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# Competence and Mastery in Practice: On Participation, Responsibility and Believing in Your Own Abilities

*Video Essay and Digital Paper*

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## Abstract

How can school-weary youth regain faith in their abilities and their own future? The film discussed in this article is a critique of compulsory school's inability to mediate knowledge and self-confidence through practical experiences. We meet two young boys who describe their schooldays as a time of little self-accomplishment and little joy in learning. Being given the opportunity to participate in the practical relation between themselves, the materials, the tools, and the customers at the car workshop Midtun Dekk, they now have experienced *performance accomplishment* and developed *self-efficacy*. They both emphasize how this workplace has changed their lives and their attitude towards themselves, and they both express a sincere gratitude to the company manager who gave them trust and responsibility. This article will highlight some of the conditions that may have contributed to their positive development. The determinative experiences of the boys combined with the power of visual communication makes it also necessary to discuss some of the considerations to be made in the process of presenting research through a research film. The author wants to ask: How much is it acceptable to edit in a research film? Can too much intervening change the result from argumentative reasoning to propaganda?

## Keywords

digital paper – empowerment in practice – mastery in practice – practical learning – workplace learning – self-efficacy in practical work



FEATURE Grethe Nina Hestholm's article is based on the film 'Competence and Mastery in Practice', which can be viewed [here](#).

## 1 Background

Every time I changed tires at the car service Midtun Dekk, I noticed how the young workers showed a special kind of commitment. At my last visit, the manager expressed his frustrations concerning a young employee, who now had received full social security for an injury he had incurred in his free time. Now this young person was permanently unemployed and had returned to his pals at the same drug scene he once came from. The manager felt a great personal loss because of this. He had helped the boy from vulnerability and hopelessness towards competence and independence, and he had built high hopes for this boys' future.

It was impressive to listen to the concern this manager felt for his employees, and it was easy to see that his care was crucial for the young people working there. During our conversation, I understood that his special commission was to give a new chance to youth who, in various ways, had experienced defeat. It struck me that I ought to make a film of how he and this practical workplace brought empowerment to these young people. But I hesitated. Why?

As a researcher I am particularly interested in various aspects of practical knowledge (for example Hestholm, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2023). For instance, what kind of learning processes are active in vocational training, where the body is recognized as the core connection between the world and the individual (Merleau-Ponty, 2013)? My focus had been on the superior artistry and knowledge of the professional practitioner (Schön, 1987). I had already made two films where this perspective was emphasized (Hestholm, 2021, 2022a). But this workplace demonstrated something else, namely the somewhat stereotypical perception of practical knowledge as suitable for those who do not master the theoretical knowledge at school. In my doctoral thesis (Hestholm, 2020) I had put a lot of effort into challenging this perception of practical knowledge. I decided therefore first not to put this film idea in action. But through an unexpected event it happened all the same: I had just picked up the film equipment for another film session when the appointment was cancelled. Standing there with the time and the equipment available I decided to contact the car service Midtun Dekk, and I was wished welcomed to come and film them.

## 2 Methodology

Constructivism assumes that there are no universal, absolute realities, and that the world is interpreted, constructed, and shared in different ways by different individuals (Hatch, 2002). The methodology of this film is based on a constructivist view in three aspects; 1) The research participants construct their narrative through their personal experience and vocational concepts of knowledge and learning, 2) I, as a researcher, construct a representation of the empirical material through my personal experience, cinematic understanding and academical conceptions of knowledge and learning, and 3) through this publication I may influence the construction of criteria and standards of research films.

At point 2, we are in the field of visual methodology. Gilligan Rose broadly defines visual research methods as any form of social science research that works with all kinds of images in all ways (Rose in Sage, 2022, 3:44). She notes that there has been a shift in focus among researchers in the last couple of decades. In the past, the research was done on existing visual images, whereas now researchers tend to produce visual images themselves. In this work, we need to develop the awareness that images have social meaning, and that we must be able to explain why we use visual techniques and think through what

we think visual images does and what kind of evidence we think they will produce for our particular research question (Rose in Sage, 2022, 4:55-5:57).

Practice is action, temporal and visual, and it seems therefore natural to display it through the film medium. Furthermore, a film can capture behaviour, communication, emotional involvement, and different forms of collaboration that may be difficult to describe in a text. It can also make content available to audiences that does not read scientific articles.

### 2.1 *Methods: Filming and Editing the Work and the Talk*

Observation and interviewing are qualitative research methods, where the main target is to create a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, and of the context in which the phenomenon stands (Hatch, 2002). The film camera is a suitable tool for documenting and studying the concrete lives of a smaller selection of people.

A way to describe my method is to say that my observing and interviewing of the employees at the car workshop was registered or documented by me through my camera. But the documentation is of course from my own point of view. Berger (1972, p. 10) puts it like this: "Every image embodies a way of seeing" and: "The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject." One of his examples concerns European, male oil painters who do not just portray women as undressed, passive sexual objects. Through this way of constructing the feminine, they also construct the masculine (Berger, 1972). "Seeing comes before words" (Berger, 1972, p. 7), and has often a stronger effect on us than words, among other things because it also conveys what we are unable to describe in words or may not be consciously aware of. I am of course not absolutely conscious of my own way of seeing, but my wish was show the boys' socialization and competence in a sympathetic way. To achieve this I needed to show how they carried out their work in the workshop, how they moved, talked and acted alone and together. Seeing this, rather than reading about it, can have a particularly informative effect on us. We are visiting the garage without being present, we can see the boys in relation to the other employees and in relation to the machines and equipment at the workshop.

In the same way as in the process of collecting film material, the editing reflects a way of seeing (Berger, 1972). As an editorial researcher, I can make crucial decisions. What should be included, what should be left out? No decision is unimportant; If I remove stuttering and misspeaking (as I did) I might conceal a significantly quality of the person but will perhaps make the message clearer.

What topics are relevant to the focus, or not? Both owners said that working at a tire workshop had low status and that it was not easy to find employees.

One question I could ask here was: would these young people been given a job if it wasn't difficult to get hold of people? One comment from the manager made me decide that this focus was irrelevant: "I'm looking for the good people, and they might as well have fallen outside in 5. 6. 7. 10th grade" (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 2:55).

But what about editing content that *is* relevant to the focus? In the section below, I will reflect on some of the decisions I made when directing my research film.

## 2.2 *Films as a Way of Presenting Research: Ethical Considerations*

This film became part of a project approved by *Sikt* – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.<sup>1</sup> The participants were informed and signed the consent form. But how exactly should I present this empiricism through the film medium? What guidelines are there for such work? How much should I, as a researcher, edit the material?

Of all my films, this turned out to be the most difficult to edit. The main reason for this was the challenging ethical considerations I had to make. Of course, as researchers we make ethical considerations in every research project and through the whole research process, whether we are writing an article or making a film (Sage, 2022, 17:29). Nevertheless, the film medium, with its lack of anonymity and with its wide range of expression in sound and image, can be significantly more revealing for the research participants than it would have been if they had contributed to a research article. And this material was particularly challenging. The boys were very open, also about their misfortunes, failures and difficulties, and there was actually no way to anonymize them. And at the same time, I needed to reveal their misfortunes and failures to show what is at stake when young people do not succeed at school. But how could I talk about their misfortunes in a manner that didn't give them too much away, but still enough to provide a well-founded critique of the school?

As a researcher I had two concerns: one, to present the boys as dignified as possible, and two, to tell the story of how the meeting with this workplace had changed their lives. Based on what I thought needed to be told, I made a critical selection from the material I had. It was a difficult balancing act between not handing over the boys by presenting them as "losers", but simultaneously tell what they wanted to be told; that they felt let down by the school, but that this workplace had given them a new chance and a hope for the future. They felt

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<sup>1</sup> Reference code 504153.

seen, included, and valuable. They were grateful for the job, for the boss and for being a part of the team. I tried to focus more on the positive change and less on their history of defeat.

### 2.3 *The Research Participants' Attitudes Towards the Film Project*

As said, the boys showed a personal interest and enthusiasm for the project and wanted to help convey the message and the criticism. Nevertheless, I wanted to make sure it was okay for the boys to go out in public as someone who had failed at school. Both assured me that they really wanted to shed light on this issue. Robin believed that this film could help pupils in similar situations as he and Iben had been in: "What we were talking about now, I feel it would give an assurance for many younger people in the situation Iben and I were in. That we didn't get. That kind of assurance, I feel we might have needed too (Robin in Hestholm, 2022b, 6:47-7:05). Iben wrote to me on e-mail: "I want more people to hear my story about school. I would like to talk more about this and help other children who are struggling at school. If you want to hear more, just get in touch, because I am quite open about all this (...)". All participants saw the film when it was finished, and again they approved publication.

But even if they are over 18 years and otherwise are competent to consent, I still have a responsibility to think carefully about what their participation may lead to. My decision was to publish the film, which also meant taking their wish to contribute seriously. Still, I can never know for sure if my decision was right.

### 2.4 *Should Music Play a Role in a Research Film?*

Is music just another element in the editorial work, or is the implementation of music taking the research film one step too far? Watching anthropological films (for example JAF, 2023), one can ask whether music has any place in research films at all. In documentaries, on the other hand, music is widely used (Rabiger 1992; Barsam, 1992). For John Grierson (1898–1972), an early documentary filmmaker with great impact in the English-speaking world, editing was crucial to the documentary's form and impact. The power lies in the composition of images, speech, sound from the surroundings and – *the music*. He believed that the documentary should not only be entertaining, but also didactic, informative, analytical and enlightening. It should show examples from the real world, and the aim should be to achieve impact and social change. Therefore, the documentary maker should be a patriot first and the artist second (Barsam, 1992).

But is a research film the same as a documentary film? Should a researcher emphasize or influence the content with music in the same way as the



documentary filmmaker? There is no doubt that music has a huge impact on us in general (Myskja & Lindbæk, 2000) and together with images in particular (Larsen, 2007). With music, we gain power over an extra dimension of communication. Can this power be misused? Grierson distinguished between propaganda films and documentary films, where propaganda films belonged to totalitarian societies and documentary films belonged to democratic societies (Barsam, 1992). But where exactly can we draw a line between the two? Can too much editing, additions and manipulation damage the credibility of the research film? Should we, as researchers, refrain from using such effects, and leave as much interpretative work as possible to the viewer of the research film? I reflected a lot on this and concluded that the same questions could be asked for the construction of research articles. In both cases, it is about being honest, trustworthy, and transparent, as formulated in guidelines for research ethics (for example NESH, 2022). In some ways, the filmmaker has more tools at hand than the article writer, for example sound, image, and movement. In other ways, the film medium has limitations. For example, it can be difficult to anchor something with academic sources, and it can take – for the film medium – an unacceptably long time to explain something thoroughly. The publication methods allow for different expressions, but both must follow the research ethics guidelines.

I decided to take advantage of the support that music can give to the message, and searched a lot for a music that could emphasize the pace, the energy, the changes, and the intensity of the workplace, but also the desperation in the message; This was a matter of existential success or failure, a matter of believing in the future or not. I found that the recording from March 1961:<sup>2</sup> Béla Bartók, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, with the New York Philharmonic and the conductor Leonard Bernstein, could support this message.

### 3 Findings: A Caring Environment

When I arrive at a film location I try to be as open as I can to whatever meets me. I enter the field with the following question: what is happening here

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2 It is allowed to use music from composers who have been dead for 70 years or more. This is also the case for recorded music, which according to the Official Journal of the European Union (September 27, 2011), had its protection period extended from 50 to 70 years. However, this law was valid from October 31, 2011, which means that recordings that at this time were older than 50 years are considered to be free, while recordings which was “only” 49 years in 2011 is covered by the new law and had 20 years added to its protection period (see also Torvund, 2013).

that is relevant to my focus? I therefore make no concrete plans before I start recording, as is usual and necessary in other film genre. In this sense, my attitude can perhaps be compared to that of a news reporter; always looking for something that might shed light on the question, and always ready to change angles according to what best serves the case (Hudson & Rowlands, 2012).

I was happy to get this unplanned appointment, and when I started filming the joy became even greater. Both the manager, the deputy head, the co-owner and the two boys spoke very clearly and freely. Their open attitude ensured me that the empirical film material would be substantial and – hopefully valid. Their actions were characterised with skill and speed, the communication with expectations, humour, and most of all, care. I talked to each one of them, and particularly asked about their educational background, how it came about that they started working at Midtun Dekk, and how they liked working there.

### 3.1 *The Experiences of the Boys*

Both boys reported extensive experiences of failure in school. They particularly suffered under the teaching methods and the classroom situation (Iben in Hestholm, 2022b, 1:31-2:22 and Robin in Hestholm, 2022b, 5:06-5:16). But the feeling of suffering and defeat had vanished during their time at the car service. They were both so very grateful to the manager, who, despite their lack of success at school, had given them trust and a new chance at his garage. The trust and the tasks he had given them had bit by bit changed them from “problem children” (Iben in Hestholm, 2022b, 2:05), to resourceful youth (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 3:58) for the company.

For the boys there was a clear ‘before and after’ they started to work at Midtun Dekk. What were their thoughts before? Perspective mention by both was:

- A feeling of incompatibility or conflict between themselves and the school.
- A feeling of no joy.
- A feeling of no success.
- An anxiety for the future.

And what did the workplace offer that caused the change? Perspective mention by both was:

- A realisation of their strong need to do something.
- A realisation of their strong need to interact with other people.
- A new sense of having developed their own character.
- A feeling of being a competent, valuable person.



### 3.2 *The Philosophy of the Manager*

The manager revealed great pedagogical flair and was very committed when he argued for his philosophy behind his approach towards these boys. Clearly, the welfare of these young people had a great personal and emotional worth for him. His commitment seemed to be based on a strong sympathy especially for young people with a difficult background.

He admitted that his pedagogical understanding had developed during his years as a leader. He had to learn to “read the youth” (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 7:37) to “push the right buttons” (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 7:42) so he could give them success and “create something” in them (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 3:12-3:36). The essential curriculum in this developmental process was *practical knowledge* or *skill*. By gradually giving the boys experience and a sense of success with practical work tasks, they would both feel valuable, and be a valuable part of a team (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 3:18-3:58).

Based on his experience, he listed some basic conditions he believed a young person needs to develop:

- Practical work as another way of experiencing success.
- A sense of being useful.
- A sense of being valuable.
- To be included in a team.
- To be pushed, being given tasks.
- To be given responsibility.
- Step by step build up a feeling of mastery.
- Through the mastery, developing experience.
- Through the experience of mastery, developing empowerment.
- A mentor who is a friend and a supporter.

### 3.3 *The Deputy Head and the Co-owner*

Both the deputy head and the co-owner confirmed that the working environment was good. In fact, the co-owner stated that the team never had been better than right now (Ruben in Hestholm, 2022b, 10:08-10:24). The deputy head praised the boys’ development and considered them as both knowledgeable and hardworking (Hestholm, 2022b, 9:52-10:01).

Unlike the boys, the manager, the deputy head, and the co-owner hadn’t had any difficulties at compulsory school. The deputy head chose general studies after lower secondary school and did quite well there, though he emphasized that he didn’t find it particularly interesting, and that he needed to work physically. I am satisfied to have this point of view included in the film because the focus is otherwise on practice as a way to achieve success for those who do not master theory.

#### 4 Theory: Competence and Mastery in Practice

A wide range of theoretical perspectives could shed light over the findings. The fact that these boys had had so many experiences of failure could be discussed through epistemological theory, educational philosophy theories and education sociology theories (Hestholm, 2020).

My limited empirical material does not suggest that the boys' attitudes towards school could be explained in the light of their cultural identity (for example Willis, 1977). What I find is an educational philosophical perspective and an individualistic, psychological perspective. Together with John Dewey, I will criticize the predominantly theoretical training in compulsory school. I will then discuss their development in light of the theory of the Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura.

##### 4.1 *"It's Better to Do It Yourself, Than to Read about What to Do"*

John Dewey is known as the front figure of educational progressivism; a movement in the early 20th century that criticized the traditional teacher-led education, with a heavy emphasis on discipline and with passive and receptive children. In the book *The Child and the Curriculum* (1990), he compares the way children naturally learn with the subjects and methods in school. Children relate to the world in an active, practical, and personal way. They perceive the world in its entirety. A child's world is held together by the experience and the affection of the social environment in which it lives. But the curriculum is theoretical, logical and it splits the world up into disciplines. Still, many pupils manage to adapt to the conditions set by the school, but Iben and Robin was not among them. Iben puts it like this: "I never liked going to school. I ended up sitting on a desk in the corner of the classroom and stared into the wall the whole day. That was never fun. So, I stopped going to school" (Iben in Hestholm, 2022b, 1:31-1:45). Robin expresses the same frustration regarding the physical passivity and methodological inefficiency:

Some people can sit down and study hard and all that. I just can't do it. I feel I have to ... do something. It's better to do it yourself, than to read about what to do. Then you actually get it.

Robin in HESTHOLM, 2022b, 5:46-6:01

Dewey compares knowledge, collected through previous experiences, with a map. However, "the map does not take the place of an actual journey" (Dewey, 1990, p. 198). In order to connect with the world, the children must be allowed

to make the journey themselves. But instead of getting the possibility to actively seek and experience the knowledge themselves, even more effort was put in same method:

(...) my thinking is: all the schools with problem children, they ought to take more initiative, with them. At least not put them in a corner. Put against the wall and given books for ten-year-olds. Taught cursive script. I don't think that's the smartest choice.

Iben in HESTHOLM, 2022b, 2:05-2:20

These teaching methods have little value when the student nevertheless does not respond to them. Dewey puts it like this:

Teaching and learning are correlative or corresponding processes, as much so as selling and buying. One might as well say he has sold when no one has bought, as to say that he has taught when no one has learned.

DEWEY, 1910, p. 29

For the student, the knowledge is linked to a specific environment, and interesting only to the extent that it can play an active role in current life. In interaction with practical life as it unfolds in the car workshop, learning flourishes:

This is exactly the opposite. You have a lot to do. Different things all the time. Interacting with the customers. I like helping people out. It's easier to help when I can talk to them and find out what the problem is.

Robin in HESTHOLM, 2022b, 5:16-5:31

The school must be child-centred, Dewey (1990) argues; the children should be allowed to follow their interests and be more active in their learning processes. But for Iben and Robin it couldn't fulfil its task. Therefore they need to downplay its importance and instead draw the attention to their personal qualities and talents, which, even if the school did not discover them, still exist:

So, I think it's bad that many only look at the education, what you've done at school and so on, because it has nothing to do with who you are, what you've done in school.

Robin in HESTHOLM, 2022b, 7:05-7:16

#### 4.2 *Getting the Opportunity to Experience Performance Accomplishments*

In the article “Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change” (1977), Bandura argues that our behaviour will depend on whether we expect to succeed with a challenge or not. He mentions four sources of efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977):

- Performance accomplishments: having experienced real mastery.
- Vicarious experiences: when significant others master.
- Verbal persuasion: encouragement within a realistic range.
- Emotional arousal: moderate tension can give the greatest expectation of mastery.

Of these, *performance accomplishments* are especially influential (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). With personal mastery experiences the efficacy expectations grow, with failures they decrease or disappear. Both boys experienced failure in school, which made them lose faith in themselves: “So I never got any motivation from school. It made me think less of myself in the way that I wouldn’t become anything”, Robin says (Hestholm, 2022b, 6:02-6:12) and continues:

I used to worry for the future and what I should become. But after I came here, that has completely gone away. It’s not a problem anymore, and there’s no panic about it. Because now I know that ... I know a lot more, and that I understand more than what ... I thought I did from school.

Robin in HESTHOLM, 2022b, 6:25-6:46

The last utterance illustrates Banduras (1977) point that once established, enhanced self-efficacy tends to generalize to other situations which previously was characterized by a lack of confidence. The experiences of mastery at the car service have gradually changed his efficacy expectations, and his self-confidence.

The boys gave each other *vicarious experiences* (Bandura, 1977, p. 197) by being ‘significant others’ to each other. Seeing significant others perform and master threatening activities can generate an expectation that they too will master the task.

By being a mentor, a friend, and a supporter (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 12:43-13:19), the manager had encouraged the boys, or *verbal persuaded* them (Bandura, 1977, p. 198) to take on manageable tasks. But if the persuasion does not correspond to a realistic possibility to master and the recipient fails, it would most likely discredit the persuader and undermine the recipient’s perceived self-efficacy. The manager expressed insight on this point as well: “One must be given responsibility with small things, to build the person up.

Then they master that, and then you progress” (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 3:45-3:53).

The manager also emphasizes that the boys need to be encouraged in a way that for some can be interpreted as pressure. He expresses frustration towards some parents who cannot endure that their children are being challenged: “It’s like they’re not allowed to be to be pushed even a little bit” (Alexander in Hestholm, 2022b, 11:56-12:29). Here, he actualises Banduras fourth source of efficacy expectations; *emotional arousal* (Bandura, 1977, p. 198–200). Emotional arousal can be informative and motivating, but too much anxiety produces fear and avoidance. Relatively weak tensions may reduce self-doubts to a point where we perform successfully (Bandura, 1977, p. 200). Using his knowledge about each of them, Alexander seemed to find this point of balance in each boy.

#### 4.3 *Does Our Curriculum Harmonize with the Theories of Dewey and Bandura?*

The curriculum in compulsory school is dominated by academic subjects (Hestholm, 2020), even if the school authorities actually want to give all pupils the same possibilities: “An injustice is made when pupils cannot develop their abilities and skills sufficiently” (Meld. St. 22 (2010–2011), p. 7). This injustice has not only to do with the fact that we are not able to serve the society with the competence it needs:

Forecasts show that our society will have a lack of labour with apprentice certification in the future. (...) Then practical knowledge must to a greater degree be introduced as equal in value, compared to academic knowledge already at lower secondary school level (...).

MELD. ST. 22 (2010–2011), p. 7

Above all, the injustice has to do with the fact that our pupils must obtain *performance accomplishments* mainly through theoretical mastering (Hestholm, 2017). This point is particularly emphasized by the progressivist Dewey.

Statistics show that too many pupils leave secondary school with low motivation and poor results (Bakken, 2022; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019). Now the government will make a report to the Parliament to find answers to why this is so, and to come up with proposals to make secondary school more practical and varied so that pupils can learn more and thrive better (Regjeringen.no, 2022). Time will tell if the government is brave enough to create a school that facilitates the children’s active, practical and personal way of learning.

## 5 Conclusion

Of all the workplaces I had visited in connection with my filming, this was the first that was so consciously and explicitly set on realizing development, motivation, responsibility, and self-confidence in young people who had not experienced this at school. I found that this perspective – although it represented the somewhat stereotypical view of practical knowledge – nevertheless is extremely important to highlight. The boys' meeting with the manager and the work at the garage had transformed them into eager, competent employees who were well liked by their colleagues. All this was a new and defining experience for them. I have showed how Bandura and Dewey can explain this transition.<sup>3</sup>

Making this film has made me aware of how image and sound can be arranged into publications with a potentially strong effect, both cognitively and emotionally. As the author of a research article, the visual researcher must therefore – if not even more – be in close dialogue with the research ethics guidelines throughout the whole research process; from collecting empirical material to editing and publishing.

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3 The aim of the EU-funded project *Pioneered* (2023): *Pioneering policy and practice to tackle educational differences in Europe*, is also to shed light on this. This workplace is an excellent example of a practice that handles – and corrects – inequalities created in education. The aim of the EU-funded project *Pioneered* (2023): *Pioneering policy and practice to tackle educational differences in Europe* is to give attention to such practices. My research is connected to this project. The *Pioneered* project receives funds from the EU's H2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement number 101004392.

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