Sales Assistants in the Making: Learning Through Responsibility

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Abstract The paper investigates how learning and processes of becoming are shaped and enacted in retail apprenticeship in Norway. The analysis draws upon a qualitative study of managers and apprentices in different retail sub-sectors. The empirical point of departure is managers who, more or less deliberately, throw apprentices into tasks from day one. Thus, the apprentices have to handle tasks with limited instruction and guidance. The paper argues that the level of trust the apprentices are shown, and the responsibility they assume, fosters emotional engagement conducive to learning. The concept of learning environment is applied to understand the relationship between affordances and engagement. In linking the organisation of work to learning processes, emphasis is placed on how ‘being responsible’ is not merely a capacity residing within the individual, but embedded in and constituted by institutionalised work roles, task allocation and trust relations. The paper aims to nuance prevailing accounts of lack of guidance as purely detrimental to workplace learning. However, the weakly established tradition of vocational training in Norwegian retail requires a critical look into the kind of learning this practice implies. Contentious issues of throwing apprentices into the deep end are discussed.

Keywords Apprenticeship · Retail sector · Learner responsibility · Vocational education and training · Learning as becoming

Introduction

Integral to trade-based apprenticeships are personal development processes that prepare young people for the world of work. The identity-transformative journey from novice to skilled worker is conceptualised as the process of becoming. The literature builds on

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the rationale of individuals gradually being socialised by and into work communities, where learning as becoming is viewed as mutually constitutive (Hager and Hodkinson 2009; Colley et al. 2003; Kirpal 2004). Chan (2013) has recently conceptualised this process by the metaphoric phases of *belonging*, *becoming* and *being*. Apprentices progress between these phases resulting from gradual shifts in the tasks and responsibilities they are allocated as their competencies grow. Becoming a skilled worker, then, involves transformation of the self through embodying the skills, routines, values and traditions of their selected occupation (Dall’Alba 2009). In developing professional ways of being, the literature points to the importance of guided learning, gradual release of responsibility, instruction and support from experienced co-workers as novices enter communities of practice (Illeris 2011; Billett 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991). A lack of such experiences characterises learning-impooverished or a ‘restrictive’ learning environment (Fuller and Unwin 2003).

This paper explores processes of learning as becoming among apprentices in Norwegian Sales vocational education and training (VET). The empirical point of departure is a consideration of apprentices who are thrown into work tasks from their first day at work, rather than being gradually introduced to their work tasks. In their work and learning activities, they are afforded limited instruction and guidance. However, rather than underscoring the poorness of retail learning environments, the findings indicate that this more or less deliberate management strategy implies apprentices taking a great deal of responsibility, fostering processes of learning as becoming. The concept of responsibility denotes feelings of personal and moral obligation, followed by the satisfaction fulfilling the responsibility and completing the relevant tasks (Hansen 2003). It is perceived as personal risk-taking with something being ‘at stake’. Assuming responsibility, e.g., over customer interaction, sales transactions or a department of the shop involves emotional engagement in and commitment to work tasks that is crucial in making learning a larger process than the acquisition of new knowledge, transforming both learning and identity through an active sense of belonging (Billett and Sommerville 2004; Felstead et al. 2007).

The role of vocational training in the retail sector differs starkly between VET-regimes.¹ Brockmann (2013) contrasts the comprehensive German dual system, providing for competence development and identification with the occupations, with the minimalist apprenticeships of the English supermarket. Norwegian Sales VET, comprising 2 years of school-based learning followed by 2 years of apprenticeship, is struggling to establish its trade identity. The current situation is that of a VET programme in which only one-third of the students commence apprenticeships. Recruitment of skilled labour in the Norwegian retail sector constitutes less than 1 % of the total number recruited (Høst et al. 2013).

Despite being a sector of increasing social, economic and cultural significance, research into retail work remains an emerging empirical field. Retail work and conditions for learning are diverse. First, there is a wide array of sub-sectors and types of retail employers, ranging from small boutique establishments to global corporate giants,

¹ One widely used typology in the comparative literature on national skill formation systems distinguishes between a liberal market economy model (e.g., Britain), a state-regulated bureaucratic model (e.g., France) and a dual-corporatist model (e.g., Germany) (Greiner 2002). Norway is characterised as a combination of state-regulated and dual-corporatist model (Olsen et al. 2008).

with immediate implications for the organisation of work and opportunities for learning. Second, the skills demand varies regarding product knowledge and soft skills, e.g., personal appearance, politeness and friendliness, traits that pertain to attitude and personality rather than technical skills (Grugulis and Bozkurt 2011; Nickson et al. 2011). The literature has, however, mainly been preoccupied with investigating low-road strategies (Andersson et al. 2011). Consequently, retail work is depicted in negative terms, as low-skilled, low-paid work.

The paper aims to emphasise the social, relational and organisational aspects of how the apprentices receive and assume responsibility in their daily work. Learning and development processes take place in concrete workplace settings. To investigate the learning opportunities available to the retail apprentices, the concept of learning environment is applied to elucidate its significance for processes of learning as becoming. The research question is: What is the relevance of being attributed, and assuming task responsibility for the process of becoming in Norwegian retail apprenticeship? The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, the analytical framework is outlined, where the interdependent basis of the learning environment is conceptualised; the learning affordances provided on the one hand and subjective engagement in the affordances on the other hand. After describing the empirical study, the analysis presented is twofold. First, the managers' accounts of encouraging apprentice independence are analysed. Subsequently, the apprentices' subjective accounts of learning, responsibility-taking and development are analysed. To conclude, contentious aspects of the findings are discussed in relation to the weakly established tradition of vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector.

Learning Environment as Analytical Framework

Qualities of the learning environment influence the kind of learning taking place, and processes of becoming. The concept of learning environment is commonly used to denote the "conditions and practices in an organisation that are likely to facilitate or hinder learning in and through work at a particular workplace" (Ellström et al. 2008, 86). Dichotomous ideal types of learning environments have been developed. Fuller and Unwin (2003) distinguish between 'expansive' and 'restrictive' apprenticeship learning environments, emphasising workforce development, whereas Ellström et al.'s (2008) 'enabling' and 'constraining' types, focus on organisational learning. Moreover, workplaces can be more or less learning 'ready'. Learning readiness denotes workplaces not only governed by a production rationale, but also by an employee development rationale (Billett 2001). Factors such as stress, overly routinized work, lack of social support and lack of meaning in work represent constraints on the workplace learning processes (Virtanen and Tynjälä 2008). Analysis of learning environments can be approached in two ways, rooted in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) distinction between objective and subjective realities. On the one hand, one may approach the study of the learning environment as an objective social 'reality'; this means focusing on the objectification of knowledge in the specific organisation of skills and division of labour, task characteristics and curricula content. Often referred to as 'learning context', this includes the material, physical, technical and organisational characteristics of the labour process, power relations, values and norms (Tynjälä 2013).

When entering the shop, the apprentice meets a pre-structured set of established norms and shared meanings to which he or she needs to adapt in order to be accepted as a legitimate participant (Lave and Wenger 1991; Smistrup 2007). These ‘external’ conditions frame the learning process, impeding or providing resources conducive to learning. On the other hand, learning environments may be studied as a subjective social ‘reality’, i.e., to provide a framework for construction of meaning that people attach to them, and how the apprentices elect to engage in the learning affordances provided (Billett 2001; Jørgensen 2013).

The process of becoming is conceptualised by the widely cited work of Lave and Wenger (1991), on the gradual transition from legitimate peripheral participation into full participation in the community of practice. What is learnt through a socialisation process becomes part of the person, and in this process it is also modified (Hodkinson et al. 2008). Constitutive of such an identity-transformative journey is internalisation, where the individual interprets the objective world and finds personal meaning. This relates to how apprentices co-construct their horizon of action and learning opportunities (Brockmann 2012), shaped between apprentices’ individual biographies, positions and dispositions to learning and the learning environment as an objective reality. Tasks and responsibility are considered subjectively redefined when taken on by the individual (Rausch 2013). The subjectively experienced importance and ‘interestingness’ of tasks is considered to foster workplace learning and enhance participatory practices. The concept of the learning environment provides a relevant analytical framework by being sensitive to the mutual relationship between structure and agency, which mutually constitutes the learning environment. In linking the organisation of work to individuals’ learning processes, emphasis is placed on how the quality of ‘being responsible’ is embedded in and constituted by the organisation of work.

There are distinct, but interrelated, aspects of the organisational context and learning environment, which determine the degree of responsibility delegated to the apprentices. First, the degree of responsibility may be affected by the organisation’s institutionalised work roles and task allocation. Task allocation entails the way different work tasks are assigned and distributed among employees with different formal positions, statuses and levels of work experience. Work tasks might be assigned by the manager, self-assigned by the apprentice or emerge from social interaction with others such as co-workers or customers. Moreover, tasks may be more or less significant, and of varying organisational or public relevance. Second, the degree of responsibility delegated and conditions for autonomy are embedded in the organisation’s norms, values and control practices. Third, institutionalised trust relations in the workplace are considered crucial in making sense of how task responsibility is delegated by management and engaged in by apprentices. Drawing on Fox (1974), Fuller and Unwin (2010) identify the level of trust between manager and employee as a key indicator of the extent to which different groups have discretion over the conception and execution of their work tasks.

The Study

The paper investigates the apprenticeship period of the Sales VET program in Norway. The Norwegian VET system is integrated in the upper-secondary post-compulsory education system (16–19 year olds). The Sales program is part of a broader vocational

cluster including other service-related tracks, designed according to the Norwegian 2+2 model. This refers to the division of the 4-year programme into 2 years of preparatory school-based learning followed by 2 years of apprenticeship. The school-based part consists of both core subjects (e.g., Norwegian language, mathematics, natural science) and programme-specific vocational subjects (e.g., sales & marketing, business & economy). Additionally, there are workplace placement periods as part of the ‘In-depth study project’ that are aimed at increasing cooperation between schools and companies and provide the students with instances of occupational practice. The apprenticeship period consists of workplace training guided by state-issued curricula in apprenticeship-authorised companies.

The empirical foundation which underpins this paper is interviews with managers and apprentices in nine shops in Norway. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to gain in-depth insight into the learning environment, interaction, practices and how apprentices engage in work and learning based on the managers’ and apprentices’ subjective frame of reference. Detailed data was collected in nine shops that provided apprenticeship. The shop selection criteria were two-fold. First, re-interviews were conducted with three of the apprentices, which is part of an ongoing qualitative longitudinal study on service sector VET in Norway. Three of the shops were ones in which these apprentices commenced apprenticeship. Additional apprentices and corresponding managers were interviewed to ensure a stronger empirical base. The selection criteria of the additional shops were based on variation regarding retail sub-sector and product knowledge requirement. Overview of the shops and corresponding apprentices and managers are presented in Table 1.tgroup

Recruitment of interviewees proved difficult. Two of the managers did not want to participate in the study. Limited ethnographic observation allowed an exploration of naturally occurring processes in situ, and provided valuable background knowledge and insight into the nature of the apprentices’ work tasks, workload, customer/work team interaction, and atmosphere of the shop. However, the subsequent analysis presents findings based on the interviews. The shops represented a variety of retail sub-sectors. Yet, there were great similarities regarding the apprentices’ task characteristics, the shops’ organisational structures and the degree of guidance and responsibility

Table 1 Overview of the shops apprentices and managers

Shop	Apprentice	Manager
Automotive retailer	1	1
Electronics retailer A	1	1
Electronics retailer B	2	1
Hardware store	1	
Supermarket	1	
Beauty products retailer	1	1
Candy store and video rental	1	1
Kitchen supplies and home décor shop	1	1
Sports and leisure equipment retailer	2	1
Total	11	7

made available to the apprentices. First, all shops were part of a larger regional or countrywide chain, most being franchise enterprises. This meant available career tracks and accessibility to in-house training schemes. Second, each of the shops employed between five and ten sales assistants. Third, all of the shops reported of tough market competition and low profit margins. Fourthly, most of the shops made a record of the apprentices' daily sales figures. These figures were transparently displayed in the company's computer system so that the department manager, general manager, other employees and the apprentices themselves could see everyone's sales figures. The automotive retailer and the supermarket each represented one end of a continuum of product knowledge requirements and organisation of work. The apprentice in the automotive retailer was given a personal office space and dealt with relatively few customers per day. This apprentice's work community consisted of four adult men. The automotive retailer sold old and new cars; besides customer interaction, work tasks consisted of handling sales contracts and preparing cars for sale. The value of sales was high, but the number of sales was low. The work demanded a great deal of product-specific knowledge of the cars and accessories. The situation in the supermarket was quite different. Work tasks consisted primarily of handling the cash register and restocking the shelves, and dealing with a large number of customers per day. Product knowledge requirements were low, meaning that the products largely sold themselves. In the two electronic retailers, the importance of product knowledge was emphasised. Here, the apprentices also participated in the most extensive chain-specific in-house training schemes compared to the other shops. The rest of the shops involved medium product knowledge requirement, meaning that a certain level of knowledge was preferred, but not necessarily decisive in order to sell the product.

The research sample comprised 11 apprentices (i.e., six men and five women) and seven managers (i.e., three men and four women). Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the apprentices and managers during the fall 2013. In the interviews with the managers, attention was focused on motivations for taking on the responsibility for apprentices, how learning and work was organised and how they considered the development processes of the apprentice. The topics covered in the apprentice interviews were how they perceived and coped with demands at work, engagement in different types of tasks, accounts of learning, and self-perceptions of becoming and being sales assistants. Learner responsibility was not the original focus of the study however its prevalence became evident through the interviewee's responses. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. After observation and interview sessions in each shop, immediate impressions were written down in the form of field notes. The interview data was analysed by text-close thematic coding. Text-close or open coding involved labelling the raw data using the interviewees' own terms, rather than applying pre-defined analytical categories. In the next round of data analysis, the labels were grouped in a number of thematically clustered categories, identifying patterns within the data. The apprentice categories were: i) product orientation, ii) learning engagement, iii) responsibility and iv) contentment. The manager categories were: i) learning-production balance, ii) learning progression, iii) personal development, and iv) work community integration. All participants were given pseudonyms and the shops have been anonymised. All quotations are translated.

Encouraging Apprentice Independence

For most of the managers, it was their first experience with providing apprenticeships. Given the weak institutionalised system for vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector, this is typical. Despite a lack of experience with such, the managers had clear conceptions of what being ‘good at the job’ entailed. They emphasised that sales assistants should be service-minded, knowledgeable about the products and foresee and satisfy the customer’s needs. The work communities consisted mainly of young people in part-time positions with the apprentice in most cases being the only full-time employee besides the manager. Moreover, the shops had flat organisational structures. This meant that there were few or no middle managers between the sales assistants and managers. For a large proportion of the day, the manager worked on the shop floor alongside the employees. The environment were largely characterised by task equality in the sense that all employees, the manager included, completed the same types of tasks, implying a non-hierarchical socialisation process. The main tasks involved customer interaction and sales transactions. Furthermore, they were involved in ordering and unpacking goods and placing them on the shelves, designing sales campaigns and keeping the shop tidy. The managers attempted to assign tasks according to the apprentices’ field of interest, whenever this was possible. For example, in electronics retailer A, the apprentice with an interest in computers was set to work in the store’s computer department.

Within the wealth of literature on apprenticeship learning, one strand emphasises the importance of guidance, which is perceived as the support that workplace managers and members of the work community provide to apprentices (Virtanen and Tynjälä 2008). The manager role is divided between providing guided learning, on the one hand, and supervision and control, on the other (Billett 2000). The majority of the managers considered their role to involve support *if needed*. The prevailing practice was that apprentices were ‘thrown in at the deep end’, being immediately immersed in authentic tasks, i.e., customer interaction and completing sales transactions. Ann, manager of the kitchen supplies and home décor shop described the way the apprentice was introduced to the tasks and task progression.

Ann: She [the apprentice] does a little bit of everything. At first, she unpacked new products. Then Christmas comes, and then it’s just like ‘straight to it’.

The extract illustrates how the manager gradually, though quickly (the apprentice started in September), introduced the apprentice to the work. Furthermore, the manager of the automotive retailer, Roy, described how he throws the apprentice into the tasks, giving him a great deal of responsibility in this process.

Researcher: Do you have a specific plan for the training?

Roy: No, we haven’t defined it like that. He [the apprentice] is thrown into it, with his own office and phone. Now, we are introducing a new car, and he is the one getting the responsibility.

Roy's trust in the apprentice is perceived as a deliberate strategy, implying that he considers this the most fruitful strategy for learning. Roy expressed an understanding of that throwing the apprentice into the tasks means to show him trust, give responsibility and to be treated with respect. Compared to the other shops in this paper, the automotive retailer was characterised by few customers and low levels of stress. This may have eased Roy's decision of delegating responsibility, considering he had the time to follow-up the apprentice. Each car sales transaction completed represented much needed money to the automotive retailer, and reversibly, each failed sales transaction had a great negative impact on the business. The apprentice's task was thereby of utmost organisational significance. Consequently, the trust shown the apprentice was of corresponding significance. On the contrary, there is Per, the manager of electronics retailer A who attributes apprentice independence to lack of time available to guide and supervise: "It's really busy here, so we cannot stand over him [the apprentice] all the time". Gunnar, the manager of the sports and leisure equipment store also pointed to lack of time to guide, but he considered the independence and responsibility 'making them better'.

Gunnar: Nobody gets special treatment here. Not everybody can handle that. But I cannot constantly follow them around. They have to take responsibility themselves. That also makes them better. (...) Take Ole [apprentice] for instance, he is also an employee, and must do what everybody else does. (...). I wish for the apprentice to become an independent employee. One must be able to see and foresee the tasks to be done. It's not my job to boss them around holding a whip. It doesn't help and it doesn't work that way. One has to take responsibility for one's own job.

The apprentices were mostly treated as employees. The emphasis that managers placed on shaping the apprentices as independent employees is interpreted as a way of wanting to promote a self-directed orientation as an instructional process² (Jossberger et al. 2010). This means that independence is conceived of as a self-regulatory practice, i.e., a way to regulate one's own learning, emotions and self-evaluation and to promote problem-solving skills, time-organisation and the ability to structure tasks. The manager of electronics retailer B gave the two apprentices management responsibility for the audio-visual department.

Hilde: I now have two apprentices who are responsible for the audio-visual department. They have been apprentices here for a long enough period. They've had lots of different tasks previously, and they handled them well. They both have audio-visual as their main task. But it's also a little bit exciting. It requires some guidance from me, of course, but it works well. (...). The apprentices come up with new ideas, and we see that it works. They have a great responsibility in

² Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) in particular have stressed the way self-regulated learning refers to two distinct but related dimensions: as an instructional process where the individual assumes primary responsibility for the learning processes, and as a personal characteristic as a preference for assuming responsibility for learning.

ordering goods for a sales campaign that they get to organise. They shall be able to try it and see. (...). The apprentices learn early that they should be independent.

Hilde also stressed the significance of promoting independent apprentices. However, she also emphasised the need to guide, assist and supervise the apprentices on their path to becoming department managers. On the one hand, the managers' desire to promote independent apprentices is considered as a deliberate pedagogical strategy. On the other hand, independence is considered an unintended consequence of poor formal training-awareness, apprenticeship experience or available resources for guidance among the managers. Either way, the result is that apprentices are thrown into the tasks and expected to speak up if a need for guidance and instruction is felt. The desire the managers expressed to shape the apprentices into independent employees may be perceived as emphasising their interdependent role in the workplace, i.e., not their independence *from* the work team or management control, guidance and support but rather the interdependence *of* the work community which is stressed. The apprentices were expected to contribute to the daily work on the same basis as the regular employees. Billett (2002) emphasises how the workplace as a learning environment is embedded in complex interdependencies between the staff and management, work practices, production goals and organisational rules. First, the apprentices in the present study were given responsibility *over* various work tasks. Second, they were given responsibility *through* their independence.

Engaging in Responsibility

Emphasising the subjective dimension of the learning environment involves studying how the apprentices elect to engage in the work and learning framework in which they are situated. The same learning affordances can be interpreted and acted upon in different ways by different apprentices. The analysis of the apprentices' subjective engagement in work and learning relates to the two main aspects of sales work: responsibility over customers and knowledge of the products. Overall, both of these 'objects' were considered by the apprentices to be resources conducive for learning.³ First, customer interaction constituted the apprentices' main work task, and they were exposed to customer interaction from day one. Customers could pose barriers to learning in the sense of being too many at once (stressful), or they could be dissatisfied or even angry (threatening). The challenges encountered in customer interaction proved to play a key role in prompting learning. The customers provided the apprentices with immediate feedback on their job performance. This immediacy of the feedback may foster self-reflection leading the apprentice continually to improve how they deal with customers. Mastering difficult customers or being able to meet the customers' needs, triggers apprentices' sense of self-efficacy⁴ and elucidates how learning and emotional engagement is interconnected. Andreas described what he found the most fun and rewarding at work:

³ The notion of 'learning resources', as opposed to barriers to learning, is based on Nielsen and Kvale (2003).

⁴ This concept reflects a person's belief that they are able to attain their goals, even if impediments exist (Bandura 1997).

Andreas: Satisfying a customer. Providing good service and selling a lot to one customer. I like to correct a dissatisfied customer's impression. That is difficult, but a lot of fun.

Second, product knowledge takes the apprentices deeper into the learning process (Aarkrog 2005). Being knowledgeable about the goods in the store enables the apprentices to deal with customers with confidence. At the same time, the apprentices may identify with being a seller by the products and product knowledge. Axel, apprentice in electronics retailer A, expressed this duality rooted in a personal interest in computers:

Axel: I have always been interested in computers. This interest started early and has developed over time. You feel a lot more secure when you are selling something that is familiar to you.

Like many of the apprentices, Hege in the candy store and video rental expressed that being able to meet the customer's needs and to be knowledgeable of the products were essential aspects of how a sales assistant should 'be':

Hege: Product knowledge is crucial. You got to know what you are selling. Like, is it of good quality? But when it comes to movies, you have to ask the customer and be a good judge of character. What kind of movie does the customer want to rent?

Describing the learning environment of retail apprenticeship, both the objective and subjective dimension is relevant to understand and conceptualise a sense of responsibility as a crucial precondition for learning and meaningful participation in work communities. The apprentices' subjective engagement in the freedom, trust and responsibility they were given provided rich learning-affordances. This is echoed in the interview with the apprentice in electronics retailer A, who believed the manager considered him increasingly capable of taking responsibility: "They [management] trust you more". Assuming responsibility over tasks contributed to personal and professional development with the satisfaction of fulfilling the responsibility they were given.

In the following extract Andreas, one of the two apprentices in electronics retailer B, relates the transformation he has experienced. Through customer interaction, experience and increased product knowledge, Andreas described how his self-confidence has grown. Andreas worked part-time in the electronic retailer for 1 year before his apprenticeship. This might have reduced potential stress arising from being thrown into the deep end at the point of interview.

Andreas: My self-confidence has increased. That's where I've become different. That gives me self-assurance. But it's also something that I have to work on myself. It's not something that my boss can tell me to do.

This quote points to the distinction between external and internal control. Here the former denotes the manager's control and governance over the apprentices' work tasks,

whereas the latter involves the apprentices' willingness to take responsibility (Hansen 2003). There need not be a contradiction between the two. Managers who told the apprentices what to do did not pose barriers to the apprentices' readiness to take responsibility. The apprentices seemed to take responsibility beyond the immediate and concrete work task they were given. After a while, they were able to identify, foresee and complete work tasks without the manager standing over them, telling them what to do. This development implies a transformation from *reactive* to *proactive* autonomy (Littlewood 1999). Reactive autonomy does not create its own direction from a pre-set starting point. Rather, once the apprentice is given direction (by the manager), reactive autonomy enables the apprentice to organise their resources in order to complete the task given. Proactive autonomy on the other hand, is apprentices, who are able to take charge of their own learning, determine the objectives, select the appropriate procedure, and then self-evaluate the action undertaken.

The daily work of these apprentices consisted, on the one hand, of a set of repetitive and routinized tasks, e.g., restocking the shelves, and a great deal of freedom, on the other. The apprentices gave accounts of routine work as providing predictable structure to the daily work. Customer interaction, which constituted the main task, was considered non-routinized work, "because no two customers are alike" (hardware store apprentice). This interaction is seen as potentially unpredictable learning situation, represents a process where the apprentices can apply knowledge and skills in a creative, improvised and self-directed way. Moreover, routine tasks may become interesting and learning-intensive if one feels responsible for what is undertaken. Stein, the apprentice in the supermarket is responsible for making all new orders except meat and tobacco goods.

Researcher: That was a lot of responsibility so early.

Apprentice: Yeah, it's really fun. My goal is to become shop manager here.

Stein states how he enjoyed the responsibility and the progression opportunities it entailed.

Based on the apprentices' accounts of school-based versus workplace learning, they all considered workplace learning as far more effective, "it wasn't till I started working in the shop that I understood what I've read in the books" (electronics retailer B apprentice). Compared to school, where one only was responsible for oneself, the majority of the apprentices were aware that if they performed poorly in the workplace, this would affect the shop as a whole. Martin, the apprentice in the automotive retailer liked the school holidays, but he enjoyed the apprenticeship, "one has a lot more responsibility here, compared to school. Like when people test drive the cars, one is responsible that the car comes back in perfect condition".

The managers emphasised that they did not differentiate between the regular sales assistants and the apprentices. However, it was crucial to the apprentices to establish a distinction between 'us' (i.e., apprentices) and 'them' (i.e., younger sales assistants in part-time positions). In the following extract, Tina described the learning process and in doing so makes a distinction between the two groups:

Tina: I mostly try to learn from myself. In case I need assistance, then I can ask anybody who works here, not only the manager. (...). When I first started, I even asked the part-time staff, but they don't know very much, just a little bit. In the beginning, I felt that they knew a little bit more than I knew about the products and stuff, but now, it's more like me giving them assignments.

The above extract evokes the notion of 'boundary work' (e.g., Lamont and Molnár 2002), demarcating 'us' versus 'them'. In differentiating herself from the part-time staff, Tina exercises a sense of self as being skilled. It is relevant to stress that the concepts of responsibility is not all-or-nothing concepts; rather there are different degrees of responsibility. Some of the apprentices like Ole in the sports and leisure equipment store felt responsible for customers entering the shop, whereas Tina in the hardware store was responsible for the department of kitchen supplies. Her responsibility entailed keeping the department tidy and ordering new products.

Learning, becoming and belonging are connected in complex ways, where prominence is given socialisation into beliefs, values and identity (Orr and Gao 2013). The empirical findings show that the apprentices' responsibility-taking is conducive to the process of becoming through creating emotional engagement and increased self-esteem when the tasks and responsibility are mastered successfully. Like most of the apprentices, Karina, in the beauty products retailer wanted to complete the apprenticeship period and keep on working in the shop. She said, "Yes, I think I feel like a proper sales assistant, perhaps even more with the trade certificate". Entering work communities which shows them trust and gives them responsibility, seems to enhance participatory practices and foster processes of becoming and being sales assistants.

Discussion: Learning in Spite of - or Because of?

The Norwegian retail sector largely recruits unskilled labour, and to varying degrees provides in-house training. One pressing challenge for the Norwegian Sales VET programme is to create a social space and an occupational category for the *skilled* sales assistant - recognised and demanded by employers, and perceived as an attractive educational track and career choice among young people. The Norwegian VET programme is now in an institutionalising phase, where traditions, practices and norms are to consolidate, manifest and establish (Olsen and Reegård 2013). Consequently, the shop managers do what is familiar to them; introduce the novice to daily work activities. Considering the weak position of vocational training in the Norwegian retail sector, one would perhaps be inclined to expect learning-impooverished environments. The apprentices were introduced to shops holding little or no experience of apprenticeship training. They were largely surrounded by young unskilled employees, whereas the managers had no well thought through plan on how the training should be organised. Furthermore, learning goals in line with the national curricula were not of great concern to the managers. Consequently, emphasis was placed on work performance and outcome. However, due to the widely recognised mechanisms of informal learning that occurs as part of everyday work activity in general, i.e., being involved in authentic work tasks integrated in a work community, the apprentices seemed to

overcome apparently restrictive conditions. In many respects, they were socialised into and co-constructing expansive learning environments.

There are (at least) four conditions to be taken into consideration when interpreting the relevance of responsibility for the process of learning as becoming, and potential for moderate generalisation (e.g., Williams 2000). First, retail work mainly involves the so-called soft skills. Being thrown into the deep end with limited initial instruction, might have other implications in other types of work requiring training of advanced technical skills. Second, the retail apprentices worked closely with the manager, undertaking many of the same tasks. This implies non-hierarchical socialisation processes, which may foster work community integration. Moreover, working closely with the apprentices, the managers were able to observe the apprentices on a daily basis, and thereby delegating responsibility under the condition of control. Third, in many of the shops included in this study, the apprentice was the only one besides the manager working full-time. It is reasonable to believe that levels of commitment, and the more working hours put in, may have eased the management strategy of delegating responsibility, and for the apprentices to assume this responsibility. Last, individual dispositions and biographies are integral to grasp how apprentices experience and co-construct their learning opportunities. Considering the low completion rates of the Norwegian Sales VET programme, it is reasonable to believe that the apprentices actually commencing apprenticeship are the ones most motivated and thereby also more able to cope with the allocation of responsibility early in the apprenticeship. This selection bias is crucial to bear in mind when considering the degree of transferability of the findings to other contexts.

By analysing the relationship between agency and structure in retail apprenticeship learning environments, this paper argues that processes of learning as becoming are embedded in receiving and assuming responsibility over work and learning. The paper has demonstrated how learner responsibility implies linkages of the apprentices' engagement, learning and motivation on the one hand, and their opportunities to be autonomous and have responsibility over tasks on the other hand. Thus, the sense of having responsibility and choices allows the apprentices to take control and ownership over their learning. However, based on the data, it is difficult to differentiate the various factors affecting the learning process, in which responsibility is only one among several.

The learning conditions involve managers, more or less intentionally, giving apprentices a great deal of responsibility from early on in the apprenticeship period. This implies apprentices who receive minimal instruction and guidance. This is echoed in the findings of Roberts (2013), where most of the training and development in retail employment is led by employees' own initiative and interaction with co-workers, beyond specific instruction. The apprentices who receive such responsibility may act upon it in different ways. Workplace learning and processes of becoming are perceived as apprentices' engagement in the learning affordances provided. The opportunity to assume responsibility over work provides an agency-enabling basis on which learning and becoming is played out and negotiated. This contrasts starkly to Taylorist management principles, exemplified by minimal employee discretion (Felstead et al. 2011). This paper shows that throwing apprentices into work tasks contributes to learning and increased self-confidence as far as the responsibility is mastered successfully. Although, the apprentices were thrown into tasks, they were situated in a learning-

supportive and trustful environment. Based on the analysis, ability and willingness to assume responsibility is considered conducive to the identity-transformative journey from novice to skilled worker.

By receiving and assuming responsibility over tasks of great organisational value, the apprentices grow into the multifaceted work community as responsible participants. They take their share of responsibility for the shop's success. It is reasonable to believe that they thereby strengthen their position in the workplace (cf. Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation). Aspects of work community integration were however not explicitly stated in the empirical material. Although it was evident that they were situated in trustful learning environments in which they thrived. The managers stressed the importance of apprentices to be independent. On the one hand, there may be tension between apprentices' independence and work team integration, in the sense of promoting independence *from* the work team. On the other hand, the analysis rather supports notions of independence and work team integration as two sides of the same coin. One learns to become independent through the integrated process of participation. Furthermore, the paper argues that in promoting independent apprentices, the apprentices' interdependent role in the shop is strengthened. It is reasonable to assume that receiving and fulfilling the responsibility has significance for the ways apprentices become members of the work community, and being recognised as such by managers and co-workers. This becoming of 'insider' may in turn strengthen a sense of belonging and commitment, relevant to the process of becoming.

However, doing a good job, in the sense of selling a lot, does not necessarily mean that one is learning a lot. The apprentices were in a process of becoming *skilled* sales assistants. However, the findings do not indicate identification with a trade community of skilled sales assistant, considering this is a weakly established category in the Norwegian retail sector. Put in other words, work team integration was insufficient for developing a skilled sales assistant identity. There are contentious issues of throwing the apprentices into the deep end, and one may question whether this practice is borderline exploitative, because apprentices represent cheap labour to the managers. Instant release of responsibility is thereby like a two-edged sword. On the one hand, as this paper argues, it fosters processes of learning as becoming. On the other hand, excessive lack of guidance, and premature delegation of responsibility may pose limitations on learning. In cases when independence and responsibility leads to insufficient support and guidance, this may cause learning stagnation, lack of initiative and isolation. Furthermore, individuals experience different degrees of constraints on their capacity for action than other, and differing ability to mobilise resources in asymmetrical power relation to others, e.g., the manager or more experienced co-workers (Fuller et al. 2004).

This paper has highlighted some of the ways in which the learning environment and organisational structures can support learning in exploring the relevance of responsibility for processes of becoming in retail apprenticeship. The responsibility they were given made the apprentices feel genuinely needed through immersion in the company's daily work, increasing self-esteem through fulfilling the responsibility assigned. When doing a good job, they received positive feedback from significant others, i.e., the manager or customers. However, the unequal power relationship between management and apprentice makes it problematic to simply state that apprentices should take more

responsibility for their own learning and development, which is a frequently repeated mantra (Fuller et al. 2004). Rather, this paper has shown how the process of taking responsibility is deeply embedded in the learning environment, in which apprentices receive and assume responsibility, calling for a more nuanced view on lack of guidance as purely detrimental to learning. Conditions for work and learning in the retail sector are conventionally perceived as learning-impooverished. To the contrary, the findings of this paper indicate learning environments as learning-ready grounded in the cyclicity of responsibility the managers are giving and the apprentices assuming. Rather than apprentices learning *in spite of* unguided learning, the apprentices learn *because of* their subjective engagement in the responsibility this implies.

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