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A process from accounts to reflections. Working with a multicultural group of 72 teacher students

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In the article 'When more get less' (Viscovi 2001) the author illustrates a workload that will be recognised by many lecturers within the university world. Without any increase in resources, we have to teach and examine more and more students. In this situation it is easy to be indulgent towards students reproducing accounts of the literature they have studied, in both oral and written examinations, instead of encouraging them towards creativity, production, reflection, awareness of and knowledge development concerning theories underlying statements in texts and in verbal communication. The solution, suggested by another author in the same publication, is to make establish particular (older) universities as institutions only for the academic elite, since the scientific quality is otherwise said to be at risk. However, I would like to argue that, although sufficient resources are necessary, resources alone are not sufficient to guarantee good quality in education.

Malmo University is required to include both students from backgrounds unaccustomed to higher education and students with cultural backgrounds other than Swedish. Malmo has an ambition to become a multicultural university in all respects, which is in my view a mission that should go without saying in a democratic society, but what does this mean in reality?

I lecture in pedagogy in Teacher Education and often give courses which include theories of development and learning. Behaviourist theory and theories by Vygotsky, Dewey, Piaget, Mead and Bernstein are discussed and compared with one another and problematised in practical settings. The Swedish curriculum for the comprehensive school and the gymnasium emphasises the value of socio-historic/socio-cultural theory as presented by Vygotsky. This means, for instance, that teaching and learning is vital for development instead of vice versa. The socio-cultural background is of importance and learning is contextual. Language development and knowledge development are intertwined. I argue that this is applicable also to students with multicultural backgrounds entering teacher education - in this paper 'multicultural' is understood as both as 'multicultural Swedish' and 'multicultural non-Swedish' backgrounds.

A great many of our students appear to have a functional colloquial language and it is hard for them to admit that they sometimes do not understand the concept-based language and theories in the study literature. In the School of Education this, and the more formal difficulties in writing and speaking Swedish, are often discussed, and some text workshops have been started so that students with 'language problems' can seek help. This work is new and has not yet been evaluated. I describe below an example of students, during their first term of communication studies, worked to develop their language and knowledge.

In autumn 2001 I was course leader for 72 students in a course called NMS (*Natur-miljö-samhälle*/Nature-Environment-Society). The syllabus began with a ten-week course 'Becoming a teacher', followed by ten weeks on 'Knowledge and learning'. From the outset we wanted the students to be part of the context, based on their own reflection,

deliberative discussion, analysis and critical scrutiny. During the first week and a half the students worked in two groups in collaboration with journalists: each group chose its own editor-in-chief and an assistant editor-in-chief. Every day started with an editorial meeting at which the content of the day's work was decided. Press conferences were organised, for example with a journalist who had written articles about the lack of discipline in Swedish schools, a consultant working with crisis and conflicts in schools, the head of the School of Education and with two researchers who had followed and documented our work from a gender aspect.

We wanted to give the students an opportunity to deal with issues concerning democracy and citizenship in a deliberative way. The first texts produced were based on interviews conducted by pairs of students. After each interview they wrote news-items, articles and reports about issues concerning their education and future lives as teachers, and were required to answer questions about their use of investigative journalistic methods. Two tabloid newspapers based on the students' work were printed by the Swedish daily newspaper *Skånska Dagbladet*, which were distributed to students in the other four teacher education fields.

This programme came as a shock to some students, who said that they “chose mathematics in order to never have to write another text in their life”. They hated Swedish as a subject, and suggested that those studying Swedish should start with a mathematics course, “otherwise it would not be fair”. Others could not understand why they had to find out themselves about the education they had just begun. “It would have been so much easier if you had just told us about everything”. However, most of the students were very positive about their somewhat unexpected start.

Newspaper week was followed by weekly seminars in which they studied literature and special issues such as 'School life', 'District studies/segregation/citizenship', 'Leadership', 'Conditions of life', 'Multiculturality' and 'Gender'. To be a participant in the seminars students had to contribute a text in which they reflected on the agenda.

At this point the students began to ask "What do you actually mean when you say that you want us to reflect upon ...”, and "How is this done?" Both of these questions show that some students interpreted 'reflection' as giving an account of content, to 'learn what's in the book'. Some said it was "what comes into your head when you hear and read something new”. Others thought it had to do with “finding out what the lecturer wanted them to believe in”. Without realising it, they had identified one of the most important questions in education: why do individuals interpret the same thing in so many and different ways?

After introductory discussions, the students exchanged texts, mostly with three or four others. These discussions, reflections and readings gave the students an insight into what it means to work in a deliberative, polyphonic (Dysthe 1996) and multicultural class-room with students from different backgrounds and with different experiences. Questions about majority and minority views were raised. I read and commented on all the texts produced, mostly by asking questions. All texts were saved in individual e-portfolios for future purposes.

The discussions and the texts showed a great variety of awareness about the content and the theories. This was because of the individual's discerning - or not discerning - different aspects of the whole, and whether these aspects were subjected to a focussed

consciousness. The students had identified and focused on different aspects and the differences became clear to them during the seminars, and was commented on: "It's been so important to me to listen to and try to understand *why* Sushan claims that discipline is the most difficult issue to handle in teaching, while I maintain quite a different position. Could it be because of her Muslim background? It must be. We have left those kind of questions behind us, haven't we? I think that the most difficult thing is how to handle parents who are not interested in their children". This student shows an us-and-them perspective and tries to put it into a past-and-present context. She is also implying something about "us" knowing better than "them". At the beginning of the course it was obvious that different kinds of awareness and understanding of issues or phenomena were taken for granted by individual students. This showed a consciousness of the *issue* experienced, but not always a consciousness of *why* there were different ways of experiencing, at a certain time, or in a certain context (Marton and Booth 1997).

After discussions based on opinions, each of the issues - 'School life', 'District studies/, segregation/citizenship', 'Leadership', 'Conditions of life', 'Multiculturality' and 'Gender' - were considered on a theoretical level. Lectures and discussions put the theories into their socio-historical and cultural context. This was something new to most students, but this process made it clear to them the reasons why education had been handled the way it had during their own school years. They realised why different theories about knowledge development give rise to different ways in which teaching was practically realised. Theories underlying political statements about multiculturality, as either a problem or a resource, were also discussed.

In teacher education we often discuss *when* it is appropriate to introduce theory and analysis. It is often argued that it is better to wait until the students have 'matured'. However, maturing is not a passive process, and this view indicates an approach to learning and knowledge development that excludes the power of using and challenging students' conceptions and ways of expressing their views on these issues. If theorising is considered to be too difficult and is left out, conceptions risk remaining as superficial level *views*. Theories do not become understandable and usable if they are not problematised and put into a context. Without this, they remain simply *facts* to be learned and memorised. In my experience, this is one of the greatest dilemmas within the educational system. Teachers are accustomed to, and proficient at, discussing methodology, but not theories of knowledge development (see Hartsmar 2001). Awareness of and the use of theories must be considered as an ongoing process throughout teachers' initial education and their continuing professional life. It is part of lifelong learning, and should not be treated as static.

The first ten-week course 'Becoming a teacher' concluded with an individually written home examination. The students were asked to look back on the texts they had written (saved in their e-portfolios); the tasks they had completed; their study literature; the lectures and discussions they had taken part in; and to reflect both on their personal development during this period and on their future work as a teacher. Half the group (36 students) produced anonymous examination scripts to avoid prejudiced marking; the other half wrote their names on their scripts. Of the 'hidden' identities, I correctly identified about 30 of the 36, which I think was the result of the many discussions we had taken part in and all the students' texts I had read. By the end of the second course I had read, commented on and put questions to some 1500 pages of text: through these I could

now hear the voices of individuals, recognise their arguments, opinions and their way of putting words into thoughts.

At the end of the course, and with the next, 'Knowledge and Learning' about to begin, the students were asked to consider how they would like to deal with the forthcoming literature seminars. They voted unanimously for the seminars to be continued, with the same demands as in the first course. To be part of the seminar, you had to contribute a text. One student said "It's very importance that you let us continue in this way. Now I understand what you meant when you said that a text is 'dead' until it meets a reader. The meaning is not within the text for us to discover. It's realised between me and the book and between us in the group. This is so different from how I was taught to read books in school. This is much more fun".

Because of this viewpoint, he seminars were held in the homes of the students, and I was deputed to take care of those who could not attend a meeting for some reason. Reports from the seminars were mailed to me, and I continued to read and comment on the texts. I could see important developments in every student, not of the same character, but of significance to every one of them. My aim was to bring about a shifting of focus from a quantitative measuring of *how much* the students had learnt to a *qualitative* view on *what* they had learnt and *why* their thinking had developed the way it had. It became important to see the student from his or her own learning perspective, instead of looking for defects.

From a democratic point of view, however, there is a snag in this. In the university world only one system exists - that of getting one academic point per week. We favour certain theories of development and learning, we teach these theories and we try to practice them. In the end, since this is about higher education, all students get the same message - after ten weeks they all have to come up with the same result since time is up. I would suggest that we need to start thinking in a more unorthodox way, and make it possible for students to both enter and leave higher education when *they* feel ready to do so and not when a fixed time has expired. Roth (2001) deals with the question of principle concerning the possibility of deliberation in the public school system. This question is to a great extent applicable to higher education as well.

The last word belongs to one of the students who at the beginning was one of the most angry.

> I have now written about things I consider to be the most important about becoming a teacher. … What I should like to say is, that the new teacher education has a new approach to and wants to create a better context for the students. I have complained a lot about the traditional teaching in the comprehensive school and in the same way as that has changed I think that teacher education has changed. We have to seek information and create an interest about what we want to learn about. My notion of higher education was that you got a pile of books, read them in what way you liked and accounted for the content in a written exam. The way we work now with discussions, writing logs after reading books, solving problems in groups, having lectures etc. are ways which make you stay.
>
> (Jonas Nerheden, NMS D, November 2001.)

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