

The Gift of Learning: Learning as social economic act in social entrepreneurship

Abstract

In this paper, learning and social economy, from a substantive approach, are compiled in terms of social entrepreneurship and a case example of a voluntary organization as learning arena. Social entrepreneurship are gaining attention from both market and welfare state for social service purposes, including tasks within general and specific education (Hulgård & Andersen, 2009; Regeringen, 2010). Learning and educational relationships are social interactions where the employed or staffer focuses his or her doing on social intervention (Schmidt, 2006a), which is seen as a potential task for some voluntary organizations. Using Marcel Mauss¹’ conceptualization of social solidarity and interaction (Mauss, 1990) as ethnographic-analytical object, is beneficial to analytically opening voluntary organizations as learning arenas (Hastrup, 2003). Besides theoretically conceptualizing social entrepreneurship and a case organization as learning arenas, the aim of this paper is to unfold the theoretical and analytical concepts linking economic anthropology and education in the context of social entrepreneurship, exemplified by Bogstøtten, Copenhagen.

The field of social enterprise and social economy

To a social economic discussion, a relevant description of the social entrepreneurial field, both as sector and as research area, would be focusing on the facts and implications of resource mix as a consequence of the cross-sectorial activities and conditions (Gardin, 2006). As research field, social entrepreneurship is rather new in Denmark and is increasingly gaining attention from both public and private interested parties. Social entrepreneurship are typologically branched into various and diverse definitions, most rapidly defined from the aspects of their financial composition, goal orientation and network strategies; or whether they are more or less connected or dependant of private sponsors, public partners, or more or less self-sufficient. Other segments again focus their typology on what these organizations have to offer, their “product” to either market or local communities, for instance by ways of social services, as mentioned (Hulgård, 2007; Hulgård & Andersen, 2009).

¹ French sociologist, ethnographer and anthropologist (1872-1950)

In the tradition of the main inspirational source of my Ph.D. thesis, Marcel Mauss, theorists within social entrepreneurship in Europe, have developed a well described conceptualization analytically applicable to the practical field of social entrepreneurship and the third sector (Hart, Laville, & Cattani, 2010; Polanyi, 1968). Mauss’ principal work, *The Gift*², is a description of archaic peoples in Polynesia, the Andaman Isles, the Maori people in New Zealand, and various Indian peoples in the American North West. These are exact comparative anthropological studies of the circulation and social significance of gifts in exchange (Mauss, 1990). Mauss’ theories have been elaborated, used and abused, in various traditions of economic and political theories since 1924. I have sought to primarily keep to Mauss’ original writings and thoughts presented in *The Gift*, adding Mauss-inspired theorists primarily within economic anthropology and social entrepreneurship (Hart et al., 2010; Polanyi, 1968).

In essence, Mauss’ theories conclude a critical approach towards the concept of ‘voluntariness’ as he argues, through his studies, that there is no such thing as voluntary work, thus all forms of investing in social life is somehow self-interested. Fundamentally disbelieving in voluntariness, Mauss’ studies challenges something which is essential in social entrepreneurship, and this helps us understand the dynamics of social entrepreneurship as culture and also as learning arenas.

Social economic ethnography

Mauss’ work in *The Gift* lies end to end with Émile Durkheim’s social research and in the tradition of a more natural scientific inspired social research than we see it today. Mauss’ gift is a construction of an analytical object, aiming to better capture and observe social life in his scientific tradition and time. His contribution to social science has impacted concept clarifying discussions of economy in social life. His observations were seen as examples of pre-capitalistic social economic behavior, while his ethnographic observations and reflections have been great sources of inspiration within political economic thinking, including the debate between substantivists and formalists led by e.g. Karl Polanyi in the 1960ies (Eriksen, 1998; Polanyi, 1968). In the light of Durkheim and Mauss, among others, and besides from describing formalistic and substantivistic economic thinking³, Polanyi evolved the

² From 1924

³ Polanyi defines the two types of economy as: “*The substantive meaning of economic derives from man’s dependence for his livelihood upon nature and his fellows. It refers to the interaction with his natural and social environment insofar as it results in supplying him with the means of material want satisfaction. The formal*

substantivistic economic conceptual framework by classifying and describing three transactional forms: market economy, redistribution, and reciprocity (Polanyi, 1968).

He describes the social function of gift exchange based on his observations describing the gift as *a total social phenomenon*⁴ (Eriksen, 1998; Mauss, 1990). The gift is a classical concept of exchange in social studies. British anthropologist Mary Douglas described the social function as follows:

“(...) each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honor of giver and recipient are engaged. It is a total system in that every item of status or of spiritual or material possession is implicated for everyone in the whole community. The system is quite simple; just the rule that every gift has to be returned in some specified way sets up a perpetual cycle of exchanges within and between generations (...) The whole society can be described by the catalogue of transfers that map all the obligations between its members. The cycling gift is the society.” (Mauss, 1990)

In the actual ethnographic work, what I find more interesting to focus on is that gift giving is of great importance to the quality of community life and that a gift of quality includes the engagement between giver and receiver, and in this exchange factors such as time and attention play important roles. Secondly what I find methodically useful is the observations what are the objects of exchange, and the social behavior connected to the exchange interactions, this leading to an interesting and useful focus when *following the thing*, using a multisited ethnographic method (Marcus, 1999). I will touch on exemplifying this method in the following presentation of the case of Bogstøtten as voluntary organization and learning arena.

Case setting: Bogstøtten, Copenhagen 2011

Bogstøtten is a study-support offer for mentally vulnerable young adults; most of the members are enrolled at Universities and the average age is around 30 years. The element of

meaning of economic derives from logical character of the means-ends relationship, as apparent in such words as ‘economical’ or ‘economizing’. It refers to a definite situation of choice, namely, that between the different uses of means induced by ‘insufficiency of the means’ (...) the logic of rational action (...)” (Polanyi, 1968)

⁴ *“Everything intermingles in them [the gift], everything constituting the strictly social life of societies that have proceeding our own (...) In these ‘total’ social phenomena, as we propose calling them, all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time – religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather, of performing total services and of distribution.”* (Mauss, 1990)

voluntariness in the everyday life in Bogstøtten, mainly concerns the members' contributions to practically running the place. Bogstøtten, by most of the members, is entered through affiliation to and referral from the psychiatric treatment system or psychological counselors. Fountain House, which is the overall organization, is aiming to help their members to create and recreate and adjust a more or less normal everyday life for the members in continuation of a shorter or longer course within psychiatric or psychological treatment. If a person is connected to one of these treatment systems, for some reason, and at the same time enrolled in education, Fountain House has created a special study support unit, and this is Bogstøtten. Members who need help in finishing their education are offered to use Bogstøtten's facilities: 2-3 people of personnel for both personal and study related support, rooms fit for studying (such as library and workspace), rooms fit for taking a break (music room, silence room, outdoor spaces) and others around the same age experiencing somewhat the same needs for reasons more or less alike (FountainHouse, 2006, 2011; Revsbech, 2011b).

Bogstøtten has a flat organizational structure, which means that as far as possible, it is encouraged that members (volunteers) and staff (employees) collaborate on the everyday work in Bogstøtten. At the same time, the members volunteer for each task they participate in; they decide which tasks to help with and to what extent. There is an informal obligation for the members to volunteer due to the organizational ideology and structure, an obligation which is not explicit. The membership is “lifelong”, which means that once you are a member, you are free to benefit from Bogstøtten's support offers and facilities as often or seldom you need or like throughout the rest of your life. The members are therefore free to choose their own individual way in using the place. Everyone is also free to participate and have a say in almost all staff-, info-, and task meetings, and as mentioned the members are free but at the same time expected to participate in various tasks as part of the daily routines, e.g. cleaning or participating in working groups. The staff members can be appointed for study support and supervision, and a members is also free to decide whether and when to participate in social activities. Some members simply use Bogstøtten as a workspace; they arrive in the morning and sit in a quiet room at a desk with their books, notes, and computers (Ibid.).

Learning in Bogstøtten

As study- and life support offer for mentally vulnerable people, more than one learning agenda is focused on in Bogstøtten, which are integrated in various ways, depending on each

member’s subjective predicament. Knud Illeris ((Illeris, 2001) describes this broad definition of learning, viewing learning as a personal process which includes both learning, development, socialization, qualification, maturation, and aging:

“Læring, udvikling, socialisering og kvalificering er i min forståelse identiske eller så stærkt overlappende funktioner at det er afsporende at forsøge at behandle dem som særskilte processer – forskellene drejer sig mest om den synsvinkel der er tale om, og hvad resultaterne af processerne relateres til. (...) bruger jeg derfor begrebet læring bredt dækkende for alle processer der fører til en varig kapacitetsændring, hvad enten den er af motorisk (bevægelsesmæssig), kognitiv (erkendelsesmæssig) eller psykodynamisk (følelses-, motivations- og holdningsmæssig) karakter.” (Ibid:17)

I point to Illeris’ definition because apart from the motor coordination included, to my experience, it is close to Bogstøtten’s own idea of learning which is integrated in Bogstøtten’s self-understanding as organization and in daily interactional practice. What is added to Illeris’ traditional, process related and broad definition of learning is learning as discursively identity creating function, important in relation to both members’ self experience but also in relation to developing an organizational brand:

“At udvikle en læringsbaseret forståelse af klubhuskonceptet med det sigte at udvikle en terminologi for det samlede tilbud i klubhuset. Forståelsen og terminologien skal omfatte både klubhuset som lærende praksisfællesskab og den individuelle inkludering heri. Læringstilgangen ligger udover den metodik, som standarderne foreskriver, men integrerer værdigrundlaget gennem sit fokus på det relationelle. Perspektiver er indadtil vidensdeling og læring og udadtil branding.” (J. Andersen, Barr, & Støm, 2011)⁵

The two quotations lined up next to each other are interesting because they illustrate how the concept of learning in this case is extended in the field of social entrepreneurship. This tendency is seen in other voluntary organizations alike⁶; these organizations exist in a cross-sector managed between the fields of voluntary organizations, on cross-sectorial terms, and learning institutionalization.

⁵ Quote from “Delvision i Bogstøttens strategiplan”

⁶ E.g. “Bromley by Bow” and “City Year”, London (Revsbech, 2011a, 2011c)

An elaboration of Bogstøtten’s learning concept is necessary in understanding what is in play on behalf of this organization, what motives are behind the learning conceptualization and what learning perspective is affiliated. In Bogstøtten’s own descriptions it is mentioned how an understanding and the value of being relational is endorsed. Yet there are no study groups in Bogstøtten even though the organization is presented as a study support offer. Study support is only practiced individually. One of the reasons for this is that the members are not referred to Bogstøtten from a certain faculty or other directly study related contexts. They are referred from another kind of community which is the psychiatric treatment system. Therefore the group of members is not composed on the basis of their common situation as students. They are still voluntary members but come from diverse studies and universities, with different abilities, from different levels and individual needs for support (FountainHouse, 2011; Revsbech, 2011b). Lave and Wenger’s descriptions of communities of practice and situated learning are built upon the idea of apprenticeship. As neither staff nor volunteer members are practicing trade- or subject specific rolemodelling or participating in concrete subject-specialized interactions in Bogstøtten, one must assume that the actual community of practice is not about the ‘books’ but about the ‘support’ – a social self managing matter (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Learning and social economy

The self managing matter in Bogstøtten can be described in two contexts: the individual study related and the social interacting. A natural focus led from the anthropological field work in Bogstøtten is the social interaction; as most importantly they are visible and accessible to observation. Observations of the study activities could be expounded in thick descriptions of young adults in traditional office work positions reading books or working on their computers (Ehn & Löfgren, 2006; Geertz, 1973). Another beneficial method, in examining objects of exchange besides observations, was the subjective narrative through individual interviews (Bernard, 1994; Kupferberg, 2007). In the individual life story interviews the informants were asked to, in their own way, put into words the nature of their way of using Bogstøtten as study support. None of the seven members (eleven interviews in total) chose to talk about the scholarly outcome or wins (Revsbech, 2011b).

Social entrepreneurship in a Mauss’ perspective is to a great extent a matter of accumulation of social value and social economical competences: how to get more to become more, to create and recreate for social purposes (Mauss, 1990; Mawson, 2008). As also emphasized by

Bogstøtten, it is about securing the framework around the learning community and learning from each other. Lacking the directly trade specific learning agenda, Illeris would call this sort of learning psychodynamic. But because the purpose of learning in Bogstøtten to a great extent is about learners' societal abilities and functions, related to being able to take care of oneself financially and socially, the learning agenda can be said to have a self managing purpose sought through an intimization of the educational relationship, as it focuses on the member's ability to create and manage a subjective sense of meaning (N. Å. Andersen & Born, 2001; Schmidt, 2006a).

Social intervention through creating a sense of meaning and building self-worth in a voluntary organization is linked with social economy seen as the ability to identify, negotiate and exchange social value and social interaction via these negotiations. In this case and culture there is a tendency to see development and self management competence, as in the ability to create a personal sense of meaning, as the solution to social and personal dysfunctions, inequality, loneliness, and inferiority. The learning environment, built upon the focus on developing the ability to identify, negotiate and exchange social value, can be further analyzed and observed using social economic ethnography as presented above and shortly exemplified in the following.

‘Space’ – an example of a valued object of exchange in Bogstøtten

Coding the data material collected in Bogstøtten it becomes evident that ‘space’ or ‘room’ is essential in daily interactions, phenomena which are connected to metaphorical articulations of ‘air’: to be able to breathe, to get some air, spaces where one can breathe freely. This ‘room’ for breathing is a sort of break and therefore connotes a certain sense of time. Because in a Mauss perspective, this room is crucial to social exchanges and accumulating social and cultural value (Mauss, 1990). Where time in a formalistic interpretation equals money, the substantivistic reading of this ‘room’ sought-after equals the possibility to accumulate social value, and therefore has value in itself. The object of value is self-perpetuating as other social phenomena like love and anger, whose nature of value accumulation seems to be that more becomes more (Polanyi, 1968; Schmidt, 2006b).

In cultural analysis it is beneficial to further enter and give attention to what goes on in these spaces in-between. Ehn and Löfgren write:

“Mellemrummet skaber ikke-tid og ikke-rum, det fungerer som en omkoblingsstation mellem før og efter. Det får sin kraft ved både at bryde og forbinde. Det er i dette mellemrum, ingenting sker, men alting forandres.” (Ehn & Löfgren, 2006)

Mauss explains the social value of time or the spaces in-between simply as a necessity to solidarity building but also a precondition to accumulating social value. He points to time as having an impact on both the value of the object of exchange as well as a condition and a premise for the overall function of social economy. The act of exchange is shaped by three elements: giving, receiving and reciprocating. In this process, time and the ability to socially manage time is of crucial importance, considering the social outcome and impact on personal status and social structures. It is a question of how time is administered by the implicated interacting parties – a question of having a sense of *timing*: how much time passes between each of the three act elements, between offer, reception and reciprocation. Besides from the significance which lies in size and understanding related to the object of exchange, exploitation, attention, or lack of same, concerning how to handle timing, co-construct the social power structures and social dramas of exchange (which are elaborated in other works e.g. by Erving Goffman and his descriptions of *impression management*) (Goffman, 1959; Mauss, 1990).

According to Mauss, time is uniquely entangled with the object of exchange. Firstly it is observed, in the Polynesian studies, how time is connected to the spirit of the gift, the *hau*, and the obligation to reciprocate. Some objects of exchange bind giver and receiver in mutual obligation throughout the object's existence, while other obligations to reciprocate can either be postponed or terminated by a spontaneously giving back or passing along. Whether reciprocation is expected immediately or more time is socially allowed to pass, also characterized the nature of the relationship along with the form, nature and promptitude of the reciprocation. The main point in these studies is that the gift exchanges take place as a precondition of social communities and can be seen as the glues which bind society together (Mauss, 1990).

Another of Mauss' points regarding time or social space between the interactional elements regards credit; in this substantivistic interpretation and French translation credit should be associated with trust as social phenomenon. Credit is time-related e.g. in a situation when the giver does not require immediate reciprocation, but shows that he or she trusts that

reciprocation will take place in time. Among the Indians in the American northwest being able to show trust is of course tied to the fact that the receiver publically pledges back payment (Ibid.). While in the example from Polynesia the sanctioning community has been replaced by Nemesis-like spiritual entities like the spirits of the ancestors or forces of nature (Ibid.). Mauss points to how credit accumulates over time, and how time is needed when it comes to any kind of counter-service. Some services, or objects, of exchange are exchanged at the same time, while others put off in mutual credit are likely to gain value over time, resulting in a richer society (Ibid.:45-46). Besides the first point that timing greatly effects social outcomes of exchange and demands attention, this denotes another point worth drawing on: according to this perspective on social economy there is a connection between personal investment of time, managing timing and the quality outcome experienced among the people in the given community.

Timing on Bogstøtten's learning agenda

As mentioned above, the most evident learning agenda in the everyday life of Bogstøtten concerns self-management, ability to create personal meaning and social agility, in this perspective viewed as the ability of timing in social exchange. Regarding ‘space’ the question is when to ask for it, when to just take it and when to give it to get at positive experience of an interaction, which is the learning frame and content at the same time. A fact of the latter point is making it even more personally vulnerable to make errors. The community is necessary as training ground, and for mentally vulnerable not mastering self-management under this paradoxical condition is sometimes the very same reason why they were referred to Fountain House in the first place. This makes them particularly vulnerable and the social learning agenda especially challenging to handle for everyone involved. Another challenge is the question of employing staff which are exemplary role models, in this social community of practice, who at the same time both master social exchange taking into account the social interactional dysfunctions a member might have. Let this stand as inspiration to considerations concerning education of staff in theses learning arenas.

Coming back to the volunteer members, according to Mauss it takes an element of freedom, time, room to digest and maneuver in others’ and one’s own social impressions in being seen and more or less constantly interacting. In an environment where this is the learning agenda the freedom, the space in-between, also becomes time for reflection and consideration regarding one’s next move in managing both one’s own need for contact, study related and

personal internalization, body positional variety (e.g. the need to take a walk, sit down or stand up and stretch) and at the same time one's own social prestatation in managing the elements of exchange: offer, reception, reciprocation. This learning and social economic perspective explains why the spaces in-between are crucial to both what the members are there to learn and the learning, as in internalization, in itself. It also explains the importance of 'space' expressed over and over both by staff and volunteers in Bogstøtten. An inclusion of the organization's financial conditions of existence in the analysis would offer further understanding and explanation of this problematic regarding Bogstøtten as learning arena.

Among staff and volunteer members of Bogstøtten various strategies to attain 'space' or time can be observed. A direct example of this is: a member gets up from the computer, walks to the window, opens it, and in spite of the fact that people are caught up in their own doings, the person bursts out loudly: “phew, I need some air”. In this small example of behavior two act elements of exchange and their social effect can be observed:

1. The person legitimizes his interrupting action by referring to a common known value 'air'. This states that the member has somehow been able to identify 'air' as a value.
2. The person offers something to the others, which is of value and thus makes a prestatation which cannot be turned down, and through this behavior obligates the others unwillingly: they would need to say thank you or make a similar gesture at a later time. Some are annoyed by this and react by ignoring. This disregard, from this perspective, could be caused by the fact, that they have been forced into receiving just by being present, which upholds the lack of 'space'.

Indirect examples of legitimizing the claim for space are e.g. surfing on the Internet or pulling away from the others physically. In Bogstøtten anxious behavior around the act of claiming space can be observed and instead of feeling worthy of claiming the space. In this exchange a diagnosis can even be made useful if it includes a statement of a special need of space confirmed by an authority. Of course this is not always the case.

The social negotiation and legitimization of 'space' is clearly seen in Bogstøtten, yet it is also clear that everybody recognizes the need for personal space and the fact that a distinct need for space is sometimes the very reason why a member is there. Being mentally vulnerable often means that due to mental disruptions, learning and mental processing, internalizing,

assimilation and accommodation, takes more time or space from input to input than non-vulnerable (Illeris, 2001; Mauss, 1990; Revsbech, 2011b).

Recapitulating the gift of learning

The educational relationship is determining to the learning interaction and thus process and outcome. It is a social relation and according to Mauss gift exchange and acts of solidarity are the glue of society. The combination creates a structuralist analysis of learning processes in a social functionalist perspective contextualized with a case example within social entrepreneurship. In the everyday understanding of a gift this phenomenon is associated with being given something for free. In a Mauss perspective the gift giving act is a social solidarity building act consisting of three elements: giving, receiving, and reciprocating. The gift of learning is to a great extent a social opportunity, but it is important to point out that the gifts have no social value in itself, but gains value through how the exchanging parties handle the interaction through e.g. prestation and timing. The value depends on personal engagement from the receiver, who is obliged to reciprocate. The receiving act requires attention, internalization and thereby personally influencing the object before reciprocating, which is a re-proposal in the social environment. This be a question of specific knowledge or other forms of competences seen as socially valuable.

The gift is a culturally defined value. One of the competences which are seen as important in Bogstøtten is the ability to identify objects of value, personally mark them and contribute socially with what is valued there. That way, mastering social interaction, social competence, is necessary in itself; and not something everybody naturally master. The gift of learning implies that the competence of learning which is a sought after cultural value which is offered, received and reciprocated socially in a culture valuing it and wanting to socially accumulate its value. Social entrepreneurship as a cultural field without a doubt has such traits. By observing what other objects of value are linked with the gift of learning in concurrently believing them to promote and seeking to accumulate the value of learning, contributes to the analysis and illumination of voluntary organizations as learning arenas.

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