A Changing Experience

– communication and meaning-making in web-based teacher training
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Abstract

This is a study of students’ meaning making in web-based higher education courses. Conditions for students meaning-making change when interaction technology is used to support educational practices. Widened Participation policy activities often use web-based programs to attract “new” groups of more experienced students. The study used a communicative approach and focused on how previous experiences influenced actions and meaning making when students encountered challenges related to course objectives. Mediated Discourse Analysis was used to analyse asynchronous communication in 10 groups during 18 weeks of a 4-year part-time distance education program, training childminders for a Bachelor of Education, specialising in early childhood.

Appearances of meaning-making were traced to changes and breaks in student communication and presented as themes of orientations of actions namely:

- **participation**, the manifestation of presence, engagement in course work and the creation of space for engagement
- **positioning**, the creation of a student identity, the organisation of work, and the construction of a group culture
- **reference**, the orientation actions took in a nexus of practices. Where did students go for examples and to challenge theoretical concepts?
- **changing experience** is a collection of moments of reification, when students came to make realisations of relevance to subject and task.

This study tells an alternative story to research on web-based education stating difficulties to achieve in-depth communication. The mediated environment offered strength for meaning-making and knowledge building as *time*, in the opportunity to develop new perspective through thinking and in encountering concepts again and again. As *numbers*, in the necessary impact of other’s experiences. And as *distance*, provided by the shift of actions in asynchronous communication, forcing thoughts into written language and making them accessible for reflection and criticism. If we are serious about widening participation we should regard students not only as numbers but instead as a valuable resource that may contribute to change in education. In this context, the combination of new groups of students and web-based scenarios provides future avenues for an informed pedagogical approach to higher education.

Keywords: Course design, Higher education pedagogy, Mediated Discourse Analysis, Meaning making, Mediation, Teacher training, Web-based learning, Web-based teaching, Widened participation
To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected.

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Svensk sammanfattning

Denna avhandling bidrar med två viktiga resultat till fältet för nätbaserat lärande. För det första stärks den sociala interaktionens betydelse för studenternas meningsskapande. För det andra påvisas styrkor i lärmiljön som konsekvenser av mediering i form av tid, mångfald samt distans. Resultaten kan kopplas till den påverkan mediering har på människors interaktion. Tid representerar möjligheten till återkommande möten med sin egen förståelse i syfte att utveckla nya och fördjupade perspektiv. Mångfald representerar andras röster och bredden som erbjuds i form av delandet av andras erfarenheter. Distansen skapas av villkoren i den asynkrona kommunikationen och tvingar tankar och tal till skriftspråk som därmed blir tillgängliga för reflektion och förändring.

Med dessa resultat hoppas jag kunna bidra till en mer nyanserad diskussion kring digitala lärmiljöer till skillnad från en mer oinitierad förståelse av mediering, vilken ofta resulterar i deterministiska utgångspunkter för IT-stödda lärmiljöer. En fördjupad förståelse för vad digitala miljöer bär med sig i form av kommunikationsvillkor är viktiga för möjligheterna till möten mellan nya grupper av studenter, ny teknik och nya distributionsformer inom högre utbildning.

Bakgrund

Detta är en studie av studenters meningsskapande i nätbaserad högre utbildning. Syftet med studien är att undersöka hur kombinationen av vad man kallar breddade rekryteringsinsatser och nya utbildningsformer påverkar studenters meningsskapande i en pedagogisk praktik.

Studenters förutsättningar att delta och skapa mening inom ett utbildningssammanhang förändras med ett ökat inslag av nätbaserade utbildningssatsningar. Utbildning omfattar idag en uppsjö av utbildningsformer där klassrumsbegreppet och föreläsningssalen inte längre är självklara inslag. Dessa nya interaktionsarenor innebär inte bara en ny ”plats” för utbildning utan kräver av oss att vi sätter oss in i specifika förutsättningar för att kommunicera och aktivt delta i dessa nya miljöer (Keating, 2005).

En sedan lång tid tillbaka etablerad underrepresentation av studenter från lägre socio-ekonomiska samhällsskikt har resulterat i både nationella och europeiska rekryteringsåtgärder under policybegreppet ”Breddad rekrytering” (Widened Participation) (Johansson et al, 2005; OECD, 2005, 2007. Målsättningen att göra högskoleutbildning mer tillgänglig och bryta med konventioner kring vem som läser vidare, har trots ökad intagningsänden inte införlivats i ett europeiskt perspektiv –
snedrekryteringen består (Adnett & Slack, 2007; Ashwin, 2006; Bridge, 2006; Högskoleverket, 2008:11R; Johansson, Kim, Storan, & Sörlin, 2005). 

Breddad rekrytering förknippas också med pedagogiskt förändringsarbete. Tanken är att nya grupper studenter inte bara skall ”släppas in” i högskolevärlden utan att deras närvaro också kan medverka till ett aktivt förnyelsearbete och en breddning av undervisningsformer inom högskolevärlden (Johansson, et al., 2005).


Med den utgångspunkten ställs frågor kring de förutsättningar som ges för studenters meningsskapande när fysisk närvaro ersätts av digital representation och handling (se Sorensen, 1999).

**Empiri**


Den studerade kommunikationen bestod av två kurser som var ett samarbete mellan Institutionen för samhällsvetenskap och Institutionen för pedagogik och utgick från ett sociokulturellt perspektiv på lärande. Didaktiska övervägningar gällande studenternas gemensamma ansvar för varandras kunskapsutveckling var genomgående implementerade. Vid kursstarten kommunicerades bedömningskriterier för kurserna med studenterna och kursledningen återkom genomgående till dessa kriterier i
sina kommentarer och instruktioner i kursen. Kursen var designad för interaktion även under perioder av individuell examination genom att studenterna hade i uppgift att göra inlägg och diskutera kurslitteraturen. Där var också exempel på kombinationer av individuella och gruppexaminationer där t.ex. ett teoretiskt perspektiv skulle väljas och bearbetas i grupp men därefter tolkas och redovisas individuellt genom olika tillämpningsuppgifter inom förskolepraktiken. Krav på förekomsten av olika teoretiska perspektiv däribland genus- och mångfaldsperspektiv var också framställda i kursplanerna.

Den första kursen behandlade barn och barndom ur ett kulturellt och ett historiskt perspektiv. Den andra kursen behandlade konsekvenser för förskolepraktiken med hjälp av bl.a. styrdokument och studier i den egna praktiken.

**Metod**


MDA antar utmaningen från pragmatismen i att hitta ett metodologisk grepp som inkluderar kommunikationens påverkan på motpartens fortsatta handlingar, och som därmed fångar och integrerar den interrelationella karaktären i nätabaserade asynkrona miljöer i analysen. MDA betonar dialektiken mellan handling och dess representationsformer och diskursivitet representeras som social handling och inte enbart som text (Scollon, 2001). MDA har i studien också kompletterats med analytiska begrepp som understryker den pedagogiska ansatsen.

**Resultat**

Uttryck för meningsskapande, baserat på Deweys meningsbegrepp, spårades som handlingar i kommunikationen som kunde kopplas till förändringar i bearbetningar av kursernas mål och syften.

Kurserna utmärkade sig genom intensiv kommunikation. Efter två år hade dessa studenter anpassat sig till och utvecklat kommunikationsmönster i den nätabaserade studiemiljön. Meningsskapandet hos studenterna var inte begränsat till aktiviteter inom utbildningsprogrammet utan införlivade privata och yrkesrelaterade praktiker.

Resultaten baserades på förändringar och brytpunkter i kommunikationen orienterade kring:

- *deltagande* – som handlingar orienterade mot ett aktivt engagemang i kursarbete och manifestation av närvaro
- *positionering* – som handlingar orienterade mot studentidentitet samt skapandet av en gruppstil
- *refererande* – som handlingar riktade mot andra praktiker, där exempel hämtades eller implementerades eller diskuteras
• förändringar – som ett uttryck för reifikationer då studenterna erfor saker av betydelse för kursinnehåll och uppgift.

Att *delta* i kommunikation är en förutsättning för ett utbyte av erfarenheter. Villkorens för deltagandet för dessa studenter förhandlades både implicit och explicit i social interaktion och startade i studenternas aktiva manifestation av deltagande i en digital miljö där närvaro måste manifesteras i aktiv handling. Dessa manifestationer av närvaro skedde i till synes betydelselösa inläggar kring väder, test av sidan, eller en hälsning. Studenterna visade att de hade kursen i åtanke men ännu inte hade påbörjat något arbete i den digitala miljön. Många av inläggen uttryckte alltså en ambition eller påbörjade ett gemensamt sammanhang.

Studenterna var i genomsnitt 40 år. Av 55 studenter som ingick i studien var det 4 som inte fullföljde kurserna. De tillhörde alla de yngsta i sina grupper. Yngre studenter ofta valde en annan strategi än de äldre när de stötte på svårigheter. Där de äldre delade med sig av sina svårigheter förökte de yngre hålla skenet upp genom förhållandevis oinitierade eller få inlägg. Många studenter (upp till 75%) stod inför en eller två omtenor under den period som studien omfattar. Att dela med sig av sin oro kring detta visade sig vara en betydligt bättre strategi än att hålla skenet uppe. De som delade sin oro fick olika former av stöd från gruppen, som t.ex. en mindre aktiv roll i gruppen ett tag eller ett tydligt uttryckt intresse och engagemang i form av uppmuntrande ord och tröst och framför allt humor. Det framstod som om gruppen utvärderade kamraternas insatser i relation till deras livssituation. De uttryckte också att det faktum att de alla var kvinnor verksamma inom samma yrkespraktik bidrog till deras motivation och meningsskapande inom kurserna. Identifieringen med andra och andras liv tycktes medföra ökad vilja att visa tilltro och förståelse.


Studenterna vände sig till olika praktiker under arbetsprocessen. Dessa kan sammanfattas som:

- utbildningssammanhang generellt
- utbildningsprogrammets sammanhang
- föräldraskap som bidragande med erfarenhet och illustrativa exempel
- föräldraskap som distraktion
- studentrollen
- den egna förskolan specifikt
- förskolan som generell praktik
• förskolan som forskningsfält


Uttryck för reifikationsprocesser – då innehåll kopplat till kursen blev tillgängligt och objektfierat för studenterna i form av begrepp, strukturer eller fenomen, fanns representerade under både individuella och gruppriktningperioder. Dessa ”lyft” inträffade dock oftare under gruppriktningperioderna. Lärarna hade designat för kommunikation även under individuella perioder genom att efterfråga ett antal inlägg per vecka. Studenterna hade dessutom redan genomfört ett samarbete när det var dags för individuella uppgifter. Inläggen ändrade dock karaktär något under individuella studieperioder. De tog formen av parallella berättelser i vilka studenterna levererade sammanfattningar av den litteratur de läste. I vissa fall var dessa sammanfattningars betydelse för det egna meningsskapandet tydlig. Då argumenterade studenterna med sig själva och åstadkom en distans till det egna tänkandet.

Där fanns också enstaka tillfällen då behov och intressen inom gruppen för en kort stund sammanföll, varefter parterna gick vidare på varsin kant med ny manifesterad förståelse. I perioder då studenterna arbetade med gruppgöteborg åstadkom de snabbare den distans som tillåt mönster att framträda eller en distans i form av ett byte av perspektiv. Under gruppriktningperioderna fanns fler teoretiska reflektioner och kopplingar till styrdokument, även under de individuella perioderna.

Potentialen i den asynkrona kommunikationen framstår som stärkt genom denna studie. Möjligheten för studenter att göra återbesök i tanke och praktik som den lagrade kommunikationen erbjuder, kan förmodligen också kopplas till det faktum att studenterna spenderade förhållandevis
mycket tid i diskussion och mindre tid med organisatorisk samordning och planering av uppgifter. Hälften av grupperna använde 10 till 12 av de 20 dagarna som var avsatt för en gruppuppgift till att diskutera och utveckla det innehållsliga, innan redovisningsprodukten överhuvudtaget kom på tal. Vad som utkristallisierade sig i diskussion var möjligt att överblicka och plocka fram när det var dags att sammanställa en inlämningsuppgift.

En alternativ berättelse

Till skillnad från många studier kring nätbaserat lärande som visat och påtalat svårigheterna i att åstadkomma en fördjupad kommunikation via nätet, visar denna studie på stora möjligheter i integreringen av studenterfarenheter och nätbaserat lärande. Dessa möjligheter visar sig i tidsaspekten – i att under tid kunna utveckla nya och fördjupade perspektiv genom att bygga på och återkomma till etablerad kunskap, där kopplingen till en praktik är viktig. En annan möjlighet ligger i mångfalden av röster – hur andras erfarenheter kan utgöra en sprängbräda samt ett förenande kitt med vilket studenterna kan bearbeta ny information. En slutlig potential ligger i den så viktiga distansen – som erbjuds i förskjutningen från att vara involverad i fysisk interaktion till att reflektera i skrivande (Sorensen, 1999) vilket gör tankar till föremål för reflektion – både egna och andras.

Att kurserna behandlade frågor om lärande och meningsskapande måste naturligtvis ha bidragit till studenternas meningsskapande. Jag hoppas ändå kunna bidra till en nyansering av mer principiella inställningar kring vilka ämnen eller discipliner som lämpar sig för nätbaserat lärande. Jag har bland annat tagit del av studier kring slöjdundervisning, astronomi och ledarskap. Det är inte ämnets eller disciplinens karaktär som uteslutande skall avgöra vilka distributionsformer som bör tillämpas utan istället tankar kring vilka processer vi vill att studenterna skall ingå i.

Kombinationen av nya studentgrupper och nätbaserat lärande innebär möjligheter till en informerad högskolepedagogik. Om vi menar allvar med breddad rekrytering, inte bara i bemärkelsen att släppa in studenter, bör vi också låta dem genom sitt deltagande bidra till en utveckling och framtida identitet för högre utbildning.
"Hej!

Som jag sa nere i Växjö har ingen i min närmaste familj dvs. mamma, pappa eller äldre bror studerat på högskola eller universitet. Min pappas syskon studerade däremot vidare och så har även mina kusiner gjort.

När erbjudandet kom tvekade jag aldrig på att jag skulle söka. Jag har bara en halvtidstjänst som är fast i botten därför kändes det extra viktigt att få en behörighet till förskoleläraretjänsterna, eftersom Vetlanda kommun har klargjort att de strävar efter att få den kompetens på alla tjänster.

Studierna har gett mig otroligt mycket inte bara för mitt arbete utan jag har vuxit och utvecklats som person i många avseenden. Inte för att jag tycker att jag har haft dåligt själförtroende tidigare men jag vågar än mer tro på mig själv och tycker att jag vågar stå för mina åsikter mer öppet och kan nu driva frågor som jag tycker känns viktiga på ett helt annat sätt. (Genom studierna har jag bevisat FÖR MIG SJÄLV att jag fixar det)

Precis som du uttrycker det Elisabet, genom att vara "bara" barnskötare kommer man ofta i underläge. Nu när jag själv läser har jag fått insikt om vad denna kunskap betyder som var svår för mig att förstå tidigare.”

(Student grupp 1)
1 Introduction and aims

This thesis takes a communicative turn to investigate the combination of “non-traditional” students and web-based education, as students try to make meaning in relation to course context.

A communicative turn is based on the role of communication for education, democratisation and the empowerment of the individual, as developed by John Dewey and his contemporaries.

This study’s What and How

By introducing technology to support learning environments, the means for students’ participation and meaning-making in educational practices have changed. We are also inviting “new groups of students” to participate in these digitalised higher educational practices. Some of these students are defined as “non-traditional” and come to higher education (HE) with more experience of life and work than traditionally younger campus students.

Pragmatists like Dewey took an interest in how previous experience contributes to people’s making of meaning in new situations. How might a new experience like studying change old experience, and could this be traced to learning in HE? Does technology interfere in this process?

The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning-making of “non-traditional” student groups in web-based higher education. The university programme studied qualified as a “widened participation” (WP) activity, and combined new student groups, interaction technology (IT) and new forms of education delivery. The programme was directed towards enhancing preschool staff competence. The students in the programme were women exclusively.

Appearances of meaning-making were analysed from 18 weeks of asynchronous student communication. For this purpose I used mediated discourse analysis. The discussion concerns the implications of the results for higher education course design based on IT-specific considerations in the light of widened participation.
Why

Student group demography in HE has changed as new groups of students have entered the academic world (Högskoleverket, 2008:11R; Johansson, et al., 2005). There is need for enhanced insight into educational scenarios combining all these fairly new ingredients in learning. Does the struggle for meaning under traditionally different circumstances alter students’ learning processes?

New means and modes

Education today, a life-long concept of repeated revisits to learning situations, no longer exclusively refers to classroom or office locations. It increasingly takes place in cyberspace - “in partnership with information technology” (Søby, 1999). These new interactional spaces do not just imply a new context for conventional practice but demand of us that we imagine and articulate new boundaries for our human perceptive system and for participation (Keating, 2005).

The techniques and procedures of physical meetings are natural to us and often un-reflected (Scollon & Scollon Wong, 2004). We have different names for different types of meetings, e.g. “lecture”, “performance”, “questioning”, “negotiation”, “lesson”, “interview”, and “doctors appointment”. These social practices work the best when relating to certain specific demands on structural and cultural protocol. Why is it for example difficult to give a lecture in a waiting room, a therapy session in a canteen or a dance performance outdoors? These forms of meeting use communication modes and mediational means that are well known by the participants. This is not yet the case with web-based communication.

Literacy is another natural and internalised competence. Scollon and Scollon Wong (2004) talk about “collective amnesia”, which seems to have descended upon humans in the sense that we do not view these processes as the use of mediated mnemonic techniques.

The close connection between language and technology indicates that the slightest change in technology changes language and thereby the means by which we create meaning (Olson, 1995; Scollon & Scollon Wong, 2004; Wertsch, 1998; Vygotsky, 1986).

My emphasis on the changed means for meaning-making is based on the relational or intersubjective dimension of meaning (Dewey, 2004/1916; Mead, 1972/1934), what is used to define a situation change, when e.g. visual cues are replaced by other representations, active communication is replacing being present, and positioning to a larger extent is based on actions. So what do we know of the ways in which digital interactional settings affect interaction?
The potential of IT for learning

For some 20 years now IT has been seen as producing profound changes in people’s lives and learning processes. The Internet, for example, has been predicted to allow for decentralisation and promoting networking structures for learning relative to hierarchical structures (Castells, 1996). MIT professors Papert and Negroponte, who were important voices in one of the most expanding areas of IT development, based their arguments on similar grounds - around IT as providing structure and support in a modern society weak on providing the same (Negroponte, 1996; Papert, 1996).

Some of the expectations on the role of IT for educational development are being fulfilled, others remain to be demonstrated. Cuban, for instance (2001), discussed the role of teachers and IT representatives for what he considered the still underused potential of IT for learning. He maintained that IT has not played the significant role it could and should have in teaching practices. Others direct their research towards identifying what different media have to offer specifically for learning and point towards didactical consequences (see Laurillard, 2002, 2006; Søby, 1999).

One of the expectations in the early days of educational technology was that individualising education was going to be much easier with the help of IT. These expectations have now been replaced by a new focus on the interactive and collaborative affordances of technology, which has proved to be more fruitful (see Almqvist, 2005; Koschmann, 1996; Sorensen, 1999; Sorensen, Takle, & Moser, 2006; Stahl, 2002).

Widened participation

A concern for the underrepresentation of students from lower socio-economic groups has led to a range of national and international policies on social inclusion under the concept of WP. In Sweden education has been regarded as a means for social change during the whole post-war period, and WP has been on the agenda since reforms in the late 70’s, albeit under different names (Franke & Nitzler, 2008). Equal access to higher education, regardless of background, ethnicity, place of residence and possible disabilities, has also been proclaimed as Swedish government policy (SOU, 2001/02:15).

The call for broader access to tertiary education was the main conclusion from the OECD report “Education at a glance” (OECD, 2005). As a result, several European countries launched government-funded WP projects\(^1\) in line with the Bologna process and its increasing focus on the social aspects of enrolment. The 2007 version of “Education at a Glance” stresses that European educational systems must deal more

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\(^1\) The Swedish and UK approaches are compared in the SISTER report of 2006: Bridging the Gap (Johanson et al, 2005).
effectively with increasing socio-economic and cultural diversity in their student populations (OECD, 2007).

To widen participation means to break away from conventions and social structures that determine who chooses to study and who does not. This is yet to come. Although more students access HE today, patterns of uneven student representations persist (Adnett & Slack, 2007; Ashwin, 2006; Bridge, 2006; Högskoleverket, 2008:11R; Johansson, et al., 2005).

A broader access to HE is associated with pedagogic change (Johansson, et al., 2005). To move from an elite system to mass education is explained as not merely changing the quantities but also the qualities of students.

The meaning of equity in education is supposed to embrace equity not only in access but also in terms of learning environments and treatments (OECD, 2003). In the communiqué of the Bologna² 2005 Bergen meeting, appropriate conditions for students to complete their studies without being hindered by their social and economic background were especially requested. Participation rates as such are but one aspect of WP (Johansson, et al., 2005). WP is thereby expected to contribute to a diversification of the forms and functions of HE by having a student population that is more representative of our whole society.

Some people warn that massification could become an equity paradox. Student demography is not changing to the same extent at old and high-status institutions. Degrees from relatively new universities are often considered of less value, especially if they are obtained through new, not very well known or trusted distribution forms (Adnett & Slack, 2007; Morley, 2001).

The multifarious programmes and courses on offer within HE are not necessarily regarded as an advantage. Accountability, which is supposed to guarantee quality, is now easily divested. When an instrumentalist view of knowledge governs the standardisation process, quality assurance is likely to be experienced as oppressive rather than creative in terms of pedagogic development (Morley, 2001).

The students in this study have taken a four-year web-based university programme on top of working at a preschool. They juggle part-time studies, partners and children, aging parents and full-time work in notable ways. In the midst of this net of practices they try to make studying rewarding and worthwhile.

These women have now obtained teaching qualifications for preschool class. Completion rates were over 90%. These circumstances make their journey even more remarkable and worth taking a closer look at.

² The Bologna declaration of June 1999, an ambition to create a HE-area of Europe, is a parallel process to the EU governance in Lisbon (2000) of a Europe of Knowledge, both being part of an effort to create a European Research Area (ERA).
And there's me

Some information about my professional interest might help the reader. I have a teachers’ exam for compulsory school (years 1-7). I was lucky to work in very dynamic schools with a high representation of IT and a large variety of cultural representation. This environment inspired me to take a degree in IT pedagogy. I was recruited some 10 years ago to help out with distance education programmes at Växjö University. This led to an EU Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Minerva project, WebMentor³ (2001 – 2005). ODL/Minerva Action was at the forefront of supporting projects trying to understand the educational and pedagogical issues of integrating IT into educational practices (Hodgson, 2001). In this project I worked with developing a theoretical framework for web-based teaching, investigating the changed conditions for learning on line. During this period I also worked as the sole evaluator of two distance education programmes at the University of Dalarna. I transferred directly from WebMentor to doctoral studies.

A prosperous twosome?

Web-based education is singled out, nationally and internationally, as a means of enhancing the intake to higher education (Johansson, et al., 2005). By combining “new groups” and “new technology” the purpose has been to reach more and new groups of students. This has also been the case with the result that “non-traditional students” have become a major student group (Högskoleverket, 2007; Johansson, et al., 2005). The two appointed pedagogic 'boosters', IT and WP, are thus joined together in university programmes identified as open and distance learning policy activities. But what do we actually know about the combination of new groups of students and digitally supported learning environments?

In this particular case we know that a majority of course work has to be carried out separated physically from teachers and peers. We know that tutoring is often synonymous with a study guide. We know that studying is only possible when allowed time from work, which in practice means sneaking away from colleagues already suffering from a heavy workload. We know that students are not considered digitally literate. We know that these students uphold a low-status position on the job, and we can be sure that they are aware of this. Does this knowledge matter to us as teachers and, if so, in what way? If we are serious about using IT to broaden the intake to HE, more research into the specific contexts and conditions that this creates for students’ learning and meaning-making is necessary. There are often speculations about the qualities of web-based education. A discussion based on more knowledge into actual on-line processes is

³ http://www.vxu.se/iped/forskn/projekt/wm/
helpful when making assumptions about different distribution forms. We owe it to these ladies and we will benefit as a discipline.

Aims

The focus of my interest is the relationship between social life and pedagogical practices. Therefore, my overall aim is to study how students’ pursue meaning in a web-based learning situation. Appearances of meaning-making are sought in the relationship between course design, a technologically mediated learning environment, student experience and course content. For this I have chosen data accessible to all teachers in a web-based context, i.e. the digitally stored communication that students produce in an higher education web-based training programme.

On terminology

E-learning usually describes any electronically mediated learning and is strongly associated with words of promises and investments, customised, self-paced and problem-based learning (Zemsky & Massy, 2004). Distance education has its focus on the separation of teacher and student. The way we regard this separation has come to change with the constant introduction of new interaction technologies. But still, distance education does not necessarily have to include technology (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006).

On-line is used for courses delivered entirely over the Internet (ibid). “On-line” also makes false pretensions, indicating that learning actually happens on-line. “On-line” also has a huge number of hits on Google, perhaps indicating the vague definition of the concept.

In this study I deal exclusively with computer-mediated technology on the Internet. Web-based education seems to have the best informational value, as it indicates nothing else than that the Internet is used as a main tool for communication. “Web-based” does not exclude physical meetings (blended forms). But it excludes all classroom-based IT-supported learning scenarios, as the Internet is not being the main tool for communication. My choice of terminology for the field of interest to this thesis will therefore be web-based learning or education, although some of the other expressions will be used when motivated by the context.

IT/ICT?

When information technologies developed and came to include communication technology (and not only the exchange of information), it became important to emphasise the interactional aspect of the technology. IT was exchanged for ICT (Information and Communication Technology). However, the connotation of “I” is changing again. Today’s

I join this initiative and support the paradigm of regarding IT in the light of its communicative and interactional powers by using IT in my wording.

Disposition

In the following second chapter, “A communicative approach to education”, I will sketch the theoretical landscape underlining this study. This means I should have covered the “What this study is all about” as an introduction, and “Why these choices”, based on the theoretical considerations in the next chapter.

The implementation of European policy (Bologna) is high on the agenda of Higher Education in Sweden. Investments in new learning organisations and technology are made at practically all universities as we read. Chapter Three is a short exposé of HE European policy activities, their consequences and their political incitements – the arena constituting the whereabouts of the study.

Now that we know where we are and where we are heading, I need to cover the paths trodden by others, as my “Related research”.

The next move is to draw the “Methodological consequences”, where the communicative approach in combination with digital artefacts leads me to Mediated Discourse Analysis. Methodological consequences are followed by a more thoroughly described research process: “Analysing data”. Results presented as themes of actions are followed by a “Concluding summary. Finally, I return to the field of HE to discuss the findings.

Please also note that the headlines in this thesis are often of an analytical character, summarising the outcome of the reasoning and that I have let the original voices of this study’s leading ladies act as uncommented introductions to all chapters.
"Nej, nu när jag läser igenom vad jag har skrivit ser jag att jag visst dömer föräldrarna på förhand." (Student grupp 2)
2 A communicative approach to education

In this chapter I will sketch out the theoretical landscape of this study by first taking a communicative turn with the help of John Dewey. This communicative turn emphasises the role of experience and meaning-making for learning, democratisation and the empowerment of the individual.

I will start by discussing the discursive character of knowledge, the role of language for what we say we know today, and then further develop the communicative approach. What is important here is to establish a link between meaning and learning in order to secure my pedagogic interest. I will end by introducing two closely linked theories of meaning of relevance to a study in a digital setting, i.e. the broader concept of “text” covered by the concept of “new literacy” and finally the notion of “mediation”, which is of great importance for understanding the complexity of meaning-making.

Theory, in my perception, is a web of intellectual tools, developed, debated and elaborated in order to help us to see other things than the merely expected.

Theories are not meant to be ‘master discourses’ providing the keys to the kingdom. They do not consist of universal and timeless or culture-free objective truths. They are simply assemblages of intellectual tools. In the case of well-developed theories these tools have long been found to work well together, complementing and extending one another in doing the work of some paradigm of inquiry. There is a continuum, and usually a historical continuity in theory development, from bricolage to paradigmatic theory, but the stuff of theory remains merely an assemblage of tools, not truths.

(Lemke, 2005, p.110)

There are traps to avoid and roads not to take when you assemble your intellectual tools, such as theory into the bargain and disciplinary taken-for-granted arguments. One must also consider the risk of non-reflected eclecticism.

Theory is built on an epistemological groundwork and is the result of history and culture. The choice of a theoretical perspective, a supporting framework for research, implies a balancing act. To strive for
independence as a researcher means that you listen in many directions, trying to adopt a critical as well as an open mind. Different theoretical schools point to different important aspects of designing research with credibility.

When you do research on digital practices you cross over traditional academic traditions. There is a delay in the process of developing an adequate theory, as pointed out by Günther Kress (2004). Here he reflects upon a new domain being staked out: the domain of human action as meaning, in the afterword to Discourse in Action

Domains set the boundaries of the field of enquiry, and in that field those who do the work develop the means and tools they need for their task. The tools that are available at any moment are always those that come from domains differently defined, tools made to do different kinds of jobs, the tools of the past. So if at times there is a lack of fit of (old) tool to (new) task then that is how it is bound to be: the old has to furnish the means for dealing with the new. Theories are not invented in a void; theories are responses by those who face specific problems to the need to deal with the problem. (Kress, 2004, p.208)

My research question is founded on the view that communication is social action. Action here refers to intentional operations of some kind. Meaning is constituted in, and is at the same time constituting, the relationships between humans, or what is referred to as “intersubjectivity”. This thesis will hence involve theories of communication as education, computer-mediated communication, theories of speech as the bearer of structures and power, and theories of meaning-making.

A serious play with words

On the discursive character of knowledge

In the days following the 9/11 disaster in 2001 Ruth Sergel, a picture editor who sorted and scanned photos of the twin-tower disaster that people brought to her, began to question the medium she worked with. She realised that it was the voices, the stories of people that were lost to the world because of the rate at which these voices were taken over by media narratives. A construction of male heroes and helpless females, the naming of “Ground Zero” and the careful discursive constructions of “wartime”, a “nesting nation” and “women as victims” followed and came to frame the stories of what people actually saw and experienced during and after the attack (Faludi, 2007).

When speech acts are repeated under similar conditions, expressions reappear and become “loaded” with meaning, as in the 9/11 example.
This is an illustration of how knowledgeable accounts of the world come to be essentially discursive, coloured by and colouring the interaction where they occur. Being rooted in material contexts and social networks, discourse generates subject positions, social relations and opportunities for and obstacles to change (Ball, 2007). Society does not only exist through communication but exists in communication.

When people communicate, similar emotional and intellectual dispositions are confirmed, e.g. how to respond to demands and expectations from the environment. Responses found normative structures of language, which members of social groups orient towards (Dewey, 2004/1916). Communication is therefore not the result of a single mind. Gergen (1994) replaces the "cogito" in the dictum of Descartes with “communicamus”. His shift in focus from "thinking" to "communicating" and from the first person singular to the first person plural summarises the concerns of scholars of various labels and prefixes who take an interest in the role of the social for knowledge and meaning. Regarding knowledge as constituted in language (including action) is to transform the question of scientific foundation from the philosophic sphere to the social.

From a linguistic to a communicative turn

For some twenty years educational science has been strongly influenced by the “linguistic turn”, which offers pedagogy theories of the constituent role of language, theories on how we have come to perceive the world around us (Fritzell, 2008; von Wright, 2007). A “communicative turn” has complemented the theoretical picture by contributing insights into the making of meaning. The communicative turn rests on an assumption of the potential of communication as socially integrative and exercising democratic power (Englund, 2000, 2007; Fritzell, 2008).

In distinguishing between the linguistic and the communicative turns, the first emphasises the role of language as a co-creator of reality, whereas the communicative turn emphasises the same constitutive character for both meaning and social interaction (von Wright, 2007). The communicative turn takes the consequences of the linguistic turn, the new route, into educational practices, so to speak.

On the concept of meaning

Research on the making of meaning in the field of education has in recent years expanded previously mainly constructivist approaches by making the individual and its social and cultural settings the focus of interest.

My purpose with this section is threefold; 1) to establish a link between meaning-making and learning, with meaning-making being the concept in focus here, 2) to explore the character of meaning-making processes, and 3) to propose how meaning can be approached empirically.
Beyond dichotomies – a start in practice

Human practice constitutes a base for understanding the nature of knowledge and reality for both a pragmatist and cultural historical approach (Miettinen, 2006). Dewey is clear when relating the ontology of knowledge to practice. Only by involving in practical interaction with the world is it possible to gain knowledge about it (Dewey, 2004/1916). Thinking and reflection are the constitutive means by which we change in and with the world around us when we are engaged in practice (Dewey, 1971).

Practice is chosen for its possibilities to go beyond the dualisms of subject – object, or theory – practice, and related theoretical problems. The concept of practice dismisses the idea of subject and object as separated entities. Instead they are regarded as interactively transformed in practical activity.

From the concept of practice follows the importance of action as language in use. For linguists like Fairclough (2004), practice is an analytic concept for the social organisation and control of linguistic events. It is as social practices that certain structural possibilities occur, the inclusion and exclusion of others and the upholding of these selections over time in particular areas of social life. The ontology of the social consists of the abstract social as structures and the concrete social as events. Structures should be regarded as a set of possibilities, but what then actually occurs as social events is the result of a mediated organisational process between structures and events that he calls social practices (ibid).

Meaning through experience

The work of John Dewey can be summarised as shifting the interest from inner mental processes to relations between the individual and society and how this affects education. He stressed the experience of the individual as a basis for development in an ever-changing society (Dewey, 1936, 1971, 2004/1916). The value we ascribe to a social institution of any kind should, according to Dewey, be connected to its possibilities to develop and change people’s experience. He was concerned about the decreasing interest in intellectual and emotional reaction to inter-human activities. He also feared the fragmentation and alienation of people from working processes, which he thought was significant for his time. This alienation would make it difficult for new generations to develop and share a common life with others. He therefore took a special interest in investigating how society engaged in forming the powers that will secure this democratic right to share the life of others (Dewey, 2004/1916).

Dewey saw that isolating subject matters from life experience could not be avoided when educating a growing population. He thought it inevitable, though, that literacy to some extent had to replace lived
experience. He believed that knowledge, as absorbed in the formation of human character through social interaction, is threatened by the institutionalisation of learning. But the experience of others is possible to share and make common through communication, and will thereby affect the dispositions of others in a relationship between experience and thinking. Meaning, he argued, is constituted in the process of communicating experience and thought, which makes communication a constitutive for pedagogy.

Dewey hardly used the word “learning” when building his communicative theory of education. A recent intensified interest in the concept of learning might be related to efforts to draw attention to the more active role of students, represented in socio-cultural and constructional strands of theory (Biesta, 2007b). This construction of the learner as an active agent is important for making a stand against more deterministic and neo-liberal influences on education that view learners as more passive recipients (see following chapter).

Dewey located the concept of meaning in the everyday actions people take, and the responses actions generate from the environment (2004/1916). We recognise the standpoint that we learn to express ourselves through the anticipated value of our contribution from another pragmatist in collaboration with Dewey, namely Mead (1972/1934). To Mead meaning is established not in gestures alone but in the whole social act. Meaning arises in the interaction between actors when they respond to each other and is to be understood as moments in one act.

Dewey used the concepts of “meaning”, “experience” and “education” as key concepts. The concept of learning implies a development in relation to something specifically expected. This relation to “something” is only studied as change here, not from its expected and intentional perspectives (specific course objectives). When meaning is created according to Dewey, students’ disposition to use, understand and confront a content/phenomenon changes.

Dewey has also inspired Englund (2000, 2007), who argues for education and a pluralistic world in terms of fundamental values, and there sees deliberative communication as constitutive for lived democracy. He also stresses participation in these communicative practices as becoming a key to democracy.

Englund (2007) describes two sides of knowledge building: knowledge and moral judgement, and proposes these as qualities for learning, together with democratic values. By stressing the moral side of learning processes and the production of knowledge, the development of critical and evaluating competences are gaining focus. Englund also talks of a "room of morals furnished" with human relations, the habit and motivation to communicate, the respect for others and the mutual evaluation of what is being said when involved in communication. He also stresses a variation of meeting with and confronting different situations, values and experiences for both teachers and students, which is possible to realise through multivocality.
Meaning and new modes

Social, economic and technological changes have brought about major changes in the landscape of communication and in the actual way how we write and make meaning from text (Kress, 2003). New patterns of communication and new social practices emerge in line with a diminishing distance in time and space (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). These changes have resulted in new theory building, involving relations between what a culture makes available as a means for making meaning and how a culture produces these messages in different representational modes (Kress, 2003). To make this clearer, we can start with the medium of the book, representing the mode of writing. The mode of writing is now more often competing with new constellations for representation. Examples of representational means apart from writing can be speaking (note the increased market for audio books), images, gestures, esthetical representations and even refraining from communication. The means for distributing meaning involves forms of writing (e.g. books, magazines and newspapers, e-mail, sms, web pages), mobile phones, TV, video, film, chat etc.

Many means involve reading on some kind of screen. The consequences of reading and writing becoming more display-oriented means that it is necessary to closely regard the logics of the communication we are dealing with. When text goes into visual modes on the screen, its logics and the concept of layout change the way we structure the text (Kress, 2003).

The dissemination of writing has for long been dominated by the medium of the book and the page. The logic of writing has thus been shaped by the affordances of the book, with consequences for our notion of knowledge as well as for the distribution of ideas and power. Writing on paper/pages is dominated by the logics of sequencing and linearity, emanating from the logics of speech and its temporality.

Image, on the other hand, is directed by the spatial relations of elements (Kress, 2003). The sentence “I live in Kalmar” offers focus and meaning due to the position of words in a sequence. The sentence might to some who know me and the old city and its location by the sea provide just about the same information as a photo of me in the city. But to those who do not know Kalmar, or me, the photo could provide a whole range of other information about the city, its character, its location, appearance, clues about my age and ideas of how I want to be perceived in relation to this information. This is the logic of the image that dominates the screen. This is image as spatial and instantaneous. To make it easier we could say that we should give more attention to the “materiality” of the resource, as artists do in choosing the material for their particular needs in trying to establish a relation to the beholder of their art. The resources of speech and writing are distinct but at the same time affected by the cultural and social meaning that inherits the resources used. To different values are attributed different modes for meaning and distribution.
Writing on the screen is already and will continue to be reshaped by the logic of the screen (Kress, 2003). So will we. The insight into offers of means for communication will steer peoples’ thoughts in choosing and interpreting towards the distinct purposes, affordances and shortcomings of the mode. But no mode carries the full meaning. That is the most important insight deriving from the theory of Gunther Kress for this analysis, that a shift to the mode of screen for writing means that writing is no longer a carrier of all meaning (if it ever was...). “Writing now plays one part in communicational ensembles, and no longer the part” (Kress, 2003, p.21).

Understanding mediation

There are different aspects of what carries meaning in interactional settings that might influence students’ communication. What is important to consider here, apart from human action and mediation, is the expansion of “text” according to theories of new literacies (see Kress, 2003). I will start by accounting for “mediation”.

Theories of learning and meaning-making share some important and underlying standpoints (Miettinen, 2006; Popkewitz, 1998). They start in the common understanding that thinking and reflection are the means by which we change in and with the world. Both also regard thought and its material means as channels for the orientation and coordination of actions of the individual in these interactions.

For both Dewey and Vygotsky, thought and its material means orient our bodies in its environment and also coordinate our actions in shared undertakings (Miettinen, 2006). Mediational means also has a transformative side, changing possibilities and ways of thinking (Olson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1986). It is not as if cultural tools, in and of themselves, operate as independent casual factors. They can however have a potent effect on the dynamics of human action (Wertsch, 1998).

Dewey used the concept of “mediation” together with “reconstruction” in characterising the functions of thought in action (Miettinen, 2006).

Vygotsky (1978) developed the concept of mediation to explain the relation between thought and action when changing in and with the world. We humans do not act in an immediate way upon the world; cultural tools mediate our actions. The constitutive character of mediation was in focus for Vygotsky’s empirical studies. By studying how different influences or non-influences transformed action, he could point to the fact that the isolation of neither individual nor mediational means could provide adequate foundation for actions carried out...
(Vygotsky, 1978). Since these cultural tools are the means by which we interact in the world, acquiring tools and communication models are vital parts of human development (see also Säljö, 2000, 2005).

By mediation we can address the human integration of material and cognitive resources. The forms of action we undertake are limited or constrained by mediational means (Wertsch, 1998). Mediational means constitute those by which students engage in meaning-making processes on line, e.g. IT, the technologies of reading and writing, mental structures and mnemonic techniques. The mere fact that all forms of communication and perception are mediated entails that the psychological and physical tools involved alter the entire flow and structure of mental functioning. Forms of writing are alterations of cognition and consciousness, see for example (Olson, 1995). This contrasts against the view that the inclusion of mediational means simply facilitates action, adding no qualitative change. It is important to stress that the indication of a link between individual or group actions and cultural, historical and institutional settings and agency, does not focus on the underlying assumptions of a deterministic or causing relationship of mediation (Wertsch, Rio, & Alvarez, 1995).

The central aspects of mediated action can be summarised as follows:

- being irreducible to either agent or means
- shaping but not determinating,
- transformatory, determinating a new instrumental act,
- empowering and constraining influence
- often emerging as spin-offs
- associated with power and authority (Wertsch, 1998; Wertsch, et al., 1995)

**Communication as education**

If meaning is established in communication, our notion of communication will reflect our views on education and the organisation of educational scenarios. From Dewey’s perspective, communication is a process influencing all participants. The difference between the means by which society has continued to exist and develop outside institutions and the means which are used with formal education becomes the intentional aim to expand the repertoire of experiences as a foundation for the meaning-making and learning of the individual (Dewey, 2004/1916). To me there is a significant standpoint in Deweys’ notion of communication, maybe due to his close cooperation with Mead. Dewey’s idea of education is that of being neither individual development, nor adjusting to an existing societal order. He stressed that the participators in communication respond to statements from “the other” as possible interpretations from the other’s experience, instead of an egocentric standpoint. What Dewey strove for, by constantly pointing to the balance
of the “formal” and the “informal” as a key question for the philosophy of education, are the differences in how skills are acquired. Intellectually, they are acquired without social dispositions being involved. Acquiring something through social interaction means having something absorbed in one’s disposition and the formation of one’s character (Dewey, 2004/1916). This actualises the double nature of learning: form and content, including the possibilities of using forms for education that have a fostering potential.

Didactical implications of Deweys’ theoretical perspective emerge from the necessity to participate and what it means to be able to share experiences and form a common ground.

How could meaning then be studied? One explicit consequence of Deweys’ reasoning is of course the study of 1) action and 2) context\(^5\), where generated responses are accounted for. These responses result in “alterations to the conditions of growth” (Dewey, 2004/1916, p. 10). In other words; when dispositions to use, understand and confront a content or phenomenon, a link is created between different situations in the meaning-making of the same individual. Meaning can be sought in the characteristic use of something that the individual applies.

Dewey and Mead changed the way many people regard communication from being not only a carrier of thoughts and ideas. Dewey’s approach has directed me to investigate processes of meaning-making in action in relation to events and observable changes or continuation occurring there.

To argue for education as communication implies an evaluation of the forms of communication and thereby the means for the fostering of democratic values. This reasoning by Dewey introduces a notion of knowledge as communicative meaning-making whereby the focus is shifted away from terms like “teaching” and “learning”. I find that Deweys’ notion of communication and its relation to meaning-making and education captures key issues when combining “new groups” of students and “new technology” for communicating.

### Making choices

I will end this chapter by addressing the question of validity in terms of the relationship between what “I think” and what “I do” in this study. I will start with what I believe I do as theoretically and personally related assumptions. The question of how it turned out is found in the chapter “Methodological considerations”.

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\(^5\) In terms of context, Dewey used “environment” and “medium” to cover more than surroundings. By surroundings he means the conditions that promote, hinder, stimulate or inhibit the activities of the individual. “The things with which a man varies are his genuine environment” Dewey, John (2004/1916) Democracy and Education, Mineola, Dover Publications.
Interfering I

Bourdieu (2004) seeks to dissolve the dualism of theory and practice, by pointing out the role of the theorists’ relation to the social world. The theorist is historically and culturally expected to have an ‘objective’ relation to the social world. However, theorists experience the world through the representations they themselves have constructed to account for it. In other words, how we come to understand the world is based on our lives’ stories. This goes for researchers as well.

An obvious consequence of the shift from subject theory to intersubjective theory is that the social collective becomes the material for communication. No individual on its own is the source of a discourse; it is indeed an interrelated process resulting in communicative patterns (Gergen, 1994). It also changes the notion of the agent as an autonomous agent free of external influences. Meaning must be sought for in action, not as underlying motifs (Lund & Sundberg, 2004).

The impossibility of speaking with someone else’s voice and the focus on “how” action is taken rather than “why” also redirect the focus away from the individual in favour of an interactional “investigation of meaning as something that is negotiated by at least two interactants, rather than controlled by speakers” (Keating & Egbert, 2004, p. 183).

My choice of “action” as the unit of analysis is therefore an attempt to overcome some of the “grand questions” of theories of science, the dualisms of individual/society and theory/practice addressed by Dewey’s pragmatism.

Taking my place within a communicative approach to meaning-making affects my own meaning-making in relation to this study’s design and interpretations. Both research planning and the actual work with results obtain the imprint of my assumptions on an epistemological level.

Another consequence of the chosen theoretical framework is the view that abstractions are to be avoided as objects of analysis. The replacing of reality with a model or a "perception of reality" means that there is a risk of seeing something, which is not there (Bourdieu, 2004). There is also a sometimes debated risk involved in describing the world as discourses. To start within discourses or structures, is in a way to start with abstractions. Starting with abstractions could mean that there will be problems in disregarding what is preset or desirable and thereby mistaking it for what has been discovered in the process (Smith, 2002).

The point of departure for this study therefore is to try to be faithful to the first principle of Mediated Discourse Analysis (the methodological approach used), i.e. “the principle of social action”:

Discourse is best conceived as a matter of social actions, not systems of representations or thoughts or values” (Scollon, 2001, p.6).


(Student grupp 3)
3 A Structural Approach to Higher Education

Regardless whether our starting point is people’s communicative actions or written visions in pedagogical research, it is important to make visible the relation between educational practice itself and larger institutional, social and historical factors of which educational practice is a part.

In this chapter I will therefore expand and deepen the higher educational context governed by European policy. I will address some changes of governing principles, since the field of education is the subject of neo-liberal influences. I will also address how these influences might have had a bearing on the alleged crisis in Higher Education (HE). This is followed by some short reflections on the implementation of the Widened Participation (WP) policy. I will hopefully be adding some possible “whys” to the picture in an attempt to uncover structures playing the fields of HE in Europe today.

Structures beyond language

Public education is under siege from globalising forces. Relationships among capital, markets and new technology influence a global “restructuring” of the field of HE. In this chapter I will try to account for some of these relationships.

First let us bear in mind the systematic reproductive powers working within the academy, which make it problematic to regard the academy as equal, non-prejudiced and multi-faceted (Morley, 2003). Although positively taking up space, the contemporary debate of educational policy takes place on unequal terms. An increasingly “limited range of ideological and discursive resources” dominate the forms and concepts of the debate (Apple, 2005, p.209).

A new managerialism

In contemporary (western) societies of today “management” has become a buzzword. As an expression of a neo-liberal value system all the resources necessary to solve social, economic and political problems in an ever-growing pluralistic society are ascribed to management (Beach, 2005).

has come to our supposed ‘rescue’ For the educational field, although differentiated in Europe, tendencies are strong, which allows us to talk about global and international processes (Apple, 2005; Welch, 1998). The changed roles and relations between the state and its citizens, which are associated with NPM, are not restricted to health care and education, but form part of the transformation of several aspects of the public sector in Europe (Beach, 2005). Tendencies are present in national contexts at all levels, regardless of the maturity of welfare (Beach, 2008).

A well-spread misconception regarding the powers and forces of a free liberal market seems to be basically that which is carrying and constructing the wave of neo-liberal values in Europe today (Beach, 2005). The NPM discourse both legitimises and supplies means for the restructuring of what used to be associated with a welfare society, using what Ball (1998) describes as “two starkly opposed ‘chronotopics’” to gain policy legitimisation (c.f. Beach & Carlson, 2004). To neo-liberal ideas are ascribed properties that contrast and compensate for the negative attributes of the failing welfare system, e.g. inefficiency, the lack of appointed responsibilities and non-innovation (Ball, 1998, 2007; Beach & Carlson, 2004). This contrast contributes to the re-articulation of the state. Concepts of professionalism, freedom and autonomy are used to “displace discourses highlighting the negative impact of commercialisation and managerial modes of regulation on the nature of education supply and labour in Europe’s schools” (Beach, 2008, p. 197).

A great deal of rhetorical effort and discursive work is (sic) expended on ensuring that the public sector is portrayed as ineffective, unresponsive, sloppy, risk-averse and innovation-resistant except when it is not). (Ball, 2007, p. 3)

The powers of a liberal market are disseminated as providing the answer to a natural crisis in the public welfare system. According to some research, there is actually an inverse relationship between private intervention in public service and quality, meaning that a negative association of private actors in public welfare is documented (Apple, 2005; Beach, 2005). Neo-liberal values could in fact be major culprits in this development, making the crisis cultural, economic and political (Ball, 2007).

A loss of values
What is constitutive of a prevailing discourse of education in society in power of generating opportunities within policies, is often generated from what is not included and maybe unspeakable (Ball, 2007). A neo-liberal form of rationality is characterised as lacking and opposing notions of humanism and democracy in welfare services, by objectifying public wealth and converting it into private forms. Market solutions have been applied to public service under the name of “efficiency”, at a
considerable cost in terms of equity and a narrowed curriculum (Welch, 1998). Here is an example from the field of web-based education.

…the most important trend in online education today is the transition from small-scale experimental courses to large-scale, mainstream operation. I like to call this the online education mega trend….Our challenge is therefore to find effective ways to organize large-scale online education. And this is a huge challenge for educational institutions. We are facing a period of important organizational development and change. So far, too little focus has been given to this issue. Another consequence of large-scale online education is that we need to focus on cost effectiveness…”

(Poulсен, 2003, p. 255)

New ways of interpreting “efficiency” have been imposed on HE on the basis of the idea that both individual and educational worth can be translated into economic terms. When economic rationality thinking is applied on education, individuals invest only in education when pay-off is expected in comparison with other options. From this reasoning follows that the beneficiaries of education, i.e. the individuals, should also carry the cost. Public investments in education are decreasing, and the emphasis is lifted from equity issues. Service to a whole community is moving down on the agenda and the role of the community for education is disempowered (Welch, 1998).

One strategy to implement change in public education is to provide a sense of giving the public what they ask for. This could be done by changing the meaning of social needs (Apple, 2005). The call for “more democracy” and responsiveness related to the state is by privileged groups met by discursively changing what is regarded as democracy. “Freedom of choice” in an educational market has become one way of redefining democracy in a conservative direction (ibid).

The influence of neo-liberal values has also had an impact on personal morals and constructions of professionalism within organisations representing welfare. When public service is transformed into companies with the need to compete with their goods, the notion of responsibilities and collective values are downgraded (Beach, 2005).

Access to knowledge

The admission system holds the key to who will have access to HE, affecting private life as well as society and making access to HE an issue of democracy and equity in terms of gender, age, class and ethnicity.

Class, gender and cultural origin still play major roles in defining, constructing and conditioning education and learning. Different life conditions create different learning conditions. Gender differences undergo transformation and are at the same time greatly influenced by society through educational policies (Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003). In
terms of gender, the way it is practised within HE today has a post-feminist character. It is not uncommon to hear the opinion that fights have been fought and positions moved forward and at least the prerequisites for equity implemented (Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003; Morley, 2006). Structures of power are instead connected to discourses of actors and individualism.

“Widened participation” “flexible and open learning” certainly have all the right codes and values embedded (e.g. democracy, empowerment, pedagogical development and participation), but it is also important to consider the overshadowing influence on social science of postmodernism as a discourse of power, attempting to come to terms with the voices of others” (Hartsock, 1996, p. 258).

**What knowledge?**

The existence of neo-liberal influences has challenged the state, represented by its educational apparatus, as the proprietor of knowledge. Accepting other financiers of knowledge than the state has resulted in new knowledge producers, a variety of actors in education emerging from non-university locations such as laboratories, research centres and think tanks. “Knowledge” in other words, is no longer a meta-narrative but the context of application (Delanty, 2001). Knowledge has become a product to enable national competitiveness.

The commodifying of knowledge fosters productivity and a culture of entrepreneurship. It is also closely related to performativity. Knowledge as “goods” is to be produced by individuals or organisations. In these processes poor performance is supposed to be avoided by systems of measurement and documentation (Ball, 2007).

In literature on the assessment of knowledge, two different discourses have come to oppose each other (Gerrevall, 2008). On the one hand, we find the “assessment for learning” and on the other, the “assessment of learning”. The latter has a more system-oriented approach, but both discourses represent an individual as well as a system perspective. It is an important task for educational practice to maintain a balance between these two perspectives. By emphasising individual aspects too strongly, education risks becoming too independent in relation to the regulative sides of the system. Too much emphasis on administrative aspects, on the other hand, risks eradicating individual rights (Gerrevall, 2008).

The field of education has in recent years developed alternative theories of the role of the State for education, suggesting that the State is in no way abdicating (Hudson, 2007). These new theories make visible the new ways in which the state changes governing. The shift in focus of intervention from the State, from regulating input into education to controlling the outputs, is regarded as one way of regaining some of its ability to control. Questions still remain, though. What idea of knowledge is sought and valued and as such disseminated, and under what influences does the construction of these knowledge objects take place?
Widened Participation as policy

Has the massive expansion of HE graduation rates in recent years had an impact on the labour market? Although numbers of HE enrolments increase generally, there is variation among European countries. Large numbers of enrolments in tertiary education are associated with policy-driven expansion in certain countries. An analysis from 2007 indicates a continued positive impact for individuals and no sign of “inflation” with regard to the value of academic qualification (OECD, 2007).

In Sweden almost half of the students are now older than 25. The representation of women has steadily increased at all levels except the post-graduate level (Franke & Nitzler, 2008). The new Swedish government bill of 2004, “New world - new university” (SOU, 2004/05:162) was aimed at making Sweden a more attractive country to study in. It also tried to come to terms with non-flexible admission rules in order to reduce the social bias in recruitment. Quality replaced the old quantitative goals of participation rates of 50%.

Responsible for Swedish WP activities has been the Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education. Its major task has been the combination of:

* Widened Participation
* Pedagogical development of HE
* Enhancement of ICT- (Information and Communication Technology) supported distance education courses and programmes, and the
* Bologna adjustments

The agency incorporating the former Council for Higher Education and The Swedish NetUniversity, has now been discontinued due to the government shift in Sweden.

What’s widened?

There are various impediments between policy and its realisation. The structures and the language any policies creates for its own legitimisation, were highlighted some decades ago by Basil Bernstein, professor of sociology and linguistics. He was puzzled by the fact that working class pupils could not keep up with middle class peers in language-based subjects although being equals in maths. His work came to establish a link between political economy, family, social identity, i.e. class, schooling and language. Bernstein’s theories identify the effect of language on social reproduction and social mobility, with social and educational codes playing an important role (Sadovnik, 2001).

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6 Ireland and Spain, whereas Germany is largely unchanged with its low comparative figures
7 50% of each age cohort
8 NSHU in Swedish.
By talking about class differences, his work also drew criticism as producing deficit theories. However, Bernstein’s work on persistent patterns and differential achievements of middle class and working class pupils sprung out of an interest in the intrinsic mechanisms of shaping and constituting what today could be transferred to the question of non-participation of some groups in higher levels of the education system. His results were important in showing the significance of discourse in relation to cognitive resources in children, i.e. that achievements had a social basis, based on the contextual character of language (see Bernstein, 1990). His work indicated a change of focus from searching for the generating principles in language to regulating structures. Bernstein’s code theory bestows links between micro and macro discourses through the participants’ orientations, in showing the sensibility of codes and contexts that are still visible.

A broadening of intake into HE is now a worldwide phenomenon (Morley, 2003). WP is still an illusion. Despite continuing policy initiatives, there is still an under-representation of students from a low socio-economic background (Ashwin, 2006; Bridge, 2006; Johansson, et al., 2005). In today’s modern post-welfare societies, although new forms of class relations have appeared, the middle-class still does better. Challenges from a system influenced by neo-liberal ideas introduce demands which the middle-class is better prepared to meet (Ball, 2003).

The numbers of students enrolled in tertiary education in Sweden and Europe as a whole have increased substantially (Ashwin, 2006; Johansson, et al., 2005). Sweden has doubled its numbers (+107%) since the beginning of the 1990s9 (Johansson, et al., 2005). In a UK context the gap between students from different socio-economic groups has only become wider since the 70’s, despite measures taken in the name of participation and equity. The 90’s were no exception (Adnett & Slack, 2007; Ball, 2003). Research suggests that class differences in participation reflect inequalities earlier on in the education system10. If rich and poor are mixing, HE is not the place where they’re doing it.

Despite slightly different national circumstances within Europe, WP involves a more complex rationale-like agency (voice and the opportunity to speak), power, class, ethnicity, gender and the notion of knowledge. In a study by Adnett and Slack (2007) it is suggested that barriers in participation in HE in the UK could be related to barriers created by the labour market. For this line of argumentation they rely on a new line of WP research, which expands the concept of lifetime economic reward for students into more comparative studies. These studies still show a high rate of returns to graduation. The students still struggle with “risk aversion, information asymmetries, low aspirations, cultural and social capital constraints” (Adnett & Slack, 2007,p. 25) – all being barriers that are necessary to lower through policy activities. The Adnett and Slack

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9 Including both late starters at HE and people in need of future training
10 Like the introduction of tuition fees in Britain in 1998
study also discusses that certain groups of entrants may systematically benefit less economically, and thereby obtain weaker economic incentives to enter HE (c.f. Brennan & Shah, 2003; Morley, 2001). Research will hopefully benefit from such new lines of reasoning and complement the theory of “overeducation”, an inflation of too many graduates on the labour market, creating an opposition to WP.

Studies of the follow-through of HE institutions show a dominance of economic incentives for carrying out WP activities (Adnett & Slack, 2007; Greenbank, 2006). Attempts to widen participation have come to follow the nature of demands of admission to HE. When there are low numbers of applicants, HE institutions adopt a more favourable attitude to recruiting students from less participating socio-economic groups. In line with Morley’s argument, working class students are more likely to go to less prestigious institutions and enrol on lower status courses, and this makes students from a lower socio-economic background less attractive on the labour market. The stratified system of HE as such reproduces inequalities (Greenbank, 2006)11.

The future of Higher Education

If education means participation in communicative practice, this implies great changes for education. However, the shift away from learning as a social concern to learning as private good, an individualistic engagement for collective empowerment (Hartsock, 1996; Morley, 2006) poses challenges to a potential change.

Until now principles for the organisation of education have been nested in an epistemology of enlightening the individual mind. Methodology, architecture and years of teacher training bear witness to a project of reconstructing socially acknowledged contents in the individual.

As the link between the national state and universities has weakened, the ties to the market have been strengthened instead. The role, which universities have played for citizenship, is thereby threatened. The dissemination of knowledge, one of the core activities of the university, is replaced with the marketisation of knowledge. Demands for more “professional” approaches to HE have resulted in a wave of literature on successful stories, learning-styles and efficient teaching. These text products related to learning are often constructed as socially decontextualised and regulated by cognitive processes (Morley, 2006). Other forces within universities descend into relativism in response to a society characterised by a high level of complexity and abstractness (Delanty, 2001). Delanty’s third way out, beyond instrumentalism and relativism, creates “communicative structures capable of matching the needs of people for cultural interpretation in order to make choices on the

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11 This is now a possible scenario in Sweden, too, as a ranking of Swedish Universities has been introduced and become the subject of media attention, Högskoleverket 2008:40R.
many options that exist for social action” (ibid. p.150). He proposes accepting contemporary cultural politics and instead exploring the ways in which discussions about them can provoke and reinstate the moral purposes of universities (Delanty, 2001).

Bauman (Bauman, 2001, 2007) is also standing at the crossroads between burning the bridges and retreating into fortresses of “esoteric language”, or uncritically confessing to economic thinking, using market parameters for HE. His proposed third way out for an institution in crisis is based on the process of learning. He argues that there are aspects of the different characters of learning that are problematic when framed by a society in constant flux. Features of post-modern society have deprived people of the points of orientation that used to make the world look stable, possible to relate to and plan for. When patterns keep dissolving and frames are removed without a warning, aspects of learning based on questioning and breaking away from the same stand out as quite schizophrenic. The rules of the game are changing as we play and “the life success (and so the ‘rationality’) of postmodern men and women depends on the speed with which they manage to get rid of old habits, rather than on the quick acquisition of new ones.” (Bauman, 2001, p.125).

Bauman pinpoints the source of the problem as not being the mistakes of professional pedagogues but the universal melting of identities, “with the deregulation and privatization of the identity-formation processes, the dispersal of authorities, the polyphony of value messages and the ensuing fragmentariness of life” (Bauman, 2001, p.127). The one big game of modernity is divided into many “poorly coordinated” games. This line of reasoning is recognisable from the governance literature, which claims that a highly fragmented society has no use for linear bureaucratic political steering.

Bauman proposes that if the intake of universities has not yet fallen sharply, it is to a large extent due to their unanticipated and unbargained-for role as a temporary shelter in a society afflicted by structural unemployment, a device allowing the newcomers to postpone for a few years the moment of truth that will arrive when the harsh realities of the labour market need to be faced.

To further consider

The imperative of a “Europe of knowledge” and WP means that universities are facing profound changes due to the increased demand for higher education. This is not only a matter of access but of, for instance, diversity in university programmes, mobility, flexible distribution forms, counselling strategies and the didactic questioning of traditional thinking.

The influence of dominating discourses for the didactics of higher education is important to consider, since it risks excluding some perspectives, such as approaches and experiences not regarded as
contributing to the meaning-making of men and women participating in academic educational practices.

The concept of knowledge and democracy is under similar threat. Academic values and traditions are in conflict with a broader intake to higher education. Dominating discourses gamble with diversity from a recruiting, empowering and equity perspective. This affects the legitimacy of courses and programmes and of the teachers working in those, often web-based, fields (Johansson, et al., 2005; Morley, 2001). Corrective and redemptive discourses follow the normative construction of the student embedded in the terminology of WP (Morley, 2001). Women, ethnic minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds constitute the group of “non-traditional” students positioning them as “others”.

"Hej!
I nästa läroplan kanske ett barns perspektiv också skulle finnas med där delaktighet och inflytande är en förutsättning. Mvh Nina”
(Student grupp 4)
4 Related research

In this chapter I present previous research of interest to this study. Choices are made from what I consider would contribute to a sound base for understanding web-based communicative practices within the theoretical frames of a communicative turn.

A new field of practice

The era of mass communication and interaction has been made possible by technological development and the significant increase of access to means of communication. Power is attached to means of communication and its organisation. But power structures associated to communication and media are challenged nowadays, as technology has become available for larger groups of people (Kress, 2003).

Higher Education has come to turn to the Internet as a possible source of expansion in both the range and provision of courses. Commercial companies have for some time now been looking at the traditional markets of universities, suggesting that their methods may provide cost-effective alternatives to traditional education. But neither the academy nor commercial companies have found it easy to grasp the task of using the Internet as a cost-efficient and qualitative means of learning.

Efforts to use corporate models of marketing in education show signs associated with the era of industrialisation (Peters, 1993). An industrial approach to IT-supported education is often governed by principles of “production of goods” such as rationalisation, division of labour, fragmentation, mechanisation and automation. These key concepts become constitutive for phenomena like distance education, e-learning, on-line learning, web-based learning and sometimes even computer-mediated communication.

However, current approaches to adult learning that have come to emphasise the social nature of learning have also affected research on IT-supported learning, and we see a growing body of research aimed at exploring social and affective features of learning situations (Jones & Issroff, 2005), which adds a welcome complexity in terms of the role of social interaction for learning on line.
Technology vs. culture
The organisation and implementation of IT-supported education in the academy has been highly influenced by the notion of technology and culture as separate entities. Technology is often described as estranging and dehumanising, as opposed to artefacts that are more considered as representatives of our cultural heritage, e.g. books, classrooms and curricula (Søby, 1999).

Until now education’s reaction to cyberspace has either been technofobic: ‘defend our cultural heritage’; or technophilic: i.e. a traditionally instrumentalist perspective espoused by politicians and engineers who hold that ICT is a neutral tool and should be used as a means of efficiently transferring knowledge. (Søby, 1999, p. 77).

There is still a tendency to think and talk about web-based learning in an industrial way worldwide, with large-scale entities processing and disseminating knowledge through a somewhat ‘uniform’ platform and methodology. By directing my stage lights at the role of mediated action, hopefully more complex considerations could come into focus.

Old & experienced?
There has been a shift of focus in higher and adult education throughout the twentieth century towards a more vocational orientation and a growing number of courses and programmes undertaken with the support of IT (Jarvis, 2001). Traditionally, non-academic students have been target groups in attempts to enhance the number of distance education courses (Bridge, 2006). “Non-traditional” students are often defined as those who start their HE studies at the age of 25 at the earliest or have made a longer break in their studies or study part time (Westerberg & Måråld, 2006).

WP has had on its agenda to increase the number of students in higher education but also to broaden the range of educational backgrounds. WP is closely related to the concept of life-long learning, implying that education is a non-finite process in people’s lives. A more diverse group of students will return/be expected to return to an institutionalised process of learning throughout their lives, which expands the questions of who studies, when and why. Teachers in HE, in addition to being faced by students lacking prerequisite knowledge, are also facing well experienced students who have already developed a high degree of intellectual and moral relativism, which is considered the objective of the whole intellectual concept of higher education.

The knowledge, expectations and experience people bring into educational scenarios will necessarily affect the way they deal with new knowledge presented to them (Laurillard, 2002). Crème (1997) and
Laurillard (2002) made interesting revisits to Perry’s scheme in the light of these new groups of adult students that today form a considerable and expanding group in higher education. Crème suggests on the basis of her work that adult students have made the move to “personal commitment” even before coming to university and that applying for a university course can be just an example of “considered commitment”, associated with financial, social and personal costs.

Why do adults want to enter and continue in higher education when it is often associated with economic disadvantages and risks of having your identity questioned? West (1996) found that by participating in HE students could reclaim or escape a past, by crossing over borders into a new identity. Studying could also be a way to overcome a lack of confidence, or marginality, as part of a struggle for authentic selves out of a background of fragmentation.

There is sometimes a clash between the identity as an experienced individual and being a student (Assarsson & Zackrisson-Sipos, 2005; Creme, 1997; Laurillard, 2002). Different strategies can be observed for students having to deal with the adjustment to a study situation, based on the idea of gradually breaking free from authority. Some students surrender to being “dependent”, but that situation can take its toll on self-confidence or force students to adjust their objectives. In Assarsson and Sipos-Zackrissson (2005) adult students demonstrated four different discursive repertoires in handling the identity of once again being a student: that of making a living, learning, earning credits and self realization. Laurillard (2002) takes evidence from her analysis of British Open University students in claiming that those who could be regarded as “mature” students do not necessarily display a correspondence between epistemological and ethical development, and she asks herself how teachers could act differently to support their process.

Digital environments

Many pedagogical practices are associated to institutions of various kinds. New technology has now introduced new environments for learning. E-learning has become a major player, trying hard to support the vision of the Commission of European Communities in the construction of learning environments.

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12 William Perry Perry, William G., Jr. (1970) *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: a scheme* New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, studied students at college level to test their reactions to intellectual and moral relativism encountered in higher education. He constructed a scheme to illustrate students’ movements from late adolescence to maturity. In this scheme, students move from "absolutism" to "multiplicity" in the first phase. They then pass through a phase of relativism. The last phase, towards "commitment", is described as a conscious act of realisation of identity and responsibility - of orientation in the real world. Crème, Phyllis (1997) *Adults Making Sense of University Practices: re-visiting Perry’s scheme of intellectual and ethical development*. *Improving Student Learning through Course Design*. Oxford, The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.
of dynamic, competitive and economically powerful societies (McConnell, 2006). Early experiences have, however, encountered problems in achieving interaction in distributed collaborative learning environments (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003).

In describing these new scenarios it is mainly what they are not that has become their distinguishing mark. Distance education or web-based education lacks face-to-face communication, teachers and students are separated in time and space, and situations are stripped of contextual clues.

Underlining these expressions is the normative status of speech and the fact that speech is considered the natural mode of social interaction, regarding digitally distributed learning as being of less quality than learning processes face-to-face (Rooksby, 2002; Sorensen, 1999) The lack of face-to-face communication is used as one of the strongest arguments against distance or web-based teaching. Communicating over the Internet, not seeing each other, makes status harder to achieve in conventional ways, such as sex, age, clothes, voice. Authority has to be deserved differently than in a group with physical meetings (Nilsson, 2005).

The digital learning environment has for some time now been associated with asynchronous discussion groups in Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). Asynchronous discussions are web- and text-based group interactions, like discussion boards, not occurring in real time. VLEs are web-based environments used to support the delivery of structured education. They are often associated with licensing fees and a considerable cost to HE institutions today. Equivalent freeware is therefore becoming more popular. VLEs have many names but represent in a substantial degree the same functions, and are today often owned by the same companies. They are designed to facilitate English-speaking educational discourses, although, since they are often translated, cultural filters tend to colour the environments.

There has been a change to more synchronous tools in line with a considerable improvement of technology and bandwidth. Synchronous communication can be a real-time text or audio chat or videoconferencing. Synchronous systems with video chat often support the sharing of documents and whiteboards. Synchronous technology is constantly being improved and is often used for seminar activities and counselling, e.g. in teacher training programmes in Sweden. Today most PCs support videoconferencing, through built-in web-cams and microphones and on-line interaction, is moving from specially built studios into everyone’s computer. Interacting in synchronous chats is what many children do after school these days, socialising, doing homework through text, audio and video chat in MSN.

One of the strongest arguments against distance or web-based teaching is the superior quality of face-to-face meetings. However, insights into interactive learning conditions of virtual learning environments show a strong potential for achieving in-depth learning; not by trying to
compensate or model communication from conditions for face-to-face dialogue but by what is embedded in conditions for electronic communication. We need to realise that inter-human online dialogues are no longer routed and embedded in physical time and that the context differs (Sorensen, 1999).

Facing distance – new distribution forms

The separation of teacher and student cannot be said to be the core characteristic of IT-supported education today. What began as a mere solution to an access problem in the early days of distance education resulted in theoretical approaches to the learning situation, separating the teaching and the learning processes as an implication of the location of the student. Theories that evolved could be described from the way they approach this separation, from a compensating point of view or possessing inherent strength. Theories addressing the separation of teacher and student as an issue of strength rest on strong beliefs in autonomous learners, guided didactic conversations, and the effects of technology.

Keegan (1993), starting from the separation of the teaching and learning processes, proposes a reintegration of the processes by deliberately planned interpersonal communication. He is followed by a strand of theories discussing the nature of the subject or the degree of student autonomy. Critical voices and implications of the failure to regard the importance of the broader environment within distance education have also been raised (Gibson, 1979).

The theory of “Transactional distance” sees autonomy rather as a risk. Transactional distance concerns a cognitive space between learning peers, their teachers and course content as a function of course structure, level of interaction and student autonomy in distance education (Moore, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Situations where students cannot influence course design (high level of pre-set structures) are characterised by a significant transactional distance (e.g. TV, Videoconferencing, videotaped lectures). Learner autonomy can compensate for lack of communication. For a student to successfully assimilate the content of a course with a high level of structure and a low level of communication, learner autonomy is needed. Students with a low motivation, new to the contents, the distribution form, HE or the way of expressing oneself in the academy, will have problems to succeed. But in a course where communication is intense students do not need to fail due to low motivation or experience; autonomy can be the result of intense communication. Teachers should strive to decrease distance in communication by enhancing dialogue in on-line environments (Edström, 2002).

Patterns in web-based communication also indicate that teachers and students communicate differently than in traditional classroom settings.
There is a more equal situation in terms of dominating the space, and teachers tend to pose fewer questions than in face-to-face lectures. An analysis of Open University courses showed an average length of student contribution of 200 words, which is equivalent to continuous speech of over one minute. This would be rare in a face-to-face learning situation (Laurillard, 2002).

Distance education is influenced by our market-oriented society (Friesen, 2004) and can easily be defined by principles regulating the production of goods. Such principles were identified as “efficiency”, “distribution of work”, “division into blocks”, and “mechanisation” in Peters’ (1993) review on the organisation of distance education.

The same decontextualised and passive notion of “knowledge” is captured in the concept of “Learning Objects”, a collection of objects of knowledge in digital databases and portals, intended to be used in different contexts over and over again. Knowledge is here regarded as the possibility to move from one individual to another as long as the packing is attractive and easily acquired through technology.

It is possible to split content in a number of learning objects and reassemble them to create new learning material or courses in the same way you play with Lego blocks. (Poulsen, 2003, p.30)

Large sums have been dedicated to the production of learning objects within the area of web-based education (Friesen, 2004).

**Supporting students**

When interaction fails to appear in web-based education, feedback is often blamed. What teachers seem to remember from more methodological literature is the importance of “swift” and “adequate” feedback and support to students. What research shows, though, is enough evidence to realise that it is a complex question and that teachers’ efforts are most likely to pay off through planning and structuring courses rather than being active in on-line discussions. First, let us take a look at teacher intervention to go on to assessing how support might be interpreted in a web-based course.

One of the issues of e-moderating (the competence of stimulating on-line activity) is to decrease the number of “lurkers” (students who do not actively participate to the same extent as others) in web-based interactions. The concept of “lurkers” has been nuanced in research, however, and has even been suggested as “influencing perceptions in unhelpful ways” (Thorpe, McCormick, Kubiak, & Carmichael, 2007, p. 355). Peering is associated with illegitimate activities, and participating by reading only as not having a value in comparison with posting in a discussion. Thorpe et al. instead suggest further investigations into readership and learning.

Maybe it is the values of reading that might explain some of the results of Mazzoloni & Maddison (2002). In their extensive data they found a
negative correlation between teachers’ interventions and students’ activity. The more teachers posted in discussions the quieter the students became and the shorter the discussion threads. The associations between teachers’ intervention and student activity were weak, which could have many possible explanations. Some possible explanations the authors put forward themselves. In groups where interaction was low, teachers might have “panicked” and intervened to stimulate interaction. Just-in-time knowledge might also be an explanation, in that by supplying students with what they need at the moment, students can move on. Students, however, rated their satisfaction with courses independently of the degree of teacher intervention. The study also concluded that a large majority of teachers’ postings gave answers to students’ questions and only to a low extent (12% compared to 68%) posed new or follow-up questions.

Östlund (2008) concluded that students appreciated a high degree of structure in a web-based course. Peers were also considered giving good support for learning through discussions and the exchange of experiences, and students also valued giving feedback to peers. Received feedback from peers was not mentioned as supporting learning, though.

**New means - Computer Mediated Communication**

A constitutive character of language is underlining the whole linguistic turn of science and the associated theories with regard to the development of the human mind. This means that it is not possible for single individuals to interact and “place” their view or opinion on another individual without something happening to both individuals’ meaning-making. When this constitutive character of language is disregarded, both teachers and students often see collaborative work as “unproductive nuisance”. That could lead researchers to look for “the effects of learning” in the wrong places, thereby missing out on the feedback of collaboration to individual minds (Stahl, 2002). Instead the powerful representational nature of virtual collaborative learning and the increased embedded reflection in learning it offers could be regarded as rich sources to “intellectual amplification” in on-line learning (Sorensen, 1999).

There is a growing body of research on computer-supported learning emanating from the dialogical potential of IT (see Dillenbourg, 1999; Koschmann, 1996; Stahl, 2002, 2003). A Collaborative Learning approach or Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) rests on social theories of learning, which acknowledge humans as fundamentally linguistic creatures existing in a kind of “thrownness” into the world and always on the way towards understanding things and situations into which they are thrown (Sorensen, et al., 2006).

The meaning of *collaborative* as opposed to *co-operative* is identified within the research field of CSCL either by the structure of the knowledge domain, the objectives of the task or the role participants take
on during work (Kreijns et al., 2003). Regardless of which, human interaction and communication are regarded as key elements for releasing the interactive potential of VLE’s (Dillenbourg, 1999).

CSCL treats learners’ active participation as the key to the collaborative process, to construct new meaning in the individual development of cognition. Furthermore, this perspective has started to focus more on the socio-ethical dimensions of educational collaboration. Collaborative methods suggest potentially built-in offers of democratic educational forms and empowerment, represented by the voice of the global learner. There are also important educational dimensions suggested such as “promoting the development and socialization of learners to become democratically oriented global citizens” (Sorensen, et al., 2006).

The interactive potential of computer-mediated communication has proved more difficult to release than expected, though. Kreijns et al. (2003) identify two possible explanations why interactive possibilities that are expected to support dialogue, for instance, often fail to deliver in the shift to asynchronous learning environments. First comes the taken-for-granted attitude that social interaction will automatically take place when interactive technology is used. Second is the tendency to restrict or separate social interaction from educational interventions with the consequence that social interaction is often ignored, neglected or forgotten. When teachers are aware of this and avoid the first pitfall, they tend to limit their actions to the educational dimension and enhance social interaction solely in service of cognitive processes (ibid). Gunawardena (1995) also links negative interactive experiences to the social rather than to the technological level. The necessity to mediate group activities in text-based environments makes social interactions complex. In a recent Swedish study (Östlund, 2008) a great majority of students ascribed great significance to social support from peers for interpreting assignments and for adjusting to the academic discourse. The study also found that peer support contributes to enhanced satisfaction, motivation and self-confidence.

A sense of a shared community, necessary for understanding each other in a text-based web-based environment, is dependent on sympathy towards the ideas on which the group is formed. When a group has no agreement on the purpose, there is need for some form of common ground (Donath, 1999). To establish this common ground individuals and communities on line are dependent on social protocols to express social capabilities for managing relationships, making decisions, building a reputation, giving advice, expressing views and creating content related to the task (Faith Cranor & Reagle Jr, 1997).

Falk (1999) and Lindberg & Olofsson (2005) argue that there is a risk that the distance education form can jeopardise the development of the critical awareness of and the connection between social interaction and learning, constituting learning as an individual process in the student. Malmberg (2006) stresses the importance of an overall educational design.
that supports and underlines a social and dialogical approach to knowledge. He warns us of using a deterministic approach to IT technology and learning and applying collaboration as a method only for parts of a programme. He warns us of using on-line collaboration as a method for parts of a program from a deterministic approach to IT technology and learning. Mercer (2000) shows how students’ awareness of the importance of language as a mediating means for collective thinking enhances their capacity for collaborative knowledge building.

From “being” to “signs of being”

Sorensen (1999) presents three basic principles for communicating in asynchronous environments. The insight into these changes provides important communicative values to virtual contexts.

1. Instead of appearing in a course context physically, students need to signal presence.

The learner only becomes present in an asynchronous communication through signs and symbols which demand some form of action. These social actions are only represented as symbols. Signs and communications from the context in which the learner is embedded are sometimes also necessary to communicate.

2. Instead of interacting face-to-face in a room, students reflect on their own and on other students’ actions.

A meta-level is automatically inserted into all the learner’s actions and interactions. This affordance of the technology introduces the students to representations of their own actions on a meta-level and creates a distance between the learner (subject) and their thoughts, beliefs and values as intended actions (object).

3. Instead of being involved in speech, students reflect in writing.

An element of reflection before posting is introduced when students write course papers on discussion boards or just through every-day communication. The reflection on headlines for discussions or the naming of postings becomes a subject of reflection that has no equivalence in face-to-face communication.

The virtual learning space creates a context, in which reflection is primary to involvement (action). In the physical world involvement (action) is regarded as being primary to reflection (Sorensen, 1999).

Electronic environments provide a variety of opportunities that support confrontations with what the learner already knows (Laurillard, 2002). These confrontations could be staged with the use of e.g. asynchronous discussions, audio and video conferencing, blogging, bulletin boards, e-mail, graphs and illustrations, newsgroups, simulations, synchronous chat systems, support systems (like FAQ), multimedia representations and the WWW in general. When learners represent their views in different forms
offered by technology, the actions and formulation of the learner are stored in the system. This way students make their thoughts available for reflection. And distance is being a precondition to reflection.

In most virtual learning spaces all signals associated with participating physically in a practice, online needs an active manifestation. Presence demands digital action. Roles, engagement, intentions and identities need to be manifested in represented action - a consequence of the shift from “being” to “signs of being”.

Another consequence is that anonymity in a group of learners, as a contrast to the web in general, is harder to achieve in an on-line learning community. Furthermore, students are experiencing problems easier to pin-point at early stages (Edström, 2002; Högskoleverket, 2008:11R). To go with the flow is not a successful strategy under these conditions.

The move from dialogically composed speech to monologically composed writing is a change that contributes to increased reflection and thinking at the shared collaborative level. It is also a tool for individual, intellectual amplification, meaning that more and different aspects of knowledge (e.g. understanding, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) can be accessible to the learner as a result of students actually becoming aware of their way of expressing things (Mercer, 2000).

The lack of cues for understanding

Time and place are in principle stretched in a social learning process in virtual communities. That makes the re-establishing of a shared context one of the most important structures to deal with. Without re-establishing a social and shared context it is not possible for the participants to communicate or collaborate (Laurillard, 2002).

The web-based learning situation is completely stripped from the contextual cues that the physical meeting provides. The physical meeting is created there and then and is regulated by how communication develops in a dynamic process (motivated and created in that situation) involving more than words. Going on line means depriving students from many of the subtle cues that we rely upon in the classroom. Contextual cues are necessary for a sense of belonging and for developing knowledge. The lack of contextual cues means that both the environment/interface and the content need to be created, motivated and negotiated carefully (Wenger, 1998). Possibilities for students to overhear comments when entering or leaving the room, experience body language, and check things during or after class with the teacher or with other students are narrowed down.

The description of computer-mediated communication as a text-only medium is no longer adequate. In educational scenarios this is still often the case, though. The lack of visual cues, central to face-to-face communication, has been described as a potential risk, leading to distanced and impersonal behaviour (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). An overview of research suggests, however, that ways of compensating for
non-verbal cues reduce the significant difference between face-to-face and on-line encounters. Naming, signatures, verbal descriptions, emotes (verbalising actions or modes), emoticons (;-) that are often used to forestall misunderstanding, homophones (CUL8r, NE1 there?, CU!) and CAPITALISATION (raise of pitch, anger or excitement) are some means of compensating for the loss of non-verbal cues (see Svenningsson, 2002; Östlund, 2008).

The use of deixis (an inexplicit reference like “here”, “there”, “then”, “this”) is associated to contexts of shared understanding and presents problems in a web-based learning scenario (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). An in-depth study of deixis shows that it could be used simultaneously for an off-line reality as well as for the shared virtual environment (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). “It’s a bit messy here at the moment ;-)”.

Research shows that asynchronous discussion groups or bulletin boards have a language style that is more similar to the written language, since the pace of the author rules the production of messages (Svenningsson, 2001). Emphasising and foregrounding (done by using a quotation or parts of a quotation by someone) is often used as a framing to make references easier. That means editing a message and only showing its relevance to the purpose, by cutting and pasting accordingly (citing previous messages). Benwell and Stokoe take this as a good example of creatively mixing modes of synchronicity and asynchronicity, stretching the limitations of the medium while rejecting its classification as socially inadequate. Speech is also broken up into smaller chunks to create the sense of here and now and avoid monological speech.

**Gender implications in computer mediated communication**

The absence of physical cues in computer-mediated communication text has put expectations on the Internet as being a democratic and egalitarian medium (Herring, 2000). All cues to gender, race and social class would, if wanted, be efficiently wiped out of communication. But gender anonymity in CMC is not supported by research (Herring, 2000). Gender style differences occur with greater than chance frequency, and differences disfavour women. Some results indicate that women are more sensitive to no-responses and tend to stop posting when they do not receive any response or receive negative attention (c.f. Herring, 2000; Nesbitt, Light, & Burns, 2000). There are in fact more women-only groups on the Internet (Herring, 2000). Men-only groups are rare. Women’s expressed social concern on line is often regarded as a “waste

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13 There are different results related to how the production of messages is done, either directly online or written and edited in a word processing program prior to being posted. Chat rooms present language that is similar to spoken language. The way that grammar is used (non-formal, looser structures, deletion of subject pronouns and prepositions) gives a strong indicator towards a more oral than literate character of CMC. The same observations go for spelling that sometimes is deviant for comic, rhetorical and bonding purposes (Sveningson 2001).
of band-width” among men. Research has found that these different systems potentially constrain each other and that female students are more positive to regulated and controlled learning environments on line (ibid).

Herring raises the interesting question of how gender differences still persist in such an anonymous medium, which is expected to hide gender. This question can be answered to some extent by problematising the concept of anonymity. But that is mostly relevant for recreational practices, and different forms of CMC must of course be distinguished here. What is relevant for this study are asynchronous, and as such only educational, practices. Of course, on-line communication is less revealing of gender since participants choose what they want others to know, but patterns still exists and gender has proved to be visible in discourse (Herring, 2000). This could be explained by participants “giving off” gender-related information (see Goffman, 1990/1959) regardless of the lack of visual cues. In mixed environments women tend to post less than men (Herring, 2000). There is also research showing that this is not the case (Mazzolini and Maddison, 2002). When asked, though, these women believed that they contributed less. Women respondents described male postings to be more technical in both nature and language and they considered themselves to be slow in comparison, due to the more considered and crafted responses they themselves produced. I cannot refrain from quoting a female student in the Mazzolini and Madison article who wrote:

… I have strengths in other areas that they [the male participants] may not - i.e. research and writing. (Take that, you pushy guys who answer every little thing with the right answers before I have a chance to think about them! You may know this stuff off the top of your heads, but give me time and I'll write about it better!)

Identity and educational practice

The concept of identity involves society’s understanding of schooling, educating “who” into “what” with didactical implications. Identities could be described as the ways people emerge as actors, claiming their place and history in universe.

As an aspect of modern life, identity has seen a veritable avalanche of attention from different disciplines and become a prism projecting and contributing to the study and understanding of a variety of aspects of different sides of human lives (Bauman, 2007; Biesta, 1999). According to Gewirtz and Cribb (2008, p. 40), identity is foremost about “who we think we are and who we want to be”. Others’ perception of who we are is also relevant to our negotiating process.

Identity is an area where categorising, i.e. stereotyping or relativism, easily happens (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008). Identities are actively
constructed as representations in different contexts, and they have a collective aspect in that we are used to answer the question of “Who I think I am” by expressing a belonging to certain categories.

There are different ways of conceptualising identity. The concept of a pre-language identity means that, although people can present themselves differently in different contexts, there is a “true” and “stable” identity that may be revealed (Biesta, 1999). This notion of identity is associated with the modern articulation of subjectivity that Foucault came to question. Postmodernism is breaking with the modern idea of the ego, an ego fully present and potentially accessible to itself with a possibility to free itself from determination and achieve total autonomy and freedom. This idea has strongly influenced our understanding of education, and by breaking free from it postmodern ideas of identity radically challenge the heart of our institutionalised education - the quest for individual agency (ibid).

A social I

An alternative understanding of identity is as a performance or construction, interpreted by others. This interpretation is located in language and social practice. Vygotsky could be described as being on the doorstep to a relational theoretical perspective on the development of the human mind by giving first access to the interest of the individual, cognitive or emotional, and thereafter the social (Gergen, 1994). American pragmatists gave intersubjectivity a more crucial role from the beginning. Dewey used the term “social medium” for the way human responses grow intelligent and gain meaning by living and acting in this medium (Biesta, 2007a). Dewey’s focus seemed to be on the importance of the social for the individual but does not so clearly express the constitutive character of this interrelationship. Pragmatism thereby represents a possible answer to the question of where identity lies - in what is accomplished in the presence of others.

A prerequisite for being social is a number of individual minds. To be an individual mind is not possible without human societies (Mead, 1972/1934). To Mead language is the mechanism in which self and mind emerge. We respond by some form of action (language included) to changes in our environment. Mead (1972/1934) identified the response individuals perceive to their actions as conditioning the existence of language. How would the individual otherwise understand her/himself? Language makes self a matter of reflection through objectifying it. The development of the individual mind is thereby supported by the actions and gestures individuals use in the presence of each other - guiding the individual further in social interactions.

Points of orientation in today’s society in terms of morals, rules, authorities and structures are fluctuating (Bauman, 2001, 2007). The rules of the game are in constant change and so the old issue of “identity” has met a new turn. The identity-building based on “living true to your kind”, not to diverge from the norm and membership - a re-embedding of people
into approved and established beds is no longer an undisputed option. Entering a profession or a business/company does no longer automatically offer a safe and possible career. “On the go” is the new alternative to embeddedness. Today both positions and places accessible to the individual are questioned in terms of values and prospects and cannot be regarded as life projects in the same obvious and undisputable way as previously. At the same time class and gender aspects, still influence choices and offers heavily and complicate the picture (Bauman, 2001).

Leathwood (2005) points to the costs for individuals of participating in HE. Apart from the economic aspect and the risks of failing, the idea of becoming a student is not always an attractive identity change. To men becoming a student can seem like a challenge to the construction of masculinity and a threat to the power that men can exercise over women.

An intersubjective understanding of the concept of identity also brings into focus questions of an ethical character. When the relationship between humans is constituted in language, in becoming someone, others are always involved (Biesta, 1999; Mead, 1972/1934; Rossiter, 2007; Säfström, 1999). Emerging as someone implies an arena for identities to emerge in the light of others or being constructed (from the perspective of the individual), implicating an “ethical space” (Säfström, 1999).

**Identity in a discursive place - a post-Goffman reflection**

The negotiation of identity is about positioning ourselves in relation to others. Rather than being reflected in language, identity is actively constituted in language (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008). Being located in discursive practices, this fluent and continuous process is also limited by the discursive practices available (as space or discourse) to students and the power structures working these practices (Bauman, 2004; Gewirtz & Cribb, 2008). The landscape where individuals (here students) participate in these negotiations has changed. The question of identity is still important in evaluating and understanding communication, but the means for doing so have changed.

Defining a situation is crucial for understanding what expectations are connected to it (Goffman, 1990/1959). Many clues are to be found beyond the time and place of interaction or concealed within it. When Goffman based his theories on individuals who are physically in each other’s presence, we had not yet entered “The Age of Personal and Participatory Media” (see The Economist, 2006). His note, however, that telephone and mail communication presumably represent reduced versions of social interaction (Goffman, 1983) is similar to statements from Chouliraki & Fairclough (1999) in stating the physical interaction as the norm, regardless of conditions.

In a text-based environment, such as an on-line educational program, traditional identity cues (such as physical appearance, clothes, speech, body gestures) are sparse. They are replaced by new and different form of
identity cues. Conventional identity signals, like material things, are open to deception. It is easy to wear clothes signalling a specific belonging or attitude. When assessing conventional signals produced by the students “expressions given” and “expressions given off” could be a useful concept (Goffman, 1990/1959, 2004). Converted into the on-line environment “expressions given off” would mean that in spite of shared technology and interface, there will be variations in writing styles, personal interactions and other clues about identity. During a longer course or program this means that it is hard to speak out of character. The opportunities to use conventional signals are blocked in this type of traditional educational platform without video-chat. Manifestations through semiotic signals have to be used instead. With a greater variety of multi-modal communication channels, long-term communication, more enclosed learning spaces and low communicative distance, it becomes more difficult to suppose that people speak out of character or facts.

The picture of Internet as offering total anonymity assumes a virtual interaction with people that did not know us prior to the Internet relations. That is no longer a fact. Internet is helping to overcome temporal and spatial constraints when separated from family, friends and desired contexts (Sveningsson, 2001). Internet is taking over much of the communication and interaction of our everyday as well as our professional lives. Not to forget the considerable growing body of blended learning and IT-supported campus programs where students recognize each other by face.

There is a need for a more updated and nuanced picture of virtual identities. A system oriented discourse of evaluation in the field of education (c.f. Gerrevall, 2008) is engaged with authenticy aspects of on-line or virtual identities. How can we know whom we are dealing with? Early theoretical tracks on computer-mediated communication paints a picture of on-line identity as something free from the impediments of being whoever we like to be, an “entirely different proposition from identity in the ‘real’ world”(Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) seeing on-line identities as creative and imaginative.

Many people use their invisibility to other participants for playful purposes, such as impersonation, or establishing quasi-fictive personae. Others find safety in the feeling that they are invisible to those with whom they are in contact, and may gain the courage to speak up where previously they were silent. (Rooksby, 2002, p. 6) “On-line identities” mark a difference from “virtual identities”, whose semantics in everyday language have connotations of “seeming to be” rather than “being” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2007).

Young people and children no longer perceive computer games and the Internet as something outside themselves. They see ICT as a situation in which they themselves participate. In cyberspace the barriers between the subject, the body and the ‘world outside’ are
radically altered. The technological is not separated from the human or the cultural. (Søby, 1999, p. 78)

Positioning theory takes an interest in problems inherent in the theatrical metaphor of “role” but by using the metaphor of “position” (Davies & Harré, 1990). Roles however, does not necessarily correspond with identity (Castells, 2004) in meaning that roles only become part of our identities when internalised and a source for meaning. Position is a more flexible term than roles that tend to have a more inscribed character. This flexibility is enhanced by the spatial dimension of the term “position”. Positioning is a phenomenon of human interaction working two ways. As well as striving for our own position in a context we also tend to position others by ascribing to them roles or values embedded in the narrative of the situation. Positions change through being abandoned or developed, depending upon the outcomes they generate.

**Ethical spaces**

Biesta (1999) argues that we need to shift our attention to the places and spaces where the subject emerges in order to sort out whether the question of location actually helps us to approach “whoever” emerges. Intersubjective spaces, as places where someone comes into presence as “a someone”, can only occur in relation to someone else and as such also take on the character of ethical spaces. Introspection is then not the answer to who someone is, but the analysis of and the actions people take in the social practice, where acting is to take the initiative (Biesta, 1999).

However, an interest in the location of the subject does not deny the person who acts, Biesta points out. It is the participation that constitutes the space -the space as a violent and interfering space. The violent character is associated with the breeching of spaces and rules, opening up the very conditions of coming into presence for someone as an identity (ibid), which is an important question regarding conditions in a web-based environment. Thinking of the ethical dimensions of space also implies a radical consequence. We should ask ourselves “where” am I as much as “where” are you instead of “who” am I, and “who” are you (Biesta, 1999).

Picking up again on the notion of the violent character of intersubjectivity immediately ascribes the same violent or interfering character to education as spaces where someone comes into presence. Not violence to which the child/student is subjected, but a constitutive element of intersubjective practice. The location of the “subject” also has important implications for the concept of agency. In modern views, agency is the objective of education and is understood in terms of autonomy, whereas Biesta (1999) argues that agency should be understood as the very condition for education.
To further consider

Textual-oriented computer-mediated communication is becoming increasingly normalised as a means for socially accepted interaction, desirable due to its efficient, recordable, cheap and productive nature. It has a potential to engender alternative social practices and understandings, dealing reflectively with words and worlds.

An alternative understanding of social practice changes the view of language as not merely a system of communication but as part of a semiotic web of "intended and unintended signs and phenomena available to us through its contextual character founding interpretation" (Rooksby, 2002). Meetings and interactions over the Internet take place in a variety of modes and mediums. Trying to make meaning on line will differ from a face-to-face situation in terms of assessable means. Words, for example, become hard currency to visually deficient environments. Computer-mediated communication has the potential to reorient the assumed priority of face-to-face communication. However, that calls for a realisation that inter-human online dialogues are no longer routed and embedded in a physical time and context (Sorensen, 1999).

Acknowledging the social character of learning means that it has to be considered by all teachers in HE and not reduced to a methodological consideration - in favour of getting students to work in groups or not. Its implications are wider still.
"Hejsan!
(Student grupp 8)
5 Methodological considerations

In this chapter I present the analytical tools used to study meaning-making as an aspect of learning in web-based educational practice. The choice of a communicative approach to education locates meaning in interaction. To study communication out of an interest in pragmatics demands a methodological approach that acknowledges the role of language for meaning and considers its open and contextual character as interrelating with recipients’ reactions.

The study of meaning-making

I have been looking for methods pointing towards the ways in which the intersubjective making of meaning is central to action, as constitutive of identities and events. Here the educational activities are performed in digital settings, which means an exploration into technology-mediated meaning-making and an analysis of communication on a screen, which go beyond text (Kress, 2003).

“Semiosis”, originating from Pierce, the American pragmatist, recognises the significance of other representation for meaning than language (Fairclough, 2004). The intersubjective production of meaning (semiosis) is an element of the social at all levels and visible in social practices as:

- ways of acting
- ways of representing
- ways of being (Fairclough, 2004)

These elements capture meaning as found in the everyday actions people perform and the responses that actions generate from the environment (Dewey, 2004/1916; Kress, 2003).

I came to realise that my search for semiosis, the start in student actions, the technology-mediated communication, and the need for a broader understanding of representations, were well cared for by Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA).

Mediated Discourse Analysis

There are methodological challenges in finding or constructing a method that can fill the gap between the analysis of communicative action and
studies of the recipients' reaction, which would capture the interrelationship of the web-based dialogue.

Mediated Discourse Analysis (Scollon, 1998, 2001, 2005; Scollon & Scollon Wong, 2004) emerges from a question of how the study of language can develop to account for its complex role in situated action. The key aspect of this argument is that discourses of interest are represented as social action, not simply as text. Mediated action is used to stress the dialectic between action and its means (Scollon, 2001).

Discourse analysis can have different connotations. It is often used for critically analysing the relationship between manifestations of language and its close connections to the existing values of views in society. In this relationship there are several possible research interest that determine what strand of discourse analysis should be chosen. Here it is the fact that the starting-point is students’ actions that leads me to MDA, where discourse is to be understood as:

… language in use, but we do not mean language ‘in general’ or abstractly; we mean some particular word, sentence, phrase, intonation, or perhaps a genre that is appropriated by a social actor to accomplish a specific action at a specific place and in a concrete moment. (Scollon, 2005, p. 20)

In collaboration with an interdisciplinary representation of researchers Ron Scollon has developed a theoretical and methodological framework that sees meaning as not exclusively residing “in the discourse itself, but rather resides in the actions people take with it” (Jones & Norris, 2005a, p. 4). This could be compared with Dewey’s epistemology, where meanings are focused on ways of doing things in shared actions, on patterns and regularities of interactions (Dewey, 1971).

With its interest in action MDA shares some common ground with other discourse analyses. First, the agreement that any social action is mediated and significantly discursive (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Second, the close analysis of texts of public discourse and a close concern for social practice in respect of public issues and a critical or ideological analysis of social processes (Scollon, 2001). Within MDA there is a focus on how different practices influence people’s actions, and how the analysis of discourse becomes a tool with which to discuss power and influence on the arenas in question (Jones & Norris, 2005) (see also Scollon and Scollon Wong, 2004).

**MDA serving pedagogy**

Educational practices are social practices destined for growth and change with a normative approach. The linguistic and communicative turns have made a point of changing the role of language and communication for science. For pedagogy this introduces theories of knowledge of a dialogical character, with the consequence that discourse analysis and communicative theoretical strands more often are used to capture the
intrinsic character of problems associated with pedagogy as a discipline (Fritzell, 2008).

The unit of analysis in MDA is social action, in which the phenomenon to be studied exists and develops. Action is carried out through semiotic objects that mediate action and becomes social as part of communication. The exchange and negotiation of a shared system of meaning is necessary (see also Dewey, 2004/1916, Chapter II).

MDA joins the strand of linguistics sharing the picture of language as dynamic and processional. As a result, they also share the need for a terminology emphasising the constitutive character of language.

MDA focuses on the action of social actors instead of institutional processes. There is no action without participators in a discourse and no discourse without action. An underlining principle that follows is that discourse is best conceived of as a matter of social actions, not as a system or as representations, thoughts or values. By identifying action going on and relating language in use to action the idea is to keep complexity alive without any pre-judgement of what action and what language use is relevant (Scollon, 2001).

Just like pragmatism, MDA takes help from ethnomethodology in searching for taken-for-granted routines, emerging rules and unspoken meanings as embodied know-how. Ethnomethodology makes a point of the lack of control of end results in communication. People act without having the end result in mind, adjusting actions as they go along by referring to what is culturally legitimate (Miettinen, 2006).

MDA has been used to challenge the often implicit sender - receiver model of communication, represented in the news discourse (see Scollon, 1998). In my experience, the same model (s-r) is an often applied process in the “distribution” of knowledge associated with electronic distribution forms of education. I see a potential in MDA for challenging models of web-based education as distributed knowledge.

Analytic concepts

A communicative approach regards thinking and reflection in collective processes as means to changes in and with the world. Cultural tools mediate the relation with the world at the same time as they are acquired, i.e. in interaction with the world. With web-based education the means and the environments with which to interact have changed, but the task still remains – to construct meaning in relation to a task and its given settings.

Dewey tried to make us see that meaning is not something out there to be captured and assimilated. It is rather about doing things in shared action, to see, make use of and integrate – to change dispositions for encountering the world. Language, Mead (1938) argues, is used for making meaning to help the individual accept the attitudes and opinions of others, which is necessary for a joint activity.
Meaning-making for these students is not restricted to the on-line practice. It takes place outside the VLE as well as in it, at work and outside work. It is not a 9-5 activity. My task is to track down what I find to be clues to meaning-making only through this interactive platform, through student fingers on the key-board.

By supporting the analytical concepts of MDA (nexus of practice, mediational means and sites of engagement) with the concept of “reification” and the contrast of “same – different”, I conduct an additional dialogue of this linguistic methodology to assist the logic of pedagogy.

I will here account for the meaning of these analytical concepts in this MDA framing.

**Context as relations of practices or “Nexus of practices”**

First some words on the concept of “context”. Criticism has been levelled at situated theories of learning, since using the word “context” with loose definitions tends to dissolve and explain anything. Many theorists have put considerable efforts into overcoming the dualisms associated with “being in the world”, not least Dewey, who sometimes seems to be in dialogue with a socio-cultural school (see Dewey, 2004/1916 on the concept of environment). The awareness of a complexity is sometimes not enough, and the translations into methodological considerations sometimes become blurry or unreflected.

Cole’s much used metaphor of “weaving together” includes historically short and long time spans to move beyond the dichotomies of “individual” and “society”, or “cognition” and “socialisation”, and sees context as surrounding and weaving together in human ontology (Cole, 1996). MDA also takes an ontological approach to context and discusses what the entities are that can be taken into consideration in an analysis. What is important here is the distinction between context as part of our understanding, and context as something that affects us. Context as part of our understanding means that the characterisation to which we ascribe the means by which we can identify and recreate a situation, is not only connected to the means but also to how we use it.

Practice is an analytic concept often used to encircle an object of study and establish its context. The concept of practice often refers to properties of a community created over time (c.f. Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Wenger, 1998). There is also an integrating reflexivity to practice, contributing to both the theorisation of practice as well as engagement in practice (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999).

MDA opposes a notion of practices being of a relatively stable character. There are impacts of other discourse systems on practices (cf. Network of practices, Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). The influence
of other practices or fields must sometimes be taken into consideration in understanding semiosis in a related practice (Scollon, 2001) 14.

Scollon uses the notion “a nexus” as a network of linked practices possibly influencing a specific practice, which suggests an openness of the social. MDA prefers “nexus of practices” to get away from presupposed hierarchical orders of discourse (Scollon, 2001, Scollon and Scollon Wong, 2004, Scollon, 2005).

Practice is here not used to frame the object of analysis, semiotic actions associated with meaning-making. Practice is regarded as the involvement of individuals and as mediational means in some shared understanding of what activity is performed. Underlining the search for these semiotic actions, though, is the notion of a nexus of practices as stretching outside the virtual learning environment, incorporating what students decide to include in their communication. The outer borders of semiosis are thus defined in the interaction of participants. These non-fixed borders thereby challenge preconceptions of language as structures, as culturally stable and associated with status, and move the focus of the text from “signs” to “signs of processes”. In practicality, borders and relevance emerge as signs of unspoken meanings. This is when “nexus” becomes a useful concept emphasising floating borders and influencing different practices in-between.

To summarise, I will be using the concept of nexus to indicate the non-fixed borders for identifying semiotic actions.

Mediational means

Mediational means are the tools by which people undertake mediated action (Scollon 1998) and should be regarded as integrating social, cultural and physical structures15.

Dewey had a slightly more deterministic and instrumental way of expressing how tools could be regarded as controlling principles. Since tools are oriented towards other external things (Dewey picked his example from crafts) they regulate and order relationships between things (Dewey, 1971). As an illustration there are no physical mallets at work here but the same effect as a mallet on the head could be obtained by writing someone in red block letter.

Mediational means reproduce histories and identities of social groups and are only interpretable within practice. Mediational means are not to be understood in a deterministic sense, though. Their possibilities and

14 Social practices are interrelated in ways that shift over time. Fairclough (1993) uses the example of practices of teaching in higher education that for some time now have been networked together with practices of management resulting in a ‘marketisation’ of higher education.

15 Scollon prefers “mediational means” and tries “to reserve the term ‘cultural tools’ for cases in which mediational means have been subjected to some degree of technologisation or objectivisation” Scollon, Ron (2001) Mediating Discourse: The Nexus of Practise, London, Routledge. Mediational means might be described here as semiotic tools.
constraints are closely linked to the area of implementation as interacting in social acting processes working both ways (Jones & Norris, 2005).

When trying to account for power and authority, perspectives that focus on the agent obviously have great appeal. However, by not taking the role of mediational means into account, these perspectives overlook ways in which the emergence of new cultural tools transforms power and authority. How is action embedded and perceived by students? How are the consequences of participatory media integrated into course objectives? Do the means to act enhance the will to act and for what purpose is it used and in the interest of whom? The role of mediational means thus actualises the integrative powers of contents and means from a pedagogic perspective.

Sites of engagement
Sites of engagement are the focal points of participant attention and the mediational means for acting. Scollon (2001) sees this as a convergence of social practices which opens windows for mediated action to occur. These sites are not to be understood as objective moments or locations but different patterns of orientation in time and space containing different expressions of identity (Jones, 2005). I understand sites of engagement as layered time, actions with different focuses, occurring in and adding meaning to different practices, depending on what perspective you add. These patterns affect the sites for constructed actions constructed and also what kind of action can be taken there. Here is an example where a student at an early stage in communication shows us how different roles are carried out simultaneously at different sites:

...Time to help my daughter, she has located the ice-cream machine so I had better go and save my newly cleaned kitchen 😊

The students construct time and space through their social practices in interaction and make us wonder what her notion of “here” is at this moment. The concept “sites of engagement” becomes a useful conceptualisation of time and space in computer-mediated communication by emphasising its origin in action (Jones, 2005).

Through repeated experience the individual has come to associate signals and factors with certain contexts, so-called contextual markers (Bateson, 2000/1972). People’s complex emotional patterns constantly try to match and identify these signals and thereby orient themselves towards certain contexts. Embedded in this orientation is e.g. the coding of discourse, expected behaviour, the distribution of roles and the striving for and execution of power. The production of text in which communication is embedded also constitutes context and meaning and is therefore constantly negotiated (Keating & Egbert, 2004). Situation definitions are involved in how objects and events are interpreted through the representations and definitions we give them (Wertsch, et al., 1995).
MDA uses situation definitions to describe how humans establish context to help us understand utterances when several denotations are possible. Situation definitions are dynamic and partially shared and as such become an issue of power (Rowe, 2005).

Reification
I have specifically added two analytical concepts to the tools of MDA to enforce the pedagogical analysis.

Sites of engagement direct us to a focus in time and space. I was in need of its equivalent, pointing towards a focus in communication. The core of a pedagogic analysis directed at meaning-making as a change of dispositions in communication calls for a concept illustrating this change in language. Inspired by Wenger (1998) I have found the concept of “reification” to be useful.

Communication according to Dewey (2004/1916) is to be understood as a process of sharing experiences until they become common goods. It is only when common goods are shared and acknowledged by all participants that we have conditions for changed dispositions (ibid). Reification is here used to identify this process of becoming “common goods”. The term is sometimes used differently in other contexts but here reification describes a process pointing to a shared focus in practice – when something becomes the point of orientation of the mediated actions of the students.

Reification means turning experience into “thingness” and refers to both product and process\(^{16}\). What is useful to us is the analytic value of the representational aspect of reification, when a phenomenon becomes accessible for reflection and is thereby shared. Loose fragments, senses and ideas find their way into abstract concepts. Gillberg (2009, p. 132) also stresses the importance of the “visible” emergence of structures and concepts for accepting the relevance of theory for the development of theoretical knowledge related to a preschool practice.

Sameness and difference
“Sameness” and “difference” are concepts which I associate with the meaning-making process of establishing changes and breaks in students’ communication. They are used here to emphasise and make visible the moves students make between what is known and familiar to them and what represents something new and different, and how they cope with the unfamiliar. New personal experience and newly encountered information are constantly measured and negotiated in relation to their familiarity, and

\(^{16}\) Wenger proposes that the process of reification shapes our experience. Like when we realise a concept, e.g. the concept of “gravity”. Once we are aware of its implications it can change the focus of our attention and our awareness and experience of our own body and what becomes accessible to us Wenger, Etienne (1998) *Communities of Practise*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
the result of the process changes students’ experiences and dispositions for making meaning.

Validating design

I argue for a communicative approach to knowledge and learning, which identifies meaning as an intersubjective process, born in the relationship between the individual and society, in semiosis. By doing that I do not regard the individual or the surrounding context as separate entities. But how is that actually considered and staged?

A first important step in being true to the preceding arguments is to make students’ actions the object of analysis. The social collective is the material for communication. Teachers are represented through mediated action in terms of course design (assignments, instructions and guidance) and their low “interference” in dialogue.

A second step towards better validation is taken in the choice of data. Data here is not constructed for research purposes. I do not have to consider the disparity between what people believe or say and what they actually do. Data is, however, constructed by students within the agenda of education. Their communication, digitally registered in these courses, proposes unequal power relations as being normally the case in education.

Data was however produced outside the influence of a research context (sometimes called “naturalistic data”) in the form of the asynchronous communication supporting the two courses, both as smaller working groups and as the general forum from the whole course. Neither students nor teachers were aware that research was to be done on the material after finishing the courses. Permission to use the material was collected after the courses had finished from both students and teachers.

Naturalistic data has some advantages worth mentioning:

• The interaction would have taken place regardless of the study
• Researchers avoid flooding the research with categories and assumptions of the researcher (in the creation of data that is to say, my comment)
• There is an orientation towards the situated practises rather than persons or institutions, avoiding the cognitive reifications of the former and the structural reifications of the latter
• The sequence of interaction is intact, capturing what came before and after action.

(Potter, 2004)

Naturalistic data is also authentic, insofar as it is the actors themselves who produce the material to be analysed.
Possible disadvantages with naturalistic interactional data material could be that certain topics or phenomena are inadequately present at all (Potter, 2004). The non-presence of data might actually also contribute to the analysis in the sense that non-existence is a result in terms of what is regarded by students as important to use in their process.

There is also a risk of reactivity (the impact of recording or registering), since the fact that communication is digitally stored could have an impact on what students choose to communicate and on which style they use. The students are aware that what they write is possible to revisit. These students are two years into the program and have had time to explore conditions for social protocol on-line.

My approach also has similarities with the research methods of hermeneutics and ethnomethodology in its explorative nature and researcher perspective. This study does not have a participator perspective, in terms of searching for explanations and collaboration from informants. The study has its focus, however, on the participators as actively participating in a nexus of practice in the field of higher education. Ethnomethodology is represented by e.g. a problematisation of differences between social practice, occupied in a material world, and social practice mediated through a screen. The focus is on how to understand the virtual social practice through what is familiar to us, although it takes different expressions.

A traditional “thick description” of context associated with ethnography is difficult to achieve on line. But MDA provides the concept of “nexus of practice” instead, which helps me to see the mix of interfering practices.

As a researcher I do not speak for the students in question. I do not try to communicate their point of view. I can only account for their actions and how they might fit into the intrinsic processes of making meaning in an educational program with all its implications.
(Student grupp 8)
6 Analysing data

Uniting Deweyan pragmatism and MDA means obtaining an intersubjective and contextual view of self and society. A consequence is that action becomes the object of study. My purpose with this section is to introduce the reader to the place of action, the context of data, as the settings for the university program studied where all of these aspects interrelate. My wish is also to share representations of the analysing process.

The nexus of interest

There is a challenge when you finally come to the stage of approaching and establishing the empirical data for research. In what way will practicality interfere? Which are the relevant virtual educational practices for my overall aim and how is it possible to identify their important nodes and events in the emerging social and discursive network (Latour, 1998)? This particular time data was presented to me.

WP at Växjö University

Växjö University has an action plan for Widened Participation17 which could be regarded as two-fold. First close co-operation with municipalities and other adult learning institutions are sought, to make access more flexible for students. The program studied here is an example of such an activity.

A second strategy is to develop student care and support systems. An IT-pedagogic studio has opened to serve the need for training university staff and for further IT-related course development.

Educational settings

My interest was steered towards a group of some 150 students in a web-based program at Växjö University, as part of a reaction from their teachers to the massive communication they produced. Questions were

raised about whether and, if so, why student communication needed to be confined. After a quick glance at the material I realised that there were more complex processes going on here than what allowed for "chit-chat" to be separated from "serious course work". This resulted in this PhD project combining "new student groups", "new technology" and "new ways" of distributing education. This communication that I encountered took place two years into the program, which meant that students had adjusted to the specific conditions of the web-based environment.

Fig. 1 shows course placement within the program

Swedish preschool staff represents at least two different categories of employees. Training for preschool teachers is a graduating program. The other category, "child minders", the vocational training takes place at the upper secondary school level. This means that the two categories have different focuses and competences in daily practice and that they possess a different status as well as different responsibilities. The importance of preschool years for children’s development has led to an increased demand for competence among the staff. Child minders as a category therefore risk unemployment and this is probably a major motivation for these students. Students will not necessarily benefit financially from this degree. Växjö University gave a 4-year, 180-credit (ECTS) part-time program, where the child minder category was trained for preschool class. The program was classified as distance education and carried out in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)\(^{18}\) with three physical meetings each semester. For students lacking adequate upper-secondary training as child-minders validation was a possible way into the program, which was used by a small number of students. When the students started the program, they had long experience of working in preschools, but little or no experience of HE or IT-supported environments. At the start of our study students were two years into the program, facing completely new working group constellations based on didactical considerations.

\(^{18}\) WebCT (now blackboard)

78
Institutional frames
The educational context both practises and symbolises powerful censorship for students in terms of the academic language (Morley, 1999). The institutional frames communicate expectations, constraining the space of action for students.
For these courses the study guide and teacher interventions (e.g. instructions for how assignments were organised) comprised the expectations on students to unite in structures and methods for coursework. There were explicit demands expressed in general guidelines on everyone’s active participation in the form of a specified task. These frames built into the course design put pressure on students to find a structure and order for their work and discussion. These organisational frames also supported students’ individual and group representations in different forms, according to existing evaluation criteria. Students were also expected to be familiar with course literature and problem areas associated with the course contents when working with assignments. Time frames were negotiated initially by students and seem in many cases to have been already agreed upon at the physical meeting, probably on the basis of the experience gained from the two previous years in the program.

Course descriptions and objectives
The aim of the whole program was for students to develop the knowledge and skills of relevance for future employment in the preschool. Their current workplace and experience were supposed to constitute the foundation for building new knowledge although their current employer and practice were not actively involved. The different courses were a shared responsibility of different schools at the university and therefore varied greatly. Common to all was a higher scientific level than previously for similar programs. There were also examples of courses where up to 80% of the students failed. Re-exams occurred frequently.
These two courses together, representing 15 ECTS, were developed as a partnership between the School of Education and the School of Social Sciences at Växjö University. An assumption of knowledge as socio-culturally constructed underlined the courses. Efforts were made to show students the importance of interaction and dialogue for their knowledge-building process. Didactical considerations that guided course design were focused on the important role of peers for knowledge-building, the important role of student experiences for assignments and the active involvement of students in the role and consequences of evaluation criteria for courses. The teacher spent a considerable amount of time at the first introductory meeting to introduce, discuss and exemplify assessment criteria and these were referred to continuously in the comments that the teachers made. The different criteria for assessing assignments were
presented as "referring", "reflecting", "adjoining theory and practice", "changing perspectives", "problematising" and "analysing".

Both individual and group assignments were used, sometimes in combination, together with parallel self-evaluation methods, both individually and in groups. Individual assignments always included a social element. For one assignment they had to present two postings a week on articles to include in their individual paper, and for another assignment a group introduction was written by the group together, although each student made individual observations at their workplace and discussed these individually in relation to their mutual introduction and focus.

Experiences from previous web-based programs at the School of Education at Växjö University were integrated into the course design. Student strategies, communication contents and results from similar programs were analysed and presented to these students at the start of the program (see Ahlbäck & Reneland, 2005; Reneland-Forsman & Ahlbäck, 2007). Personally I was not involved in either the planning or the implementation of these particular courses.

These two courses used an explicit scientific and critical perspective. This meant that literature of a more textbook character had been exchanged for scientific articles. There was a higher representation of collaboration among the different schools at the university, which resulted in a higher representation of competence among teachers for the whole program. Theories from different scientific disciplines were to be applied in problematising working practice, including a gender perspective.

The first course was aimed at “students developing the knowledge necessary to identify with and understand how cultural identities and the living conditions of young children are created and formed by different contexts” (Study guide 1, my translation). The courses were structured around three themes:

1. *Representations and conceptions of childhood,*
2. *Children, childhood and life conditions,*
3. *Getting closer to children’s perspectives*

The second course was directly linked to the first by including discussions of consequences of Course 1 for preschool and school.

Instructions for working with the literature were given in a general introductory text:

Work with literature is done through the use of WebCT with the objective for the group to broaden their professional understanding of the course contents. As different concepts and subjects are discussed, a common understanding will develop that demonstrates different perspectives. Discussions help to elaborate your language as the meaning of concepts are discussed, thereby becoming
possible to use throughout the course. This implies that students’ experiences from preschool/school are important and that the course literature is related to pedagogic practice. Literature is of course central to each subject and must be represented in postings and discussions (Study guide 2, p.8, my translation).

All new segments and assignments were introduced in a “reading guide”. This is an example of the introduction to a reading guide:

Representations of childhood

In an earlier assignment you had to define the concept of “children”. The idea is now for you to deepen that problematisation by using a societal perspective and critically examining different representations of children, and how relations are constructed and expressed on the basis of these representations … (Study guide 1, p. 11, my translation)

Teachers from both academic schools shared the supervision of and support to students. The students were divided into groups of 4-6 participants, making a total of 29 groups. The teachers took care of 3-5 groups each. The courses were carried out during a time span of 18 weeks in 2005.

The complete digital communication of 10 groups, the general course discussion forum, 29 group evaluations and the two study guides constitute data for the study. During this period the smallest asynchronous discussion units, the work groups of 4-6 students, produced an average of 396 messages per group (ranging from 189 - 801 messages). The ten groups of 55 students produced 4503 (out of a total of some 12 000) postings during this period.

Fig. 2 shows how group and individual assignments were spread over the courses.
The selection of data

One concern when confiding the data was the possible impact of teachers, which needed to be considered. I therefore made the final selection include a whole unit of groups (5), supervised by the same teacher, which seemed to have an especially high level of interaction in terms of numbers of postings (group 1 – 5). I added one group from every other teacher by just picking the same number from all groups. That gave me 10 groups, or 55 students (Table 1). Variety in representation was the principle guiding my selection, both in terms of a teaching perspective (all groups representing one teacher and all teachers represented), and in terms of numbers of postings (ranging from the lowest to the highest numbers of postings). The whole selection came to include the groups with the largest and those with the lowest number of postings.

Table 1, showing the number of contributions by individuals and teachers during the two courses, (18 weeks).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Ind 1</th>
<th>Ind 2</th>
<th>Ind 3</th>
<th>Ind 4</th>
<th>Ind 5</th>
<th>Ind 6</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>481</td>
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<td>107</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>44</td>
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<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>114</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>446</td>
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<td>67</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>318</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>468/4503</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closing in on communication

It is the actions students take in an educational context that represent and hold the original research interest for me. The refining of the research questions and the chiselling of method has, however, taken place when confronting these communicative actions. New methodological alternatives have appeared necessary. Sometimes they have forced me back to a study of theory on phenomena that were not visible initially. It has been a true expedition. As an example I had to discontinue the qualitative analysis two years into my study to get myself a quantitative picture of things not visible in the qualitative analysis. That is how I came to identify individuals diverting from the group norm, which led to
interesting results about drop-outs. Once identified, I could resume my initial qualitative analysis with a deeper understanding. My focus changed as new types of relations and further insights into their conditions were revealed to me.

Language hides as much as it reveals and that implies a need of a variety of data and methods. The notion of context as interfering calls for a richer ethnographic description of data. A coherent analysis is also necessary, where actions preceding and following postings are studied (as discussion threads or as chronological events compared). I first made an open analysis by reading through the material. Semiotic actions were identified and the work to establish the orientations of these actions started.

In positioning themselves students act to be seen, heard and acknowledged, a prerequisite for being able to act within the group. This "casting" process was oriented towards establishing a base for a joint project. “Casting” as a noun can point at something “being formed by a mould”, as well as “the careful choice of actors”\[19\] and also the “throwing of a fishing line”. These are all useful metaphors for what went on. Individuals adjusted to the smaller working groups, established roles and “baits” and were presented to the other group members. A foundation was negotiated by students which represented a set of shared values, beliefs and experiences, forming a group culture for communicating.

I have tried to find different ways to account for the situated character of the production and interpretation of postings. By postings I refer to whole chunks of texts produced by one student on one occasion. Students added a subject as a heading and postings were identified by date and time. In some cases the relation between postings needed to be accounted for to add validity to analyses.

For practical reasons I have sometimes chosen not to quote, or just to quote partially without the possibility to show the full line of quotings relating to each other. I made all the translations as a last step after finishing with the analyses. For substantial quotes the original Swedish is to be found in an appendix. The vast amount of data prevents me from presenting quotes in their context too frequently, but hopefully this presentation will give the reader a better insight into the analysing process at the stage before the results are presented.

Since my main interest is showing processes, neither individuals nor groups are in focus. I have, however, chosen to mark quotations (from the asynchronous discussion) by group numbers, to show their origin. That would make a control of the variety and broadness of data in terms of group representation easier. The numbers of the groups are changed to avoid identification. When there is a point in following an individual reasoning, this is indicated.

My intentions have been to use quoted text verbatim, but since the quotes have been translated from Swedish into English (as a last stage...
after the completion of the analysis), corrections have been made. Spelling mistakes have been lost in the process and some grammatical and syntactical corrections have been made when necessary for comprehension. The quotes from the asynchronous discussion are presented in their original character, (Courier). Quotes from secondary data, like group evaluations or study guides, are presented in the Times font to bear in mind the different contexts of data and show them to the reader as they appeared to group members and me.

**Semiotic actions**

I have approached these 18 weeks of on-line discussion within a university program in an explorative way. The two courses were already finalised and the material just “sat” on a server. It was extensive (over 10,000 postings in the discussion group alone).

My first step of analysis was to get a picture of what was going on in communication. This was done by just reading the printouts of the asynchronous communication as PDF files from the VLE. These printouts had the same interface as the actual digital environment. I then started making field notes.

Guiding this initial analysis were the key concepts of MDA (meditational means, nexus of practices and sites of engagement). They supplied me with questions like: What kind of action is mediated here? What means seem to accomplish this action? What other practices seem to be interfering? What kind of impact do they seem to have on the communication? Where are the sites of engagement and how are they distributed in time?

Manifestations in language were categorised as types of action. The categorisation of actions was formed after several readings of the material and the field notes. Categories of interest for intersubjective meaning-making, semioses, are shown in Table 2 (following) together with their manifestations in language.

---

20 Common in on-line communication
Table 2 showing semiotic actions identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of action</th>
<th>Expressed as</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-action</td>
<td>silence, avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acts of pointing”</td>
<td>references</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declarations</td>
<td>acts of presence, interest, expectations, promises, ambitions, rhetoric, personal views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deliveries</td>
<td>drop-offs expected by peers and teachers (observations, reflections, conclusions, confidences, answers, questions, arguments, definitions, contextual cues, introductions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>challenges</td>
<td>invitations, openings, questions, regrets, rejections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confirmations</td>
<td>acknowledgments, concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closures</td>
<td>agreements, changes of subject, signing-offs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here follows an attempt to make visible some of these actions in the communicative practice in which the postings have been created and interpreted by students in communication. It is taken from Group 1, the one with the most extensive communication (801 messages).

All groups just met briefly at the end of the weekend at the university. This thread started on Monday morning when students were back at work. The lengthy quotes with a reference number are all found in their Swedish original in the appendix.

(Q1) Hi everybody!

I have to admit that I thought it was a little nervous to change groups, I had already changed three times before and I thought that I had just landed and then, here we go again. Then I was worried because all of you seemed so fantastically efficient so I felt: oh oh, this is not going to be easy. I especially thought of the project we did last course when some of you had finished before the summer break. My group
was out at the last minute - but we had fun meanwhile - and above all, we finished in time (but not in good time)...

(In the middle passage that follows here the writer praised one of the lecturers at their weekend meeting and referred to his lecture on group dynamics where she found support for feeling anxious about changing groups. She then shared a story of a small breakdown once home, facing an accident her daughter had had while she (the mother) was away at the university and then she rounds off with:

...I just had to take a look at our own new page to "check" if discussions were already going on - but to my surprise - I was the first one here. Take care and I will get back with some thoughts on the first assignment when I have finished thinking, Take care all new friends, Hug Tina

This posting is important, as it is a good example of represented presence. The student acted through language to show presence and to contribute to group culture. Tina was first on stage in her group after a course introduction weekend on campus. She delivered confidences (about nervousness and disappointment). There were declarations and unspoken promises of ambition. She referred to the lecture on group dynamics and connected theories presented at the lecture to her own reaction to switching groups. Closure signals were of an intimate kind, including a wish to be taken aboard - a hug.

The same student was responsible also for the next posting in time, two hours later, and now she had become oriented towards the task by creating a new thread (with the purpose of commenting on articles). This posting was to a large extent represented by deliveries in relation to teacher expectations and her earlier promises of ambitions – see I can be trusted! A stage had been opened for discussion. She named the thread by the task - week principle. (The first social thread she called "Hi my new group"). She now delivered arguments and summaries related to two different articles. Her closure was still made in an intimate and friendly way, although it was a task-oriented contribution.

Different ways of representing data

Let us continue to use Group 1 as an example. On the afternoon of day two, group member number two, Anna, enters the stage after the two initial postings by Tina. Anna uses the social thread (“Hi my new group”) created by Tina and acknowledges her personally by saying:

(Q2) Hi Tina (and the rest of you by all means!)
I agree with you that the weekend in Växjö was pretty demanding, you were ready to go home after the exam, weren't you 😊

Missed the 2 last lectures unfortunately, my colleague that I travel together with, had a bad headache and wanted to drive home and crawl under the covers and just sleep, not much to do about that, but I hope that the hand-outs from the lectures will be available in WebCT.

I am glad to hear that it all turned out well for your daughter in spite of everything, Tina.

Time to help my daughter, she has located the ice-cream machine so I had better go and save my newly cleaned kitchen 😊

All the best. Regards Anna / (group 1)

Anna’s posting appears to be an act of showing presence. She also made declarations of ambitions (“I hope the hand-outs from the lectures will be available”) and of humour by using a smiley. She confirmed the right to feel worn-out and anxious in relation to new groups – new tasks. There were signs of a nexus here the way she introduces the facts of life (being dependent on fellow students for rides that might have interfered with her own plans and she tells us that she is a mother and clearly states this as a priority at this stage. This student hinted at a site of engagements in the future although it was not opened yet, “there are notes”, “I can be trusted”, “I am ambitious and know my way around WebCT”. She confirmed the culture of letting family and everyday concerns be part of this group culture. Anna’s closure was friendly but more formal.

These two initial messages together formed a foundation for a group culture. We learned that the students were two mothers that took parenting as well as the course seriously.

Half an hour later number two, Anna, was back with a posting in the assignment thread where she confirmed Tina’s interpretation of the assignment. Her last sentence was a contribution to the negotiation of a common ground for the assignment – a draft for a contract. She then challenged the other group members in that she and Tina had agreed upon an interpretation of the task. She also delivered a contextual cue placing her on a geographical map. And so communication continued by all members making an entrance. The last member to enter (number 5) did so on day three from when discussions started (14 messages later). She used the first social thread (“Hi my new group”) and focused on sorting things out that she seemed to think might be in the way of a fruitful interaction.
(Q3) Hi everybody!

I agree and feel that it took me some days to fully start after the very hectic weekend. I also felt good about the group and it was nice to be able to sit down and talk even if I felt pretty empty at that time, so it wasn't lack of interest on my part if anyone got that message. Of course I was concerned about changing groups, I have been in a group in which the majority has stayed since we started and it worked very well. I thought about what I said about finishing before the holiday, which was not meant to put a pressure on anyone in this group. But of course, I think it is better to take on a heavier workload in the beginning and possibly have a calm period later. But I am flexible and will adjust to whatever circumstances. I think this group will work very well together too. Take care, hug, Ylva

All group members had now entered the stage. While the group had been waiting for everyone to join in, articles were discussed and the others wrote presentations of themselves on an invitation from Anna, all in day 1.

When analysing students' meaning-making processes in relation to the course contents I have also used a condensed way of presenting data. I have applied it here on a contrasting example of how another group starts their on-line interaction. This group is from the same cluster (the responsibility of the same teacher) and starts off in a very different way in terms of contents and semiotic signals. It takes six days before all members have entered the group. The first message in the group is clearly task-oriented with no social talk or contextual clues:

Hi all! Here's my first contribution ...

Student number two also entered without any social phrases and did not sign off at all. This is consistent down the line.

(Q4) When reading this article (mentioned in heading, my comment) I can only think of how strong our children will become and what a conscious generation will come to take care of us when we get old, so lovely and positive! Imagine a life-project of being a child! It wasn't so idyllic before with
children getting beaten, incest and alcoholism at home. Children today have no experience of what we call an idyllic childhood and from what we know they will probably call theirs idyllic.

As a reader you have been able to follow two examples of initial communication in groups. Field notes helped in identifying actions as spoken and unspoken meanings. Original quotes are also presented in the next chapter, although not so frequently. When discussions start and postings represent 3-800 words, a condensed method is used to present long threads of extensive postings when necessary. The above quote (Q4) is here presented in a condensed form.

Student number two:
- delivered a non-specified reference, a reflection on the consequences of today’s methods of upbringing in a positive sense, an introduction to a child’s perspective
- confirmed the complexity of “idyllic”

In this section I have tried to make visible the communicative practice in which the postings have been created and interpreted by students and how I have worked with identifying actions going on.

**The orientation of actions as themes**

The students’ idea of what kind of discursive activity they are involved in affects their actions. Two years into the program, students have had time to adjust to academic expectations and technology and this will of course influence the nature of communication. Students knew their way around the platform and communicative patterns in this data are likely to differ from those at the start of the program or from periods following the one accounted for here.

A search for intersubjective meaning-making demands a next step after identifying actions and their manifestations. I needed to try to establish the orientations of student actions. These orientations are here presented as themes. Themes are based on plausibility, clusters, the use of metaphors and simple counting (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These four themes, “participation”, “positioning”, “reference” and “a changing experience” also constitute the structure for presenting the results.

The analysing process can be summarised as follows:

1. initial reading
2. the creation of field notes from following readings
3. the identification of semiotic actions, and finally,
4. the establishment of themes, representing the orientations of semiotic actions.
"På min förskola har vi flera invandrarbarn där familjen har en helt annan bakgrund än den vi är vana vid. När vi har inskolningssamtal med dessa föräldrar har vi ett helt annat upplägg. I stället för att komma med en massa information om vår förskola vid vårt första möte, frågar vi i stället om deras bakgrund, hur de har kommit hit vad de har varit med om, deras kultur och tradition. Genom att visa intressera för deras bakgrund lär vi känna familjen och därmed har vi lättare att möta dem utifrån deras livssituation och upplevelser av värden precis som det står i häftet. För hur gärna man än vill så är det svårare att inta ett perspektivseende när man möter någon med så olika erfarenheter.

Dessa samtal brukar vara givande och intressanta och genom att vi visar intresse och ställer frågor brukar vi få mycket bra kontakt som vi sedan bygger vidare på. De allra flesta berättar gärna om sina upplevelser och delar med sig av sina erfarenheter till oss”.

Kram M” (Student grupp 1)
7 Results

The orientations of students’ actions formed discursive patterns. Among these patterns I have searched for actions that point towards changes and breaks in communication. These changes and breaks are here presented together with examples. The presentation of results is organised according to previously introduced themes of orientations in actions.

Actions are both presented as original threads of postings and in a condensed form. The thick descriptions are meant to create meaning and context for the more complex, intersubjective processes.

In the next chapter, “Concluding summary”, the up-coming results are analysed as semiosis that is intersubjectively negotiated meaning. I show their potential as transforming students’ actions and perspectives in meaning-making when confronting course work and assignments.

Participation

Some discursive patterns occur more frequently at different stages in communication. I start by accounting for actions oriented towards participation, as moments in communication and as representations of motives presented by students in their group evaluations. These patterns were common during the first days of communication but also during work with group evaluations and during intensive periods of re-exams that occurred at the second half of these courses.

Accepting the challenge

There were different aspects of participation to consider when studying the material. Two years into the program the students had already accepted the challenge this program posed to their lives and careers. In facing these two new courses costs were high in terms of health and wellbeing for themselves and their families. There was also the risk of failure, not being able to take on the two new courses when struggling with re-exams. Loyalties at work were jeopardised, as they needed to prioritise studying for another two years. Students sometimes shared stories of colleagues showing little or no understanding of their situation. Their colleagues’ lack of understanding, as perceived by the students, is
both present as unspoken meanings in their communication and explicitly expressed in their group evaluations.

Motivation for students was still an important factor in terms of how the course design was able to maintain and create their motivation and make participating feel worthwhile. The students had recently completed two courses that they criticised for their low relevance, as they saw it. A majority of them were facing re-exams. They were forced into complete new working constellations. These new courses needed to pay off.

The advantages of shared objectives and life and working situations were expressed by all groups and probably had an affect on the process of forming a community. A common goal, to obtain the status of teachers for preschool class, was shared, accepted and articulated by all students, although feelings were mixed about how their employers had been dealing with their situation.

What unites us first hand is our need for development through studying. This need is luckily fulfilled through acknowledgement, a sense of belonging and feeling important together with others in a group. (from group evaluation).

Support from municipalities materialised as course literature for some students. Some had a more continuous evaluation with their employer, resulting in an occasional decrease in working hours during some course periods. But for a majority of students, studying at this program was something they did on top of everything else like nursing a baby or getting a call from the police about mischievous teenage children or even losing a parent – all events mentioned in communication.

Students testified that child-minders were of no interest to their employer for the future and that they sensed this. Many of them had from time to time considered further training but circumstances had never been "right".

My municipality works to enhance pedagogical competence, and they want preschool trained staff first hand. I am so glad I started this program, which I feel is very rewarding. Of course I have been ready to throw in the towel now and then, but the advantages are bigger, no doubt about that. (group 1)

This program and the interest the students sensed from the university and in some cases from their employer seemed to be the push they needed. All groups in this study gave voice to a longing to change their status and move on to new professional roles. Not only from the risk of being marginalised at the workplace in the future. Their long experience

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21 I identified three municipalities (out of 7) supporting the students with course literature, buying and stocking it.
and (still) positive identity as child-minders spurred them to look for enhanced competence and responsibilities coming from studying, seeing knowledge as empowering their situation, not only from an economic point of view. The following are some quotes from students from the early days of the course and the period of working with group evaluations.

No one in my closest family has taken part in Higher Education or studied at university. I never thought I would either.

...it (getting access to program, my comment) was like winning Lotto I thought. There was no return, if you wanted to keep your job you had to board the train for departure, especially since I didn't think that we would ever get that chance again.

I've experienced hard times at the beginning but thanks to support from the group and others around me I am still here and I am grateful for that today. Even if it is very tough now and then, it is very rewarding.

I have always had a wish for further training as a preschool teacher but never got around to it, when the children were small it never felt realistic.

Some students expressed that they wanted to be role models - for children and colleagues. They wanted to represent what they considered a more accurate and positive picture of school and school activities, which could help to change attitudes towards school and studying. They saw themselves as being role models already. They believed that being students themselves and talking about it when working with children would help to change expectations and attitudes to studying. They expressed that they could show that education was "fun and important". "You don't need a degree for that but it helps being a living example", as one group chose to express it in their evaluation.

In Study guide 1, available through the VLE and distributed to all students at the first meeting, the teachers started by presenting course objectives and relating them to preschool policy documents. Students’ personal life histories were there described as the foundation for critical thinking and meaning-making in the course. The text was relatively clear
about what was expected of the students. The text also acknowledged the everyday puzzle of studying.

In the text the teachers linked the degree of on-line activity in a group to the group’s knowledge production and results. Students’ private and social networks, as well as the role of peers, were described as important for the quality of their work and their chances of completing the course.

It is important to notice that the instructions did not limit previous experiences to preschool-related experiences. This was noticeable in different contexts in the study guide. The text on course evaluation, for instance, carried a notion of recognising what students brought with them into the course context. Evaluation was described as an on-going process with the aim that "the course in the best way possible shall listen to students and use their viewpoints to, if necessary, change course structure to best serve the student group in question" (Study guide 1, my translation).

The course design also added perspectives from previous courses in the program. Teachers communicated a will to supply complementary instructions for students who failed at their first attempts, in order for them to develop their work and pass the exam. The criteria for differentiating grades were also presented. All assignments and the related literature were introduced in the text and also inserted in an overall planning for the whole course together with a week-by-week instruction.

At an early stage the teachers made a lengthy comment in the general course forum about the character of the emerging discussions. They praised the activity, in general supporting terms. They commented on how literature was processed and the directions the discussions were taking. This was followed by a more specific feedback. The teachers raised a finger of warning by commenting on the role of personal opinions and feelings for developing a critical perspective. They pointed to the risk of students failing to question preconceptions and their origin.

Some questions on administrative and organisational matters were posted by students at the start of Course 1 in the general course forum. The students shared the information they owned as a collective and answered some of these questions themselves. The general course forum was also used by students for the logistics of the course literature that was being supplied by the municipalities.

**Signs of being**

A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a place where you negotiate and create your own and shared space, primarily by logging in. To log in is a necessary action to be able to see and hear. To be seen and to be heard, however, demand some kind of communicative action.

Although oriented towards a physical protocol, these students have not developed or applied so many of the known means of compensating for the loss of non-verbal cues, often associated with young net-cultures (see
Svenningsson, 2002). They show some awareness in commenting on the unintentional use of CAPITAL LETTERS. They also showed the need to agree with previous speakers, actions equivalent to nods and eye contact. Communication was narrative and lengthy in character. As such, the communication studied agrees with research on asynchronous discussion groups or bulletin boards that show a language style more similar to written language, where the pace of the author rules the production of messages (Sveningsson, 2001). There are plenty of humorous references to the contents of a previous course, which I regard as a type of bonding and a test of loyalties. Humorous moves in conversation are regarded as having important implications for the building of relationships (Keating and Egbert, 2004).

The experiences students had had during the first two years of the program had prepared them for how the unexpectedness of life might interfere with course work. This might be the reason why they showed trust and support in terms of the ambitions and achievements of other group members. There seemed to be some special conditions, though. Receiving trust and support from other group members seemed to be related to how group culture and autonomy were established.

The forming of group culture started with students confirming each other in messages. These postings often seemed to have no obvious substance. Initial communication seemed to be oriented towards presence and ambitions, as we just saw examples of in the previous chapter. Students used words like “true” and “sure”. They expressed careful and almost humble attitudes in adjoining the others: “You lot seemed so ambitious”, “I'm nervous about changing groups”. There were promises of things to come but the substance and initiated articulations were still missing. These messages showed signs of trying out the level of ambition. Are we to join forces and for what purposes?

(Q5) Hi!!!

When I saw that some of you had already written something, my thought was that oh you lot are so ambitious to have started contributing already. But at the same time it was nice to see that you were not too persistent.

Really nice to hear from you. Meanwhile Mona
(group 4)

A first phase of positioning slowly moved into a process of “casting”, where members moved on to negotiate expectations, explicit or implicit roles and to draw up contracts for forming a group. These are quotes from all groups.
Do you feel the same?
I see it your way...
It was quite extensive although easy to read
I thought X's lecture was fantastic...
I'm not sure I have understood the assignment...
I think the subject is both interesting and important
I think you’re right, otherwise we are two lost souls...
The texts were a bit tricky
I am not always so quick at turning my thoughts into words or analysing so I can get stressed if everything is to be done at the last minute
If we take on this challenge, expecting everyone to feel responsible and contribute ....
Hope you understand my writing, find it difficult to express myself in text

These negotiations were visible throughout the material. Trust and support were shown from the start but had to be continuously earned.

Positioning

The concept of positioning is used for representations in actions oriented towards issues of roles and identities and for showing presence and activity.

Introducing me

The students had a brief opportunity to meet their new groups at the end of the introduction weekend. The meeting was in some cases referred to. Mostly this was done indirectly by dropping contextual cues in the text. Dropping contextual cues might also have contributed to a sense of belonging, building upon the meeting as a shared experience but also supplying information for those who were not there, re-creating the context. Open references to the meetings were made by groups where all students had been present. The cues seemed to address identity issues, what students wanted to be associated with in terms of material and
geographical aspects. Unarticulated meanings like “I am the one with five kids, remember?” or “I am the one who had horses you know” or “I am the one who likes to be well prepared”. This information is not “spoken” on-line but hinted at through these contextual cues.

I call this careful construction of shared context “fly-bys”. The students showed up on line but were not yet fully present. This process started as soon as the students were back at home or their workplace, Sunday night for some of them, but most commonly during Monday, the first official day of work at the new course.

Subject: Testing
Hi girls!
I have nothing to write about the literature yet but I wanted to check out the site. Bye Bye !!
Best regards Mona (group 4)

Subject: About: Testing
Hi there!
In the summerheat.../Sara (group 4)

Flying by means that you can both “show” yourself and drop something off, a promise or a sign of ambition or declarations by pointing to sites of engagement in the future, promises and signs of ambitions or geographical contexts, as we will see later.

Hi there!
Just wanted to check out our new site. How are you doing reading the "thin" compendium?
We’ll speak later on discussions...have a nice day
/Best regards Lotten (group 3)

Hi girls! I will start reading the compendium today and hope to come up with some good ideas for postings. This feels like a pretty reasonable task! Cheers!/
Claire (group 3)

The two postings above could be regarded as acts in negotiating a group culture. Lotten added citation marks to “thin” to show irony and thereby
tried out the others’ reaction to this. Would they agree and join her in regarding the articles to be too many? Claire, however, declared her view: This feels like a pretty reasonable task!

Time is an interesting concept here. It seemed important to show occupation with course work or to look for sympathy and understanding even though not logged in. Small dispatch notes were quickly followed by a contribution only a short time after, minutes sometimes.

(Q6) Hi girls...
Unfortunately I do not think that I can deliver both my weekly postings tonight, since I have been occupied in mind ...(Dad’s done a by-pass operation today, so I have been nervous about this.) But I will do my best...
/Mia
(group 9)

One hour later, however, Mia produced a lengthy contribution (417 words) to the discussion on schools, children and society in a historical perspective. Posting a short excuse or a remark that was followed only minutes later by a contribution was an often-repeated pattern.

The negotiation of group culture
Groups initially coped with the creation of a foundation for acting and addressing the course subject differently. This first illustration is related to group autonomy specifically and starts with an example from group 5. Communication started on a Monday (the first day back from the weekend at the university) with no social talk or contextualisation of postings, just up-front postings on articles with no signing-off, other than sometimes just the name of the student.

On Friday, ending the first week, one group member delivered four postings on articles, all according to instructions in the study guide. She delivered comments on another group member’s posting before creating a new thread on Saturday morning, naming it “Weekend off”.

(Q7) Hi everybody! I am taking the weekend off, going away with my husband. It feels necessary after all this studying lately. You'll hear from me next week.
Have a nice weekend! /Bodil
(group 5)

This posting was not responded to. Its content was not referred to in any other postings or threads. This was a group that started their communication with up-front postings on articles, without greeting the
group or any specific member. There were a few more groups doing this but they were a minority. Group 5 did not sign off in any of their postings, which all totally lacked contextual cues. There were no signs of negotiating a group culture. Silence and non-acting seemed to define this up-coming situation (of going away) as being outside their mandate to act upon. Eleven postings followed this one (Q6) but without reference to it. Then the teacher intervened and took over the authoritative role by giving guidance on the necessity of having a healthy balance between course work and private time. After this incident the students started to add social content to postings, greeting each other and even adding presentations two months into communication.

In a contrasting example a member of group 2 started group communication by a long personal posting on headaches and a heavy work-load. She talked about the need to go away over the weekend with her husband. She had, however, not yet delivered any course-related postings as Bodil had. This posting was responded to the next morning by another group member:

(Q8) Hi Carol!

I absolutely think that you should go along to the country this weekend and not put pressure on yourself in terms of studying right now. Tread more slowly after the exam, which I think we all experienced as tough to prepare for and give yourself a break and a chance to recover. I think we all agree that it's been difficult to "recharge" for a new course and that it doesn't matter whether our postings or comments occasionally appear a little later than agreed upon when we met, that was just to have some guidelines to avoid a heavy workload later on. Things can turn up for anyone of us, making us late with postings and that's OK as long as we are aware of the reasons for it.

Take care Carol and hopefully you'll get some help with your headaches.

Hug from Marie

(group 2)

The other group members followed this protocol by sharing their personal life at the same time as they contributed to the discussion. This group produced 19 postings altogether on the Friday, introducing the weekend when Carol was going away. They addressed the whole group or a particular member to support them and signed off in a personal way, sometimes with a "hug". They separated the character of postings by
using different headings or discussion threads. All course work postings were introduced and contextualised, though.
This was their first posting on course work, starting the discussion:

(Q 9) Hi!
Hope all is well with you. I have had some problem to "reset" and start working seriously with this new course. After the weekend (course introduction at university, my comment) it felt like you just wanted to relax for a while but I guess it's time to start all over and the course seems like great fun and interesting, so I'm sure it will be very good. By the way, I am happy to end up in this group in particular, you were all so positive and inspiring so I think we will have some good and fun time together and be able to do some good collaborative work too.

Now time for my contribution, I have started to read the articles and ... "
(group 2)

Group 2 differed in terms of how they regarded their mandate to act. They were the responsibility of the same teacher as group 5 and had therefore received the same information and introduction. Group number 2 had started their communication in a very different way, negotiating a group culture. The different character of communication might have helped them to cope on their own with a situation that was not specifically addressed by the study guide. Group 5, on the other hand, needed the authority of the teacher to address the situation. After group 5 changed the style of communication to include more social talk, no help from the teacher was needed again.

There were several examples of an unspoken meaning of “sharing” as a condition for membership. Sharing then included more than explicitly course work-related matters. These students bonded through both praise and criticism. Since an unusual high degree of students were facing re-exams, preparing for these were draining them of energy, adding anxiety to the group process. Humorous remarks or cries for sympathy were common in relation to these other courses and seemed to work as a kind of bonding.

Out of the group of 55 closely studied students four did not finish any of the two courses studied here. These four all represented the youngest students in their groups. When looking closer at groups where one individual in particular diverted from the average amount of communication (see Table 1), it turned out that these students were preparing for a re-exam or waiting passively for the results. The diverting focus created by re-exams seemed to cause more dropouts than did
problems of a technical nature. Probably due to this shared experience of the previous courses that many of them had not passed yet, students were supportive and tolerant as far as low contribution periods were concerned. This tolerance however, seemed to be connected to students’ will to share their concerns with the group.

Here is one example where one group member with significant low participation overall gave her understanding of the term "context" in reference to a phenomenon founded in educational theory. When she then related it to an example from practice you could see that she had not fully understood the concept. She sensed this and added a remark at the end of her posting:

...I'm not sure I have understood "contextualisation" cause I haven't heard it before. Let me know if you think I'm all wrong.

Sometimes postings fill the function of rhetorical thinking - a meta reflection helping the student to answer a question herself. This was more common during individual assignment periods where you can see students carrying out discussions with themselves. This posting, however, expressed only doubt and you did not get the feeling that she was onto something herself. None of the group members addressed her concern of not understanding the theoretical term. This student did not get any attention or response to this message, until later in the process when she expressed doubts whether she should show up at the mid-term physical meeting at all. She hesitated to be part of the group presentation, since she felt she had not contributed in the same way as the others. It was only then, when she shared the reasons for her low activity and her fears of failing the re-exam with the other group members, that she got the group's attention. In this case it was too late, the student never understood “context” in this context and later dropped the program.

Reference

Reference as a theme represents the orientations of language in practice. Where in their nexus of practices did students direct their focus when struggling with course contents and the reading of articles? Where did they go for their examples, or to test theory or challenge established concept or views, and how did they focus their attention on the organisational aspects of the courses? And how did they re-create a shared context.

A changing focus

Having showed up in the VLE was followed by a series of “touchdowns”. Touchdowns were postings where the students declared their present site
of engagement as still being outside the course context. The postings seemed to fill the function of an open window towards the group. Posting showed interest and presence, although people were doing other things at the moment

(Q10) Hi!

Haven’t even looked at something remotely related to studies today. Done some cleaning and then we had a birthday party with near and dear ones. I enjoy a break. I think it feels great with you guys and look forward to working together. “See you” Birgitta (group 6)

Some postings into the course communication changed from just showing an interest but doing other things to a change in priorities, or signs of commitment:

(Q11) I just wanted to tell you that I sat down with a migraine, after a 8-yr birthday party, thinking – oh I just have to get through this.. (reply to your postings). And imagine, here I am wide-awake and happy! Reading your postings was inspiring, interesting and well worthwhile. It actually feels pretty good to write one's thoughts out of the system and get some feedback too. Good night, me and this head of mine are off to bed /Christina (group 7)

(Q 12) I am reading now too! The articles are so interesting. They take me on an exciting, but sometimes tough, trip to my inner self. What's my foundation, the one I build my knowledge from and what do I construct? My job at preschool becomes more serious, important and demanding. I feel so small, so small, so small...

   Tomorrow is Friday! We have a loooong weekend before us...

   (group 3)
This takes time! Haven't had time for anything else but course work on this my day off, but the dirty washing and the dust angels aren't going anywhere, they are patiently waiting for me to finish this. ☺

Linn.

(group 8)

These signs of commitment tell us that they have now opened this site and that commitment is on the way.

After establishing shared learning objects with the help of the study guide, negotiation started around ways to identify, express, and describe phenomena related to learning objects – to establish analytical tools. For many groups this was an articulated, on-going meta-cognitive process.

(Q14) The Pygmalion Effect”, a new word for me, but its meaning I've come across before. It's often like that, during the course you get access to a new language, to be able to put words to old experiences

(group 3)

(Q15) I have recently changed workplaces and it takes time to land; to get a place in the team and get to know the children. But I feel that I grow from reading the literature, it makes me want to question and change things. I am starting to develop my competence...

(group 1)

(Q16) I think that what enriches our discussions is that we can look at things differently. It is easy to regard something in a specific way but when you get to share someone else's thoughts you can start thinking and understanding things differently and that makes it possible to broaden your horizon I think. Nothing’s all wrong or right, eh... Best regards

(group 2)

**Process and products**

There were indications of both a system and a process orientation of actions in student communication.

The naming of discussion threads revealed different strategies for tackling the assignment. In some groups like group 1, which had the richest communication (801 postings), social and course content threads
were separated at the beginning. There was one social thread started, communicating expectations, anxiety and an ambition to be seen ("Hi my new group") and a parallel thread created by the same person at the same time, named by task and week number. Both threads generated around 12 postings over the same days. All threads onwards were named after themes in the discussion.

In other groups there was a noticeable system orientation in terms of headings. Contributions were named after the person making them and the number of the week. “Sara’s posting week 36”, “Sara’s posting w 37”. This was probably related to the expectations of the teachers and a way of for students to show peers and teachers that they had fulfilled their part. The personal identification and connection to week numbers of course made the control of individual contributions easier to perform.

The character of communication showed many signs of a process-oriented communication as opposed to a more instrumental product orientation. The students had 20 days to produce the first group assignment. Table 3 illustrates how many postings were made before students first mentioned the assembling of discussions into a paper product. The number of days ranged from 5 to as many as 12 days of discussions before the groups focused their attention explicitly on the group paper by mentioning the paper or the organisation of work. Half of the groups (5) worked for 10 days or more with the contents before they made any kind of reference to the end product, which is half of the number of days bound for this particular task.

The fact that students spent a considerable time discussing subject related issues must be considered worthy of notice and not a probable outcome for campus student seminars. This table also shows us how grades were distributed among the groups for the first group assignment that was studied here and suggests once and for all that the number of postings is probably not a good health indicator for an asynchronous discussion forum, as also suggested by Mazzolini and Maddison (2007).
Table 3. Comparisons among student groups of the number of postings the students made before they first mentioned the end product, the total number of postings, the number of days before the first mentioning of the end product, and the grade assigned to the group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Postings before mentioning end product</th>
<th>Total number of postings</th>
<th>Days before mentioning end product</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>801</td>
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* equivalent with G, ** equivalent with VG

Contextualising postings

Other practices were referred to in different ways. When students were to deliver something, the most common way to do this was by introducing the reader to something of the context of producing the posting. Early on in communication cues on geographical whereabouts, health or distracting events were used. Sometimes these had just the character of making a careful start, other times these cues might have been directed at how peers should understand the context of production and therefore bear it in mind when reading. During intense periods of discussions, introducing deliveries were often made by acknowledging a peer who had commented on the same phenomenon.

This is an example from early on in communication when the student was about to drop something off for the first time.
Hi everybody!

Had a nice day off this warm late summer’s day, have read the articles and am here sharing some of my thoughts on article content...

(group 7)

Here the introduction is made by supplying circumstances for producing the text.

Thought I'd try a posting on infantile adults but my cold makes it difficult to think...

(group 6)

Hi all! I am sorry if I have been silent these last few days, but my family and myself have been in Varberg where we have our caravan. Here is my second posting, I will comment on yours later tonight...

(group 3)

Less common was getting straight to the point.

_article: Negotiating families: A description. I think it strengthens children to negotiate, I really think children of today challenge us...

(group 9)

Here the student used the heading to indicate the concept she has chosen to discuss, but the posting is in no other way embedded into a context for writing it or greeting the group.

**Signs of a Nexus**

In terms of practices, students explicitly oriented themselves towards

- the field of education
- the context of the university program
- parenting as supplying experience
- parenting as things diverting their focus
- being a student
- their own every-day practice
- preschool generally – as a field of practice
- preschool generally – as research

When new themes were introduced, students often started by associating to their own children or specific situations or routines at their preschool. The following illustration is a collection of comments from group 1 on the same article to illustrate how different practices come into
focus. The article is one of 7 illustrating the first theme of the “Representations of children and childhood” course and problematises different perspectives on the concept of “care” related to preschool activities. The first student went directly to discussing “care” in terms of what she experienced during a recent reform on how many hours at preschools siblings were allowed when parents were at home caring for a new baby.

(Q17) ...As we understood it the biggest source of irritation among parents were that their children did not get lunch at preschool. Do you not eat during daytime as an adult? Personally I enjoy eating in peace and quiet with only my family around without having to cut up food, feed, help, explain, wipe up, answer the telephone and at the same time try to eat something myself. A “pedagogic lunch” at a toddlers’ section gives me at least a belly-ache...

(group 1)

A couple of hours later another student confirmed this example and added one herself.

(Q18) The examples you give are common among us too and as late as last week we had a mother who was very irritated that we had an excursion on her day off. But you can take your children to the woods yourself. No, I don’t know what you will look at and then it might not be the same...(the parent answered, my comment)

On the following day this thread moved into a more general perspective on care related to preschool...

(Q19) I think that care and learning go together. The author writes that care means to help with very basic things like food, dressing and bedtime routines. It involves the body. Everything around children is important isn’t it, not just learning from books like mathematics...

Here followed a passage where she expressed her view that everything they do at preschool involves learning but in a much more intimate way... She then rounded up:
especially when you see the joy in their eyes from having accomplished something themselves.

The next student introduced a historical perspective, on care in the interest of whom, which later changed to discussing the concept of “Curling parents”22.

Changing from preschool specifically to preschool generally seemed to be a critical point in communication. Here it was done by conceptualising “care” with the help of the article and the follow-up by the historical reference – care in whose interest.

A changing experience

Looking at the results of the communication, the overall impression is positive. Communication was generally supportive and respectful. It seems like having a common understanding of what they shared as a group helped the students to distance themselves from personal views and experiences. But of course there were nuances to consider. I will here try to share moments of reification, when concepts “materialise” to students and become accessible for communication and reflection.

How communication came to develop was the result of a complex web of interactions. The following is an example of a posting I referred to as “empty”. It just sits there with general thoughts without specific references. As far as we understand, this student could have produced this posting without having read the course literature. When following the communication more closely, this turned out to be a very active and productive group member. This posting was probably delivered as a sign of presence, making the discussion look active and alive.

(Q20) You often say that things used to be better and that might be true to some extent, but there is constant progress and you just have to accept changes, both the positive and the negative ones. It is sad though that children spend so much time at preschool and leisure-time centres. Could that be an effect of the maximum fee system? (group 10)

So how did postings like the one above develop and come to contribute to the construction of meaning for students?

Threads of postings differed when you study their impact on students’ meaning-making. There were postings of an affirmative character, looking for reinforcement, as well as problematising and rhetorical

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22 Curling parents is an expression used in Sweden to refer to doting parents.
postings. But most groups managed to take discussions to a challenging and contributing level at some stage. I will try to show some insight into how this was achieved and examples of when groups had problems with their progression in taking discussions on to a next level.

**Staying grounded**

Unwillingness to change views was seldom present as whole threads in discussions but could be the start of one, and sometimes also the outcome, dependent of how experiences and course literature were used in the process.

This quotation finished a 200-word posting only vaguely related to an article (the student could in fact just have responded to the heading).

(Q21) Ugh! do you think I am whining? I sound like a real reactionary don’t I! But you were supposed to have a critical approach to what you read, right? Donna (group 6)

Let us use this as an example, taking a start in personal experiences and views here found in the early days of communication on an assignment. When supposed to comment on articles, Donna only delivered strictly personal statements. There was no self-criticism in sight. It looked as if she was after affirmation and used what she had perceived as a key concept in the course, namely “critical thinking” (see! I read the study guide). She did, however, not apply the concept on her own perspective.

Group 6 continued to make plenty of personal declarations but few deliveries and references. When the group realised that it was time to think about the end product they had produced over 40 postings stating mainly personal views. There were some associations to the themes in the study guide but only generally mentioned. This group seemed to have its focus elsewhere. They spent a longer than average time on flying by, dropping declarations that represented presence, filled the space and created a sense of activity but this site of engagement was not fully opened. You can almost feel that they awaited someone’s initiative. A slight change came with this posting:

(Q22) I find this week’s task really difficult. As you write Bibi, the literature is quite tricky and I find it difficult to understand what they are after. That’s why I came here to see if any of you had started to write something wise, but nope. Instead I have to return to the literature again and see what I can make out of it (or go to bed and postpone everything for another day)
Bibi, referred to in the previous posting, delivered her views on how to approach the assignment.

(Q23) Maybe we will discover that we share some experiences. Or our experiences differ, maybe even our views on things and I guess that also needs to be accounted for. Here we need to establish cause and effect relationships, which we have to motivate and argue for. The assignment is exciting but difficult and I think time is short, when do we need to close the discussion? There is more to life than studies. Or what do you think? Regards Bibi

There is reason to believe that the character of the discussion of mainly making parallel declarations or confirming each other had the consequence that their end-product in many respects came to build upon a comparison with each other. They had not yet formed the common ground necessary for taking on what was presented to them through the course.

Take-offs
There’s a challenge in trying to make visible the reification process of students. To show how a phenomenon first becomes accessible for reflection and thereby shared. It started as loose fragments, senses and ideas that found their way into abstract concepts accessible for reflection. These processes emerged through long threads difficult to visualise.

Moments when students came to realise things that they had sensed and experienced in practice but not had found their own access to, were well represented in the material. Reflections on the usefulness of literature and assignments were also quite often expressed.

(Q24) Do you believe you would have noticed these articles if we hadn't taken this course? It is fun to discover 'new things' when studying the different courses. Thanks for your advice and good luck with assignment 2:5 and I'll see you on Friday/ Cecilia (group 6, individual assignment period)

(Q25)...I suppose that what's new is that you get words for it and an enhanced awareness of what it can mean for my profession. Remember that we actually thought that...(group 10)
Building upon the concept of “we” instead of “I” proved to be one way for the groups to get “airborne”; for students to put some distance between themselves and the practice where they had been working for some time on one hand, and theory on the other. By using the notion of “we”, students managed to unite with other group members although not always agreeing. That was one of the ways in which the group then in terms of “same”, what was known and familiar to them, could undertake “different”. ”We” became a platform from which students could explore and broaden their understanding as individuals and as a collective.

Some groups had longer periods of delivering personal views. The next group were using general examples, adjoining in “sameness”, but not ready to reflect upon “different”. Their discussions had problems to take-off just as the group in Q21-23.

This following posting deals with the concept of “negotiating families”, mainly by referring to articles and then stating a contrasting personal opinion, however. You sense some discrepancy between views represented by the literature and this student’s personal views. You sense an opinion that children who learn to argue take up too much space and might fall into the habit of talking back.

(Q26) Hi again! In one of the articles (not specified, my comment) it says, “the child’s ability and competence is changed when valuing children's rights”. Further on in the article it says that children's opinions should be heard. It also covers “the negotiating family”. I think it is good that we should respect children. But sometimes it feels like children are brought up to question and argue, which can lead to the child taking up too much space. They learn how to question adults (can probably lead to them starting to talk back). Imagine how time's changed!!! Before, children had to wait for their turn at meals. Now they are often the first to help themselves. Not that I say that's wrong, but how we regard children today is so different... (group 10)

Her view was shared and confirmed by the next “speaker”, but the orientation of the thread changed two postings later by a third student:

(Q27) Hi! I thought about what you wrote in your first posting. There are however both advantages and disadvantages due to the fact that we live in a different time now. It is actually important to learn how to question things and go into argument, that's needed
in today's society. At the same time you must be able to show respect and I guess that's missing sometimes, especially towards older people. / Pia

(group 10)

Pia moved through the nexus of practices and presented her arguments from a different perspective. This change of perspective was accomplished by relating the concept of “talking back” to a societal level instead of to every-day preschool practice. She also addressed talking back as a competence. As such the group could continue to discuss the competence of “talking back” as being a concern for preschool and school activities. She finished, though, by acknowledging the first student by interpreting her opinions as being about the lack of respect, something she too could identify with. This student’s questioning and support created a “we” in at least one respect (we who think it is important that children have a sense of respect). Being seen and respected in her view of things probably made it easier for the first student to reflect upon her own statements from the new perspective that Pia introduced: What kind of competence is talking-back in a societal perspective?

Another example takes off more quickly and is representative of what I would call an expanding thread, moving between sameness and difference, grappling for theoretical concepts emerging from the discussion and confirming them in practice. A discussion thread in group 1 on "The participation of young children in everyday practice" evolved into the concept of "taking a child’s perspective".

Member number one established the thread by:
- delivering quotes from the course literature on the term "participation"
- presenting her own experience
- referring to policy documents/curriculum
- delivering a general statement
- confirming the general standpoint with an example from her own everyday practice

Member number two then
- confirmed the subject, - "This is difficult"
- referred to the course literature
- reconfirmed, -"This is interesting"
- made a statement from her own experience
- challenged by problematising from a general perspective and
delivered in everyday practice

Member number three
- confirmed the problem by sharing her own experience
- declared a personal statement
- expressed a more general aspect
• landed in everyday practice

Member number three then presented an example showing that there are ways to deal with the problem - she shared a good example, first in general terms, then as an example from everyday practice. Her argument shifted the problem from being about whether young children could or would benefit from participating to the issue of how adults interpret participation. She answered yes to the question of "Can young children participate in the construction of everyday practice?" and then added the question: "In what different ways do we, adults in childcare, interpret participation and what could be the consequences?"

Member number four then introduced "difference" by
• reflecting upon the problem from a policy document/curriculum perspective. What do they have to say about "participation"?
• trying her own interpretation
• presenting a conclusion
• using course literature to problematise, using two different examples

20 minutes later she (member number four) presented a short summing-up reflection.

Immediately member number five
• confirmed the value of discussing the problem (not the different opinions)
• delivered an example from preschool practice
• referred to the course literature
• contributed a new depth by making a synthesis of problems one and two and described it as an issue of "perspectives". "How do pedagogues know they are acting from a child perspective?"
• shared a positive example from everyday practice
• referred to curricula
• returned to practice to present a conclusion

When member number five confirmed the value of discussing the problem she contributed to a culture where all group members’ sayings are regarded as important but are not in any way compared or evaluated. By not evaluating the different opinions, but only emphasising the importance of discussing the problem, the student might have opened up for the new concepts that emerged from the discussion after this. The group had another go at theory and its representations in policy.

Member number six contributed by illustrating the issue of participation from a school perspective by talking about it in more general terms to return to a personal example related to the course literature. By introducing new examples their original line of questioning was expanded and reformulated.
The thread slowly came to an end by emerging into a parallel thread: "Taking a child perspective or what is best for children?” The course literature and curricula were questioned by member number two, by using challenging general examples, not related to preschool. She then reflected upon shared experiences from the previous thread and summarised half an hour later by saying:

Those examples make me wonder if it isn’t possible to change my previous opinions after all!

There are also some examples of students reflecting and using understanding previously established in the program as a basis for relating to new research. In this case the student encountered articles that seemed to have added to or changed her experiences of “taking a child’s perspective”. She expressed a new understanding of the concept. The student

- referred to peers
- delivered a reflection on the values of peer contributions
- delivered a reflection on the value of reading course literature
- pointed towards a previous course and the concept of ”applying a child’s perspective” presented there
- summarised a definition from the previous course
- made a conclusion and an elaborated definition based on her latest readings
- delivered a literature reference of relevance for her conclusion
- made a personal reflection (group 8)

In a previous example (Q26-27) group 10 were expressing personal opinions on children “talking back” and taking up space in everyday practice. Pia, one of the group members, planted the idea of “talking back” as a necessary competence in today’s society. A competence being of their professional concern seemed to be her unspoken meaning. She probably tested her idea against the literature, because she returned a couple of hours later with a reference to the curriculum and how it discussed competence and the participation of children in everyday practice. She

- delivered a reference to a page in a comment to the curriculum where the question of children’s participation and influence at school and preschool was being discussed
- delivered an example from her preschool about what was done there
- pointed towards practice again by problematising the differences between policy and practice (the lack of time)
pointed towards the curriculum comments by making a reference to where the role of the preschool to develop children’s trust in their own ability could be found.

• delivered suggestions about how these competences could be stimulated in small children
• referred to how the curriculum wants this work documented
• delivered a compromise on how this could be achieved in practice, despite constant lack of time, together with an argument why this is necessary work to do.

With these two postings she had created sameness between her opinions as a group member and policy documents. Being a member of a group her sameness came to work as an offer for the whole group and probably made it easier for other group members to expand their views and discussions. Two days later the student who started the thread on “talking back” replied:

(Q28) Hi! Pia, I agree with you, we should probably let the children participate. I think we can probably do better. It was an eye-opener reading the literature about how important this is. It is easy to take decisions based on your own personal opinion. We should probably let the children take up more space. You also write about letting the children play more. I agree with you on this too. Playing freely is so incredibly important. We have such a fixed schedule to consider all the time so it is difficult to skip whatever is planned and take an interest in what the children are asking about and want to know more about. (No signing off, my comment)

This is a good illustration of how the character of group communication becomes extremely important for the future development of students’ perspectives.

When a group member took a start in literature, it was usually followed by a first phase of sharing personal experiences aroused by it. Experience could be used for challenging or dismissing literature or as in this following quote, as enforcement for elaborating a perspective.

The next example of a take-off is from group 1. A student made reference to a text and the concept of “normal” and then oriented herself towards what she interpreted as signs of being normal in today’s society, maybe to test her own understanding of what the authors wrote about normality. She pursued her own understanding and shared an example
she had experienced as a parent that she thought was related to “normality”.

(Q29) Gunilla Halldén refers to Hockney & James where they say that we make a difference between what is regarded as normal and what is not, by emphasising differences. That's the case isn't it! Like you write Sandra, all these beauty ideals we are exposed to must influence us. My daughter who is eight made us think twice when visiting Mc Donalds during our holiday...

... You really wonder what's happening when children that age already are focusing on their looks

(group 1)

Another group member took up the thread the next morning. Her posting seemed to take off from an established base in everyday practice and her own experience as a parent to take on a societal and cultural perspective. She then returned to consequences for practice.

(Q30) Hi there!

I have also been thinking about what Halldén refers to in Jenny Hockey & Allison James, about different stages in life where children and old people are not regarded as the norm and the consequences of such thinking is turned into a denial of the dependence of adults. In our society there is an early focus on children becoming self-governing/autonomous, by for example giving them their own room early on. Or like Gunilla (author, my comment) continues, "in a individualistic society it is the autonomous individual’s competence and ability to learn that is emphasised".

I know that in many other cultures life is about just that, being allowed to be dependent on others, and being dependent is a confirmation of your own value. They help each other over generations, and family bonding is incredible strong. I myself think that sharing the problems of others, seeing them as mine, fosters empathy and compassion.
Gunilla Halldén finishes by writing "What care is possible in our time?" We meet curling parents daily that want what is best for their children. That's why I think it is extra important to work with fundamental values where we in preschool communicate that all children are equal. No one can take personal advantage at the expense of others.

"Hug" Dina (group 1)

The same group later got “stuck” in personal opinions on parents of today doting on their children. This student then moved the problem to a historical context by using the course literature and introduced a more nuanced way of regarding the phenomenon among her peers:

(Q31) Hi!
Bengt Sandin writes (ref to article, my comment) that as early as the 18th century, there were sometimes intense discussions on the need for a school system corresponding to the needs of the growing bourgeoisie. And what were their interests, I ask myself. I picture them (the bourgeoisie, my comment) as being well off, maybe in possession of some kind of business and supporting their children’s education financially. Maybe they gave them (the children, my comment) a piece of land where they could build themselves a home or they could start working in the family business. To me this is similar to what we call ‘curling-parents’. But they (wealthy people, my comment) were a minority back then. Today we are better off in general and can help our children and we do so. So is this an issue because the minority has become a majority? Is it a result of the economy?/Ellen. (group 1)

This take-off from what seemed to be an inability to raise the horizon from every-day practice immediately had an effect on the other students. In this case every-day practice had previously only been used to confirm personal opinions. A change of perspective here seemed like a fruitful action.

(Q32) Hi!

When you Ellen describe how things used to be I realise that you could call that a sort
of ‘curling’ but I haven’t thought about it that way. It is probably the way you describe it, that they were a minority and now we are all better off.//Marie. (group 1)

(Q33) Hi,

I also find this an interesting thought Ellen! I haven’t thought about it that way, so that was a new, fresh idea. It is always fun when someone finds something new, not spotted by anyone else. That’s what’s so good about this program I think, since we all work with the same things and you get a lot of fun and interesting hints, ideas and new ways of thinking! Kind regards K. (group 1)

These examples show the importance of studying these postings as whole threads embedded in their proper context, to see what role they played in the process of meaning-making.

**Flying solo**

Moments of reification were possible to study also during individual assignment periods, since group activities in terms of postings and comments were required during these tasks as well.

Individual assignments all had an element of social to them. During one period students were to produce a specified number of postings on articles and comment on each other before producing an individual paper. This was very much the same procedure as when working with the group paper, which was the first assignment in the course. The students probably had useful experiences from this collaboration when having to produce the text themselves. For another assignment the group collaborated around an introduction, which they finalised according to their individual choices but within the theme chosen and theorised by the group.

During these individual assignment periods, communications slightly differed by comparison. Students seemed to summarise articles to a larger extent and test their essence in a monological form. During this period postings supposedly just showed ambition and presence.

The following example is taken from an individual assignment period when students were supposed to reflect upon articles together, but prepare an individual paper. This period is from the late part of the course in group 8, following previously presented collaboration periods in time.

Member number 1 started this individual period by

- making an ironic comment on the more interesting focus in this course by way of comparison.
• telling us that she is reading outdoors.
• mentioning a day when she expects to contribute.

Member number two
• made a 1060(!)-word summary of two articles
• oriented towards an upcoming group assignment

Member number three
• reflected upon what ”we” represent in terms of notions of childhood (inspired by an article)

Member number two
• commented with what seems like distracted empty clichés (shows presence, although focus elsewhere)

Then, member number three
• continued to reflect upon historical notions of children and childhood

Member number four
• introduced a new text on “pedagogical meetings” not previously mentioned
• ended with a locally anchored example

After that number one was back to
• summarising the above article by also giving an example from practice
• trying to define “perspectives” but confused it with “contextualisation”

Number three
• commented on the previous example in positive ways (that was a good idea!)

Number five
• posed a question directed at number three on the organisational aspects of this method when being a family child-minder

Number two
• shortly delivered a reflection oriented towards a professional object
• linked her opinion to one of the articles

As we see here, communication during individual assignment periods contained fewer categories of actions, and had a focus on declaring personal opinions or summaries of articles.

In campus courses it is not unusual that teachers summarise literature and theories and point to highlights in literature, something these students were supposed to manage on their own with the help of reading instructions. Peers could be used for the same purpose, though, either by trying their own summary as one of the requested postings, or by getting access to the other group members’ interpretation of texts. This gave communication a monological character involving many parallel processes, when students summarised the same articles without referring to each other. What happened after these monologues becomes important, however.
I will now present some examples when this monological form was broken and the delivery of personal experiences and views, maybe signalling an inability to take on a concept or subject, were exchanged for other actions.

There were several cases when this break in communication seemed to be triggered by a summarising and structuring posting by one student that helped the others to approach the subject and stop encircling it. This particular posting cited below represented a change for this particular student. We do not know whether it inspired others. She used theory from sociology to compare with pedagogy to explore her own understanding of “perspective”. This exploration took the form of a monologue, since none of the others joined her conversation. Her postings differed slightly in that she did not “just” deliver summaries or reflections but argued with herself. She also seemed to consider and benefit from what the others wrote. The fact that the teachers had designed the course so that students had to produce comments on literature also during an individual assignment period seemed to have supplied this student with more food for thought.

(Q34) When it comes to perspectives, I cannot help thinking a little about Luhmann. He states that no one can describe someone else’s perspective in a correct way. What we do is that we, with the help of our own terminology, confirm someone else’s perspective, which emanates from ourselves, and Luhmann states that we are all subject to this fact. Even if sociologists sometimes claim to be able to study other people’s perspectives this is completely wrong. Of course Jenner (the pedagogue, my comment) doesn’t mean that identification and complete understanding is necessary but that empathy and the will to understand are.

(group 9)

In the next case group 4 were trying to comment on a book on gender pedagogy. That resulted in a line of personal experiences not linked to the book in any specific way.

(Q35) When I was in a store with my girls, they each chose a “lucky bag” that had the text “mostly for boys” written on it. They had read this but wanted it anyway. The cashier pointed out that this was a bag for boys. We are aware of that but want it anyway. Why he asked? Is it to be nice? Nice? Aren’t “boy’s things” fun and good? My
girls were very satisfied with the content. But how did he regard equal opportunities for sexes? Would it have been different if the cashier had been a girl?

(group 4)

A couple of hours later: A confirmation was delivered through a similar example

I have a daughter who is into motocross...

After a while a third student delivered a 768-word follow-up posting inspired by texts introducing a gender perspective. She summarised it, presenting highlights and referring to the subject as a general issue for preschool and introducing a societal perspective.

The student

• delivered an excuse for and explanation of why she had not yet commented on the others
• introduced the posting by referring to week number
• posed a question from a book that problematised the concept of equal opportunities for boys and girls
• drew a conclusion on core issues for preschool with support from the text
• introduced and motivated the role of preschool for equity
• made a specific reference to the text on the impact of adults/pedagogues for changing structures
• cited the text again to emphasise her point
• challenged their (as a collective) professional role for changing gender structures
• once again cited the text for emphasis
• delivered an example of what it is possible to do to enhance competence among colleagues
• delivered a few questions related to consequences of the example
• delivered a general personal conclusion
• delivered several conclusions for practice specifically
• supported these conclusions by using her own experience in preschool practice
• posed a rhetorical question
• pointed towards a somewhat provocative representation of preschool staff in action presented in the course literature
• confirmed this critical representation
• praised the frequent use of examples from practice in the text
• delivered an anecdote from her own practice vaguely related
• landed in a conclusion of the outcome of her activity in practice.
• rounded off by once again praising the literature
• made a closure by using a citation from the literature
This student used texts from the book and some articles and linked them to examples in preschool generally and specifically. There is a significantly important semiotic action performed by this student. At the end she points to a rather provocative example of preschool staff behaviour found in the literature. She could have ascribed this apparently unwanted behaviour to preschool teachers as a category. In such a case they, as child-minders, could have conveniently formed an opposing category, not the one criticised by the author of the article. But she did not act in this direction. Instead she included herself and her peers in the category being criticised. The talk of self-reflection and criticism in the literature was applied.

It went about the same way as usual when we pedagogues want to have some peace and quiet...

This posting seemed to have triggered the need for the usual silent nods, which here needed to be represented. Accordingly, this posting was followed by short agreeing postings by all other students in the group, although they had not finished their reading yet. The posting seemed to have had the effect of finding a focus for reading and understanding the literature for the whole group and their individual work.

These were examples from an individual assignments period. Students made summaries on the same articles, mainly without commenting or referring to each other. But sometimes communication converged for a moment either as a personal insight or an exchange of views, both resulting in changing the directions of the actions of the others. In this previous example some of the group members ended up testing views on gender within their social networks and accounted for some of the discussions they had had in postings.

In group 9 a student encountered a posting by another group member representing a more elaborated meaning than her own of a concept in the course. This is an example of a convergence of parallel processes during an individual assignment period. This example represents the moment where the focus of two students working on individual tracks opened a mutual site of engagement that resulted in commenting on each other and not only summarising articles.

Hi Inger!

I got the goosebumps from reading your posting...

By switching the perspective this student seemed to be able to see that there was a “different” apprehension to “knowing someone”. She continued and
- used the metaphor of “a light has dawned on me”
- delivered a reflection on her own behaviour towards new pupils throughout the year
• delivered an explanation of her behaviour based on the concept of “knowing the children” (“I know these children”), she then switched to the perspective of the children and what “knowing her” implies to them (Do they know me?)
• problematised the fact that older children do not show or express anxiety the same way as younger children do and how their lack of response had made it possible for her to carry on in old footsteps without the children objecting explicitly (regarding how to introduce older children to new group constellations, environments or staff)
• made a closure by thanking the other student and then rounded off..

...ooh, I can’t really explain what I mean, I long for a verbal discussion, to be able to explain! /Olivia (group 9)

The longing for a verbal discussion makes you reflect upon the kind of process she is in at the moment and what it is in the verbal discussion she is after. Is it the character of the oral communication such as the immediate response, a synchronicity with the others she is after or is it the struggles of having to write so much to get to her point? It makes you wonder about the culture of writing in the academy that has a sense of “readiness” to it. Here she seems to want to test things, to talk in a non-specified direction and maybe not risk having to account for her views later, as writing things down automatically imply.

In this chapter I have presented results as examples of the orientations of actions towards change or no change in how students have tackled the course. It was obvious during these periods that the choice of strategy mattered for reification, since the way students used each other mattered for how their insights developed. In the following concluding summary, a summarising analysis presents different aspects of meaning-making emanating out of the study of discourse in action.
"Du nämner att vi inte alltid gör rätt, men vi försöker. Vi analyserar och reflekterar, vi får vidgade vyer vilket ger oss nya perspektiv att tänka på i våra pedagogiska möten. Jag är inne i en period där jag analyserar alla mina möten hela tiden, och det känns som jag hamnat i en svacka. Allt var enklare när man bara "kunde vara" - jag upplevde att jag hade ett barnperspektiv även då, men jag hade definitiv inte den kunskap och den insikt jag har idag. Är det bara jag som känner så - att man inte får göra fel? Samtidigt vet jag att vi alla gör fel - vi är inte mer än människor. Men det är väl det där att vi skall vara "duktiga flickor" hela tiden - det har vi ju fått lära oss".

"Jag tycker med att jag analyserar mer nu, inte bara mig själv, utan kollegor, barn, föräldrar... Ibland blir det FÖR mycket. Håller med dig om att det var enklare innan man började den här utbildningen. Men samtidigt har jag lärt mig att lägga energi på "rätt" saker, innan kunde jag gå och reta mig på småsaker, och det tycker jag är skönt. Har lärt mig prioritera det som känns viktigt. Sedan kan man ha olika åsikter om vad som är viktigt... (Studenter grupp 3).
8 Concluding summary

I have seen students express personal opinions, using peers and everyday practice for confirmation when handling expectations of an educational design and their own search for meaning. If this was a single subject course, based on individual activities that might have been the end of story. However, I have witnessed an alternative story showing strengths in participating in a communicative practice where strength show as time, in the opportunity to develop new perspective through thinking and in encountering concepts again and again. I have seen strength as numbers, the necessary impact of other’s experiences. And I have seen strength as distance provided by the shift of actions in asynchronous communication, forcing thoughts into written language thereby accessible for reflection and criticism.

This has been a quest for the meaning-making of students in web-based asynchronous learning environments. My overall aim was to study how students’ pursue meaning in a web-based learning situation. Appearances of meaning-making were sought in the relationship between course design, a technologically mediated learning environment, student experience and course content. A communicative approach inspired by Dewey, has led me to the study of students actions and how previous experiences contribute to the meaning-making of students when encountering new experiences related to course objectives.

Data in terms of asynchronous communication is from two courses in a 4-year university program aimed at training childminders for preschool class. The program was classified as part-time distance education. All students were women and working in preschool during their studies.

Based on Deweys’ notion of meaning, meaning –making was sought as changed dispositions and their intersubjective origin in communication. Appearances of meaning-making were traced as changes and breaks in student communication during 18 weeks of asynchronous communication (10 groups, 55 students) in a Virtual Learning Environment (WebCT), during both group and individual assignment periods.

The chosen key-concepts for analysis (meditational means, nexus of practices, sites of engagement, reification and sameness-difference: see chapter 5) were used to identify clusters of actions and their orientations as discursive themes. Such semiotic actions were e.g. non-action (silence, negligence), pointing (references), declarations (of presence, ambition, personal views) deliveries (of promises or course related expectations),
challenges (invitations, openings, questions, rejections), confirmations, (acknowledgements, concerns) and closures (agreements, change of subjects, signing-offs).

Then followed a construction of themes (Table 4) based on actions that seemed related to the meaning making processes of students. These themes of orientations in action towards meaning-making are:

- participation, actions oriented towards an active manifestation of presence, engagement in course work– a commitment to task, and the creation of space for engagement.
- positioning, oriented towards the creation of a student identity, the organisation of work, and the construction of a group culture
- reference as the orientation actions took in a nexus of practices.

Where did students go for examples? To challenge theoretical concepts? – To mirror their existing views and knowledge? changing experience is a collection of moments of reification, when students come to make realisations of relevance to subject and task. An elaborated experience with what the students could further encounter course related content.

| Participation       | · Accepting the challenge  |
|                     | · Signs of being           |
| Positioning         | · Introducing me           |
|                     | · The negotiation of group culture |
| Reference           | · A changing focus        |
|                     | · Process and product      |
|                     | · Contextualising posting, |
|                     | · Signs of a nexus         |
| A changing experience | · Staying grounded        |
|                     | · Take-offs                |
|                     | · Flying solo              |

When investigating core aspects of education different traditions result in different notions of communication (von Wright, 2007). They also represent different views of the student. When the student is regarded as the recipient of knowledge, communication comes to represent format and structure for transportation of knowledge. When the student is seen as involved in a personal developmental process, communication becomes means for interaction, for sharing his/her world and taking part in others. Common for both perspectives is the role of communication as means for representing what is considered learning. Taking a communicative turn implies a more complex interactional process, linking people, environment and knowledge in constitutive intersubjective processes.
So what could be said about meaning-making in these educational practices in the relationship between course design, meditational means, students’ experiences and course content?

**Participation**

To participate is a condition for being able to exchange experiences. Participation is often surrounded by explicit and implicit conditions founded in social interaction.

**By representation**

Presence on-line must be represented. Entering a room has different connotations on line and affects the style of communication by, for instance, the presence of seemingly empty postings, an important insight for teachers. Action became the necessary tool for claims and attribution of social identity for these students. Action was represented in students’ texts and showed signs of changes in forms and functions in writing, pointed to by Kress (2003). Most of the apprehended changes in the style of writing were related to the necessary shift from appearance to representation (Sorensen, 1999) provoked by the digital environment and lack of physical representation. This meant that students often sent messages whose actual contents were second to the significance of sending it. The contents were not further referred to or commented. This did not mean that group members did not understand the message; they however understood the function of it. ‘Fly-bys’ and such seemingly ‘empty’ postings over time, both seemed to be oriented towards physical social protocol. The act of posting became a way of showing attention; create a context, of keeping someone’s gaze and to signal presence. These postings should not, I think, be interpreted as testing the site, or the computer. After two years of communicating in this learning environment students had no need to test technology. It was the fact that they were posting that invoked meaning. Roles, engagement, intentions and identities were manifested in these postings as represented presence. “I hear you but I’m working with other things right now”, “I know we have work to do but I will open a shared window in a short time” “I’m here, trust me”. This was all part of contracting and group culture.

**By sharing and negotiating**

When distance education has a high number of older and experienced students it affects the whole course/program (Högskoleverket, 2007). With experience come broader and deeper professional perspectives. Age that way contributes to quality in web-based courses. According to The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket, 2007)
experienced students aim higher and spurs teachers and organisations. In this program, the mean age for students was 40 (born 1965). The four drop-outs (out of 55) all represented the youngest students in their respective groups and were born in 1980, 1978, 1976 and 1971 (compare to a mean of 1965).

There also seemed to be differences in student interaction related to age, maybe deriving from issues of identity, self-esteem and life experience. When having trouble to cope, it was the youngest students who failed. What differed here seemed to be the openness with which older students communicated. Some younger students seemed to have a strategy of hiding instead of sharing. Anxiety, fears and obstacles, which interfered with coursework were not introduced and shared with the group by younger students to the same extent. Keeping things to yourself was not a fruitful strategy for this program. Another possible explanation to the concentration of younger students among dropouts could be related to the fact that younger students might be experiencing phases of life that include younger children.

Students also evaluated each other’s achievements in relation to their private and professional lives. Favours could be cashed in, a switch in responsibilities could be made due to a personal situation and encouraging comments could be expected. Everything provided that the facts of life were communicated. Sharing personal lives and issues of affect seems like an important condition for receiving support and trust.

The fact that all students were women was sometimes identified and referred to by the students themselves as enhancing meaning-making processes. I see this as related to the roles they take on and the nexus they thereby bring into educational practice, a nexus partly familiar to many of them. This familiarity seems to help them in trusting and supporting peers.

Positioning

The concept of positioning referred to actions oriented towards creating a student identity, the distribution of roles, the organisation of work, and the formation of a group culture.

Social pleasantries have been found to have a clearly institutional identity orientation (Drew and Sorjonen, 1997 in Keating and Egbert, 2004). Social pleasantries also seemed to be of significance for the meaning-making of these groups in terms of how they were able to adjoin ambitions and expectations in a shared direction for work. Here an established and negotiated group culture helped groups to solve problems and unexpected situations they encountered during the courses. Groups that did not spend a lot of time on initial processes establishing social protocol and group values, encountered difficulties related to autonomy. Some needed help from outside the group in establishing a protocol around presence and ambition. Differences in terms of autonomy were
also visible when the information from teachers or the University was unsatisfactory. Here an established and negotiated group culture helped groups solve problems and unexpected situations they encountered during the courses. Groups that did not spend a lot of time on initial processes establishing social protocol and group values, encountered difficulties related to autonomy. Some needed help from outside the group in establishing a protocol around presence and ambition. Differences in terms of autonomy were also visible when information were unsatisfactory. Groups too quick to leave or forgot to constantly re-negotiate group culture, had difficulties to decide upon strategies to move on and solve problems due to a lack of information. Groups that spent a great amount of communication on social protocol were better prepared to deal with unexpected situations and to take group decisions and they were more eager to accept challenges beyond a minimum level of expectancy (like taking on literature or lectures outside the course).

Reference

By “reference” as orientations of actions, I refer to where in nexus the students directed their interest.

Preschool practice in these courses came to represent both an arena with which to compare and test new information but also as the originator of important representations of phenomena that the students had not yet grappled, nor objectified, or in Wengers words “reificated”. The fact that the students were working in preschool while studying stood out as both a pre-requisite as well as an obstacle. To achieve the necessary distance – a bird-perspective on practice, is hard when standing to your knees in it. To be able to see and establish links and relations between what seems like random events appears to be difficult and students tended to use what was closest to them for reference. A consequence is that it then becomes easy for students to use theory for own confirmation or rejection.

Sharing the experience of others has instead the potential to turn “random” into “patterns” and through reification, into theoretical approaches to practice (c.f. Gillberg, 2009). Croona argues that within educational practice we have the prerogative of inviting students to participate in discussion and, since students (in the best of worlds, my comment) represent different experiences, sexes, age and ethnicity, there are opportunities for expanded and deepened learning (Croona, 2008).

But to start with, these students often challenged or dismissed what was presented to them as theory by using own lived experience as reference.

Bernstein (1990) established a link between macro- and microstructures in language explicitly addressed as elaborated and restricted codes. The more common use of restricted codes by working-class children was associated with using local context as the more common first source of reference for them. Whereas middle-class
children were more context sensitive and scanned communication for cues to what was expected of them in terms of discourse and could orient themselves to different context and discourses (Bernstein, 1990).

There were similarities in how these students made references and used course material for their understanding by using their closest everyday practice as their first source of reference in trying to make meaning related to a task. Students needed help from each other or literature to orient themselves towards other contexts than the familiar everyday practice at preschool or private context of being a parent. In terms of practices, students explicitly oriented themselves towards

- parenting as supplying experience
- parenting as things diverting their focus
- being a student
- the context of the university program
- their preschool specifically
- preschool generally – as a field of practice
- preschool as a research field

This is where group interaction became important. Literature supplied these other orientations but when students failed to see relevance of other perspectives or practices for the discussion, these other orientations were not included in the students’ nexus. Sometimes this difficulty was founded in misunderstandings or complete lack of understanding of concepts in literature. The relevance of theory was hidden to students. Professional training in HE is often criticised for not being able to link professional practice and theory through a critical and scientific approach (Högskoleverket, 2006). This has resulted in opinions among students and practitioners that theory is related to research and research criteria, whereas practice is related to the everyday activities at a workplace (Carlsson & Linnér, 2008). Here experience “the experience of others” is one way of making these missing links of relevance to students, who themselves cannot relate to a theoretical concept. The fact that colleges, but not themselves, have experienced something made it part of a constitutive process of a professional object of concern to us.

A Changing Experience

A changed experience refers to processes of reification, when new concepts and added experiences become accessible for students for reflection and discussion.

Reification processes, when students came to identify and recognise previously unknown phenomena to them, were distributed between both individual and group assignment periods. When it was time for an individual assignment, an individual paper or a documented observation from practice, the students had already experienced collaborating. The teachers had designed for communication during all periods in terms of asking for specified numbers of postings on articles. Students produced
fewer postings during individual periods, but not significantly less. The character of communication differed though. During individual assignments, it was obvious that parallel individual processes were going on. Sometimes these individual processes coincided and a changed meaning and understanding could be traced. The asynchronous discussions seemed to be used for “thinking out loud” during individual assignments, which sometimes gave postings a rhetorical character. When individuals were studied from this perspective, you could see that some students gained specifically from collaboration. They used the monological form not simply to produce a weekly posting but to achieve necessary distance for reflecting, on own views and course material.

From a teaching perspective it becomes important to consider the possible impact of an academic writing culture (Dysthe, 1996; Gustafsson, 2008). Regarding texts as products and not processes might hinder students from trying out unfinished thoughts more frequent.

Students produced more visible “take-offs” during group work periods. That means that they achieved the necessary distance for switching perspectives or to see new or unknown links and pattern. Periods of narrow perspectives, represented by summaries of articles or accounting for own experiences, were longer during individual communication periods. Theoretically students should have gained a broader variety of analytic tools from previous collaborative assignments to apply when working individually.

The relationship between sameness and difference seems to stimulate and push the reification process. Some groups were at the beginning strongly rooted in everyday practice and in their process of making meaning in course context, literature and theory was used only to confirm practice or personal opinions. Analytic concepts or tools introduced with the help of peers, facilitated the distance necessary for students to uncover links and relations between what could have seemed like random events and conquer “difference”. During take-offs, students often changed from talking in a confirmative way of ”us” and what ”we do” to using general language referring to the profession. Theory was explored and its usefulness was tried out in practice, but from a more general perspective.

The potential of writing in the asynchronous communication form clearly seems strengthened by these results. We have all experienced walking away from a meeting or a lecture with unfinished thoughts, hanging around, more or less graspable. What did she actually say? What do I really think about that? How can I pursue this thought? These are questions possible to revisit in asynchronous communication. The same affordance could be viewed negatively too. The fact that thoughts and utterances live on somewhere in cyberspace, make people more careful – for good and bad. Some students might experience great anxiety before they send their first contribution, or any posting for that matter. Once they press the send button it is out there for the world to see.
An alternative story

Working with the semiotic actions and themes evoked by the material, the increasingly pregnant role of the mediated environment stands out. The intrinsic character of mediation can, when considered as partly done in these two courses, contributes to alternative stories. Alternative to the one’s told of difficulties to achieve in-depth communication, of second best alternatives and things missing from communication. I would like to add, as my contribution, an alternative structure to thinking about web-based education as a relationship between course design, a technologically mediated learning environment, student experience and course content.

Being close to questions of learning and meaning, these courses are exceptional in terms of meaning making and have of course enhanced these students meaning processes. Developing the knowledge necessary to identify with and understand how cultural identities and the living conditions of young children are created and formed by different contexts was what was expected from the students to enable them to cope with consequences for preschool practice. This fact made for instance, references to nexus an important part of developing knowledge related to these courses particular objectives. To reflect upon your own learning process introduces meta-reflection, which forms part of these students professional development. I hope however, to contribute complexity and nuance to attitudes of a principal character when it comes to what subjects or disciplines are suitable for web-based learning. I have taken part of research on courses in e.g. crafts, astronomy and leadership. It is not the character of a subject or discipline that exclusively should determine whether courses in these subjects are suitable for web-based forms but instead informed discussions on what kind of processes we want students to experience and what kind of knowledge we want them to develop.

Subject matters, course design, technology and students experiences are aspects often referred to as important for turnouts of web-based education. To me the most important result in this material is how the study of meaning-making here has indicated a potential shift from knowledge as product to knowledge as process and how that is favoured by the conditions for this particular learning environment. The teachers did not just speak and write of knowledge in the sense of a process. Consequences were built into course design.

The idea of texts as mediational means brings into picture not the production of the text itself but the production of the action it provokes i.e. the tool by which people undertake action (Scollon, 1998) and relates to the role of artefacts and mediation. Some of these tools were written language and technology. The mediated character of communication contributed time, numbers and distance that facilitated the orientation towards knowledge as process that I found.
- Time, as the opportunity to develop new perspective through thinking and in encountering concepts again and again
- Numbers, as the impact of other’s experiences
- Distance as the provided transformation of actions in asynchronous communication, forcing thoughts into written language thereby accessible for reflection and criticism. Distance to self, distance to preschool practice and distance to thought.

One of the things that affected my choice of data was the sometimes spoken opinion that social talk in computer mediated “classrooms” was a waste of time and was important to separate from more task oriented communication. I think this study also contributes to a more complex picture of the role of social talk for meaning-making and learning and is maybe linked to a potential process orientation. Not sharing a social world would mean to be left out of its meaning. “There would be no seeing the trees because of the forest” (Dewey, 2004/1916). To Dewey, participation was the gate to meaning and communication. Participation on-line demands action. In some groups students worked actively at getting acquainted before they addressed their first assignment (here a group paper). When time came to produce and deliver the product, the students could easily overview the process. This could help them to reflect upon fruitful ways to organise the discussion and its emerging concepts and pick up what had become important themes considered valuable for the group. The students made between 18 - 110 postings (which means 8 – 12 days out of the 20 days intended for the whole assignment) before addressing the assignment in formal or organising terms. They used these postings to relate to and discuss articles and key concepts as encouraged by the study guide. This could be an expression of trust in course design but it could also be explained by technological gains. Students’ discussions were documented digitally and accessible to them throughout the course. This might be the reason that they could safely rest in a process of establishing a common ground for the group. The digitally documented discussions provided material for structure and meta-reflection when it was time for groups to summarise and analyse their work.

Some groups oriented towards the organisational and administrative aspects of the course expressed that getting to know each other initially were not a main priority. That would take time and focus from course work. This attitude changed over time and adjustments were made and more time spent on social interaction, not specifically directed towards course work.

23 This was expressed in their final group evaluations
There is strength in time

The short time-scale, the delay in time represented by the asynchronous communication allowed students to check spelling and formulations and how others apprehended their representations, using people within their personal nexus. It also allowed space for dealing with “interfering” practices such as family and work.

The long time-scale, the result of studying at a program at half-pace allowed for different processes. Maybe longer time-scales encourage process-oriented thinking among students. But long time-scales also mean that studying interferes with private, social and professional life. Long time-scales make it easier to get to know each other and share more previous experience, affecting the interpretation of meaning in communication. Time in a long-term perspective showed itself as a pedagogical affordance. Students made revisits to theory and literature encountered earlier in the program. Time allowed for growth and development. The teachers also had better opportunities to get to know their students.

You would think that time and distance also would allow for plagiarism. Here time seemed to be compensating for that risk. It is difficult to speak out of character in so many, and intense postings as we have seen here.

In this course, the teachers posted an argument about the danger of getting stuck in personal opinion in the common discussion forum. Here, moving along a longer time-scales in an asynchronous learning environment, we have less reason to fear personal opinions and values, provided that environments are created that stimulate group discussions allowing for alternative experiences to challenge personal opinions. Sources can be questioned and careful considerations can be taken on the best way to address them. Personal opinions are also easier to address for what they are at the time being, i.e. restricted formulations of lived life and as such possible to change with changed experiences (Dewey, 2004/1916; Kreijns, et al., 2003).

Time allowed for diversity, for “different” to become “same”, more familiar, for sharing until common goods (Dewey, 1971). This pedagogical design as we have seen an example of here, would not be possible to the same extent for short single subject courses.

There is strength in numbers

Numbers could here be associated to both the age of students, the increased cohort of “new student” but most important was the consequences of the two previous facts in terms of the number of experiences these students together contributed with. A large body of experiences constituted a resource for constructing new or changed meaning in relation to course content. Student experiences both came to represent “same” and “difference” to other student and as such enhanced
the transition to face and take on what represented “different” in course content. Unfamiliar became familiar with the eyes of the collective.

Dewey (2007, Chapter XI) measures the value of an experience in the continuities in which it leads its ‘owner’, to a knowledge and familiarity around new situations. From studying the communication and development of these students, I would like to suggest that a missing link could be to fully understand that to participate in something is also to participate with something (c.f. Laurillard, 2002). What students bring to studies in terms of nexus of practices and previous experiences should be used in course design to strengthen the meaning - making of students.

Swift and adequate feedback due to the “separation” of teacher and students in distance education is a mantra often repeated and sometimes instrumentalised into learning management systems. Teachers are greeted with their average response time and a comparison for the whole system when logging into a VLE.

In these courses it is the students themselves that provide a considerable part of the feedback (see for example the number of postings produced by teachers in table 1). When questions were of administrative or organisational character, they were posted in the overall program discussion group. Teachers were not involved in the conceptual discussions. If they “peeped in” with a general encouraging comment, this received no interest from the students. In some but not all groups, the teachers’ evaluation of the group assignment was published in the asynchronous discussion. The character of the feedback seemed to be much appreciated and were commented on by students. These comments were not directed back to teachers but inspired declarations by students on what they considered useful for taking on the individual assignment to follow.

The question of student autonomy is related to the question of feedback. What I have witnessed here seems to support the theory of transactional distance, seeing the talk of “student autonomy” as a risk. Transactional distance is a function of the level of interaction, student autonomy and course structures (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Student autonomy is not regarded a prerequisite, it can be designed for. With a high and intense level of interaction, students become less dependent on their own autonomy. Autonomy should not be regarded as a prerequisite for distance or web-based studies but as something that could be achieved during studies. To suggest that teachers stimulate student autonomy by actively participating in on-line dialogue is jumping to conclusions however (c.f. Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Moore, 1993). I found these results sufficient enough to call for a more complex view of feedback in web-based and distance courses. What do we specifically imply when talking about feedback, and in what ways can these needs be built in to course design? With a decreasing number of hours put in by teachers at campus courses, the role of asynchronous or synchronous communication could be a welcome support with didactical implications worth to consider.
There is strength in distance

Communication leads to changes in people’s experiences as they share events, thoughts and feelings. “Meaning depends upon connection with a shared experience” (Dewey, 2004/1916, p. 15). In this reasoning, change is linked to the act of formulating thoughts, experiences and feelings as well as taking part of others’; getting outside it (Dewey, 2004/1916, p. 5). In these digitally mediated environments, the relation between interaction and responses to a new material, what Dewey refers to as material for thinking (Dewey, 2004/1916, chapter XII) can become explicit to the individual through the representational character of communication in a VLE. A modified disposition thus require distance, the opportunity to walk a few steps in someone else’s shoes.

The actions the students performed in transforming thoughts into words brought about this distance in terms of a meta-level that gave access to previously non-formulated thoughts. To see yourself in the presence of others was an offer embedded in course design.

The sharing of experiences of others has instead had the potential to turn “random” into “patterns” and through reification into theoretical approaches to practice.

The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education also concludes in their reports on e-learning quality (Högskoleverket, 2004, 2008:11R) that a high occurrence of written communication raises expectations and quality on student’s achievements in distance and on-line education. The continuous documentation of student work makes it more difficult for non-committed students to pass exams in comparison to campus courses.


9 Education for change

In this chapter I will discuss findings in a larger Higher Education (HE) policy context with an orientation towards the implications for the designs of web-based learning and the potential of web-based education. I will also address what I regard as misconceptions sometimes muddling the policy-making and research side of web-based education. There is need for a new angle, contributing complexity regarding communicative aspects of web-based education such as its potential for changing the object of knowledge when, for instance, the consequences of mediation in web-based scenarios are considered.

Bernstein (1990) criticised the sociology of education for only becoming a medium for dominating external discourses rather than forming a voice of its own. He saw a consequence in a relay function of education for power and gender issues. There are possibilities of a changed pedagogical approach in HE in trying to face up to the promises of “Widened Participation” (WP). But there are also threats to the possible disruptive power of new groups of students entering the academy. Under the influence of marketisation societal changes have put pressure on HE to become flexible producers of a workforce. Web-based education has become a means for responding to the needs of a mass-education system – with widened participation as its flagship. Using the needs of the economy as incitements for planning schools and universities is problematic. Predictability is very low in a rapidly changing society. The labour market has already experienced consequences of rapid economic and technological changes for employability. Revisits to educational institutions will be a way to strengthen the value for labour and capital. Job training turns into life-long learning (Beck, 2004).

Apart from a more representative student group in terms of gender, ethnicity, disabilities and socio-economic background, WP offers opportunities to see to the professionalisation of workforces. The Swedish government is launching considerable investments for future years to enhance competence in the compulsory school system as well as preschool competence enhancement. The latest venture targets natural sciences and maths and will take form as training for practising teachers as well as new forms of teacher training (Proposition, 2008:09:1). The compulsory school is just one area exemplifying the need for the constant training and development of a profession. Many of these ventures are
likely to come into question for web-based forms. The world is also experiencing a recession that might result in large numbers of people entering or re-entering HE. Later in life considerations of other things than being a student might force many people into web-based forms of education.

All these people, affected by all these circumstances, have a possibility not only to adjust to, but also to contribute to the area of HE by their different experiences. What I have witnessed in terms of these two web-based courses, seems to me like interesting and promising examples of addressing the combination of widening participation, new technology and professional training, provided the existence of a constitutive relationship.

A methodological reflection

Sometimes discourse analysts, although setting out to focus on social or communicative actions in practice, end up with solely a text analysis (Scollon, 2001). This has been my real challenge. In what way is this a pedagogic study and not an uninitiated discourse analysis? Looking back at the process and the results I think I managed to a certain degree.

The use of MDA has allowed me get to the actions of student through their accompanied linguistic form. That’s made it possible for me to go beyond reigning discourses of the educational arena, “the common sense” (Fairclough, 2001/1998) setting the frames for an educational scenario. Using the analytic tools of MDA, new things emerged that shifted and changed my focus away from established “common senses” often associated with the area of web-based education. Sites of engagement made me aware of how students created and opened spaces for interaction and work and made visible to me how students through mediational means pointed to future sites and how historical sites were used in creating meaning. The concept of freedom in time and space, attributed to web-based education, can no longer be associated just with being able to choose where and when to study. Complexity was added. MDA made me see constructions of e.g. time and space for these courses differently and that this construction could be linked to identity and meaning-making and reached beyond words as etymology. The notion of space also came in focus through the links and references to other practices but also in the functionality of postings in creating space in time, pointing towards outburst of action to come. Maybe it is just the novelty of concepts that acts like eye-opener when striving with understanding a methodological approach. But so far I feel that my choices has added richness to analysis.

Meaning-making have been at focus for this study. I have looked for the ways in which language in use, accomplishes specific actions in specific situations. I have carried the larger contexts for these educational practices in mind and so connected knowledge and meaning to both societal and individual perspectives.
This is a pedagogic analysis using tools from linguistics. It is the ambition of discursive pedagogy to regard its questions, regardless of practice, as questions of cultural theoretical relevance, connecting knowledge and meaning to both societal and individual contexts where language plays a significant role (Fritzell, 2008). I will therefore make closure by returning to the area of HE to discuss implications of findings and thereby build bridges between individual empowerment and the public function of education. I do this by discussing the potential of HE. In what way might pragmatic qualities of a web-based educational practice allow me to say something about the role and potential of HE?

Complexity wanted

There is a risk of drawing too general conclusions when you claim a relational approach to knowledge. However, I have found mediation to be a core aspect of this study, which is possible to introduce to a more general discussion on web-based educational practices. It is only by considering the character of mediation that we can seriously compare and discuss research and policy attempts concerning technology mediated learning environments. It is also carelessness around aspects of mediation that I think results in a deterministic view of technology for learning. It is the differences in the understanding of mediation, which are important differences to account for when talking about identity and meaning-making processes in digitally mediated environments.

In some strands of discourse theory mediation is understood as the separation of the production and consumption of text (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Physical meetings are characterised as “shared contexts” to distinguish them from “mediated contexts”. I find this problematic. The problem lies in the normativity thereby ascribed to the physical meeting, without discussing its character. This I mean blocks efforts to see the working and interrelated processes in different educational practices. Chouliraki and Fairclough (1999) talk about “reduction” when describing mediated discourses, with a “narrowing range of symbolic resources” available for making and interpreting meaning. In face-to-face communication resources include intonation and non-verbal communication (facial expression, gestures, etc), which are absent in the mediated discourse and have to be “compensated for” in various ways (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

This compensating way of discussing conditions for meaning-making takes for granted the full representation and function of meaning-making processes in physical interactions. There is a lack of discussion as to what constitutes the making of meaning and the role of mediational means and what thereby can be “missing” or “absent” in all contexts, even “shared contexts”.

When a concept becomes instrumental (like mediation in this sense) instead of analytical, it is necessary to add some complexity to the
picture. We need to take into account not only the resources for meaning-making but also the qualities they provide. Even the “meddling” of adjoining practices in “shared contexts” could be important analytical aspects worth considering in physical educational practices, in order to problematise web-based educational practices in a more nuanced way.

Interfering discourses

Crossing into the relatively “unknown” territory of digital practices implies new frontiers and the opening up of new spaces of action whereas others are lost. Sometimes new spaces become free fields or intellectual zones, sometimes battlefields for fights and contradictions are opened but hopefully fields of hybridity and growth are established (Fornäs, Klein, Ladendorf, Sundén, & Sveningsson, 2002). Within my own discipline of pedagogy, the field of web-based education has been ruled by what I consider the discourse of “second best”, based on things missing in interaction. From a technological perspective there have been frequent expressions of a deterministic discourse of technology as automatically bringing about certain effects.

The constant division of web- and campus-based conditions does not help complexity. Fruitful interaction in distributed collaborative learning environments no longer depends on technology alone. Technology is still blamed as insufficient, and comparisons with interactive face-to-face learning processes are to the benefit of the latter and the reason why knowledge about conditions of face-to-face dialogues still guides the stimulation of learning processes on line (Sorensen, 1999).

A good and welcome consequence of the division, however, is the growing interest in acquiring an insight into communicative processes in web-based learning, making it possible to discuss its empowering potential and use in achieving the task of HE.

Design for change

Very few students dropped these courses, actually less than five percent. The level of interaction was high and evenly distributed. Course objectives were met in a satisfactory way. As we have seen from previous research, this is not a story told everyday. In this case course design made a difference.

Today we have an increasing number of web-based courses where people participate in the pursuit of knowledge and meaning. Their process of constructing meaning in these courses will undoubtedly be affected by the new conditions for human interaction that come with the environment. The biggest misconception among teachers, apart from adopting a deterministic approach to technology, is that possible success is in the hands of the user when at the same time they have not been
invited. Participation anticipates invitation. I have heard teachers say that students never felt the need of using discussion groups. We cannot, however trust the students to choose the best methods for their studying. Mentors are there to make it worthwhile and to act as role models. Appropriate methods should be chosen in accordance with aims and outcomes. Synchronous communication should be designed and chosen when this is the added value sought for.

For these courses teachers had made an effort of considering the special conditions of the non-embeddedness in time and context of inter-human web-based interaction and the strengths of asynchronous communication. Efforts had been made to support students’ understanding of conditions for collaboration and interaction, to which Guribye (2005) ascribes the same importance for the level of success of web-based courses as the production of new knowledge.

Sharing presupposes that something is known or graspable to the individual. Keys to how personal opinions and values are formed become accessible to us as individuals and as a collective by discussing and sharing the experiences of others. It is on the basis of one’s own experiences that meaning is created in these everyday moments of sharing through social activities (Dewey, 2004/1916). Added to this should be experiencing education as worthwhile. Education then becomes an empowering experience to individuals, and keep feelings of being lost and powerless at a distance (West, 1996).

The possibility of documenting all communication in the VLE has didactical implications for how, for instance, lived experience, personal thoughts and values can be used in pedagogical practices. When given space in a course, they can serve as the explicit platform for students. That way lived experience becomes the subject of meta-reflection, adding a quality necessary in courses of a vocational and professional character (Ahlbäck & Reneland, 2005). The potential powers of communication and dialogical conditions for development and change support these arguments and must be considered in designing web-based education for which rich interaction and dialogical conditions are not an unconditional effect (c.f. Kreijns et al., 2003; Laurillard, 2002; Malmberg, 2006; Mazzolini and Maddison, 2007; Sorensen, 1999).

This study provides enough material to also problematise the concept of support in relation to stimulating interaction among students. There is oppositional debate on whether the participation of teachers stimulates on-line interactions. The question should rather be about what kind of stimulation is requested and how it can be supplied (Sorensen, 1999, Kreijns et al., 2003, Mazzolini and Maddison, 2005, Thorpe et al., 2007). Malmberg (2006) addressed the questions of shallow and unsatisfactory interaction to the unreflected use of interactional technology or collaborative methodological approaches. I am bound to agree. Although not actively participating in these discussions, the teachers have managed to establish fruitful circumstances for interaction and the exchange of experiences as a foundation for internalising theoretical concepts and
understanding in a form that satisfactorily addresses the requirements of regulations.

Collaborative knowledge building is structured by the intertwining of group and personal perspectives. This does not mean that we should ignore or fixate upon the role of individual minds, but see them in interaction with group understanding (Stahl, 2002). To design for interaction, not necessarily group work, becomes crucial for the meaning-making and knowledge-building of the whole collective. Collaborative knowledge-building could change the ways students regard their own role for the knowledge-building of others, adding often missing ethical aspects to education.

By focusing on group activities, which necessarily include roles for individuals within the group, and by noticing the importance of artefacts in the world, such as spoken, written or published texts that capture newly constructed knowledge, we move away from an approach to learning focused on individual minds (Stahl, 2002).

What and whose knowledge?

Speaking for communication as education, as Dewey did, implies a shift in focus from knowledge as content to knowledge as processes and thereby changes responsibilities to once again focus on the role of educational institutions. The questioning of HE identity (Bauman, 2001; Delanty, 2001) has also put the concept of knowledge in focus. More diverse, independent and multicultural HE institutions are seen as a way of reclaiming legitimacy for HE with consequences for how we regard knowledge. Other forces strive towards a “cult of excellence” and quality assurance and validity for education in terms of standards, comparability, and a short-term economic rationale with its consequences for the notion of knowledge (Apple, 2005; Ball, 1998, 2007; Beach, 2008; Beach & Carlson, 2004; Welch, 1998).

IT has a potential power to support both paradigms, depending on the meaning we ascribe to knowledge. IT has of course the potential to reach, represent, administer and control masses. But IT also has a potential through its mediational character to actually change our dispositions for meaning-making and learning.

The rate at which our society today does and is able to change must affect what we regard as knowledge. Education can no longer be aimed at the fostering and education of individuals for a pre-defined society (Bauman, 2001; Welch, 1998). When norms are in flux, society needs to cope with diversity in terms of values, and students need to see the world, its diversity and themselves in it. To be able to develop competences like tolerance and respect for what is different means that students’ abilities to be critical and self-critical must be focused on (Bauman, 2001). To handle fragmentation, change and insecurity our understanding of knowledge needs to be based on the situated and communicative character of knowledge. To see yourself in the presence of others
becomes extremely important and emphasises the reflexive character of knowledge. Are the courses studied here an example of how universities could find “encounters between different cultures, different views of ‘how society works’, different views of ‘the good society’ and different views of good professionalism” (Englund, 2008)? And how might widened participation in HE and participation through the use of IT relate to this scenario?

An intersubjective approach to knowledge inevitably relates knowledge to our cultural system of meaning. The role we ascribe to communication for meaning-making then becomes essential in challenging ruling discourses. The forms for acquiring knowledge and knowledge itself merge. When not only a policy, WP can introduce new narratives into HE.

There is, however, an everyday pedagogic challenge for teachers to improve relations between experience and knowledge-building which is not predestined in terms of knowledgeable objects. It is not until a diversity of students, including marginalised groups and their interests, realise that their dimensions of knowledge are represented and valued that education becomes a truly alternative option in people’s lives (Harding, 1991).

The role of pedagogy

When Bernstein asked for the voice of pedagogy he pointed to its potential power of change. Dewey was also led by the social dimension of education and the role it could play as morals in fostering for democracy and individuality. He specifically paid attention to the conditions of growth and change with the outcome in mind. He proposed an intimate relationship between the forms of education and the results in terms of the characterisation of knowledge (Dewey, 2004/1916). The participant in communication develops an enlarged and changed experience, which can become accessible for self-reflection through forms of education, with a change in the dispositions of the individual as a result. Participating in HE means taking part in a cultural diversity where the shaping of individuality takes place through self-reflexivity, when encountering ever-present conflicts of responsibility (Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, 2008) continuously embedded in HE.

The task of HE, to provide education, is regulated by law and specifies the expected outcome. HE institutions are required to actively stimulate WP and to work for sustainable development for present and future generations, e.g. in terms of social welfare, justice and equity. Students are expected to develop an understanding of cultural diversity and international aspects, to develop an ability to make independent and critical judgments, identify, formulate and solve problems and cope with changes in their professional lives (SFS, 1993 (2006)). This will not happen regardless of what kind of environment the students encounter.
Finding distribution forms and methodological approaches for education contributing to these demands strengthens the legitimacy of HE for future societal projects, as also suggested by Ljunggren and Unemar-Öst (2008).

An obstacle in this search is the fact that web-based education is the target of both internal and external oppression. Outer oppression is conducted in terms of the colonisation and habituation of pedagogical practice by technological discourses and thereby connected views of knowledge. Inner resistance is carried out in terms of absent pedagogues and debate. The absence of pedagogues and a discussion of web-based didactics leave the field open to colonisation. The prevailing notion of knowledge, as something possible to transport from individual to individual has as such also come to influence and guide the organisation of web-based education in HE. Money is spent on administrators, studios (e.g. Telecasting) and technicians, but rarely on pedagogic support. Of course, it is often in the name of pedagogic support that technicians and administrators work. Money is saved on pedagogy.

“Non traditional”– the norm of today and the promise for the future

This study has dealt with students classified as non-traditional (no previous higher education, older than the average student, working while studying, some validated into the program). Being a non-traditional group, it had many homogeneous elements. The students had all been part of similar educational practices, they had similar backgrounds and were of the same sex and ethnicity (this conclusion is based on what they have decided to share with each other, of course). Some of the obstacles involved when trying to experience what others have experienced might be easier to overcome for such a homogeneous group. This raises the question of how diverse a student group can be. When do different experiences contribute and collaborate, and when do they hinder? Or is it a matter of didactical considerations? In encountering “difference” in terms of theoretical and analytical approaches, the acknowledgment of student experiences throughout the course design seemed to have worked as a springboard for self-reflection. In terms of unfamiliar discourses, interfering working conditions in everyday practice, students’ insecurity or no “sense of belonging” the rich and supportive communication created rules and frames for overcoming these obstacles, adding to experience.

Homogeneity rather than diversity, however, must be said to have guided the knowledge-building process of these students. I cannot help thinking that there might be limitations to how “different” approaches can be in terms of different views of the good society, different views of good professionalism when striving for encounters between different cultures in HE (c.f Hartman, 2009). But maybe the digitalised environment can
help push these borders? What might be possible to achieve in a digital environment differs in relation to pedagogical practices in physical environments.

The need to create a common ground and identities within the community adds aspects of shared understanding, which are easy to miss out in traditional pedagogical practices. The changed dimension of time and space changes conditions for reflections. The change of reflection prior to action might introduce further confrontations with personal values and opinions. There is the representation of elaborated codes used by peers that students can use for their own development when confronting practice.

The fact that students taking a distance/web-based teacher training course and are older and more experienced than students in general is important in the learning process (Högskoleverket, 2007). Experience is regarded as a consequence of working practice. These students are also described as more eager to problematise and criticise. A conclusion drawn by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is that the student population contributes to making web-based alternatives more advanced than campus education. This is perhaps said as a commendable attempt to balance the talk of distance education as a B-form of education, a second best alternative. I would raise a finger of warning, though, and say that this is a possibility but cannot be realised without didactical considerations. Experience is not a guarantee on its own of broader and deeper perspectives but a “booster”, and indeed one of considerable worth. Once again, neither the distribution form nor the student material is in itself a guarantee for the successful outcome of an educational activity.

**What about men?**

Non-traditional students are moving towards the mainstream of higher education, and as such they have played an important role in changing HE. But so far middle-class students constitute the largest group in comparison with recruitments from groups of lower socio-economic backgrounds (Högskoleverket, 2008:33 R; Leathwood, 2005). Women are in majority in several European countries, including Sweden and the UK. University programs in areas of education, health and care attract many women, while men undertake their vocational training at the upper secondary level (Leathwood, 2005).

The question of how these women constructed meaning raises further questions about the meaning-making of other groups. Putting groups of people together and labelling them students, their differences are easily forgotten (Assarsson & Zackrisson-Sipos, 2005). A broader recruitment from new professional fields of e.g. nursing/caring has added to the family of university programs in Sweden. These programs have a majority of female students and have contributed to changing the gender landscape of HE (Witt, 2008).
There are concerns that I find should not be connected with the dominating participation of women in HE, which we should regard as important and welcome, but with the diminishing participation of men (Högskoleverket, 2008). How can we better design for web-based education attracting men? In what way are issues of power and identity and lived experiences of importance in that search?

Finally...

The habituation of managerialism in the field of web-based education has been a quick and simple process since the area of IT and pedagogy is so scarcely populated by pedagogues. Its structures are also gendered with its women students, women teachers in majority, and male IT-support and designers.

Along with the growing dependency of market-like conditions for attracting students and contracting research, there are now many new actors making claims and trying to set the agenda for HE. Whose interest will be in focus remains to be seen. This is an important task for pedagogy as a discipline, taking action, formulating questions based on the potential and powers of education, and investigating and implementing the potential of these groups of students and learning environments in the future development of higher education.
References


Appendix

Original quotes in Swedish

Q1 Chapter 6

Hej på Er alla!

Jag får erkänna att jag tyckte det var lite nervöst att byta grupp, jag har redan bytt tre gånger innan och tyckte att jag precis hade landat och så jag lite orolig för Ni verkade så fantastiskt effektiva, så jag kände: åh, åh det här kommer att bli lite jobbigt. Jag tänkte speciellt på projektarbetet vi hade i förra krus, då en del av Er redan var färdiga med den innan semstern. Min grupp var ute i sista minuten - men vi hade roligt under tiden - och framför allt vi fick den färdigt i tid (obs - ej i god tid)…

…Jag var bara tvungen titta in på vår egen nya sida, och ”kolla” om diskussionen var i full gång - men döm om min häpnad - jag var först. Ni får ha det så bra jag återkommer med lite tankar kring första uppgiften när jag har tänkt färdigt.Ha det så gott alla nya vänner!
Kram Tina

Q2

Hej Tina(och ni andra m för den delen!)
Håller med dej om att helgen var ganska krävande, efter tentan hade man gärna åkt hem ;)
Missade de 2 sista föreläsningarna tyvärr, min kollega som jag samåker med fick en fruktansvärd huvudvärk så hon ville hem och dra täcket över huvudet och bara sova, sånt som händer, men jag hoppas att materialet från de föreläsningarna kommer in på WebCT.
Skönt att höra att det gick bra för din dotter trots allt, Tina. Nu får jag nog hjälpa min dotter, hon har letat fram glassmaskinen så jag får väl ut och rädda mitt nystäckade kök :)

Må så gott allihop! Mvh Anna

Q3

Hej på er!

Jag håller också med och känner att det har tagit några dagar att komma igång fullt ut igen efter den mycket hektiska helgen. Jag tycker också att gruppen kändes bra och det var skönt att få sitta och prata i gruppen även om jag kände mig ganska tom i huvudet då, så det var inte ointresse om någon uppfattade det så. Visst var jag bekymrad över att byta grupp, jag har varit i en grupp som de flesta har varit sedan starten och den har fungerat jättebra. Jag tänker på det jag sa om att vi jobbade undan innan semestern, det var inte menat som att sätta nåon press i denna gruppen. Men skönt att jobba undan och ev få lite lugnare en period. Men jag är flexibel och anpassar mig till de omständigheter som råder, jag tror att denna gruppen kommer att fungera jättebra också.

Ha det så gott så länge kram Ylva

Q4

När jag läser den här artiklen tänker jag bara, vilka starka barn vi får, och vilken medveten generation som skall ta hand om oss när vi blir gamla, så härligt och positvt! Va underbart med ett livsprojekt som att vara barn! Det var väl inte så idylliskt förr med aga, incest alkoholism i stugorna och handikappade barn som inte fick visas…

…Barn idag vet ju inget om vad vi kallar idylliska barndomen och vad vet vi
de kommer säkert att kalla sin barndom som idyllisk...

Q5  Chapter 7
Hej!!
När jag såg att någon/några hade skrivit här så tänkte jag vad duktiga ni är som redan har lagt in era inlägg. Men det var samtidigt skönt att ni inte var så ihärdiga med skrivandet. Kul att höra ifrån er. Ha det bra så länge...
Mvh Mona

Q6
Hej tjejer...
Tyvärr tror jag att jag inte att jag kommer att få in båda mina inlägg ikväll, då jag varit lite splittrad i mina tankar... (Pappa har gjort en bypass operation idag, så jag har varit lite nervis inför detta.) Men jag ska göra så gott jag kan...
/Mia

Q7
Hej på er! Jag tar ledigt över helgen, åker iväg med min man. Det känns välbehövligt efter sista tidens pluggande. Vi hörs nästa vecka. Ha en fortsatt bra helg! / Bodil

Q8
Hej Carola!
Jag tycker absolut du ska följa med till Blekinge i helgen och inte ha så stora krav på dig själv när det gäller studierna just nu. Ta det lite alla upplevde som jobbig att läsa till och ge dig själv en chans att återhämta dig lite. Jag tror att alla har tyckt det varit lite svårt att "ladda om" om till ny kurs och det gör ju inget om våra inlägg eller kommentarer ibland kommer in lite senare än vi bestämde när vi träffades, det var ju mest för att ha lite riktlinjer att gå efter för att slippa att jobben hoppar sig längre fram. Vi kan alla få saker som gör att vi blir sena med inlägg som ska göras och det är ju helt OK men visst är det bra när vi vet om varandra. Sköt om dig Carola och hoppas du kan få någon hjälp mot din huvudvärk framöver.
Kram från Marie.

Q9
Hej på er!
Jag hoppas allt är väl med er. Själv har jag haft lite svårt att "ställa om" och börja ta tag ordentligt i den nya kursen. Efter helgen kändes det som man helst bara ville koppla av helt ett tag men nu är det väl dags att ta nya tag och kursen verkar väldigt rolig och intressant, så det blir säkert jättebra. Jag är förresten glad att jag hamnat just i den här gruppen, ni var alla så positiva och inspirerade så jag tror vi får det bra och roligt tillsammans och kommer att kunna göra bra gemensamma arbeten också.

Så var det då inläggen, jag har börjat läsa artiklarna och...

Q10
Hej!
Har inte öppnat något i studieväg idag. Har städat lite och sen har vi haft 14-års kalas med nära och kära. Skönt med lite paus. Tycker att det kändes jättebra med er nya gruppermedlemmar ser fram emot att få jobba ihop med er. Vi hörs Birgitta
Q11

Q12
Jag läser också nu! Artiklarna är så intressanta. Dom tar med mig på en spännande resa, men ibland även tuff resa till mitt inre. Vilken är min grund, den som jag bygger min kunskap från och vad konstruerar jag? Mitt jobb på förskolan blir alltmer allvarligt, viktigt och krävande. Jag känner mig så liten, så liten, så liten... Imorgen är det fredag! Vi har en lååååååång helg framför oss...

Q13
Men oj vad det tar tid! Har inte hunnit mycket annat idag på min lediga tid, men tvätt och dammratior springer inte ifrån en, de väntar snällt på att jag ska bli färdig framför datorn 😊 Linn.

Q14
Pygmalioneffekten, ett nytt ord för mig, men betydelsen av denna har jag kommit i kontakt med innan. Ofta är det så att under kursens gång får man begrepp så att man kan sätta ord på sådant som man redan har erfarenhet av.

Q15
Jag har nyligen bytt arbetsplats och det tar tid att landa; komma in i arbetsslaget och lära känna barnen. Men jag känner att jag växer när jag läser litteraturen, det får mig att ifrågasätta och vilja förändra. Jag håller på att utveckla min kompetens.

Q16

Q17
Som vi förstod det var det största irretationsmomentet hos föräldrarna att deras barn inte fick lunch på förskolan. Åter man som vuxen inte någon mat under dagen? Personligen njuter jag av att få äta i lugn och ro hemma med bara min familj, utan att behöva dela, mata, hjälpa, förklara, torka, svara i telefon och samtidigt försöka äta lite själv. Den pedagogiska måltiden på en småbarnsavdelning ger i allafall mig mest magknip...

Q18
De exempel du ger är vanliga hos oss också och senast i förra veckan hade vi en mamma som var väldigt irriterad för att vi skulle gå på utedag just när hon hade ledig dag. Men du kan ju gå ut med dina barn i skogen själv. Nej jag vet ju inte vad ni kommer att titta på och då kanske det inte blir samma.

Q19
Omsorg och lärande hör ihop, tycker jag. Författaren skriver att omsorg innebär att hjälpa till med mycket basala ting som mat, påklädnings och sänggående. Det rör kroppen. Allt är väl viktigt med barn, inte bara lärande av te x böcker, matematik... ---
... särskilt när barnet lyckas och man ser glädjen i deras ögon att de kan själva.

Q20
Man säger ofta att det var bättre förr och det kanske det var till en viss del, men utvecklingen går framåt och det är bara att hänga med och acceptera förändringarna, både de positiva och negativa. Det sorgliga tycker jag att barn är så mycket tid på förskolan och fritids. Kan det bero på maxtaxan?

Q21
Usch, tycker ni att det låter gnälligt? Jag låter som en riktig bakåtsträvare! Men man skulle ju ha ett kritiskt förhållningssätt till det man läste, var det inte så? Donna

Q22
Jag tycker verkligen att uppgiften var svår denna veckan. Som du skriver Bibi så är ju litteraturen ganska svår och jag har svårt att komma på vad det är som de är ute efter. Därför gick jag in här för att se om någon av er hade börjat skriva något klokt, men tji fick jag. Nu får jag istället gå tillbaka till litteraturen igen och se om jag kan få ihop något. (eller går jag och lägger mig och skjuter på det en dag till!)

Q23
Kanske har vi en del lika erfarenheter och då framkommer det eller också har vi olika erfarenheter och kanske också synsätt och då bör det väl också redovisas. Här ska det framkomma orsakssamband och förklaringar som ska motiveras och argumenteras. Uppgiften är spännande men svår och jag tycker att tiden är rysligt knapp. Det finns ju ett liv utanför studierna också. Vad tycker ni? Hälsningar Bibi

Q24
Tror du att du hade fastnat för dessa artiklar om vi inte läst denna kursen? För det är kul hur man ser "nya" saker när manläser de olika kurserna. Tack för tipsen och lycka till med uppgift 2:5 så ses vi på fredag. /Cecilia

Q25
Det nya ligger väl i att man får ord för det och en ökad medvetenhet om vad det kan innebära I mitt yrke. Minns ni att vi faktiskt var inne på...

Q26

Q27
Hej! Jag tänkte på det du skrev om i ditt första inlägg. Det är ju både för- och nackdelar med att vi lever i en annan tid nu. Det är ju viktigt att lära sig att ifrågasätta och argumentera, det behövs i dagens samhälle. Samtidigt måste man kunna visa respekt för varandra och det kan väl saknas ibland, särskilt mot äldre människor. / Pia
Q28

Q29
...Gunilla Halldén tar upp Hockey och James resonemang där de säger att vi skiljer på det som är normal och det som är avvikande genom att vi betonar skillnader. Visst är det väl så! Som du skriver Tina att det måste påverka med alla skönhetsideal vi matas med från alla håll. Min dotter som är åtta år fick oss att tänka till när vi under semestern hamnade på MC Donalds...

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...Man undrar vad som händer när så pass små barn redan tänker på sitt utseende.

Q30
Hej på er!
Jag har också funderat lite på vad Gunilla Halldén skriva om Jenny Hockey och Allison James olika faser där barn och gamla inte ses som normala och där följden blir ett förnekande av den vuxna människans beroende. I vårt samhälle ligger fokus tidigt på att barnet ska bli självständigt genom att t ex ganska tidigt ge barnen eget rum. Eller som Gunilla fortsätter att skriva “i ett individualistiskt samhälle är det de autonoma individernas kompetens och förmåga till lärande som framhävs”.

Jag vet att i många andra kulturer går livet ut på att just få vara beroende av varandra och att vara beroende är en bekräftelse på att du är värdefull. De hjälps åt över generationerna och släktbanden är otroligt starka. Själv tror jag att det är detta som föder empati och medkänsla, där andras problem även är mina.


Kram Dina

Q31
Hej!
Bengt Sandin skriver i artikel en skolan barnen och samhället att redan under 1700-talet hade man tidvis fört en intensiv diskussion kring behovet av ett skolväsende som svarade mot den framväxande borglighetens intresse. Mina tankar går så här vad var borglighetens intresse? Jag tänker mig att dessa borgare ofta hade det bra ställt och kanske hade de någon form av rörelse, de försökte nog ekonomiskt att se till att sina barn skaffade sig en utbildning, sedan gav de kanske dem en bit mark där de kunde bygga sig ett hem och ev kunde de börja arbeta i föräldrarnas rörelse. I mina ögon är detta en form av curlingföräldrar, men de var en minoritet då. Nu idag när vi alla överlag har det bättre ställt ekonomiskt och vi alla i gör så. Även om det nu också framkommit en massa andra saker som vi gör. Så har detta ämne blivit så aktuellt är det därför att minoritetssgruppen har blivit en majoritet?

Beror det på ekonomin? /Ellen
Q32
Hej!
När du Ellen beskriver hur det var förr tycker jag också att man kan kalla det som en typ av curling men jag har inte tänkt på det så. Det är nog som du skriver att de var i en minoritet och att vi nu alla har det bättre.
// Mari

Q33
Hej
Jag tycker med att det var en intressant tanke Ellen! Har inte alls tänkt på det sättet, så det var en ny, fräscht idé. Alltid kul när någon hittar något nytt som ingen annan sett. Det är det som är så bra med denna utbildningen tycker jag, eftersom alla jobbar inom ungefär samma verksamhet så får man massa roliga och intressanta tips, ideér och nya tankesätt!
mvh K

Q34
När det sedan gäller detta med perspektivseende kan jag inte låta bli att tänka lite på Luhmann. Han menar att det inte finns någon som kan beskriva på ett korrekt sätt. Det vi gör är att med hjälp av våra egna begrepp annans perspektiv detta blir ändå i slutändan ett perspektiv som kommer från oss själva och Luhmann menar att vi är alla underkastade samma faktum. Även om sociologer ibland gör anspråk på att kunna studera andras perspektiv är detta helt felaktigt. Nu menar visserligen Jenner att identifikation och fullständig förståelse inte alltid är nödvändigt utan däremot att inlevelse och vilja till förståelse är viktigast.

Q35
Hej, och tack för allt engagemang som ni har lagt ner under dessa två kurser OXA531 Identitet och meningsskapande och OXA232 Pedagogiska möten och lärande. Ni har kommit halvvägs genom er utbildning och ni är en härlig grupp att arbeta med. Under OXA531 gjorde vi helt nya grupper vilket några kände en viss oro inför men ni har verkligen försökt att skapa nya relationer och många har uttryckt sig positivt kring gruppbytet och att det gått över förväntan bra. Ni har också gett uttryck för att ni har lärt er mycket genom dessa båda kurser i era processloggar vilket är mycket stimulerande för oss att läsa.


Vid dessa studier hade vi fått tillåtelse att använda studenternas kommunikation i studieforumen, chatten och de inlämningsuppgifter som empiri. Vi gjorde även några intervjuer med några studenter för att diskutera resultaten.

Nu skulle vi vilja be er om tillåtelse att använda materialet som finns i kurserna OXA531 och OXA232 för nya studier för att dels få kunskap om hur grupper utvecklas på nätet och hur lärandet och meningsskapandet har utvecklas i just er grupp. Det är av mycket stor betydelse att vi får tillåtelse från er för att kunna utveckla vår förståelse för lärandet i distanskurser – det är intressant för oss här på Växjö universitet när vi möter er i nya kurser inom lärarutbildningsprogrammet framöver men också för andra utbildningar. Ni är en unik grupp där den är ovanligt stor (ca 165) och med den yrkeserfarenhet som ni bär med er under utbildningen.

Ni kommer själva att skriva examensarbeten i slutet av utbildningen och då kommer ni i kontakt med de forskningsetiska regler som gäller för all forskning. Dessa är bl a individskyddskravet som handlar om information, samtycke, konfidentialitet samt hur forskningsmaterialet får utnyttjas. För oss innebär det att allt material som vi kommer att ta del av kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt – dvs. att inga obehöriga får ta del av empirin samt att inget av de presenterade resultaten skall kunna förknippas med en enskild person. Det innebär för dig att du måste ha möjlighet att säga nej tack jag vill inte att mina texter skall vara med i denna studie.

Vi är oerhört tacksamma om vi får tillåtelse från Dig att använda ditt material från dessa båda kurser. Om du inte vill att materialet skall användas eller undrar något mer kring tänkta studier ber vi dig att höra av dig genom att svara på detta mail.

Vänliga hälsningar och lycka till framöver!

Tor Ahlbäck
Institutionen för samhällsvetenskap

Dnr: SVI 2007/69-514

KURSPLAN

Identitet och meningsskapande

Identity and the making of meaning

Kurskod: OX531A
Beslutsdatum: 2007-06-13
Beslutande organ: Institutionsstyrelsen
Gäller från: 2007-07-01
Undervisningsspråk: Svenska
Ämne: Samhällsvetenskap
Högskolepoäng/ECTS-poäng: 7,5
Nivå: Grundnivå
Fördjupning: G2, fortsättningskurs
Inplacering i utbildningsystemet: Ingår i distansprogrammet för lärarexamen för förskola och förskoleklass, 120/140 poäng.

Förkunskaper: För tillträde till kursen krävs att den studerande är antagen till distansutbildning av barnskötare till lärarexamen för förskolans/förskoleklassens verksamhet (LOXFY). Dessutom krävs att i huvudsak minst 50 poäng av tidigare kurser inom programmet är godkända.

Förväntade läranderesultat: Med hjälp av kursens teoretiska perspektiv och utgångspunkter skall studenten utveckla sin förmåga såväl muntligt som skriftligt av att kunna förklara, kunna dra samband, göra jämförelse mellan olika teoretiska modeller för att utveckla sina kunskaper för olika aspekter av barns meningsskapande, såväl som förskolebarn/elever som uppväxande generation. Avsikten är att få en fördjupad förståelse och kunna dra väl grundade slutsatser för hur relationen mellan förskolan som institution och de övriga sociala livs villkor som omger barn påverkas och påverkar utifrån olika dimensioner.

Studenten skall efter genomgången kurs:

– kunna tillämpa och utveckla ett grundläggande vetenskapligt kritiskt och problematiserande förhållningssätt kring barnperspektivet, barns livsvillkor och identitetsskapande i relation till förskolans verksamhet

– visa på en utvecklad teoretiskt grundad förståelse och analys för samhällets stabilitet och förändring och att kunna redogöra för hur dessa påverkar barns livs situation, och våra föreställningar om barn och barndomen

Innehåll

Undervisningsformer

Undervisningen består av helgföreläsningar där föreläsningar och gruppdiskussioner ingår. Föreläsningar och slutseminarier är obligatoriska.

OEX-utbildningen ges på distans vilket innebär att i det flesta fall kommer man som student att arbeta med datorn som redskap i kommunikationen med studenter och handledare under kursens gång.

Läromedel

Se slutet av dokumentet.

Examinationsformer

Kursen examineras genom studentens aktiva deltagandet vid såväl de fysiska som de virtuella mötena samt genom två skriftliga uppgifter individuellt och en i grupp.

Betygssättning

Vid betygssättningen används något av betygen Väl Godkänd, Godkänd eller Underkänd.

Överlappning

Kursbevis

Studerande som med godkänt resultat genomgått kursen kan på begäran erhålla kursbevis.

Övrigt

För de studerande som ej godkänts vid ordinarie VFU ges en-dast möjlighet till ytterligare en förnyad prövning.

Läromedel

Titel, förlag och utgivningsår

Obligatorisk litteratur:

Bertilsson, Lena & Åberg, Britt-Marie


Halldén, Gunilla

Den moderna barndomen och barns vardagsliv. 52
Stockholm: Carlssons förlag (2007). (Kap.1-4. 10)

Jenner, Håkan

Månsson, Per

Selander, Staffan
Kobran, nallen och majjen.
Tradition och förnyelse i svensk skola och skolforskning
Artikel: Skolan, barnen och samhället - i ett historiskt perspektiv, Bengt Sandin
Can be reached via Internet: http://www.skolutveckling.se/

SOU 1999:63
Att lära och leda. Det nya läraruppdraget. (kap. 3, 24 s).
Regeringskansliet, SOU. (1999).
Kan nås via Internet (www.regeringen.se

Skolverket
1998 års läroplan för förskolan (Lpfo 98)
Kan nås via Internet: http://www.skolverket.se

Svaleryd, Kajsa
Kompendium
(Säljs av institutionen för Samhällsvetenskap)
Kursplan

Kurskod: OXA232
Kursbenskoding: Pedagogiska möten och lärande
Engelsk benämning: Pedagogical meetings and learning
Undervisningsspråk: Svenska
Ämne: Pedagogik
Poängtal: 5 poäng
ECTS poäng: 7,5 poäng
Nivå: 21-40 poäng
Inplacering i utbildningssystemet: Ingår i distansprogrammet för lärarexamen för förskola och förskoleklass, 120/140 poäng.
Gäller från: 2005-11-11

Förkunskaper: För tillträde till kursen krävs att den studerande är antagen till distansutbildning av barnskötare till lärarexamen för förskolans/förskoleklassens verksamhet (LOXFY), har genomfört och i huvudsak blivit godkänd på tidigare kurser inom programmet.

Syfte: Syftet med kursen är att den studerande skall ges möjligheter att utveckla ett professionellt förhållningssätt i förhållande till det pedagogiska mötet. En utgångspunkt för kursen är att barns samlärande är centralt för kunskapsutvecklingen liksom att det finns flera pedagogiska riktningar för hur det formaliserade lärandet kan organiseras. Samspelet mellan förskollärare och barn är centralt liksom samspelet mellan personal för en lärande miljö. En annan utgångspunkt för kursen är samtalets betydelse både för barns meningskapande och lärande.

Efter avslutad kurs skall den studerande:
- ha utvecklat förståelse för hur barn läser tillsammans
- ha kunskap om hur kultur och medier påverkar socialisation, identitet och det pedagogiska mötet
- ha förståelse för estetiska uttrycksformers betydelse för barns meningsskapande
- ha kunskap om och utvecklat sin erfarenhet av samtal med barn enskilt och i grupp
- kunna planera, genomföra, dokumentera och utvärdera ett pedagogiskt möte
- ha utvecklat en förståelse för det pedagogiska mötet och dess förutsättningar utifrån såväl ett barnperspektiv, ett lärarperspektiv som ett samhällsperspektiv
Innehåll
Kursen innehåller följande:
- förutsättningar för barns lärande
- teorier kring barns samlärande
- estetiska uttryckssformer och lärande
- samtalsmetod
- planering, genomförande, dokumentation och utvärdering av ett pedagogiskt möte i förskola, fritidshem eller skola.

Undervisningsformer
Undervisningen sker på distans med några fysiska träffar. De fysiska träffarna är obligatoriska och består av föreläsningar och seminarier. Övriga studier sker individuellt och i grupp över Internet.

Läromedel
Se nedan.

Examinationsformer
Kursen examineras genom studentens aktiva deltagandet vid såväl de fysiska som de virtuella mötena samt skriftliga uppgifter individuellt och i grupp samt rapportsskrivande.

Betygssättning
Betygssättning sker med något av betygen Väl Godkänd, Godkänd eller Underkänd.

Kursbevis
Studerande med godkänt resultat på kursen, Pedagogiska möten och lärande, 5 poäng, kan erhålla kursbevis efter begäran hos institutionsssekreteraren.

Övrigt
En poäng av kursen utgörs av verksamhetsförlagd utbildning.

Kursansvarig institution; Institutionen för pedagogik avdelningen för didaktik.

Läromedelsförteckning

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<tr>
<td>Claesander, Annika</td>
<td><strong>Våldet påverkar – men hur?</strong> Artikel ur tidningen Förskolan, Nr 2 (2002) Tillhandahålls av institutionen i ett kompendium till självkostnadspris.</td>
<td>2 s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forsell, Anna</td>
<td><strong>Boken om pedagogerna.</strong> Stockholm: Liber (2005). Kap. 3 – 10 och 13</td>
<td>ca 170 s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gustafsson, Inga</td>
<td><strong>TV – bundsförvant eller fiende?</strong> Om barn, föräldrar och TV-tittande. Välddskildringsrådets skrifserie nr 12 (1995) Tillhandahålls av institutionen i ett kompendium till självkostnadspris.</td>
<td>15 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmsen, Merete</td>
<td><strong>Samtalsbilder – en väg till kommunikation med barn.</strong> Lund: Studentlitteratur (2005)</td>
<td>ca 100 s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autor(er)</td>
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<td>Olsson, Kristin Boreson, Cecilia</td>
<td><em>Medieanalys för analfabeter. I Medieresor – om medier för pedagoger.</em></td>
<td>Stockholm: Sveriges Utbildningsradio AB Tillhandahålls av institutionen i ett kompendium till självkostnadspris.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Williams, Pia Sheridan, Sonja Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid</td>
<td><em>Barns samlärande – en forskningsöversikt.</em></td>
<td>Stockholm: Skolverket/Liber distr. (2000)</td>
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Litteratur från kursen Meningsskapande och identitet (OXA 531) används som referenslitteratur.


