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## **She told me to develop my reflections ...'**

*Nanny Hartsmar*

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In *Future Citizens in Europe* (Hartsmar, 2002) I described my work as 'A process from accounts to reflections: working with a multicultural group of 72 teacher students'. Student reflections, deliberative discussions, analysis and critical scrutiny of lectures, course books, and weekly seminars concerning 'School life', 'District studies/segregation/citizenship', 'Leadership', 'Conditions of life', 'Multiculturality' and 'Gender' were reported. During 2003-2004 that work is followed up with (a) fifteen interviews carried out with students in Spring 2003 and six with teachers in the same period and (b) an interactive and communicative assessment which will be reported at a later date.

This paper focuses on some answers on the role of tutoring and coaching relative to students' experiences and to the outcomes of their studies. It seems hard for students to formulate their tutoring needs, and to ask their tutors about the implications of what s/he requires of the student. Some teachers find difficulty in being explicit about their demands since they themselves are uncertain about how to formulate adequate demands.

What has come to interest me more and more over time is what students mean when in interviews they tell me that they 'don't understand what we are talking about'. Students mention background, academic language and cultural differences as reasons for difficulties with their studies, and when asked about tutoring concerning papers they have written, they also refer to lack of adequate and professional tutoring. As three of the students said:

You sit there and you nod and try to look informed and make a pretence of being in full control. One tutor told me to 'develop my reflections' and I said that I would do that. When I sat down to actually do it, I realised that I didn't know what she meant. What exactly does it mean to develop one's reflections? Does it mean that I have to write more about it, or is it something about the way I am thinking? Another favourite expression teachers use is 'you must enter deeply into this'. I keep on reading and writing, but how do I know when it is deep enough? Is it like when journalists dig and dig to find more information? When I talk to other students there seems to be as many interpretations as there are students. Some say it is being able to scrutinise theories. I do not agree. Well, not in the first year at least. How can we scrutinise theories when we have not even heard of them? Are we not supposed to learn things here? (Female student, second year. Swedish background, unaccustomed to academic studies)

Coming here scared me tremendously. The language people use is not familiar to me at all and I do not mean just the Swedish language. It is also the academic language as such, and the way people act. It is confusing when you think you are part of something and then find out that implicitly you are not ... After the first year I thought I'd vomit if I was asked ever again to 'reflect' and 'scientifically develop' my thoughts. I know that your group talked a lot about the meaning of things, but I can't say we did that in our group. We were pretty much left on our own and it was taken for granted that we understood what the teacher meant.

Strangely enough we were called 'pupils'. That created a lot of hostility in the group and towards the teacher. I could see that those who were the weakest academically were those who 'barked' the most. Just like small dogs. I suppose they were afraid, just like me. (Male student, second year. Non-Swedish background, unaccustomed to academic studies)

The male student quoted above says: 'It's also the academic language as such and the way people act'. When this student mentions language he is describing the whole situation as 'the way people act'. He doesn't grasp the subtle 'Swedish discourse' and the hidden the cultural codes (Hundeide 2003).

It varies a lot – what kind of tutoring you get when you write things. Some teachers write a lot of comments and really try to be explicit but some are simply hopeless. They write things like: 'keep on like this', 'not enough', 'good', 'where are your reflections?', 'deeper thoughts, please' and 'not scientific'. What do you make of that? It is not professional as I see it. For instance, 'keep on like this' – what on earth does that mean? I want the tutor to tell me what he or she means by 'scientific'. I know I am not a complete idiot, but comments like that make me feel like one. They certainly don't help me. (Female, first year. Swedish background, accustomed to academic studies)

Teachers, asked about factors concerning tutoring problems, talk about lack of time and uncertainty in tutoring.

You have to meet the students many times to talk about their writing. Then you have to read several versions and it takes too much time. I am not sure how to handle tutoring when it's about reports. What is a good report? A couple of times I have accepted what a student has presented, only to find that the examiner does not approve at all. You were the examiner once. That makes me feel stupid and angry. How am I supposed to know about these things? My boss simply assigns it to me as part of my appointment. For heavens sake – I've never written anything like that myself. That's not so easy to be open about. One of my colleagues once said to me 'if you work here you have to be able to handle that'. It makes you feel ashamed and insignificant. It's as if you're a 'nobody' in this world if writing and tutoring reports is not your favourite thing. They didn't say anything about that when I was employed and I have no doctoral degree or anything like that. So there I am with my students, pretending to be very professional, when in fact I've no clue whatsoever of what I'm tutoring and how I'm supposed to do it. Later on, when the examiner doesn't approve, the student gets mad and blames me and I feel stupid again. (Female, 2 years as a university teacher)

Other tutors tend to hold a strictly technical point of view about tutoring:

Let's say that a student is going to write a report about this or that. My job is to see that the report is written in a formal way and meets a certain standard. I make marginal notes and tick things such as 'background', 'method' etc that must be there and that I find in the text. If it's not there I make a note about that. My time margins are too tight for anything else. (Male, PhD, 8 years as a university teacher)

Everybody is talking about the importance of reflections nowadays. I don't think it's up to me to help them to reflect upon, for example, theories they've studied. If they've come this far you must assume that they are capable of reflecting on their own. Where would I find the time for that? Otherwise, what are they doing here? My job is to make them use the scientific model of writing. That's what I'm good at. (Female, PhD, 9 years as a university teacher)

In the acts of tutoring and coaching we listen, communicate and stimulate processes. In this work it is almost inevitable that we experience tension, opposition and even conflicts. Bergenheim (2001) shows that it is unusual that institutions, even in doctoral studies, are in any way prepared to handle problems like these. It is common for tutors to deal with conflicts by *not* dealing with them. Bringing problems to the surface also means exposing yourself, something that cuts both ways. Tutors are left on their own to solve their problems. As with Bergenheim's study, the teachers I interviewed mention ethnicity as a possible source of conflicts.

I must admit that I don't know how to treat some of the Muslim students. Most of them are so respectful – don't take this wrong, respect is something good – but it can also have a checking effect on their performances. It's as if some of them want me to tell them how to think, and then they 'say after me' without thinking for themselves. I understand that some of them come from very hierarchical countries but I find it hard to deal with. It irritates me and I'm afraid it'll show and that they'll think that I nourish some kind of hatred towards foreigners. How much can I demand without being too hard on them, and without renouncing quality demands? Or shall I just be contemptuous if they don't argue as much as some of the Swedish students? (Female, 16 years as a university teacher.)

If I should mention to others that I find tutoring difficult – even saying it to you is tough – I'm afraid they would look down upon me. I'm not exactly a person with very high status. (Female, 2 years as a university teacher.)

The interviews also show differences between students with Swedish backgrounds who are accustomed to academic studies and Swedish students who are not, and students with multicultural backgrounds, whether accustomed or unaccustomed to academic studies.

I shall discuss this in the perspective of the well-known and comfortable, the distant spheres we seldom visit, and the area between the well-known and the distant. When discussing communities and exclusion of influences from outside, Touraine (2002) in *Can we live together? Equality and difference*<sup>1</sup> uses the Aristotelian terms *oikos* for the well-known, *ecclesion* for the distant sphere, and *agora* for the area in between. These terms will be used here.

I see education as a place where it should be possible to meet each other as equals, not allowing ourselves to be alarmed by the differences that we notice. Several of the Swedish students unaccustomed to academic studies and students with multicultural backgrounds argue that they feel excluded from what they define as 'common knowledge about how to interact with others and how to interpret what teachers expect'. Students with multicultural backgrounds mean that their non-Swedish cultural identity is suppressed and that this affects their ability to succeed with their studies.

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<sup>1</sup> French title: *Pourrons-nous vivre ensemble? Égaux et différents.*

Everyone who enters academic studies, figuratively speaking, carries the private, well-known and comfortable, the *oikos*, in his or her luggage. This is where, every day, students meet others they know face to face while discussing and negotiating their lives. *Oikos* meets with *ecclesion*, the distant sphere, here the community, when public issues concerning everybody are discussed. I should like to see education as the third area, the *agora* - the one between *oikos* and *ecclesion*. This area is neither private nor public, but a bit of both. Education in its best sense offers students this third area as a sphere where the public and the private meet, are introduced to each other and learn the intercultural art of living together. Teachers too need the *agora*, not only as a place for meeting and helping students in their development but as a place for discussing issues concerning their job as tutors. Teachers as well as students are in need of views and arguments from others to develop their thinking and performance.

Tourain (ibid) pictures the *agora* as the root of democracy. What I hear students and teachers say is that they need a democratic way of meeting with others with experiences different from their own. If education could invite students and teachers to the *agora*, a 'translation' between *oikos* and *ecclesion* could take place. When interviewed students and teachers say:

I can't find anything to relate to ... my background you see ... there is no one I can talk to in my family. The academic language is so difficult. (Swedish female student, first year, unaccustomed to academic studies)

We've had this mixed course about science and cultural perspectives and it's been very interesting. There is one thing I don't understand. Why does culture only mean western culture? I'm invisible. (Female Muslim student from former Yugoslavia, second year, accustomed to academic studies)

I felt so stupid and shy when I first came here. It was as if I was the only one who didn't understand anything. All the Swedish students seemed to be so confident. They were talking to you as if you had known each other for years and were close friends. (Male student from former Yugoslavia, second year, unaccustomed to academic studies)

I would have preferred that all teachers created possibilities for us to handle things the way we did when we first started in your group. You asked us to read and then write texts with our reflections. Then we met in groups and discussed and shared experiences. It made me feel safe and confident. In the second year nothing of that is going on. (Swedish male student, second year, unaccustomed to academic studies)

When I was employed nobody sat down with me and gave me the whole picture of what it's like to become a university teacher. It's hard to grasp what kind of context you're entering. (Female. 9 years as a university teacher)

When I came here I thought this was a place where everybody was involved in interesting discussions, turning problems over. I had hoped to develop as a teacher. In the long run you have to realise you're on your own. Everybody is literally running around with very little time for reflection and discussion with colleagues. The scheduled meetings we have are mostly about listening to information from the leaders. Perhaps that's not fair to say but I feel frustrated

when I think of all the things I'd like to do. (Male, PhD, 8 years as a university teacher)

Handal & Lauvås (2000, s.56) state the following items as necessary for the tutoring discourse.

- a dialogue with no struggle for power
- between equal parties
- about facts of mutual interest
- where the better argument is ascribed most significance.

When meeting each other in the *agora* students and teachers may achieve what I believe they are asking for. They need a place for translation between the *oikos* and the *ecclesion*: a place where individual experiences can be dealt with as public issues and public issues can be transformed into and used as individual projects: a place where 'the better argument' can be negotiated.

At first I thought it was a waste of time to discuss the content of the text-books and all the questions at issue as much as we did, but I've reluctantly come to realise that I've learned a lot this way. It's been good for me to listen to arguments other than those I'd already decided were the best ones. Somehow my identity has developed more since I've come to appreciate the plurality of thinking and dealing with various issues in our group. I don't feel threatened any more. You see, I was brought up in a very 'Swedish' home. The multiculturalism I've met here has taught me that it's only possible to function together if we acknowledge each other's differences. For instance, I had no idea that there were so many ways of arguing about water power and control of the environment. To me it was about saving rivers from exploitation. When my Iraqi friend talked about controlling the rivers as a way of obtaining power over another country, I felt very immature and ignorant. I think this is a kind of teaching as well, even if it's not always done by teachers. (Swedish female student, first year, accustomed to academic studies)

Being here today, discussing these things with you, has actually meant that I've started a new process. You've made me think about things that have been latent in my mind. Now that I've started to talk about them, nobody can stop me again. (Female, 16 years as a university teacher)

The last two quotations reveal new levels of possibilities at both ends of the intercultural translation work. We can consider translation and interpretation between the *oikos* and the *ecclesion* as a hermeneutic circle. If translation stops, democracy ends. '...Then we met in groups and discussed and shared experiences. It made me feel safe and confident. The second year nothing of that is going on.' This translation work cannot be seen as an isolated issue in a course plan, something done and completed when one course is finished. All translations must be continuously negotiable. The meaning is not something that is to be found outside individuals: it is situated and negotiated within ongoing processes. 'Somehow my identity has developed more since I've learnt to appreciate the plurality of thinking and dealing with various issues' says the last student quoted above. It is obvious that constant discussing and negotiating meaning, and listening to others, have meant something significant that we would never have noticed if these students had

been left on their own studying text-books. We learn in co-operation with others. The student who talks about water power and control of the environment says: 'To me it was about saving rivers from exploitation. When my Iraqi friend talked about controlling the rivers as a way of obtaining power over another country, I felt very immature and ignorant.' Learning is social in its essence, and part of an historical and cultural context. The interaction between the Swedish and the Iraqi student gave new meaning to 'water power', based on insights into two cultures. When students take part in and negotiate social learning processes they become part of new cultural discourses (on situated learning, see Lave & Wenger 1991, Säljö 2000, Dysthe 2003).

When asked during the interviews what kind of tutoring they wanted most, the students all gave answers with the same implication: 'This...what we are doing now. It's comforting that someone is really interested in how I think and feel about my education', 'Just sitting down talking to a teacher about what matters is worth a million', 'Tutoring to me is that someone has the time to really listen to you and take your questions and arguments seriously', 'Meeting and talking like we were doing right now. I don't mean chatting and stuff like that. I mean talking about important things concerning my situation here'.

Teachers show the same attitude: 'I've been in this house for almost ten years and it's the first time someone has taken an interest in what I think', 'It was painful in one way but also very satisfactory that you picked me as one of your informants. We really need to talk about our job'.

Anyone who increases his understanding increases his pain. (Ecclesiastes)

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