Experiencing the University Context

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ABSTRACT

Our problem is how to design, with the use of distance and ICT, an appropriate academic context for learning, for students with no previous knowledge of this context. Our aim is to analyse and describe the learner's relation to the object of his/her studies as part of his/her relation to the learning activity. By using a combination of a phenomenographic approach and activity system theory, we analyse how students experience the learning environment in the extended university. Our results are based in the learner's perspective. A new methodological approach, using the techniques of creating an intersubjective field, is discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords

Learning contexts, phenomenography, activity system, structure of awareness, interviews, intersubjectivity

INTRODUCTION

Sweden's largest trade union, the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, *Kommunal*, aims for 20% of its members to prepare for entry to higher education by 2010, to meet the changes that are occurring in their workplaces. This is in line with the Swedish government's policy to a widening participation of students where higher education is not the tradition (SOU 2000:47) as well as to support life-long learning in a wider sense (Askling and Foss-Fridlizius, 2001). To this end Lund University, in collaboration with the union and in keeping with its aim of widening participation through increased flexibility, has designed and is running a preparatory course which gives 5 credits, and which aims to introduce participants to the study forms and cultures of the university. It has three main attributes:

- it is totally off-campus with telephone and IT-communication as the medium that links participants, teachers and subject matter;

- it is flexible in time, in that as soon as four members declare a commitment to starting the course they are brought together and a course starts just for them;

- it is problem oriented and group-based, in that the course is focused around 6 problems, or cases, which the group of 4 has to work with in order to meet the goals of the course.

The long-term goal is to prepare the participants from the union for life-long learning, and to offer propaedeutic support for overcoming difficulties in the early stages of going to higher education as well as to raise the level of competence in the workplace (Wigforss et al., 2004).

The six problems that comprise the learning objectives of the course take up different critical aspects of the university student's work. One considers the academic use of language, for example; it starts with the group taking a difficult text, coming to an understanding of it in simpler terms, and continues by their reflection over their learning processes during the exercise and how the academic language relates to their everyday language. Another gives the students in the group the task of interviewing a teacher in their probable subject of study on the forms of learning that are common and expected in the subject area, and on research in the area; the group goes on to compare and contrast the learning forms and their own learning in the exercise. A thread running through the activities is the recurrent written evaluations of the academic communication, the tutors supporting the students in their efforts to express themselves and take part in discussions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

Learning in this preparatory distance course is being studied as part of the project *Learning in the Extended University* (LiEU), (Booth, this conference). The aim of this study is to investigate how the students – with no background of previous academic studies – experience learning in the university context offered through the web-based flexible introductory course. Learning is characterised as "participation in the ongoing and constantly recurrent constitution of the object of learning", (Marton and Booth, 1997 page 162). To put it more concretely, learning is taking the material and tasks, the questions and discussions, that are brought to the student's attention by the course, and making sense of it all in the light of personal experience, finding a path through it that satisfies one's curiosity and needs, all through personal reflections, group discussions and written papers.

The conceptual framework for the study has its base in a combination of two theoretical tools for describing and analyzing learning and learning contexts, namely a phenomenographic research orientation and more specific the structure of awareness/consciousness (Marton, 1981; Marton and Booth, 1997) and in an activity system theoretical approach (Engeström, 1987; Cole and Engeström, 1993). By this combination of a first order research perspective (the context as an activity system), with a second order research perspective (the context as experienced by the student), it will then be possible to understand the issues concerning designing and implementing good and challenging learning environments through distance courses in higher education. The focus in the present study is to look at the experience of the phenomenon (learning in the university context) as it emerges during the interview in terms of the intersubjective consciousness according to Daniel Stern (Stern, 2004). The focus is in particular on how aspects of the offered university context were experienced in the life-worlds of students with no previous knowledge of the university context, (Williamson, 1998)

An activity system as a context for university learning

Human activities are socio-culturally based and always directed towards an object/motive/goal. The object/motive/goal powers the energy of the activity and arises out of need(s) in individuals as well as groups of individuals. The individual's and/or the group's striving towards the object is carried out through actions within the activity system. Within the activity system there are inner contradictions and tensions like frustration, problems, lack of confidence, which create the climate for development and change. An activity is a theoretical entity. The unit for the research analysis is the activity as a whole, including the components and their mediating role for the intentional striving between the subject and object. The activity always takes place in a socio-cultural context. This means that the subjects' striving towards the object in the activity is mediated through highly cultural tools. Tools or artefacts can be both material and immaterial, examples of material tools are study-guides, computer-programs, tasks etc and examples of immaterial tools are language, dialogues, communicative events etc. The relation between the subject and the object is mediated through socio-culturally based rules, formal or informal.

The learning environment (here: an introductory course provided as a distance education course at Lund university) can be seen as an activity system where the student's striving towards the object (motive for studying) is mediated through instruments, rules and the communities. The activity is placed in a socio-cultural setting for higher education in Sweden. In the activity system the student is striving and motivated by the object for learning, here: to get the knowledge and competencies for lifelong learning in higher education. To obtain the object they are initially provided with a set of tools like a study-guide, where short-term learning objectives are described as well as the overall course learning objectives. They are also provided with material and communication tools in a web platform. In the platform they can also access the five problem-based starters for the following learning objectives: study techniques, university organisation and mission, learning in a university context, the academic language and critical information seeking. The relation between the student and the learning object to become a university learner is thus mediated through a variety of tools.

The activity takes place in a socio-cultural setting (here: the Lund university context) the relation between the student and the object is also mediated through formal and informal rules from this context. Formal rules may be to attend to the five audio-conferences attached to each task, or to publish a written report according to guidelines and with set deadlines. Informal rules could be to discuss in a specific linguistic manner at the audio-conference (academically, so to speak).

The relation between the student and the learning object is also mediated through the division of labour or roles we have in a certain community. The community in the activity could be the study group, the family or the workplace, all affecting how the student experiences the activity in his life-world.

The outcome for the student from this activity can be described both at a cognitive/emotional level and at a physical level. At the physical level the learning outcome can be evaluated and experienced in the light of

known academic standards, such as a successful final assessment (here: a short scientifically oriented essay), or the course certificate obtained. At a cognitive/emotional level the learning outcome might be a feeling of knowing how to tackle academic study tasks and to feel self-confident and secure in the new identity. Figure 1 below illustrates the activity system for a learner striving towards the goal/learning object: to become a university student.
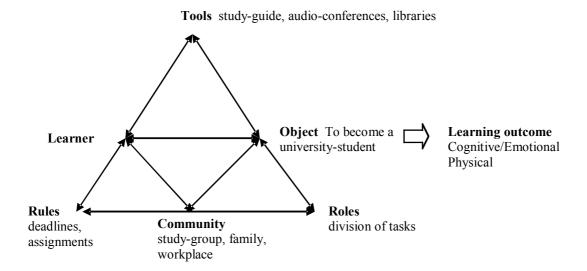
Figure1. The activity system for learning to become a university student, adopted from Engeström (1987)

From this description of the context for the activity from a first order perspective we now proceed to a second order perspective where we may study the student's experience from an inside perspective of the activity system.

A structure of awareness

The analytic framework for understanding the learner's awareness of a phenomenon can be described in terms of an external and internal horizon (Marton and Booth, 1997). The internal horizon consists of the awareness of the inherent aspects of the phenomenon and the relationship between these aspects and the phenomenon as a whole. The external horizon consists of the awareness of the background of the phenomenon. The following example of experiencing a deer in the woods can illustrate the two concepts:

> "Thus, the external horizon of coming on the deer in the woods extends from the immediate boundary of the experience – the dark forest against which the deer is discerned – through all other contexts in which related occurrences have been experienced (e.g. walks in the forest, deer in the zoo, nursery tales, reports of hunting incidents etc.). The internal horizon compromises of the deer itself, its parts, its stance, its structural presence." (Marton and Booth, 1997, p. 87).

This is the structural aspect of the awareness of a phenomenon. The structure of awareness must also be described by a referential aspect (the meaning inherent in the structure). The combination of a phenomenographic and an activity theoretical approach show the learning outcome as part of the learner's external horizon, while the activity system in it itself is part of the learner's internal horizon.

RESEARCH POPULATION AND MATERIAL

Flexibility of course start

The first course (with 4 participants) started in January 2003 and by the end of 2005, 43 members from *Kommunal* have participated in totally 11 courses. As soon as a study-group of 4 is formed, the course starts for them and then the estimated length of the course is 6 months. Parallel to the 11 courses offered to the union members of *Kommunal*, we have also started and completed 7 courses for union members from sif (another union for white-collar works in industry). However this study-group is not in focus for the LiEU project (Wigforss, et al., 2004).

Diversity of participants

The students are all members of the Swedish trade union *Kommunal.* So far (by the end of December 2005), 43 union members have participated in the course. The course is only offered as a distance course and the participants are geographically spread all over Sweden, with a dominance of union members from the three major cities in Sweden. Of the 43 participants there are 36 women and 7 men, with an age average of 35-40 years (age spans from 24 to 60 y.). The study results for the research population are presented in table 1, below.

Study results	Number
Group 1 completed the course within 6 month	23
Group 2 are still studying in the course	11
Group 3 have formally resigned from the course	9
Total number of course participants (December 2005)	43

Table 1. Number of participants in the course (2003-2005) divided into three groups according to their study results.

Natural data

During the course, data for the individual student are sampled with no reference to the research project. The kind of natural data thus later available for the project are written assignments, taped audio-conferences, written feedback from the teacher and students' evaluation sheets after course completion. We intend to work with these data later in order to get a better picture of student's as well as the teachers' experience of the activity.

Direct data: the research interview

The students from Group 1, table 1 above, have been (or will be) interviewed with regard to their previous and present learning experience. The interviews are conducted according to a phenomenographic research approach, aiming to capture the phenomenon of university life as experienced by the students as an *external horizon*, with the various critical aspects that the problems focused on as constituents of the *internal horizon* of the interviews (Marton & Booth, 1997). They are analysed accordingly, seeking categories of qualitative variation in ways of experiencing, on the one hand, learning and studying at university, the *what* of the phenomenon, and, on the other hand, *how* these students tackled the problems, the discussions, the activities and the communication that ran through the course.

THE LEARNER'S PERSPECTIVE

So far 4 students from Group 1, se table 1, have been interviewed. They were selected among the 23 students so that two of them had continued with further studies and two have not done so - so far, that is one year after course completion. Interviews were conducted by their teacher a year after course completion in their homes (or close by). The interviews were audiotaped and lasted about 1- 1.5 hours. The interviews have then been transcribed and a clarification of the transcriptions has been conducted by the interviewer, (Kvale, 1996).

The interviewed are labelled A-D in order to keep strict anonymity. Three of the interviewed are females. Two of them (C and D) continued directly after the course to other HE studies, the others (A-B) have not yet continued with further studies, in spite of their statement to do so (in the course evaluation sheet). Two of them (A and C) had no previous knowledge or experience of a university context; the other two (B and D) had, surprisingly, one or both parents who were either researchers or teachers at a university/university college. None of them had any experience of previous studies in HE. Below we present some of the results from these individual interviews. It is, however, so far not possible to describe the students' experience more extensively or to draw more than tentative conclusions from their own expressed experiences of the university context.

Internal Horizon

The following utterances from the interviews concern some critical aspects in the student internal horizon (italics are comments from the authors):

A. (*Reflecting on dealing with the course assignments*) "and you have to think in a different way, when you seek information for the problem and then when you discover that there is so much to be found!…" ……"It took quite a time to handle the assignments, I had to think about how to structure it (*the written presentation*), but as soon as that was done it was very easy to continue."

A. (*Reflecting on the studyvisit to the university, task 2 in the course*) "I felt like being among a lot of twenty-year-olds (*A is 35 y.*), there were so many, so much younger than me. You could not see anyone over 30 years. But when you study in a distance mode (*meaning the course*) you don't have to care about age. I think that is very positive."

A. (*Reflecting on the course*) "I felt very well …on my way to something different; with hopes…you could change your life a little bit."

A. (*Reflecting on the course*) "It was so much fun to study since you learn new things… I think I listened to the News much better during the course, mostly because you listen in a different way … I mean I was reflecting in a different way. I can do my job almost blindfolded."

B. (*Reflecting on the course as a university course*) "The most obvious was the work we did, it felt very serious. Thinking about how you write an assignment (*meaning the written presentations to each task*). It was so solid without being too overwhelming. All the tasks were good because you had to start reading books, where you sample what is important for the task, that is just what is important with studies. And then to get to know the university and the academic language. The task about what a text really means when it is written in a difficult way and how it expresses the authors own views. It is interesting and you don't do that in high-schools."

B. (*Reflecting on the communication in the audio-conferences between teacher and participants*) "I think it worked so well because the communication between the teacher and the participants worked so well. The teacher listened, was emphatic and supportive and gave us good advices without belittling, and positive criticism at all times, that was very good. Perhaps you are not so lucky in studying in an ordinary course (meaning on campus). There you are so dependant on the teacher… Actually I don't know how it is. But I think it is nice when you don't need to have eye-contact."

B. (*Reflecting on dealing with the course assignments*) "When I could study during my job, when I felt I was not needed, then I wrote (*the assignment*). It was fun. Plus that I could not study at home, when I had care of the children. I made the assignments when I wanted to….so it feels like I would like to study more. Preferably a distance course since… I so to speak are more relaxed then."

C. (*Reflecting on learning*) "I started to learn about computers. I had no computer experience so when the course started, you had to use a computer to seek information…and you had to find information by yourself and then the way you should write it down, that was totally different than what you thought beforehand."

C. (*Reflecting on the study-method, problem based learning*) "Now it feels Ok, but in the beginning it was very strange. I thought it should be the teacher telling me what to study and which page where I could find the answers. And also this, that there were many answers! That it is not just one answer that is correct but that it can be many answers that are correct.

C. (*Reflecting on the most difficult learning events*) "To make refererences to others. That was really difficult to integrate in my mind that I have to write down, who had said what in my writing assignments. Now it is very self evident to me."

D. (*Reflecting on the course as a university course*) "I felt it directly (*connected to the first audio-conference*) where the teacher was very professional…..then that it (*learning*) was so independent. It felt more academic

than going to school, so to speak. I am not that kind of person that likes to sit in lessons all day long, I want to decide myself what to do and how to dispose my time….the fact that it (*the course*) was on distance made it even more independent.

D. (*Reflecting on dealing with the course assignments*) "… the last task was about autism, a rather vaste subject, but still….and then it was just to start searching for facts and perhaps make an interview, as I did. To do it all by yourself…that it is not all in a book is nice and….I like to have to decide what to have in it (*in the written report*) by yourself."

D. (*Reflecting on the most difficult learning events: the first audio-conference*) "I did not know how the oral presentations should be done. To write an essay, that I knew, but then to present it orally, that I did not know. I did not know, how it should be done and how scary the others (*participants*) were…and how scary the teacher could be!"

D. (*Reflecting on the following audio-conferences*) "I was nervous the first time because I had no idea of to which I should present my report…but the nervousness went quickly away, they were so nice."

D. (*Reflecting on the required learning*) "But still, I am very unsure…of the level. How should the language be, was it very academic or a little bit slower or…and I still perhaps do not know that…how it will be later (in further HE studies)….if it will be the same level or more difficult literature etc."

D. (*Reflecting on the study- visit to the university, task 2 in the course*) "Oh it felt very good, when I came to the place. It was very nice buildings, both the new ones and the old ones. I had no idea that it (*the specific university building)* was located there."

External Horizon

The following utterances from the interviews concern some critical aspects in the student's external horizon (italics are comments from the authors):

A. (*Reflecting on the job*) "It is not acceptable anymore to just remain in the same job"…."People react: Have you been there so long, is it not time for you to do something else….I would like to do so, but since I don't like oral presentations (*as she understands is necessary in university courses)* the options are limited then. "

A. (*Reflecting on the role*) "I would like to be in a role where you are self-confident and just know what you are talking about. But I get so nervous… the words get jammed like porridge in the throat. You can't say what you really wanted to speak about. It is an Achilles' heal."

A. (*Reflecting on the competition*) "It is so tuff to have to compete. (*Referring to younger colleagues at the workplace*) They are so ambitious and I have to stand-beside…"

A. (*Reflecting on the learning outcome by looking at further studies in HE*) " …"the third year, it was literature in English and my Good!, are you supposed to read books in English, that is scientific literature? Then I really felt I had nothing to do in that world."

B. (*Reflecting on previous and further studies in HE*) "If I had had a talent for learning I might have, so to speak just slipped into something, but since I have experienced a resistance connected to my own studies and felt…..the thing with math. I have had difficulties with math since my first year in school. But it might not be so difficult. I might reach an acceptable level (*in math*), but for studying at university, no I don't think so."

C. (*Reflecting on university learning*) "I thought I could not manage (*university studies*). It probably had to do with my ambition level. You had to know everything going to university….and I though I did not read much, neither fiction or…. Well, then I thought after all, why not, I might manage it. Yes, and then I saw this introductory course…."

C. (*Reflecting on learning outcome*) "So I have reached the goal. Because the goal was to find out if I could study at a university. And this I have proved. So I am actually very satisfied so far. So I don't need …(*to prove the capability to study in HE*) …but I liked it so much. That is why I wanted to continue. It was very difficult to slow down after having completed the course. Where are my books? Shall I not write more assignments?"

D. (*Reflecting on learning outcome*) "I wanted to study in the course since I wanted to know more about how it is to study at a university. I wanted to come into this way of thinking, since I wanted to continue with university studies later, or rather quite soon."

DISCUSSION

What can be discussed so far by looking at the transcripts from 4 interviews?

By experiencing the activity at least two of the participants A and B have drawn the conclusion that they cannot manage to study in a university context - although they both have acquired the course certificate. Their arguments are similar, A cannot manage the English literature or oral presentations in front of a student audience and B cannot manage the math and the eye contact with a teacher. They have not met any of these aspects in the introductory course. A is also reluctant to engage in the university context on campus, since he/she feels too old compared to the other students.

The other two interviewed participants (C and D) draw a different conclusion from their experience with the activity. They feel that they now know how to deal with learning in a university context although D expresses a reservation about managing the level of academic language in reading and writing. During the interview with C it was obvious that C was very successful in his/her continuing HE studies.

In their experience, from the activity, of what constitutes learning in an university context, they refer to thinking differently, thinking in a new way, referring to others while writing reports, there are many right answers to one question, to work independently, to select your own facts for solving the problem, to produce your own knowledge. These aspects are very much in line with other research findings on student's perception of learning in higher education (for an updated review of students conception of learning, see Entwistle and Peterson, 2005).

How to proceed with the next interviews?

Interviews with the remaining 28 students will be conducted during spring 2006. However there are problems with using interviews in researching student's experiences of learning, (see Rowbotham, 2004 for a literature review on the issue). The major problem is to make the student verbalise/articulate how they learn and what they experience being in the learning context/activity.

"In deciding on the structure of interviews, the researcher chooses between providing sufficient control and structure so respondents produce comparable data, and sufficient lack of structure to allow the interviewee to construct their own subjective responses." (Rowbotham, 2004, p.226).

Are there then other ways (than the research interview) to deal with the problems of investigating the learner's awareness of their learning experience and process? We think so. A new approach that has not so far been tested as a research method for the learning experience would be to make use of critical aspects from the dialogue as in a psychotherapeutic session (Stern, 2004a).

"The goal in psychotherapy is to share similar mental landscape so that one can understand and be understood. We call this sharing of subjective experience "intersubjectivity". It includes both the explicit (verbal) meaning of what one says and the implicit meaning, which is nonverbal and more concerned with feeling." (Stern, 2004b, p.368)

This would mean that we would use communication tools elaborated and tested in a psychotherapeutic setting in order to create an intersubjective field (Stern, 2004a), where critical aspects of the phenomenon would be elaborated through a mutual constitution of the meaning. In the conference in April, we will probably be able to give some evidence from this new approach to understand our students learning experience in the extended university.

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