Students' narratives from experiences in academic studies

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Summary

The study's empiric is based on five students' narratives about earlier experiences of school and current experiences in university educations. The narratives are described and analyzed related to the education support they are offered in university. The students visit frequently the university’s study workshop to take part of the written language aid that is offered. Three themes have been crystallized in the analysis: the students' need for clear support structures, teachers’ feedback and the use of the students’ educational capital. The result shows that the support is not perceived to be sufficient to carry out the studies independently.

Keywords: academic literacy, narratives, study workshop, support structures, university students

Background, objectives and aim

The present study is based on five students’ narratives experienced from frequent visits at the university study workshops. Students who opted to participate in the study are mainly from pre-school teacher education and teacher education as well as from other university programs. The interest for students' learning can be related to an earlier study about pre-service teachers
reading (Svensson, 2011). Here is studied pre-service teachers reading on the basis of a socio-cultural perspective. The pre-service students’ narratives make visible perceptions and experiences of what has been important aspects for reading in a life-long perspective. A number of aspects proved important as invitation, participation and challenge from significant others in order to develop new ways of reading, i.e. significant others supports reading processes for different reasons and in diverse contexts. Within earlier research in Sweden elucidates for example Ask (2005, 2007) and Blåsjö (2004) those problems students experience at stage transitions from upper secondary school to college. Bergman (2014, 2016) elucidates similar issues on the basis of teachers in higher educations’ work with supporting students' development in literacy in higher education. Today almost every university and colleges in Sweden offered support for their students in study workshops.

The aim of the study workshops is to facilitate for the students to conquer academic literacy skills. The study is based on five students' narratives from earlier school experiences and current experiences in university education with focus on student’s visits at university’s study workshop, taking part of the written language aid that is offered. Students' narratives are used in order to achieve knowledge about their experiences of university studies related to the aid the students apply for in the study workshop. This knowledge can along with earlier research and theoretical perspectives contribute to development of didactics in higher education.

Existing study tries to answer the question:

- What in the students’ narratives stands out as important, favorable or unfavorable for the students' development of academic literacy in the university education?

The theoretical starting point in existing study is based on a sociocultural perspective with focus on learning through social and creative processes of making meaning. A socio-cultural
perspective assumes that learning is performed in conjunction with others in situated practices, comparable to what Lave and Wenger (1991) call legitimized peripheral participation. Learning takes place in interaction, where the student progressively moves between different positions through participation in the learning practice. Initially, the student leaves from a peripheral position, ‘novis’, to the center of practice, ‘expert’, when knowledge has been internalized. Lave and Wenger use the term Communities of Practice (CoP), which has been developed in practical professional communities, including tailors, midwives and butchers. Wenger's definition (1998) of CoP as a mutual commitment to a joint enterprise with a shared repertoire can therefore be discussed if it is transmissible in a knowledge environment, in which individuals develop and learn for different purposes and goals in a theoretical context, such as Arthur (2016) who problematizes in his research on CoP in the university environment.

Researchers such as Gee, (2008) Lemke, (1990) and Street (1995) use the concept of literacy for writing-language activities and embrace an ideological approach where literacy is regarded as a complex social phenomenon related to social and political processes. In this context literacy means the ability to use different kinds of texts in different contexts and to a critical review, that is, to question the context and purposes for which texts are written and intended to be used. The term also means that students independently can manage, communicate and use the languages required in different contexts.


**Method**
The choice of a narrative method, which uses stories as a source of knowledge, is based on narratives as a tool that can contribute to knowledge of people's experiences, but also about the culture and society in which the narrator lives. The individual story can, when it is contextualized, provide knowledge about the social and cultural environment. Mishler (1995) distinguishes the story and the narrative. In the narrative there is a correlation between language and reality, but where the relationship should be problematized. The story instead focuses on how storytelling is performed.

Presenting examples of people's ways of perceiving their background, their current situation and their perception of the future is based on the belief that stories generate knowledge of importance (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Study of students’ narratives of their own reading and writing in a university context, is a research tool helping in the development of the university's educational/didactic work. Goodson and Sikes (ibid.) also argue that the narrative method is empowering for the narrator, and that the story creates understanding and meaning from past experiences, related to a historical and social context.

Stories are constructions and in the narrative, the narrator designs herself along with the listener (Bamberg, 2004). In this study, narratives from five students are analyzed and interpreted. The reflexive component is important for both informant and researcher. For the researcher, reflexivity means being aware of the co-operative role in the design of the story. During this process the knowledge is deepened on how stories are derived from social life, but also creating and influencing social life (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1987).

The five students who were interested in participating in the study were women between 20 and 40 years old. These were selected for interview, a so-called availability check. Interviewers were informed that the study was only used for research purposes and that they could interrupt their participation whenever they wanted, and that their stories were anonymized with code names.
The five stories were presented for the researcher, recorded and transcribed. The narratives were transcribed with focus on the content of the narratives, that is what the students tell, not how they tell. Each student’s story was transcribed in its entirety for analysis and interpretation. A content analysis of the narratives has been done by coding based on meaning content, where different themes are highlighted (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

**Conclusion**

The results of this study point out that support and feedback are desirable at several levels of education, which means that teachers need to be aware of their own subject discipline literacy practice, in order to support students' learning processes. Based on student narratives, the support in the study workshop is not sufficient for the students to enable them to study independently and in-depth. Finally, it can be said that the results indicate that qualitative education and student involvement in the studies can be strengthened through cooperation at program/course level. This can be achieved by collegial cooperation between teachers and between teacher and student, as well as between student and student. Collaboration should be clearly stated in the syllabi and practiced as working methods in the courses. Such forms of work can stimulate relationships between teachers and students and between students for creative learning communities, both in academic and social groups, which are important for the sense of belonging.

The study is based on narratives from five students who regularly visit the study workshop. The empirical material should be seen as examples of experiences from higher education, and the results should therefore not be generalized. Through transparency in the presentation of study purpose, selection of participants, data processing and analysis, the reader will be acquainted with the researcher's procedures throughout the study. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) use credibility, reliability and transferability as functional concepts in qualitative research. The study can be considered credible because it explores what has been the
intention, i.e., some students' narratives from experiences in higher education. Critical issues in the data processing are the way data is processed and what is reduced in the process of condensed meaning and themes.

**Intent of publications:** This presentation will be submitted to *Problems of Education in the 21st Century* to during autumn 2018

**References**


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