

Mediator Competencies and Approaches to Participatory Education for Sustainable Development

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Introduction

When education for sustainable development (ESD) is related to higher education it is normally perceived as a matter of students' learning and competence development in relation to sustainable development issues like the greenhouse effect, biodiversity, consumption patterns etc. In this paper, we address another aspect of ESD in higher education. The fact that, as part of their professional work, many graduates will become mediators involved in organising participatory processes on sustainable development issues.

Compared with teachers in the formal educational system, mediators of social learning processes in non-formal educational settings like local communities and workplaces remain a rather diffuse category. More detailed reflections are needed on what kind of competencies higher education should try to promote among students to prepare them for this role.

In this paper, we explore this topic from two different perspectives. In the first part of the paper, we apply an external, theoretical perspective in order to identify some of the essential challenges ESD mediators face. In the second part, we further explore ways of perceiving and coping with the challenges of ESD mediation by applying an internal perspective. We present and discuss some of the empirical data from a recent research project on environmental science students' and new environmental professionals' conceptions of sustainable development and their own potential roles. Both parts of the paper are explorative and identify mediator competencies as arising from the relationship between the social space of ESD mediators, which implies a number of potential roles and some key dilemmas, and the ESD mediators' own intentions and frames of mind.

The paper presents work in progress and we conclude by listing topics we hope will become subjects of further research.

Key concepts and theoretical reflections

In this first part we will briefly present how we understand and use our key concepts, thereby opening for some theoretical reflections on ESD mediator competencies.

Mediators

In general terms, we define mediation as a process of coming between different social agents with a view to finding ways forward (Blauert and Zadek 1998: 10). Mediators are in this

sense characterised as ‘process design specialists’ or ‘invention specialists’ (Forester 1999: 163f). To make a distinction from other types of agency “...*these people are not experts we consult for technical knowledge. They are not distant judges to whom we appeal to interpret the law. They are not neutral bureaucrats who tell us impassionately that the rules apply to everyone, and here’s what it is that we must do. Mediators must be instead more like respected, critical and attentive friends*” (ibid: 195).

However, mediators are not alien, socially neutral agents; they belong to, and act from, different social positions. Some mediators “operate within the social system” whereas others are “external agents who operate as formal facilitators” (Wildemeersch 2007: 102). Some are NGO activists embedded in the civic sphere, others act from a position as public officers, while yet others are professional consultants with a commercial interest (cf. Læssøe 2007). Mediators in a public officer position tend to mediate with a bias as the local authorities’ ‘extended arm’, while mediators embedded in the civic sphere tend to mediate with a bias towards ‘citizen advocacy’. Between these positions, commercial and external mediators tend to play the role of the ‘impartial third part’ (Læssøe 2001: 189ff). Mediators in a company or public institution will in the same manner be embedded differently and be positioned with different roles.

The concept of mediation may furthermore be divided into four different aspects or roles:

- First, mediators are ‘*interpreters*’ in the sense that they do not create new knowledge, but translate existing, often scientific, knowledge into a form they find useful for facilitating participatory processes (Dekker, Diani et al. 1998). In a more comprehensive way, interpreters transfer “ideas and practices from one place to another” (Jamison 2005).
- Second, they are ‘*initiators of participation*’, who bring cases to the people and people to the cases. As initiators, they are promoters who try to motivate and mobilise participants and to create new space for public activity around a certain case.
- Third, they are ‘*networkers*’, who bring people together from different organisational or institutional settings, who coordinate activities and support cooperation. This function makes mediators similar to what Smits and Kuhlman describe as ‘systemic instruments: “*Systemic instruments are arrangements that create interfaces between actors from different institutional realms; they are supposed to enhance conditions for innovation by, amongst other things, providing a platform for learning and experimenting*” (Loeber, van Mierlo et al. 2007).
- Finally, mediators also play an important role as ‘*facilitators*’ who organise and moderate social interaction in order to overcome obstacles and support engagement, reflection, learning and/or social change (Læssøe 2007).

Mediators differ in their way of combining and emphasising these roles. Furthermore, it is important to be aware of the slightly different ways mediation is perceived in different institutional settings. In connection with legal and social conflicts, mediators are commonly used as independent third-party negotiators with expertise in conflict resolution (Forester 1999: 158ff). In the field of policy and planning, mediation is typically approached as a matter of facilitating the bargaining between different social interests in order to reach a compromise on an applicable decision (cf. Susskind and Ozawa 1983). However, rooted in republican and deliberative democracy theory, other political and planning theorists have criticised this approach. In their conception, mediation is enhanced to a process of organising

public dialogue as a process of participation and social learning (cf. Friedmann 1987; Forester 1999).

Mediators, whether they are oriented towards conflict resolution or deliberative social learning, will face a basic challenge in coping with the tension between independence versus involvement. This tension implies not one, but two dilemmas: The first is about independence from versus involvement with the different stakeholders. Initiators, networkers and facilitators have to involve themselves and build relations with the involved agents. However, this may undermine their autonomous position. Their involvement may make local stakeholders see them as parties to the case or as actually serving the objectives of a local stakeholder. The second dilemma is about professionalism versus engagement in relation to the case. If mediators are too detached from the case in the sense that they do not really know what it is about, they risk disturbing the process rather than facilitating it. On the other hand, knowledgeable and committed mediators may allow their personal views and values to curtail and control the participants' process. (cf. Læssøe 2007). Hence, coping with these tensions between independence and involvement is a basic challenge for mediators.

For the remainder of the paper, we will restrict our scope on mediators to the deliberative social learning approach to mediation, which in our minds is especially inspiring in relation to the challenge of sustainable development, particularly in the context of a non-formal educational approach. Yet even if we restrict ourselves to this learning-oriented approach to mediations, there are still some distinctions to be made. We will delve deeper into these in the next section.

Participation and social learning

As indicated above, mediation can be based on different interests. In this section we will further clarify and define our use of the concept by relating it to the concepts of participation and social learning.

A first step in this direction involves making a few statements about the concept of participation. In our way of using this concept, it does not refer to every kind of stakeholder involvement but only to the involvement of lay people in issues of socio-cultural change. In the Scandinavian tradition of democracy, efforts to promote citizen participation are usually referred to as 'folkeoplysning'. Translated literally, this concept means 'people's enlightenment', but it should more accurately be translated as 'empowerment of the people to reflect on the values of life and to participate in democracy' (Borish 1991; Dupont and Hansen 1998). From this point of view, mediation of participatory processes is not just a matter of facilitating the expression of people's preferences and the negotiation between the different social interests in order to reach a compromise and an applicable decision. It implies and stresses the importance of time and space for public reflection and learning as well. As Hanna Pitkin puts it: "*...But actual participation in political action, deliberation, and conflict may make us aware of our more remote and indirect connections with others, the long-range and large-scale significance of what we want and are doing..... In the process, we learn to think about the [public] standards themselves, about our stake in the existence of standards, of justice, of our community; so that afterwards we are changed. Economic man becomes a citizen*" (cf. Forester 1999: 179).

It is definitely true that all kinds of mediation aim at learning in one way or another. Professional third-party mediators, who facilitate conflict solving and other kinds of negotiations, stress dialogue as a tool for mutual learning and creative co-production of solutions (ibid: 158ff). Furthermore, there are good reasons for characterising this kind of learning as social learning. Learning is naturally always related, in one way or another, to its social context, and learning through mediation of dialogues between social interests is obviously social. However, if we dig a bit deeper into different approaches to social learning, we can make an important distinction.

Wals and van der Liej define social learning as “learning that takes place when divergent interests, norms, values and constructions of reality meet in an environment that is conducive to learning” (Wals and van der Leij 2007: 18). The question is what is meant by ‘an environment that is conducive to learning’. This depends on what the aim of the learning process is. Opponents of the conflict resolution type of mediation differentiate between affirmative and transformative types of learning and criticise this type of mediation for being exactly functionalistic and thus affirmative. Mediation is reduced to a matter of administrative conflict management rather than a support for democratic ‘Bildung’. As Fischer puts it: “*Mediation, as such, is an attempt to substantially depoliticize public environmental disagreements by enabling professional mediators to shape the context of decision making....But environmental mediation has not proven to be the magic solution it was envisioned to be. Although its proponents see the process of pursuing non-political objectives, its opponents have seen it as a strategy for biasing the deliberative process in technical rather than democratic directions*” (Fischer 2000: 107). Nielsen and Nielsen note that: “*Basically it is oriented towards consensus making and what is possible inside the existing horizon of the administration – even though the border perhaps may be moved a little...Social learning is here just an instrument as part of a crisis management*” (Nielsen and Nielsen 2007: 25). Contrary to this narrowing of social dialogue and learning towards consensus about technical solutions, Wals emphasises the importance of ‘dissensus’ for social learning: “*Social learning.....not only allows for commonalities and social capital to form, it also provides space for discord and ‘dissensus’. From this perspective democracy and participation, much like social learning, depend on this space for difference, dissonance, conflict and antagonism*” (Wals 2007: 501). But why are personal ambivalences and social disagreements so important for participatory social learning? We argue that there are at least three good reasons.

First, even though consensus sometimes motivates participation by creating a mood of synergy, the focus on consensus risks reducing the scope to triviality, that is, to what everybody is ready to agree upon from the beginning. In the long run, the rejection of every kind of dissensus thus makes it difficult to maintain public engagement (Læssøe 2007).

The second argument is put forward by Wals, who argues for social learning as a transformative type of learning: “*Learning often results from a critical analysis of one’s own norms, values, interests and construction of reality (deconstruction), exposure to alternative ones (confrontation) and the construction of new ones (reconstruction)*” (Wals 2007: 498). This is what Schön and Argyris (Argyris and Schön 1978) describe as ‘double loop learning’. Problem solving is not just based on the participant’s existing ‘frames of mind’, but implies a process in which these frames are challenged and reconstructed. Incorporation of personal as well as social dissensus is necessary to support this type of learning. Mediation of

participatory social learning thus implies the process of “*challenging learners with alternative ways of interpreting their experience*” and presenting them with “*ideas and behaviors that cause them to examine critically their values, ways of acting, and the assumptions by which they live*” (Brookfield quoted by Fischer 2000: 182).

However, participatory social learning should not only be seen as personal learning in social spaces and during social processes. In our way of using the concept, the subject of learning is social as well. Here we relate to Nielsen & Nielsen, who regard social learning as a critical utopian concept. They draw on Whright Mills’s concept of ‘sociological imagination’, that is, the ability to shift between the political social system level and the personal lifeworld level and relate them to one another. Furthermore, they relate this aim to Oskar Negt’s concept of ‘exemplary learning’, that is, the support of learning focusing on the relation between tensions and conflicts in the participant’s own everyday life and societal reality (Nielsen and Nielsen 2007: 28).

For a number of reasons, it is a challenging task for mediators to support this kind of ‘dissensus-oriented’ social learning:

Questioning people’s frames of mind is a sensitive task that risks blocking learning rather than facilitating a process of double loop learning. Attempts to change existing orientations do not only give rise to anxiety but may provoke resistance as a way of defending personal identity as well. Hence, mediators have to be aware of the dissonance thresholds of the participants. The trick, as Wals sees it, is “*to learn on the edge of peoples’ individual comfort zones with regards to dissonance....Put simply: there is no learning without dissonance, and there is no learning with too much dissonance! Ideally facilitators of social learning become skilful in reading people’s comfort zones, and when needed, expanding them little by little.*”

Participation and social learning are normally described as two aspects of the same approach. Nevertheless, in practice they easily give rise to a dilemma between populism and paternalism: on the one hand, the task of mediators is to try to mobilise participants and to provide opportunities for them to take ownership and influence the process. On the other hand, from a social learning point of view, mediators should not just appeal to the participants’ existing orientations, but rather challenge them and guide them to reconstruct them (cf. the quote from Brookfield above). If they give too much priority to participation, they easily end up with a laissez faire process without any kind of double loop social learning. If they give too much priority to transformative social learning, they risk either scaring the participants away or ending up with a process that seems to be participative but is actually paternalistic and manipulative. Being aware of and able to cope with this dilemma is in our opinion one of the key competencies that mediators of participatory social learning need. There are different ways of coping, for example, applying comparative, experimental and convivial methods that fulfil the requirements of participatory appeal as well as of challenging the borders of the existing frames of mind. Moreover, mediators can counteract manipulation by focusing on uncertainties, dilemmas and choices and offering different answers to them. Instead of focusing on problem solving, mediators should help participants transform their worries into actual formulations of problems, and reflect on these problems in ways that enable them to construct new adequate frames of mind (Rein and Schön 1981).

The dilemma between populism and paternalism is accentuated when the topic is sustainable

development. We will now turn to this topic and show that it contains other dilemmas with which mediators should be able to cope.

Sustainable development and education

We regard sustainable development (SD) as an open and contestable concept. However, this does not mean that it is without any kind of general substance. SD must deal with the relationship between present and coming generations, the relationship between sustaining and developing, between 'local interests and global consequences' and the distribution of resources between rich and poor (Breiting and Læssøe 2007). The challenge of ESD is to support and qualify societal reflections on the dilemmas, complexities, uncertainties, risks and potentials related to these basic tensions. Furthermore, SD is not only about ecological threats. It implies the ability of humans and societal institutions to understand and cope with the dialectical relationships between socio-cultural reality, economy and ecology. These core tensions and relationships have to be concretised to make sense in the different local settings. The contestable nature of SD, as well as the transformation from general issues to specific local settings, implies that SD cannot take place without learning (Scott and Gough 2003). Dryzek puts it this way: *"Environmental issues feature high degrees of uncertainty and complexity, which are magnified as ecological systems interact with social, economic and political systems. Thus we need institutions and discourses which are capable of learning – not least about their own shortcomings"* (Dryzek 1997: 198).

In the conclusion of his book "Social learning towards a sustainable world", Wals emphasises that this learning should be transformative: *"A red thread running through this book is that the key to creating a more sustainable world lies precisely in learning, and not just any learning, but rather in transformative learning that leads to a new kind of thinking, alternative values and co-created, creative solutions, co-owned by more reflexive citizens, living in a more reflexive and resilient society"* (Wals 2007: 500). This intention fits in well with our approach to social learning, but for ESD mediators, it is a complicated challenge. We have already touched upon some challenges for mediators in relation to transformative social learning. When this kind of learning aims at sustainable development, these challenges become even more complicated. Other dilemmas arise as key challenges, too. These include:

The dilemma between efficiency and genuine participatory social learning:

When citizen participation takes place in market sphere settings or in political and public planning settings, time pressures and the demand for quick measurable results restrict the potential for genuine citizen participation with double loop learning and co-production of new knowledge and practices (Læssøe 1995). On the one hand, mediators are under pressure to produce hardcore results; on the other hand, they are expected to mobilise people and create public spaces for learning that will develop their action competencies. SD issues tend to accentuate this tension because the risks of dramatic future consequences stress the process: 'Enough talk, time for action' as we are often told. For mediators, this tension is typically complicated by difficulties of managing power relations and different rationalities in participatory processes. They are trapped, either by being totally incorporated into the techno-functionalistic market or policy-planning system or by being excluded from any relations to these systems. According to the Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen, the only way to prevent being trapped in one of these positions is to move between them (Mathiesen 1982). In a similar way, Vare and Scott argue for the simultaneous application of

two different ESD approaches: “*ESD 1 as the promotion of informed, skilled behaviours and ways of thinking, useful in the short-term where the need is clearly identified and agreed, and ESD2 as building capacity to think critically about what experts say and to test ideas, exploring the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in sustainable living*” (Vare and Scott 2007). The point here is that ESD mediators should be able to move between techno-functionalistic and social learning oriented approaches. Another way to cope with the dilemma could be to try to create public spaces for participatory social learning which is neither incorporated nor excluded from the decision making systems, but semi-integrated. This may sound somewhat idealistic, but the Danish Folk high schools and the Swedish public Study Circles are actually good historical examples of this (cf. Jamison, Eyerman et al. 1990).

The dilemma between populism and paternalism:

We have already mentioned this dilemma but return to it here because it is accentuated by the request for SD. The general tensions of SD cannot be negotiated or transform already existing practices without participation. However, while participation in relation to social issues normally implies a personal interest, that is, that the attendees can look forward to improvements in their own quality of life, SD challenges the interest in ‘what is good for me, here and now’ by emphasising an awareness of the consequences for ‘the other, at another place at another time’ (Heinberg 2003). For this reason, ESD mediators are confronted with the dilemma in an even harder version: How should they approach the already existing practices, values and orientations? Try to adapt to them and build upon them? Or try to contest and change them? ESD mediators can choose a populist or a paternalistic strategy or try to establish a position in between as a kind of critical friend. The choice has consequences for what kind of competencies they need.

Affiliated to the above-mentioned dilemma is a potential conflict between the global scope of SD and the local settings of citizens:

The challenge of ESD mediators is to link the global and the local which is, indeed, easier to argue than to do. The challenge is not just about bringing global and abstract perspectives into local reality, but that a local reality has narrow confines for solutions. ESD mediators usually mediate between local agents, while mediation between people in different parts of the world remains rather seldom.

Finally, we wish to emphasise the tension between pluralism versus consensus:

In accordance with the deliberative tradition, participation may be seen as a precondition for a good democratic process through which as many voices and perspectives as possible are involved and confronted (Dryzek 2002; Dobson 2003). The aim here is to enhance the pluralism of the process and thereby the social learning and competence of people to cope with SD. In contrast, participation in SD issues can be regarded as an approach to social learning that aims to replace special interests with a responsibility for the common, global good (Kemp 2005). If mediators position themselves as ‘pluralists’, they should be able to challenge the existing consensus (discourses, social norms, practices) and make differences visible. If they, on the contrary, regard consensus as an end, they should be able to apply creative, consensus promoting workshop methods as well as to work with conflict resolution.

Thus far we have identified a number of roles and dilemmas mediators of non-formal ESD face. This leads us to the next section, in which we will explain how we understand the concept of competence in relation to ESD mediators.

Our view on the concept of competence

When we speak of competencies, we do not refer only to individual knowledge, skills or attitudes or to external demands placed on individuals. Competence, as we use the concept, characterises the relation between people's potential capacity and the tasks and challenges they are confronted with (Ohlson & Targama, 1986). Yet what is viewed as a challenge is by no means the same for everyone. It depends on how people experience their work. The dilemmas mentioned above could be seen as examples of different ways to conceptualise the challenges mediators face. Rather than describing specific qualifications, competence expresses the more general abilities to cope with often complex and unforeseeable situations (Illeris, 2006: 143ff). Again, this points our attention to individuals' experiences of work. Hence, in this paper we will apply an interpretative approach to competencies (Sandberg, 1994, 2000; Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 1996, 2006). This approach may be summarised as follows:

“Depending upon the way in which work is experienced, particular knowledge, skills, attitudes will be developed. That is, different ways of experiencing the work produce different meanings for specific knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 1996:421)

In this perspective, competence development depends on changes in individuals' experiences of their work. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) describe the development of competencies as a development of stages of understanding of the work context. Beginners try to follow rules and act independently of the actual work situation while experts act instead on the basis of the situation. Experts have accumulated experiences from their work practice and have developed an intuitive feeling for how different demands can be met in various situations. Thus, in this perspective, the way to become a competent mediator is to gain lots of experience of the process of mediation. Sandberg (1994, 2000) questions this view. Competence development is a question of changing one's experience of work. The process of competence development is thus two-fold, as new ways of understanding the work affects individuals experience of work, which in turn open up for further competence development (Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 1996, 2006). This view comes close to Schön's (1983) concept of reflective learning, which is also close to the phenomenographic view of learning as a process of discrimination and variation (Linder & Marshall, 2003) In this perspective, being a competent mediator is not only a question of time and hard work. It is also a question of how mediation is experienced as work. This might also be seen as a process of discerning the salient features of a work situation. We will return to and elaborate this discussion in the next part of the paper.

Until now our focus has been on the roles and key challenges faced by ESD mediators. On a general level, we have identified interpreters, initiators, networkers and facilitators as potential roles and the dilemma between independence vs. involvement as a challenge. In relation to a participatory social learning approach, we have emphasised the tension between populism and paternalism as a key challenge. This challenge is even more intense in the field of SD. Finally, in relation to ESD, we also stressed the tension between efficiency and

genuine participatory social learning, between global scope and local setting and between pluralism and consensus as key challenges. Further work could definitely identify a range of more specific tasks related to the different roles and other important challenges as well. In this paper, we will now take another route by turning our attention to the orientations and capacity of the agents who are becoming ESD mediators. How do they approach sustainable development and the roles and challenges mentioned above? We are not able to provide a general answer to this question, but by means of an empirical study, we are able to explore it to a certain degree and to clarify needs for further research.

An empirical study of environmental science students and new environmental professionals

The basis of this second part of the paper is a PhD project which will be finished in May, 2008 (Johansson, forthcoming). Seven students at the end of a three-year training program in environmental science and seven new environmental professionals have been interviewed. The interviews have subsequently been analysed in order to examine the students' comprehension of their future working life and the employees' reflections on the step from student to professional practice. Before we present some of the findings, we will introduce the methodological approach and design of the project in this next section.

Methodological approach and design

Above, we understood competence as something that is, to some extent, dependent on individual experiences of work. We will now turn our attention to phenomenography as a research approach to studying these experiences, inspired by Sandberg's (1994) use of this approach in contemporary competence research.

Phenomenography is a research approach focusing on individuals' conceptions of phenomena and the variations between different conceptions. The approach was developed at the University of Gothenburg in the seventies and has since evolved in different directions (Marton 1981; Sandberg, 1994; Marton & Booth, 1997). The phenomenographic approach draws upon a non-dualistic model of experience, which can be traced back to Brentano's (1973) notions of intentionality. This could also be related to phenomenological principles, where conceptions are seen as expressions of people's lived experience of the world which, as a next step, is expected to form the context and starting points for action (van Manen 1990; Sandberg 2005).

In a phenomenographic perspective, the ability to grasp something *as* something is seen as a process of discernment through variation. Discernment requires putting something forward against a background of something else (Marton & Booth, 1997). It could also be viewed as a process of applying a frame to a field of experience. This enables the individual to highlight certain features of a phenomenon and bind together aspects of the phenomenon. The process of framing is also a starting point for problem settings and further action. The process of framing cannot be separated from the process of naming. Framing a field of experience is dependent on and generates a context for the naming of the phenomenon within the frame (Rein & Schön, 1977).

A phenomenographic study is based on individuals' statements about their experiences of a phenomenon. These statements are usually collected by means of interviews with open-ended questions. The answers are followed up by questions like: "could you please give me an example of this..." or "could you explain this further...". The purpose is to reach a broad description of the interviewee's experience of a phenomenon. The interviews are recorded and then transcribed. The analysis of the transcriptions starts on an individual level. Every interview is read and different ways of experience – in this case, environmental problems and the professions related to them - are noted. At the next step, the analysis is moved to a structural level. The different ways of experience noted are divided into categories of experience. This means that the individual ways of experience are grouped together with the purpose of illustrating the variation in the ways of experiencing something. The third step of the analysis is to identify different frameworks developed in different fields of experiences for how environmental problems can be handled and possibly solved. Moreover, we identify the ways the students and recent graduates define the character of their professions.

As mentioned above, the aim of a phenomenographic analysis is to describe the variation of experiences of phenomena. Ensuring that participants talk about the same phenomenon is a methodological challenge. If this problem is not solved, any variation found may simply be due to the fact that the participants are talking about different phenomena. In the study we present here, the participants are connected by their experiences from the same educational program in environmental studies. Some of them are at the end of the program and some of them have recently graduated and found work. In both cases, they are at the beginning of a professional career. Even if the informants have no experience as mediators, they probably have ideas about what mediation might involve and how they should act. They also have some ideas about desirable ways of working with environmental problems and who should be involved in this kind of work. Here we would like to draw a comparison with Dall'Alba's (1998) study of how medical students just beginning their studies characterise their practice. Dall'Alba argues that even if the students have no experience in practising medicine, they have some conception of what this kind of practice involves. They have, after all, chosen to study medicine. In the same way, the students in this study have chosen environmental studies in order to work as environmental professionals at some point in the future. The recent graduates with jobs have gained their first experience in working as professionals with environmental issues.

The results of the study show variation in experiences with environmental problems and the nature of environmental professions. The results also show variation in the framing of these fields of experiences with environmental problems and the nature of environmental professions. In the next part of the paper, we will use the results of the phenomenographic research to discuss mediator competencies.

Some ways of experiencing and framing environmental problems and environmental professions related to mediation

Perspective on sustainable development:

We will open our presentation and discussion of the findings with the informants' descriptions of the kinds of demands they face when working with SD as a professional. Both the students and the professionals adopt an environmental perspective on SD. They perceive

the solutions of environmental problems to be a central condition for SD. Therefore, they view the core of their competence as an ability to deal with environmental problems and promote solutions to them. Environmental problems are in this case viewed as something caused by people's actions. Environmental problems are to some extent cultural problems. One important condition for solving them is changing norms and behaviours. This means that one important task as a professional is to explain the problems in order to convince individuals and organisations to act differently. But what exactly should be explained is a question of how one frames the problem. We will return to this later on.

Personal engagement:

The informants express a strong personal engagement in environmental issues and they frequently refer to this as an important reason for having chosen to study environmental studies and for aspiring to work with these issues in the future. Both the students and the recent graduates describe this personal devotion to environmental issues as something they need if they are to do good work as environmental professionals and mediators. However, they are also aware of the potential problems related to this personal devotion. Both the students and the recent graduates have found that their choice of education and profession can provoke people. One student describes herself as "everyone's bad conscience" and makes an effort to not discuss her education and future work plans with relatives and friends. Other informants relate similar experiences. One of the recent graduates speaks of the need for defusing environmental problems in his daily work with environmental management issues in a company. Another new employee working on a project aimed at changing people's transport behaviour, has decided to avoid mentioning environmental problems altogether. Instead, she talks about economy and health when she tries to persuade people to change their daily transport behaviour.

Professional attitude:

The dilemma is to develop an appropriate kind of professional engagement. When learning to push people to the edge of their comfort zone, as Wals describes it, the informants speak of the need to appear as ordinary as possible. This means that as a professional, one should try to have a pleasant personality and appearance. Being ordinary can be seen as a precondition for being a successful interpreter of environmental problems and initiator of participation. In order to explain to others what ought to be done, students and new employees must learn how to act to reach other people. Yet what should be explained?

The challenge of explaining abstract and invisible problems:

Both the students and the new employees characterise environmental problems as abstract and often invisible in our daily life. Consequently, it is often very hard – or almost impossible – to point to evidence of the global environmental crisis or to generate positive examples of successful ways of handling the problems. This makes every attempt to work with environmental problems challenging because it is hard to see the results of different efforts to solve them or the consequences of the problems. It also means that, to some extent, people have to believe that their daily work makes a difference. Yet this gives rise to another challenge: How should they make environmental problems visible as a starting point for action? The process of making the problems visible involves naming and framing the problems.

Three different ways of naming and framing the problems:

Different ways of naming and framing the problems highlight different features and concerns about them. These must be addressed if the problems are to be explained to others and solved. They also help identify ways of understanding the problems and the skills necessary for dealing with environmental problems in a successful way.

In this case, it has been possible to find three different ways of framing environmental problems: as technical and administrative problems, as a question of changing lifestyles in a consumption society, and as a global challenge for modern society as a whole.

If environmental problems are framed as technical and administrative problems, they can be dealt with by applying various management skills in the context of different environmental management systems. If the problems are framed as a question of lifestyle in a consumption society, they can be dealt with by changing consumption patterns. Both of these ways of framing environmental problems create cases that can be solved without any groundbreaking changes in modern society. Environmental professionals do not then need to be professional revolutionaries but can instead work as functionalistic reorganisers within existing structures. Environmental problems can be solved, and sustainable development conceived of as manageable, without questioning the whole idea of the western modern consumption society. Participation is thus more a matter of being involved in green consumption, recycling or working with environmental management systems.

If environmental problems are framed as global threats calling for groundbreaking changes of modern society as a whole, sustainable development is not an option but the only alternative. Environmental problems follow their own agenda and cannot be controlled. Therefore, we cannot keep our lifestyles if we want to escape the consequences of large-scale environmental changes. Green consumption and environmental management are not enough. If environmental problems are framed in this way, environmental professionals may view themselves as part of an inevitable change in society and our way of living. In this case, participation becomes a matter of mobilising a social movement and the mediator's task becomes promoting radical change.

The last way of framing environmental problems implies moral and existential questions and is related to personal engagement. SD becomes a matter of comprehensive changes on both the structural and individual level. However, this way of framing the problem is more difficult to combine with the contemporary labour market for environmental professionals.

The dilemma between personal framing and professionalism:

Today, there are already established professional roles and discourses connected with environmental work that contradict more radical views of SD (cf. Dryzek 1997). If problems are framed as technical and administrative or as a question of lifestyle it is easier to find a professional role. Professional mediators work with environmental issues in a company or at the municipality level. In this case, mediators must adjust their goal to fit the organisation they work within. Participation in this case may most likely be about persuading colleagues to take an active part in the company or institution's environmental work. This is also a form of mobilisation, but it is not aimed at achieving radical structural change, but rather at changing some daily work routines.

Both the students and the recent graduates seem to be aware of the different ways of framing environmental problems. They often describe a tension between desirable versus possible ways of working with environmental problems in different work contexts. They speak of radical changes as desirable, but are at the same time aware of the risk of being viewed as provokers and green extremists. As mentioned above, they say that to become competent mediators they need to be seen as pleasant and ordinary.

When they enter a work context, the new graduates feel a need to reframe the problem or learn to combine personal ways of framing the problem with professional ways of framing them. For the informants in the study, entering a work context means being brought face to face with established norms and practices. Therefore, both the environmental students and the recently employed environmental professionals speak of the need to develop professional ways of framing the problem and to find strategies to combine them with personal ways of framing environmental problems. This also means that environmental professionals and mediators often find themselves in a field of tension between personal versus professional ways of expressing and framing environmental problems.

Different work conditions also call for different ways of framing the problem, which also can give rise to tensions between personal versus professional ways of framing the problems. Competent mediators need to understand the bounds which are set by different working conditions, but must also try to challenge them. This means that sometimes mediators can use their own personal ways of experiencing and framing problems as a guideline. Personal engagement in environmental issues can thus be useful resource, but it must be handled with care.

The tension between personal framing and engagement versus professionalism extends the dilemma presented in the first part of this paper. It may also be related to the role of mediators as interpreters. Both the students and the professionals describe the need for transforming the problems into something acceptable for the target groups.

Coping with the tension between consensus and pluralism:

This dilemma, introduced in the first part of the paper, can be approached in different ways depending on how environmental problems are perceived. Environmental professionals may strive for consensus about the importance of working with environmental issues. However, there may also be reasons for taking a pluralistic approach to working with environmental issues. One of the interviewees, who works with environmental management at an energy company, observed that environmental issues were not the main business of the company. The company did not refuse to take environmental issues seriously, but in everyday practice many other tasks were given higher priority. Changing established practices can be an uphill battle. A recent study of how building companies cope with environmental issues in practice shows that the established views of how to build quickly and efficiently frequently conflict with the ambitions of building in environmentally friendly ways. Many of the environmental workers interviewed were young, ambitious new employees who had to confront older employees and their norms about construction (Gluch, 2005).

Neutrality versus advocacy for the non-participating agents:

As mentioned in the first part, there is a difficult balance between engagement and independence which ESD mediators must be qualified to cope with. The empirical study

revealed that the environmental science students and environmental professionals regard themselves as agents representing environmental interests rather than as neutral mediators. This has to do with the specific challenge of SD. An independent role as a moderator is easier when mediation takes place between different agents who are physically present. It becomes much more difficult if the issue involves future generations and people in other parts of the world. In the latter case, the mediator easily becomes the spokesperson for the non-present agents. This may open up a dialogue but it also implies that the mediator becomes a participant rather than a mediator. It can also be hard to find a neutral position in a company, especially if there are aspects of the main business that are in conflict with the environmental professional's personal engagement. In some cases, the work involves confronting some of these aspects, for example as part of a presentation of an environmental management system.

Based on the empirical study we have tried to conceptualise how some environmental science students and new environmental professionals frame their task as mediators. By doing so, we add some aspects to the challenges they should be able to cope with. There is still a need for further research. We will return to this in our concluding discussion.

Concluding discussion

We have taken two different perspectives on ESD mediator competencies: an external perspective, focusing on the challenges of ESD mediation, and an internal perspective, focusing on the motives, conceptions and expectations of students and new environmental professionals who could be expected to become professional mediators.

The external perspective led to the definition of ESD mediation as a specific type of mediation with an emphasis on participatory social learning and on the key issues of sustainable development. Mediator competencies could be related to this specific approach to mediation, but by differentiating between different roles and ways of coping with key challenges we also emphasised that ESD mediation could be approached differently. We described four roles: interpreters, initiators, networkers and facilitators, which imply different kind of competencies. Furthermore, we identified the dilemma between independence versus involvement as a general challenge for mediators. Related to a participatory social learning approach, the tension between populism and paternalism was described as a key challenge. Finally, related to ESD, we saw three key challenges for mediators in the fields of tension between efficiency and genuine participatory social learning, between global scope and local setting and between pluralism and consensus.

By means of the empirical study we applied an internal perspective to gain insight into how some coming mediators perceived the meaning and challenges of ESD mediation. One important, but perhaps not surprising, finding was that their approach to SD was marked by a heavy emotional and normative engagement. This will certainly influence the way they try to develop their mediator competencies. Their situation is, however, more complex. To the dilemmas associated with the first perspective, we could add new aspects and even new key dilemmas. Especially the tension between engagement and professionalism proved to be an important dilemma to cope with.

What conclusions can we draw based on this insight? Does it make any sense?

We took our point of departure in the statement that developers of ESD higher education programmes must take into account the fact that students need to learn not only about SD but about ESD as well because many of them will play the role of mediators as part of their future jobs. Teaching students to become competent ESD mediators in non-formal settings requires competent educational thinking on the part of their teachers. It is our hope that the knowledge about students' conceptions and the perspectives on the role and challenges of ESD mediation presented in this paper will make useful contributions to this thinking.

We have described a number of challenges as dilemmas or tensions. The point in doing so has been to emphasise that they are not simple problems with simple, general solutions. Rather, they are general challenges which the mediator continually has to be aware of and able to cope with. As dynamic relations they will imply potentials as well as obstacles, but the ability to overcome the obstacles and unfold the potentials depends on knowledge about the specific context and the process.

Skilled ESD mediators should not only reflect on their possibilities to apply different roles and the implications of different approaches to the general challenges; it is also important that they are self-reflexive. In other words, they should be able to cope with their own emotional and discursive orientations in relation to the topic, to the involved agents and to the professional, externally defined conditions in ways that support the social learning process. The phenomenographic study presented here can be seen as an attempt to explore and conceptualise ways in which coming ESD mediators think about themselves, their motives, tasks and situation.

Research on participatory oriented ESD in non-formal settings is not rare, but there is a need for more research with a focus on the mediating agents and their thinking, actions and competencies. As mentioned in the introduction, our research in this field should be regarded as work in progress. Our ambition is to continue our research with a joint project on this issue. We will conclude this paper with a list of aspects that we think need further research and that may be included in our coming project:

First of all, there is a need for research that can elaborate our understanding of ESD mediation in practice. In particular, we stress the need for:

- Research on the conditions of ESD mediation in different settings. For example, there are important differences between ESD mediation in public spaces, where the aim is to promote dialogue and social learning, in local planning and policy, where the aim is to mobilise citizens to take part in result oriented decision making, and in public institutions and private companies, where the aim is to change professional practice.
- Research that explores the differences between mediation as an independent profession and as a part of an existing profession.
- Research focusing on non-formal and informal learning about mediation and SD that takes place after the formal education as competence development in different work contexts. An important aspect of this is to gain a deeper understanding of how practice influences newly employed mediators' ways of framing SD problems and possible solutions of them. Practices also contains norms, which in some cases are in accordance with the mediators' norms and in other cases contest them.

- Research that goes a step further into the exploration of aspects of ESD mediation. For example, we need more knowledge on the sub-conscious attitudes and 'hidden curricula' of ESD mediators. Further research could, for example, explore the different roles of ESD mediation and describe the competencies needed for each of them.

Another type of research that could be helpful is research elucidating the ESD mediator practice in relation to power. On the one hand, ESD mediators could be conceived of as agents without formal power and with the intention of promoting open-ended participatory social learning about SD. On the other hand, the neutrality of mediators is contested, and mediators can be conceived of as discursively powerful as interpreters and organisationally powerful as networkers, initiators and facilitators. Educational theory on participation and learning tends to be abstracted from socio-political theory on participation and power. However, ESD mediators are acting in non-formal settings where a narrow educational focus risks having unforeseen socio-political implications.

There is also a need for theoretical development to connect contemporary research on competence development and organisational management with the results from contemporary ESD research. Furthermore, ESD mediation in our research has been related to environmental agents, but theory on ESD, as presented in this paper, calls for re-thinking and development of a more comprehensive scope on the ESD mediating agency.

Finally, we stress a need for research on higher education ESD that focuses on curricula development and development of educational practice related to qualifying students to become ESD mediators. This could be done as action research involving interaction between experimentation in practice and theoretical reflections.

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