Participating with Experience—A Case Study of Students as Co-Producers of Course Design

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Abstract

Higher Education (HE) needs to handle a diverse student population. The role of student expectations and previous experience is a key to fully participate. This study investigates student meaning making and interaction in a course designed to stimulate student as co-creators of course content and aims. Results revealed that rich communication added structure for students, that open-ended design challenged student approaches and constructed students as subjects. Analysis was made using recorded webinars, asynchronous discussion forums and e-mails. Data was categorised as communicative actions based on their orientations in the course i.e., what further actions they provoked. Analysis was guided by theories on participation and framing (Wenger & Bernstein). The influence of dominating discourses for the didactics of HE risk excluding some perspectives and experiences when students' experiences and expectations are not regarded as contributing to the meaning making of their own participating in academic educational practices. Finally, the study suggests that a move into web-based contexts more easily challenges students' preconceptions of studying.

Keywords: course design, Higher Education, participation, student experience

1. Introduction

This is a case study addressing the tension between students' expectation on a learning environment and intentions of academy staff that advocate autonomy based on traditional intellectual competencies such as critical thinking e.g., an in-depth approach to learning. The competing discourses of "learning" and "succeeding" have "consequences for the manner in which students approach their studies and the type of knowledge they acquire" (Nilsson & Wihlborg, 2011).

There is a considerate bulk of research connecting student expectations and attitudes to responses to the learning environment. William Perry sketched students' movements between knowledge as an absolute entity, knowledge as provisional but also as developing a commitment to a personal reasoned perspective (Perry, 1970). Marton, Säljö and Svensson have contributed research linking aspirations and intentions to understanding (Marton & Säljö, 1976; Svensson, 1977; Säljö, 1979). Entwistle and Peterson (2004) followed with a review on conceptions on knowledge and learning related to study behaviour and influences of the learning environment. Common core is student expectations and student orientations based on previous experiences. To participate *in* something is also to participate *with* something (Reneland-Forsman, 2009). It summups learning as a move towards a more meaningful whole for students.

This small-scale study investigates into how student respond to a course designed to foster participation based on students' making meaningful use of course content as co-creators. Students were also encouraged to play an active part in communicating their thoughts with the use of interactive media as form and content.

2. Framing Higher Education

Universities have become major actors in providing opportunities for learning on life-long learning paths which demand of them commitment to provide educational designs beyond traditional cycles (Ehlers & Schneckenberg, 2010). That would mean ubiquitous learning scenarios better corresponding with the diversifying student population and ICT adoption into all levels of education. To handle a diversified student population means addressing a range of previous experiences and different levels of autonomy in the student population. There is

also an increased demand for strengthened quality assurance and easier recognised qualifications following the Bologna acted out in HE as definitions and easily measurable objectives turning the life-long learning agenda into more check lists than an education programs (Nordin, 2011). This chase for control is contributing to teachers' experience of co-creation in course design as "risky" and teachers can feel unprepared both in terms of institutional pressures as well as being challenged in their communication skills as well as subject matters. Students' co-creation of curricula is often centred on student feedback to inform teachers curricula design although education institutions stress student influence (Bovill, 2013).

The concept of alignment (Biggs, 2003) is well established in the field of HE, recognising the need to align goals, methods and outcomes in course design. What it overlooks however is what students bring to learning in terms of perceptions of knowledge, their readiness to learn, the shared understanding of pre-set goals and the need for teachers to use concepts and actions available to the learner (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Laurillard, 2012). Teachers' intended or suggested learning objects should only be regarded as a starting point for a process and planning involving the experience of those involved in a learning experience (Dewey, 1916, 2011). But to closely follow Dewey in terms of letting students influence learning outcomes in a particular course is rare in education below PhD level (Laurillard, 2012).

3. Theoretical Basis and Conceptual Toolkit

The web-based educational practice analysed here is regarded as a space with a constitutive aspect—where the subject emerges or interacts (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Biesta, 1999). Participation is constituted in terms of the constant negotiations opening up the very conditions of participating. By suggesting the analytical concept of space in line with Gee (2006) focus is shifted away from the membership aspects of participation to the geographical conceptual representation of a place where social configurations act in the creation of meaning and exchange of experiences take place. This space as an educational practice is an arena for investigating what happens in a higher education course when the teacher takes the above outlined challenges seriously and tries to design a pedagogic practice that encourages students to become active co-producers of content and knowledge.

To make students co-producers of content means to take seriously the strong imprints of higher education structures that is being challenged by the teachers. Bernstein's concept of weak and strong framing (2003) provides a coerce analytic tool for discussing orientations of students' communicative actions in data. Students' actions can be traced to how they identify what is relevant in a given context (recognition rules) and how they act upon it (realisation rules) (Bernstein, 2000).

Meaning is further discussed as interacting with framing to orient students' actions. According to Jones and Norris (2005) meaning resides in the actions people take with it, also understood as a contextual rationality. The orientations of actions, influence students' forthcoming actions based upon experience and dispositions as meaning (Dewey, 2004, 1916). Action triggered by meaning emanates in intersubjectivity and intersubjectivity is here used in its radical sense (Note 1) for locating the production of meaning and knowledge.

Finally, it is the intersubjective location of meaning that is important to bear in mind. It is the design of those spaces that constitute the research focus in this study and in what ways these spaces as intersubjective practices might promote learning and personal development through participating in a collective practice.

4. The Context of the Study

The university course studied was designed with the intention to structurally and discursively promote learning and understanding by keeping a flexible approach to predefined course content aligned with course objectives. The teacher's intention was to create space for students to develop their own objectives and interests within a flexible but common pedagogic practice. To illustrate this, not all modules and assignments were defined when the course started but were to be developed in collaboration with students based on their needs and adjoining practices. Lectures were abandoned for on-line seminars, designed for dialogue and an exchange of related experiences. Different web-based tools were used for communication. The teacher challenged students invoking questions about exams and assignments in their role as control devices.

4.1 The Course

The study is based on a single-subject web-based course in pedagogy of 15 ECTS titled "Design for Creative Learning". The aim of the course, as stated in the curriculum, was for students to develop knowledge of learning as a creative activity but also to develop the ability to design learning activities with a creative approach to learning. Content was defined as seven subject matters namely; the meaning of creativity, learning and design, the relationship between creativity, aesthetics and art, the role of popular and media cultures for creativity, the exploration of digital tools and designs in terms of creativity. General competencies to be addressed according to

curriculum were analytical thinking, reflection and interpretation, media technological competence, critical awareness and collaborative problem solving skills on-line. The examination was a written paper equivalent to 7.5 ECTS and the design of a creative learning environment (7.5 ECTS). Only pass and failed were used as grades. All modules (subject matters) had a stated objective but were otherwise not finalised. Individual or collaborative processes were often a choice in the hands of students. There were set deadlines but these were regarded by the teacher as structural tools for students rather than a help to organise the teacher's work. This opinion was communicated with the students. The study-guide communicated a view of learning as a community activity with expectations on students to be active and respect the role of communication. Course structure built on recurrent webinars where the group discussed course literature and assignments. The seminars always followed the same structure, starting with formative evaluation to identify questions related to coursework. Questions on subject matters followed, where students were encouraged to comment and react to questions. The design was set with an ambition to complement the webinars with asynchronous discussion groups so that both written and oral communication would occur and give room for individual preferences. This test was done as a small-scale project with 7 active students.

5. Methodology

Asynchronous discussions and recorded webinars constituted data together with student papers and course evaluations. As a first phase communicative actions were identified (Table 1) based on their orientations in the course i.e., what further actions they provoked (Dewey, 1971). Elaborations were performed on what emerged when transcending a predefined curriculum. Actions were identified from what followed their occurrence, for example, if they added direction and clarity for further actions, this was identified as a *structural action*. *Amplifying actions* on the other hand were characterised by both traversing and exploring curriculum where *adaptive actions* focused on relating to a pre-defined object. *Consolidating actions* encircled the contracting of redefining a negotiated content. This categorisation of communicative actions was further used to discuss meaning emerging in the intersubjective spaces.

Table 1. Categorization of communicative actions (empirically based)

Category of actions	Description
adaptive	–adjusted and conformed to curriculum
amplifying	–traversed, explored and expanded curriculum
consolidating	–seeking and contributing to a shared curriculum
opposing	–criticized or showed discontent towards curriculum
structural	–providing orientation

6. Findings

In the following analysis results are organised as themes representing data from different modes in the course. Themes are characterised by vividness and sometimes tension of trying to make room for students' experience although struggling with how to understand the framing. Each theme illustrates events where meaning is intersubjectively interpreted within the framing.

6.1 Trying to Adjust

This data is taken from a webinar. The assignment was designed as a discussion forum. Its purpose was to sort out and present three central concepts in the course literature namely modern aesthetics, the radical aesthetics and market aesthetics (Thavenius, 2005). Every concept was supported with sub-questions such as "What is meant by? How do you interpret…? What arguments supports...? What connections can you see…?" Students were also told to add questions they thought were relevant and interesting but missing.

Sandra started the discussion by accounting for her understanding of modern aesthetics as she has interpreted it from the literature. Her posting was followed by another 20 postings during a period of three weeks. Some were more "schooling like" in the way they answered the questions. Others used the questions to argue from their own interest like "doing art". For one of these postings the heading "Another diversion into Art" suggests insecurity in terms of framing the task.

Sandra also initiated the two remaining concepts. This time her initial posting only resulted in five postings on

each concept. The teacher contributed a lengthy problematisation posted in the middle of the assignment period. Lisa became unsure and wanted to know whether participating in the discussion was enough as a contribution or if they also should write a paper. This was not asked for in instructions but Lisa ended up doing this anyway as legitimate and relevant for her.

In the following webinar Vera expressed that she felt that the method used in the course, to publish questions and answers in the discussion was difficult. She found it difficult to contribute something genuine. She said she did not know what to write since others had already submitted extended answers. She pointed out that this resulted in a lot of "reiterations" although represented differently. "You have to think very very hard" to be able to come up with a contrasting perspective which is very "demanding". Jonathan reacted to the discussion of how the assignment on discussing core concept from literature should be structured by saying; I apply self-censorship if there is hard structure. Vera gave witness to a tougher than usual reading framed by laughter. She neither wanted to "repeat" what others already had said nor present the same idea. "How do you come up with something new when you are not the first 'there'?" She felt pressure from the method—to "do more" and compared herself with two other participants, who she felt were engaged and pushed the course forward. She shared their views, being a teacher like them, but did not want to repeat their arguments. Vera preferred the webinarsasthey allowed for a development of views and arguments. Through her criticism, the difficulty of handling the discussion as three different threads became obvious. Thread number one touched upon the two others and made these threads redundant. She felt participating was not enough and said, "I have to contribute something substantial to be noticed as doing my share, and I need to feel that my share is appreciated by the others". Others agreed (in the chat) that the structure was not clear and that there were differences in working in discussion forums or webinars. Sandra on the other hand felt differently. She expressed that there was "good" structure but she was also the first to make a posting. The teacher who had been following the discussion for some time stepped in and explained the purpose of the questions to stimulate the discussion and that the questions were not intended as "school questions" that everyone had to answer to pass. Some students initiated discussions and others could elaborate on them. This should have been clearer she admits. The students commented that "it's the way you are used to reacting, if someone poses a question you are supposed to answer, I guess that's what this is all about...". The teacher did not comment upon the difficulties of applying new perspectives to introduce higher order thinking. Instead she focused on what consequences a more strict moderated discussion might have in constructing the participants as "pupils". Finally Vera, who brought up the critical point, presented an alternative way to phrase the assignment that she thought would have made it easier for all to contribute to the elaboration of concepts. Her way involved a combination of the actual questions and an option in what you choose to answer. However she realised herself that she had to study harder than ever, more than any other course she'd attended since she was forced to bring her thinking to another level "and that feels good I must say".

After talking about how the course challenged the participants' needs for order, structure and self-censorship in relation to chaos, loose structures and crossing borders and the whole balancing act in between, Vera said "Isn't this whole course a bit provocative (laughter). All these things we are to do, like this, start working with this and let's see what you can make out of it".

6.1.1 Analysis

Two different types of responses to the assignment emerge. One is descriptive, to summarise concepts. The other type of response is reflective and more open, encouraging own interpretations and associations. Here we see signs of how the loose framing result in both adaptive actions as a response to what is traditionally expected of the student but also the more open and reflective actions. Communication had elements of students looking for what was expected and wanted by the teacher. Vera opposed this order (to publish comments and answers) since she did not feel that she could contribute anything genuine. Her initial adaptive actions changed into opposition to introduce structural actions by changing the instructions. Vera's conflict and frustration to what she might have experienced as invisible pedagogy—weak classification and framing (Bernstein, 2003) lead into a different strand of actions moving away from and contributing with something more meaningful for herself and her peers. Adaptive actions thereby changed towards conditions for expanding actions by using opposing actions. Vera gave examples of assignments that would challenge and develop her thinking.

6.2 Exploring Curriculum

Jonathan was in his 30s and had apart from other HE-courses also taken a previous course in Digital storytelling. He was interested in art and had applied to art schools but had not been admitted. He said he felt insecure whether he would fit in the course since he was not a teacher like many of the other participants (e-mail to teacher). He expressed a concern that he did not have a job to use for reflecting and knowledge building, but said

that he enjoyed the previous course, which introduced him to people who were reflecting upon a more active use of digital media in their pedagogic practice. Jonathan took part in the discussions based on his knowledge of art. He continuously linked url:s to the world of art but expressed concerns regarding their relevance but his actions were copied by others. "What triggered me in the book was the 'radical aesthetics' and the way aesthetics was described. Suddenly everything falls into place, things I have been carrying around for years. That there are two different explanations to the word" (asynchronous discussion forum). He then concluded this in his own words as "my completely illogical and irrational relation to the world/context/culture and 'on the other side as beauty'. Vera—an art teacher responded to another of his postings and wrote "I opened the link you referred to and couldn't stop from reading almost all". The two of them then started collaborating on the next module, "Design of creative learning environments". They called their production "A surreal video project" and the design of the project was presented in the form of a video. The study guide introduced this assignment as an individual task. They did not suggest collaboration to the teacher, only concluded that they are a bit late in handing in the assignment. The teacher did not interfere. In the final written assignment, Jonathan reflected upon how he could use the insights he made during the course namely what connection he could make between art, pedagogy and care. He shared an idea about psychiatric care and an aspiration to be able to use aesthetic activities in working with this category of patients. He ended by reflecting upon how the three separate courses he had taken that semester instead could work together career wise (the disabled act, administrative law and design for creative learning). "And I now see it as possible to figure out what I want to spend my life doing".

6.2.1 Analysis

This student was unsure of the framing and whether he would "fit" the idea of a student at this particular course. From what he expressed we understand that he found room for making meaning based on his own experiences although something of a struggle. The course with its weak framing seemed to empower him through its design in terms of how he came to evaluate his own situation and future activities in life. The course as such came to offer him tools despite his idea of him having to fit in. He could write to construct meaning for himself rather than fulfil criteria. By choosing to participate he contributes to the negotiation of the space. He does so both by 1) amplifying—expanding and adding to curriculum when he introduces his art reflections whose legitimacy he is unsure of; and 2) by opposing the framing—the how and evaluation of what to be learned, in moving into collaboration with Vera. The gain they could see in each other's partnership might have pushed them in the direction of opposing or neglecting the pre-set instructions. The challenge of the teacher's intentions in the previous task might have pushed the students amplifying actions here.

6.3 Using Concepts Fora Shared Curriculum

Now back to the continuous webinars, this one discussing children's digital (creative) activities.

The teacher started the session by bringing up what she has observed as a central theme in the students preparatory texts, namely "identity". She asked how this could be regarded in relation to the use of powerful digital media and the discussion that followed focused how young people exposed themselves by uploading pictures or videos. A slight condescending attitude characterised the discussion. Sandra used expressions like: "they should have realised this earlier", "we took that for granted", "are they stupid or…", "how can they not realise that this is public material and that everyone can see them?" when talking about activities of her pupils. The teacher tried to steer the discussion to be about the search for an identity among young people and asked questions on the role of school in this process. The discussion lingered around exposure, responsibilities and safety issues. The teacher repeated her question with the implicit message that if school took young people's process of constructing a self seriously, these risks might decrease. Lynn made a statement on the difficulties of this since it is not an activity young people want to openly be engaged in. She had tried using digital storytelling. The teacher then rephrased her question and asked "How can you work with film, theatre or with performance, how is "radical aesthetics" (from course literature) possible to use to make space for the question of identity? Vera now picks up the thread and starts reflecting. As an art teacher she presents a project dedicated to the theme of gender identity and how she used pictures and media to illustrate the fundamental question of how we as individuals want to be affirmed. During the initial lengthy discussion on risk-behaviour of young people, the following conversation appeared in the chat of the webinar:

Vera: *mmm...*

Ruth: *try to make them aware...*

Ruth: *we have to interfere...*

Ruth: *it's good if they realise that it's traceable* (what they do; our comment)—*the IT-police...*

When the teacher uses the concept of "radical aesthetics" Ruth suddenly writes: *drama...*

When Vera talks the following is written in the chat:

Ruth: *interesting*

Ruth: *sad that girls want to be affirmed*

Vera: *girls practically scream look AT me…*

Sandra continues with examples from her daily practice and Ruth rounded off by saying: *...thought about using technology in a fun and creative way and how that created films and drama. I think that both Sandra's contribution and Vera's were very...well they made me think, what you could do and how to move on...*

6.3.1 Analysis

In this example the discussion got stuck around young people's use of digital media focusing on unwanted and "risk" behaviour constituting pupils as careless victims. The introduction of a theoretical concept (structuring action) was used by the teacher to orient the students towards a shared meaning of what discussion instead could be about (consolidation). The concept radical aesthetics from course literature and a previous webinar seemed to shift students' orientation from a notion of identity initially discussed as exposure, risks and responsibilities, to a notion of identity work as powerful and meaningful and offering ways to introduce a meta-thinking among pupils. Amplifying notions of identity were the examples provided by the participants themselves.

7. A Space for Negotiation?

This section summarises what derived from the analysis.

Data indicates that students' approaches and actions of ten are influenced by their notions on teaching and assignments (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Tapp, 2015). Trying to adjust to framing the students discuss how to respond to an assignment with some frustration. It seemed that the request for students to pose questions in itself contributed to defining a situation possible for negating old notions and creating new perceptions of what education might imply. This was achieved by mixing opposing and consolidating actions in renegotiating the curriculum, an issue discussed further in the next section.

There are signs of students evaluating their own ability to contribute to the learning scenario of the course rather than asking themselves in what ways the course will empower them. The student in general has to accept curriculum if willing to participate (c.f. Laurillard, 2012). In this material, students act to establish the learning space and its protocol on several occasions. What the students regard as the pre-set content and perspective in this weak framing is visible in the ways they validate own contributions. This is done when they think that they are traversing curriculum—expanding the frames. Previous expectations of pedagogical practices are visible in negotiations when students want to believe that the course can constitute a tool for their own development—personal or professional.

Some previously discussed theoretical concepts became established and shared knowledge in seminars. A theoretical concept could enable students to move forward from only exchanging and trying out the relevance of everyday stories towards the establishment of a joint focus, in line with loosely structured course objectives (references to author removed). In discussions the teacher managed to provide a common and acknowledged concept that provided orientation and restructured the discussion. The stories and experience of the students were not sufficient enough to take discussions to another level since the language for conceptualising the experience was missing in communication. But when introduced by the teacher, the concepts were used to frame personal experience enabling students to see common aspects that became a shared experience and knowledge. A seemingly unstructured communication made room for experience to be conceptualised and tried out in the light of theory, supporting the meaning making of each student. Students commented struggling with adjustment to previous experiences of a learning context that a renegotiation of curriculum is more easily done in the webinars because of its immediate and not secondary form (e.g., expanding…).

In sum, results show that a weak framing could generate learning in a higher education course. The tension involved when trying to break with previous experiences of learning contexts creates opportunities. The risks with a weak framing could be met by applying a consequent student—teacher relationship. Framing for participation is necessary as well as reification—as the accessibility of concepts, patterns and theories for students are necessary in a pedagogic practice (c.f. Tapp, 2015). In data students were observed to use theoretical concepts to become aware of and understand their everyday practice in new and different ways. Appropriated concepts become tools to better understand a human practice, *which is not equivalent to using experience and practice to understand the concepts.*

The loosely structured designs encouraged student initiatives and enabled them to amplify course context by introducing their own thinking, interests, and experience. Such a design for developmental multi-directionality (Matusov & Hayes, 2000) can be achieved in a weak framing. It takes opened-ended objectives, that one-to-many communication is abandoned for dialogue, that additional structural actions are provided in communication with students continuously, and that theoretical tools can be communicated and experienced by students in order to apply their own objectives and move between practices. We conclude that meaning was jointly constructed as a consequence of adjusting previous experiences of and educational practice.

Changing course design in the way that is implied here, demands different things of the teacher. It is important to be aware of the importance of student's previous experience and attitudes and how they interact with the best intentions of a careful design (Laurillard, 2012; Schommer-Aikins, 2002). Style of communication and how successful you are as a teacher in creating a sense of belonging with the students have a potential to change student behaviour and expectations.

The teacher in this study experienced feelings of inadequacy at some point. In Bovill (2013) academic staff uses the term "nerve wracking" together with "meaningful dialogue" and "transformatory". This design requires the teacher to focus students' participation and create relevant structures as the course goes along demanding some negotiating and communication skills. Teachers need to allow for questions relevant from a student perspective and experience, which is not necessarily the same as the teachers'. In some way this might feel like relinquishing control. Instead the teachers' become co-creators of knowledge. Through teachers' design, knowledge of the field can be used to suit the conditions necessary.

8. From Object to Subject

Different notions of course design are necessary if HE wants to be a democratic and knowledge creating activity and not just a reproductive practice where grades and credits are consumed and exchanged. First we need to promote students being regarded as subjects and not the object for teaching activities, and demand a design that asks of teachers to provoke thoughts, rather than teach (Tapp, 2015). The tradition within HE however, implies that the teacher delivers a predefined set of concepts and theories. Contemporary pedagogic theory on the other hand tells us that it is of great importance for teachers to take into consideration students' experiences and level of knowledge in order for students to make sense of what has been taught (Laurillard, 2012). Instead objectives of a course can and should be stated but rather be expressed as analytical and critical skills, which allows for them to be realised in different ways and questioned for their relevance. Students should become subjects and education their tool for developing higher order thinking, insights and competences relevant for their situation. But students are driven by their previous educational experience and expectations as a result of the habitualised influence of institutionalised aspects of educational structures through a lifetime. These perceptions can change and develop as a response to a context (Lowyck, Elen, & Clarebout, 2005).

In HE practises content is not negotiable but pre-set and students expect them to be so. Results indicate that a move into web-based contexts more easily challenges students' recognition and realisation rules as the students here gave witness to. When education is regarded a commodity it has consequences for pedagogic practices in terms of what kind of learning and what notions of knowledge are possible and promoted. In such a system, an atomistic view of knowledge thrives knowledge as stable and most favourably approached as small, restrained entities to be taught. Students are reduced to "receivers" and teachers become suppliers of pre-packed information. There is a risk that education is transformed into instrumental and large-scale production processes where grades and exams become major goals at the expense of genuine knowledge building and liberal education (Nilsson & Wihlborg, 2011).

Finally, the influence of dominating discourses for the didactics of HE is important to consider since it risks excluding some perspectives and experiences. That way some students' experiences and expectations are not regarded as contributing to the meaning making of their own participating in academic educational practices.

Acknowledgement

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Note

Note 1. Intersubjectivity does not necessarily include consensus (Matusov, 1996). You could agree to disagree and in that sense include the consensus.

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