to learning encountered was often the result of interaction between the people taking part in the course and the director of the seminar. This is logical if learning in course instructor training courses is a quest for orientation regarding own professional lives (ibid p. 205).

The last important aspects relates to the learning group. During the empirical study it was shown that the learning group plays an important role in learning in course instructor training courses (ibid, p. 133). If the learning group can be trusted and an open and an appreciative working atmosphere is created, the subject benefits in the learning process. But if the learning group cannot be trusted, the subjects have to protect themselves and their professional position in order not to endanger their "good reputations". Consequently, training courses can be understood as contexts in which the development of professionalism is closely linked with the positive or negative role the seminar director and the other attendees play.

The seminar analysed included defensive learning conditions, which the course instructors were not able to remove by themselves. If subjects enter learning situations where they are automatically in a state of dependency, because they encounter their boss, subjects are merely able to "surrender" to these learning conditions and try to emerge from them in one piece. Holzkamp writes that as regards "defensive learning", learning is "only a necessity because I can therefore avoid having the scope I have to act taken away from me" (Holzkamp 1995, p. 192). But it is not about overcoming a learning problem that has been personally excluded, but escaping "a situation without the imminent loss of skills and quality of life" (ibid, p. 193).

Possible questions about the resistance to learning based on subjective logic by course instructors, as described here, could be as follows: As a course instructor can I refuse to take part in a training course with my own boss? Can I overcome problems from my own

professional experience expansively and in an open manner during the learning process if I am unable to guess the reactions of my fellow learners beforehand?

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