Students' pondering
An educational challenge to the arts and humanities in a market-oriented education system

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to address the educational aspect of pondering in terms of the reflection and reconsideration that the arts and humanities are both known and renowned for. While arts and humanities have, for many years, been under political pressure to adopt the more solution-oriented attitude of hard science, our students were quick to adopt this trend, too, and they are requesting classes and tools for quick-fixing, rather than activities that facilitate deep learning. Instead we argue for a two-sided approach, where critical reflection through pondering is in dialogue with and mutually supportive to problem-orientation. We discuss some perspectives and possibilities of learning that can enhance the reflective dimension of academic practice among students and report on an experiment that employs learning portfolios as a student-driven

tool for facilitating the reflective pondering necessary for developing a professional identity that is focussed not only on solutions and presentations, but also on a deeper understanding of issues.

Keywords learning portfolios, pondering, humanities, neo-liberalism, students

Introduction

This article discusses the educational challenges for the arts and humanities, in light of the increasing market orientation that universities currently face. Arts and humanities seek to ward themselves from the political winds of change coming in from the technical sciences, and the attempt to push discourse towards more market- and utility-oriented concerns. As teachers, we experience an ever-greater demand for competencies that are easily marketed and 'career beneficial', often at the cost of academic virtues distinctive to the field. On the basis of experiences gleaned from using portfolios as a teaching method, we discuss their opportunity for making students *ponder and foster the depth necessary to make their studies a road into, and not just through, the arts and humanities. Our point is, that this pondering supports the students' learning process and their faculties and skills to work problem-orientated.*

The university's gradual market orientation

Since the first universities saw the light of day, their institutional purpose has undergone radical developments. From initially being instrumental to the rulers' governing of the crowd, and later by serving the crown's interests, universities are today increasingly oriented towards the masses and their needs for education and operational knowledge (Kristensen *et al.* 2007).

A key issue in this debate is to whom or for what purpose the university's knowledge is beneficial. Kant (1798/2007) described how the original university serviced the crown's need for knowledge useful for governing the masses. Departments of medicine were instrumental for ensuring physical well-being, schools of law were instrumental in ensuring the integrity of material goods and colleges of theology ensured the eternal good. Philosophy stood in their shade, as its contribution was more likely to undermine than strengthen the crown's power. In Humboldt's (1809/2007) outline

of the classic German university, research is separated from the purpose- and utility-oriented production of knowledge. Similar divisions were seen in France in the wake of its revolution, as universities were tasked with the purpose of epistemological and ontological research. The professional-, business- and market-oriented production of knowledge was outsourced to specialised academies. During the next two centuries, universities gradually became more oriented towards facilitating education for the masses.

During the 20th century, universities experienced increased pressure towards what we today see as market orientation (Biesta 2009; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Now, as liberal research is gradually replaced with more strategic, grant-oriented funding, universities are compelled to focus on producing whatever knowledge is demanded and to refit their educational programmes to suit market expectations.

Market orientation impacts universities in two ways: 1) they are held accountable for how their knowledge production is beneficial to society's interests, and 2) market interests are given the opportunity to influence what research universities are expected to conduct. Gibbons (1997/2007) describes the shift from a context-independent, modus-1 research approach towards the transdisciplinary and application-oriented, modus-2 research approach. In modus-2, universities can no longer autonomously decide what kinds of knowledge to produce, but are inclined towards the types of knowledge, problems and solutions put in demand by society's interests (Nielsen 2007).

Käufer and Scharmer (2007) claim that the knowledge conveyed by universities is constantly becoming less and less relevant, whereas the knowledge that is relevant is being conveyed less and less by universities. They illustrate universities as conveyers of knowledge and raises the question of utility as determined by whether this knowledge is useful or not, claiming that universities should contribute to innovation, that is modus-2 even further.

The shift towards a market-oriented understanding of purpose has had a profound impact on recognition of the arts and humanities' value. In light of market value, the contributions from engineering and science are evident as tangible innovations. Still, figures1 indicate the financial reward to be substantial when em-

ploying a Master of Arts, compared to one with a civil engineering background.

Teaching the humanities in the gap between problems and solutions

A key part of humanistic competency calls not only for solving problems by applying humanistic approaches, but also for creating new problems through the deconstruction of the adequacy of existing solutions (Henriksen 2014). From a rationalist perspective, solving problems calls for rational principles either to solve, or at least moderate, an identified problem. In contrast, a poststructuralist perspective accentuates the inadequacy of an existing solution in order to revitalise the underlying problem, thereby rendering the solution unviable. The humanities student must be able both to apply solutions to problems and to deconstruct existing solutions as possibly inadequate, and consequently have to deal with the dialectic relationship between problems and solutions.

As teachers, we can frequently observe the commercialisation of the university, as students' orientation towards utilisation is particularly prominent. In Käufer and Scharmer's description of the development in the modern university, they use Schön's conception of 'reflection in action' to characterise how today's students seemingly exhibit their preferences by giving priority to courses that provide them with operational and marketable skills. It is no longer satisfactory to know what and why; today's students express an impatient desire to approach and solve concrete problems (Käufer and Scharmer 2007, 248ff).

As teachers at the Master in Communication at Aalborg University, we frequently experience this orientation through questions like 'What is the practical use of this?' whenever a topic's alignment to a potential, future practice is not immediately visible. Here, Weber's (1904/1995) distinction between goal- and process- oriented rationality becomes visible as eagerness towards being able to handle future issues and less towards pondering on the process of recognition. The dialectic relationship between problems and solutions, values and goals is out of balance.

Biggs and Tang's (2007) typifies this binary representation of student rationality in their Robert and Susan personas: Robert navigates strategically to pass his exam while work-dodging to the

greatest possible extent, while Susan allows herself to ponder on the process, deepening her understanding. Robert's surface learning enables him to solve immediate problems, while Susan's more lingering strategy gives her an opportunity for deeper learning by understanding the problem, problematising it and exploring alternative solutions. Biggs & Tang notice how the number of 'Roberts' seems to have increased significantly, and attribute this shift in the average student profile to mass enrolment in universities, alluding to the mistake of enrolling some of the 'Roberts'. This shift of interests towards readily marketable skills can be seen as a neoliberal consequence of the market situation to which the students must submit. Considering the 'Roberts' party, one can argue that it can be difficult to promote oneself in the labour market as being extremely critical of existing practices, aiming at the deconstruction of existing solutions. In favour of the 'Susans', one might argue that, if the humanistic skills are reduced to instrumental tools to produce solutions to immediate problems, the humanistic candidate will be reduced to a quick-fixing consultant without sufficient background.

In the shift of educational policy and theory from knowing to doing, the student is constructed as the performative student (Barnett 2009, 430). By neglecting a distinctive role "for knowledge that transcends specific social practices, interests and contexts, these approaches remove the grounds for a critical relationship between theory and curriculum policy and practice" (Young 2008, 82), and expresses an "anti-educational" marketisation of the educational policy. Teaching humanities would become professional training instead of academic education. Here, Käufer and Scharmer's emphasis on practice appears to be too short-sighted in an academic, educational context.

As teachers, we argue for an intermediate position where deep learning and acknowledgement are perceived as prerequisites for more market-oriented activities and strategies. Humanistic education is not just a question of getting application-oriented knowledge and skills; it is about academic reflection, building and a special modus to existence; that is, "a much wider form of human" (Barnett 2009, 431). As constant change makes the future unpredictable, ideal knowledge is not a single type, but a conglomerate of many.

With the predominant demand for the 'Roberts' and their superficial skills, it is a challenge to establish and maintain students' fo-

cus on lingering activities. We see, in other words, a challenge as a consequence of the neoliberal economy for the didactics of the humanities with deep learning and cognition. How can we didactically create academic pondering in humanistic education?

Pondering as a learning state of mind

Pondering is seen as the state of mind that precedes deep and critical reflection. To become able to enter this mental state, one has to slow down and leave the straight, determined course of performance and production. To ponder means to be both able and willing to reconsider processes and procedures while production and performance are put on hold.

Through his concept of professional domains, Maturana (Maturana and Varela 1992) introduces a temporally defined space for the reflective phase of professional practice. By separating the domain of production from that of reflection, he semantically separates the two rationalities that, in turn, characterise professional practice. Professional objectivity, methods and tools are linked to the domain of production and are used in the actual problem-solving process. When transitioning to the domain of reflection, professional objectivity and causality is abandoned in favour of a more investigative, second-order understanding of the professional practice. Here, the possibilities and limitations of the habitual understanding of production are addressed, in order to allow alternative perspectives and their potential contributions to emerge. If this perspective is translated into different approaches to knowing and learning, the student's entrance into the domain of production is about solving problems, undertaking a job or an assignment by applying operational tools to reach a solution. Shifting to the domain of reflection puts a break to this search for solutions and instead encourages reflection upon the appropriateness of the applied approaches through which new understandings and approaches may occur.

To move the students from the domain of production to that of reflection would require a didactic choreography that shifts the focus from problem solving to problem understanding. Since a problem-solving approach would invite the application of well-established solutions, the problem-oriented approach invites to the development of deeper understandings of the problem prior to any investigation of possible solutions. This is where we use the notion

of pondering to frame the academic lingering for rethinking the truisms that connects problem and solution. To Barnett, the process of obtaining knowledge influences human beings. An awareness of this becoming is more relevant than ever: in a complex and changing world, the separation of educational knowledge and skills is insufficient.

This pondering-approach to learning and teaching is a principal critique of the dominant jug-and-jar model for teaching that sees the student as a container to be filled. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) devised a concept for skills development that passes through five levels – from novice to expert. According to Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2006), their model focuses on each stage and not the individual's development of professional skills. It also assumes progress as continuous and stepwise. This might be the case, but the notion is generally rather an idealisation. To this horizontal skills development, Dall'Alba and Sandberg operate with a vertically embodied understanding connected to practice. These two dimensions illustrate that every social, historical, cultural or personal context interferes with skill development. In this perspective, professional learning and development are not just questions of practice and understanding, but also of self-understanding, or, in the words of Barnett, the coming to be.

Although Dall'Alba and Sandberg's model is related to the development of professional skills, we find that the principle of coupling the horizontal and vertical dimensions of learning is applicable to academic learning contexts as well, because this points to the importance of individuality and self-reflection as an essential part of learning: the process of becoming through pondering.

Learning portfolios as a tool for choreographing pondering

To better allow students an opportunity to ponder on their personal becoming as academics, we experimented with the use of learning portfolios as a self-reflective tool for Master's degree students' first semesters during 2014 and 2015. This experiment aimed to give salience to the deeper ends of the students' academic practice.

Learning portfolio differs markedly from that of a presentation or performance portfolio (Zubizaretta 2004, 4). Performance portfolios document the *outcome* of learning, while learning portfolios reflect the *process* of learning. Creating a learning portfolio is a more open,

flexible, unpredictable and even painful task compared to creating a presentational portfolio, or any other text that aims at presenting specific skills and accomplishments (Zubizaretta 2004, 7). Therefore, we made the assumption that working with learning portfolios could elicit the students' ability for independent (re)consideration giving them the opportunity to ponder on their studies.

Teaching method and process

The production of learning portfolios was integrated into an introductory course called Professional Wondering and Exploration, which was taught by two of the article's authors. This course trains the students' ability to develop and express wonderings based on human experience with the purpose of formulating scientific research questions and scientific problems related to communication (Curriculum, 2014). A key learning objective here is to be able to look inwards and to reflect critically on one's own learning and understanding. The portfolio assignment was introduced during this course, but aimed to address all learning activities of the semester. The portfolio assignment was announced at the beginning of the semester and was to be handed in at the end of the semester. During this period, the students were given three classes on the task:

1. Students received initial instructions of the procedure and requirements of the task.
2. A mandatory workshop followed, focusing on different work and design strategies.
3. A few weeks before the assignment deadline, the students were invited to participate in a supplementary workshop that focussed on preparing the portfolio for submission.

Collaborative learning elements were integrated into all three classes via tasks such as peer discussion and reviews/feedback.

The didactic design of the assignment was based on Zubizaretta's (2004) three principles: reflection, documentation and collaboration. Reflection leads to the composition of reflective narratives of learning; documentation is the collection, selection and disposition of evidence for learning; and collaboration occurs through sharing, discussion and feedback from peers and teachers. Zubizaretta argues, "the student who pulls all three domains together stands a

greater chance of transforming an incidental learning activity into a deeper, enduring learning process" (Zubizaretta 2004, 21). Students were encouraged to keep a learning logbook and to collect a variety of learning materials during all study activities throughout the semester. As the collections of materials grew larger, the students could start writing coherent texts about their learning process. This two-part workflow allowed "the deliberate and systematic attention [...] to a student's self-reflective, metacognitive appraisal of how and, more importantly, why learning has occurred" (Zubizaretta 2004, 4).

Due to the explorative character of the teaching experiment, the requirements for passing the assignment were held at a bare minimum, hence three simple requirements were given for the final portfolios: 1) Electronic submission, 2) Inclusion of all the semester's ten study activities, and 3) Timely submission. Along the way, the students discussed examples of how a learning portfolio might look, but no explicit instructions were given regarding how or what to write.

Findings

94 portfolios were submitted from the 2014 and 2015 courses. The material has been analysed through repeated close readings and coding of significant themes of content and linguistic strategies in the students' descriptions of their individual learning processes. A further elaboration on our findings and their significance for the use of learningsportfolios as didactic technology of reflection will be unfolded elsewhere. In the following, we give a short insight into some of our key findings illustrated by representative excerpts from students' portfolios. These findings sustain our assumption that working with learning portfolios has the potential to make students think deeply during the process and on their prospects of learning. The majority of portfolios contained emerging or detailed reflections of learning. Three interrelated themes seem to have had particular impact on the students' individual learning processes:

- Self-acknowledgement and agency
- Attitude and strategy
- Connections and progression

Through their acknowledgement of self and personal agency, the students positioned themselves as learners who realised that they are responsible for their individual learning process:

> I have been very happy with this candidate and the way it has been initiated, because it reminds me, that I'm actually in the process of learning, and this causes me to reflect on what I am actually thinking about and why. […] so I think this start encouraged me to look up and remember why I am here and what I want out of it. (translation from portfolio 31, 2014)

One exercise connected to the portfolio assignment was to write a personal, professional profile based on previous and future learning. According to the students, this became a kick-starter for their writing process, because it made them see themselves as academic beings who already had a professional identity to build on, yet it also exposed gaps for further learning in the years to come. Considering the 'hows' and 'whys' of their education led them to rediscover how and why they study at all.

The second recurring theme in the portfolios was the impact of attitude on students' study strategies. The students became aware of how their mental approaches influenced their learning experiences and outcomes:

> Already when I read the [course] description, I had a very negative attitude; and by reading the curriculum texts with a negative premise, I only confirmed myself that it was useless and unimportant. But but but! After the course had finished and I had to reflect on it in this portfolio, I realized something. I need to be better at
>
> 'open thinking'. [...] the attitude I have towards a texts, even before I read it, affects what I get out of it. (translation from portfolio 42, 2014)

This particular student experienced the benefits of patience and open-mindedness, even as the purpose and usability of the learning activity was not obvious from the beginning:

> I would like to try to develop my thinking and approach to texts, projects, preparation, etc. so that I do not immediately lose interest if I [...] So, I am about to learn that it is okay to be confused, it just means that you have come across something new, which you then may/must try to understand or accept [...]. (translation from portfolio 42, 2014)

Several portfolios exhibited similar acknowledgements of confusion and insecurity as an inevitable, part of the learning process. This added a more constructive understanding of seemingly problematic feelings.

The third theme with influence on learning was the connections and progression within and across perspectives and activities:

> When I wrote my logbook-notes, I often thought, that the process was unnecessary. But now, when I keep the statements together, I can see that it is because I could not see the development in my own approach to special academic problems. Therefore, I believe that the process in itself has been the most important issue here – not this final product. […]. (translation from portfolio 22, 2015)

Several students were quite sceptical about the portfolio assignment. Writing reflectively about learning is a slow and unpredictable process, and several students found the task annoying at first. Despite the struggle, most developed a desire to continue their reflective writing. In Zubizaretta's terms, they came to "understand the satisfaction of taking ownership of their own learning" (2004, p. xvi).

Evaluation and assessment

The collection of learning portfolios shows how this kind of reflective writing generates increased awareness and acknowledgement of the personal process of learning. Learning portfolios do not guarantee deep reflective learning, but they seem to offer students an opportunity to ponder on their educational process, which might enhance their scope of studying to more than the mere acquisition of practical skills.

As is apparent from the excerpts above, creating a learning portfolio is a self-centred activity aimed at self-reflection and -exploration. As analysis shows, self-centred writing, in some cases, turned into self-promoting or self-absorbed writing instead. The cases can be divided into three categories of self-positioning: as the observer, as the evaluator and as the learner.

The examples above all illustrate the learning position as students reached new insights and new paths to deeper learning. Self-exploration and -reflection can be found, e.g. as narratives of insecurity and confusion, leading to wondering, reconsidering and new discoveries about their becoming as better learners. Not all students were able to represent themselves as learners, either because they did not go beyond observation, or because they ended up evaluating rather than reflecting on their learning.

The observers resorted to writing descriptions of what happened: "We did this assignment by doing so and so; we learned this and that". These students put themselves in a passive and distanced position without integrating personal aspects or investments such as feelings, wonder or explanations. The evaluators, on the other hand, jumped to evaluative conclusions about the learning activity and/or their own performance. "It was fun/difficult/interesting; I was good/bad at …". A few students even took the opportunity to give critical feedback to the educators. The writing of these students were, above all, judgemental. In neither case did the students show any personal obligation to or responsibility for the learning process or its outcome; they did not take ownership of their learning.

Conclusion

Using portfolios to facilitate pondering was in no way an easy task, neither for the students, nor for us as teachers. From our perspective, it was worth the effort. Some students did resort to more evaluative or self-presenting approaches, but to those students who embraced the task, the portfolios helped them to become academic, reflective students. The contribution to humanistic didactics from using portfolios is the opportunity it provides for students to ponder on the connections and contexts that tie together professional competence across otherwise separated exams and classes. Ideally, the portfolio's pondering will support a shift in mindset from problem-solving to problem-understanding and -orientation and allowing the students

to be wonderers and *students*. Consequently, the neo-liberal utility orientation is challenged through lateral reflections, opening up room for moving the focus back to the deeper understanding that Kant called for.

To humanities, portfolios propose an opportunity to withstand the current threat of watering down the humanist candidate's professionalism as would happen if it was reduced to a battery of quick-fixes. Rather than trying to ride the neoliberal winds towards more marketable skills, tools for pondering offer a road back towards the deepened understandings that humanities is best known for.

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Notes

1   http://hdl.handle.net/10398/8741