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The Missing Teacher: Contradictions and Conflicts in the Experience of Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

A nationwide Swedish distance education programme, SÄL, was offered to adults with previous higher education studies working as teachers in K-12. A smaller study conducted among this group of students at Göteborg University, Göteborg, revealed concerns regarding teacher performance online. A follow-up and larger study using a questionnaire survey was used to reveal possible conflicts and contradictions in the programme. An analysis suggests that there is a contradiction between how the programme is presented and how it is carried out in a number of cases. There are also conflicts, not only between teachers and students, but also between senior university management and some of the course leaders/teachers. The study found that the students perceived many teachers as being absent in the discussions online. Teacher importance for student knowledge-building also scores very low compared, for example, with face-to-face meetings.

Keywords

Blended learning, virtual learning environment, adult learning, activity theory

INTRODUCTION

Distance education supported by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and dual mode education are relatively new to higher education in Sweden and were seriously considered for the first time at national level in 1994 (SOU 1998:84). The increase in the number of distance learning students was almost 300% between 1994 and 2003, compared to a 40% increase in full-time students in higher education during the same period. A nationwide distance education programme (SÄL) was offered by six universities to lessen the shortage of qualified teachers in K-12. The programme was launched in 2002 and will end in 2006. The target group was individuals who had pursued higher education studies and worked at least part-time in schools as teachers without having earned formal pedagogical and/or subject matter qualifications. They were required to study part-time for a maximum of three years, depending on their previous education, while continuing to work part-time in their respective schools. The study in this paper was conducted within this programme at Göteborg University, Göteborg, Sweden.

A review of 21 curricula in the SÄL programme in the spring of 2005 revealed that three described the course form as a distance learning course while the remaining 18 did not. The majority of the curricula were not adapted to distance education (It should be noted that a curriculum is a legal document under Swedish law.) In general, the courses comprised one face-to-face meeting per month. The students had access to mentors, usually specially trained teachers and the students' work colleagues, in their respective municipalities. The teacher educators generally had little or no experience of online teaching and learning and had not participated in any competence development programme addressing online teaching until the beginning of 2004, i.e., two years into the programme. The FirstClass (FC) standalone client software was used to connect to the FirstClass online learning environment. It was also possible to connect via a web-based interface.

In the autumn of 2004, a small-scale, web-based study was used to collect quantitative data and students' comments, with the main purpose of initiating seminar discussions with the teacher educators in the programme. After evaluating the first study, the main concern was to understand why almost one fourth of the students did not choose to be present online in their course during at least 30 days of the first half of the term. When the study was evaluated, it was found that almost 25% of the students had chosen not to be present online for at least 30 days of the first half of the term and the main concern was to understand why this was the case. This finding, together with the students' comments about passive or missing teachers in the online discussion fora, resulted in the need to further investigate the online programme with a more detailed paper-based questionnaire to the students.

The study was designed to respond to the following question: What practices and contradictions for the students and the teachers emerge due to the design characteristics of the SÄL programme?

Important factors in online learning

In a review of research about factors for learning among K-12 pupils, Gustafsson and Myrberg (2002) concluded that the teacher is the single most important factor for the pupils' learning success. The research on factors for online learners' success seems to paint a more scattered picture.

There are studies in which online teacher contact scores as high as face-to-face teacher contact for learner success (i.e., Wilkes & Burnham, 1991; Hiltz, Coppola, Rotter, Turoff & Benbunan-Fich, 2000), but Phipps and Merisotis (2000) argued that a high degree of communication between students was the single most important factor for online learning. Davies and Graff (2005) found that online interaction did not lead to noticeably higher performance for students achieving pass grades. Smith and Taveras (2004) referred to Shea, Swan, and Pickett (2001) and Trippe (2001) by pointing out that the interaction between the instructor and the student is especially important.

A large-scale investigation was carried out by seven research groups in Ohio, USA, with the purpose of giving recommendations to institutions in higher education in the state. They found that improved student learning was achieved by prompt, regular, relevant and non-threatening feedback and communication between the student and the teacher, and by early recommendations to the students to establish contact between themselves when cooperation was mandatory in the course.

The course design was an important factor for promoting student learning by cooperation. The report stressed the importance of regular competence development for online teachers (Cook, Pryor, Díaz, Juliana and Kratcoski, 2002).

As SÄL was an in-service programme and intended for adult learners only, possible differences between this group of students and younger students also had to be considered. In a review of adult learner perception of academic studies, Hillesheim (1998) concluded that adult learners are less confident about succeeding with their studies, more often need frequent support from instructors, downplay the role of experience and knowledge gained through work, are more prone to isolate themselves from other students and also more anxious about failure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Activity Theory (AT) (Engeström, 2005) was considered to be a useful framework for studying the online programme as a system within a broader system of activities - the teacher training programme at Göteborg University - and for addressing some issues about teaching and learning.

AT was employed with the twofold aim of:

- Understanding the contradictions between the goals of individual teachers and the goals of the organisation (McNaught, 2001). The institution, in fact, put the teachers under pressure to perform the goal-oriented activities (Leontiev, 1978) set forth as a collective subject.
- Situating the mediating technology in the set of activities in which it was used.

In AT, every conscious human activity is conceptualised as the interaction of three elements: a subject interacts with the environment through material or intellectual artefacts or tools to produce an outcome and accomplish an "object goal" (Kaptelinin, 1996), which precedes and motivates the activity. This triad has been extended with three further elements: the community in which the activity takes place, the rules governing the activity and the division of labour organised by the community (Engeström, 1987). The elements are often represented as nodes in a triangular diagram.

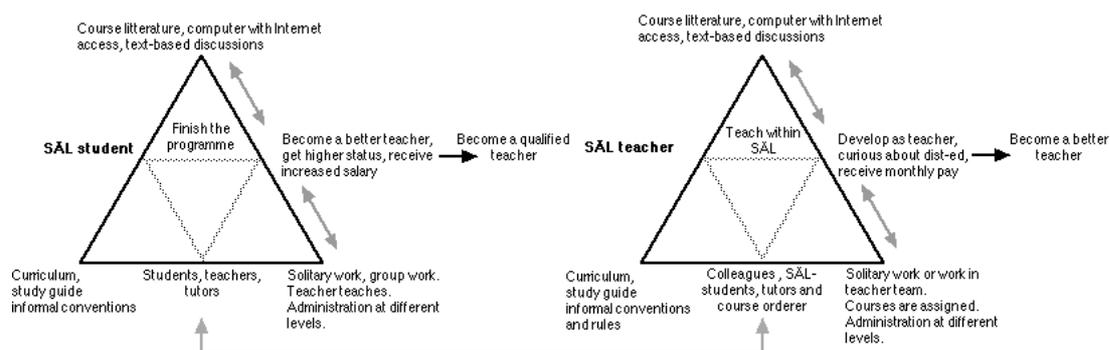


Figure 1. Engeström's expanded activity system model applied to the SÄL programme

Problems, conflicts, clashes and breakdowns within and between these nodes are called contradictions: they are seen as inevitable but also as drivers for development. The notion of contradiction is especially relevant for the present study. With respect to potential factors underpinning the success of teaching and learning in a virtual environment, Activity Theory points out that it is impossible to avoid contradictions between individual and collective activities. Therefore, the success or failure of a system depends on the ability to resolve such contradictions, as well as on the mutual transformations of individual and collective activities (Hedestig and Kapteinin, 2003).

METHOD

The programme involved 803 students. The average and the median age were 42 with a minimum age of 25 and a maximum age of 61 years. The majority of the students were women, which also reflects the gender distribution among teachers in general in Swedish schools. A small percentage (the exact number is unknown) had previous experience of distance education.

Two studies were conducted. The first small-scale study was carried out with the purpose of initiating discussions among the teacher educators. The need for a second or main study emerged from (1) the low response rate of 22.5% (Bryman, 2004, p. 136), and (2) students' comments about passive or missing teachers in the online discussion fora.

The first study

A self-opening message asking the students to fill out the web-based questionnaire was created in the main discussion forum (in FC) for each course in the SÄL programme. The questionnaire consisted of nine statements with agree/disagree options and a comment field for each statement. The students were encouraged to use the comment fields to elaborate their answers. The questionnaire was open for 17 days and visible for an additional 13 days.

The main study

A paper-based questionnaire was sent at the end of November, 2004, to 743 of 803 students enrolled in the programme. Students who had not passed at least one course during 2004 were excluded. The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements and questions. The returned questionnaires, as well as data naming single teachers, departments, and/or faculties, were anonymised. A model based on simple statistics was used to analyse the data and compare the answers to a number of questions/statements from the group that agreed that the teacher(s) participated actively online with the group that did not agree. Categorisation of the comments and a modified and simplified version of Jonassen and Roher-Murphy's questioning scheme (1999, pp. 70-8) were used for the final analysis.

RESULTS

The response rate was 22.5% (n=152) for the first study and 58.3% (n=434) for the main study. Of the students who responded to the main study, 45% had studied 1-2 terms, 40% had studied 3-4 terms and 15% had studied 5-6 terms. The studies generated a total of 2438 comments, varying from a single word up to nearly a quarter of a page in length.

The first study

The history function in FC was used to show that 458 of 675 students (67.8%) logged in to FC and could read the auto-open message. The questionnaire was answered by 152 students (22.5%), but 61 students (9.0%) visited too late and had read-only access to the questionnaire. Almost one of four students (23.2%) failed to log in during the 30 days that the questionnaire was visible. A total of 773 comments were submitted.

Three categories of teacher behaviour emerged from the comments on the online discussions:

- the teacher who participated actively and moderated the student discussions when necessary;
- the reactive/passive but present teacher who seldom engaged in student discussions;
- the absent teacher.

The main study

Almost nine of ten students (88%) were satisfied with the programme, although close to four of ten students (37%) agreed with the statement that their teachers did not participate in the discussions online. Two groups of students can be constructed: those who agree and those who disagree with the statement that the teachers did not participate in the student discussions online. These two groups are compared in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparisons between “teachers not present online” (Agree) and “teachers present online” (Disagree)

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Difference	n
The teacher did not participate in our discussions online and...	35.8%	64.2%	28.4%	399
... I received a study guide when the course started.	71.4%	77.1%	-5.7%	140, 253
... the information in the study guide was valuable.	80.4%	91.0%	-10.6%	138, 189
... to receive an answer from the teacher I had to send him/her an e-mail.	69.7%	38.4%	31.3%	132, 237
... the teacher posted our tasks in FC.	33.6%	50.8%	-17.2%	140, 252
... the course was not conducted according to the information we received at the start of the course.	21.5%	6.9%	14.6%	135, 246
... I would like the teacher to participate in the discussions.	70.2%	82.1%	-11.9%	141, 251
... I would like the teacher to participate more than once per week.	40.5%	62.8%	-22.3%	116, 223
... the teacher did not use FC to give us group tasks. We created relevant discussions	45.9%	33.6%	12.3%	140, 253

without teacher participation.				
... I'm not satisfied with the course quality.	23.0%	6.1%	16.9%	139, 243
... online and campus education were felt to be an integrated whole and supported each other.	50.0%	78.1%	-28.1%	138, 247

Table 2. Response times from teachers not present in student discussions online compared with teachers who are present online.

Answer received	The missing teacher (n=126)	The present teacher (n=246)
Within 24 hours	12.8%	20.7%
Within 2 – 3 days	31.7%	50.4%
Within a week	27.0%	22.7%
More than a week	9.5%	4.9%
The teacher never answered	19.0%	1.2%

The statement “The knowledge I have gained has primarily been through...”: “individual work, discussions with fellow students, teacher assignments, campus education or teacher participation online” yielded the following results for both groups of students. On a scale from 5 to 1, where 5 is “agree most” and 1 “agree least”, individual work scored 3.7, discussions with fellow students 3.6, teacher assignments 3.5, campus education 3.45 and teacher participation online 1.9 (2.3 for the agree group). Except where noted there were no significant differences between the two groups (<0.05).

Two questions regarding what study activities took place in reality (r) and what activities the students wished would take place (w) yielded the following results.

- The teacher posted tasks in FC: r=44%, w=44%;
- The teacher gave us tasks when meeting face to face: r=91%, w=76%;
- The teacher participated in our discussions in FC: r=49%, w=77%;
- The teacher did not participate in our discussions: r=52%, w=8%;
- The teacher should control and monitor our discussions in FC: r=N.A., w=29%;
- The assignments were discussed at the next face-to-face meeting: r=85%, w=76%.

Categorisation of the comments

From the main study, 890 out of 1665 comments were categorised according to the proposed AT model (Figure 1) and Jonassen and Roher-Murphy’s modified questioning scheme (1999, pp. 70-8) for designing a constructivist learning environment (CLE). The original questioning scheme was used to analyse the activity system (Figure 1) in six steps asking specific but modified questions for each step. A total of 25 categories were constructed, 17 of which were used. About 50% of all comments were either negative regarding teacher performance or stated that the teachers were passive or merely reactive online.

The category called *the passive teacher* included critical comments about poor or non-existent teacher involvement in the discussions and made up more than 15% of all comments. One student wrote: “*The teacher should have been more active. Otherwise the subject is hard to study online. Many tasks took several hours of unnecessary work to figure out, even though we discussed them online in my group.*”

The second largest group were *mediation not as intended*, with slightly less than 13% of the comments. The study guide or the information about the course from the teacher or the programme information from the university were commented as not being correct or lacking in this category.

The reactive teacher received 10% of the comments. In this case, the teacher responded or reacted to student input but s/he was seldom proactive.

Almost as many comments, 9%, were received in *the varying teacher performance* category. The students reported on differences in teacher activity online, which could vary between very active to non-existent.

A student commented *the proactive teacher* in this way: “*Even though it is distance education, the teacher’s presence can feel “real” when s/he participates actively in the discussions and gives us comments.*” This category received 8% of the comments.

Mediation as intended and *the varied teaching* categories received roughly 7% each of the comments. The study guide, other - both oral and textual - instructions and the variation in teaching were positively commented on.

Almost 5% of the comments were in the category *Campus teaching*. With few exceptions all comments were positive or very positive about the lecturers. One student wrote, “*We had the privilege to meet fantastic lecturers on campus!*”

The remaining nine categories represent less than 25%, of which the largest received approx. 4%. These comments have been omitted, as they have no significant impact on the main findings.

The main contradiction arises from whether a teacher is online or not. A student with a missing online teacher faces serious problems, such as not being able to receive feedback from the teacher in the discussion fora. This happens to one student out of five. Another ten percent had to wait for an answer or comment from the teacher for more than a week. More than one of five students in this group agrees that the course was not conducted according to the information received at the beginning of the course, compared to one of fourteen students in the other group with teachers present online. Almost one student in four was dissatisfied with the quality of the course.

The teacher who participated online was more appreciated than his/her colleagues who were missing, even though the students in both groups agreed that their online teacher supported knowledge-building only to a minor extent. The few face-to-face meetings appeared to be much more important in that respect. The students with an online teacher expressed greater appreciation about being online and their communication in the study groups seemed to work better. They also wanted the teacher to participate more than did the group with the absent teacher. These students are much less dissatisfied with the evaluated course.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has resulted in a significant number of comments on the great variation of teachers’ participation in the examined programme and on some of the conditions under which the programme was offered. There was pressure on the teachers to teach the courses but there was no corresponding pressure directed at changing the teachers’ responsibilities and the knowledge of how to use online environments in learning and teaching. The university did not seem to acknowledge the difference between campus and distance education and this approach had negative consequences on student learning. The students’ attributed poor value for the activities conducted online by the teachers. The Board of Education for teacher training, which is responsible for the SÄL programme, did not have a policy document for online teaching and learning, nor does such a document exist for Göteborg University. Teacher in-service training was optional and started in 2004, which is two years after the introduction of SÄL. The teachers were expected to perform professionally online despite having inadequate competences for online teaching. This situation generates conflicts between the teachers and the students who do not understand why some teachers are absent online. The true motive is not revealed and the students are presented with other (invalid) explanations.

Teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum. Within the context of the classroom, effective teaching and learning require a partnership between teachers and students. As in any partnership, the terms of the relationship need to be clearly defined and the responsibilities of each party articulated. A syllabus is needed to serve as a reference for students and for teachers to organise their workload. In the SÄL programme, the study guide intended as an agreement for such a partnership, detailing the parties’ expectations, how students should proceed and assessment criteria, was seriously lacking. The majority of the curricula (18 out of 21) did not even mention online learning. In the remaining three it was only briefly mentioned. It is also noticeable that only three of four students received a study guide at the beginning of the programme.

The contradiction between institutional and personal expectations impacted the way in which the supposedly online programme was presented and conducted. In reality, the enrolled students ended up attending a sort of campus programme, as most of the learning activities occur in the monthly face-to-face meetings. A student wrote: “*This must be the first time the faculty of XX has arranged online education. They act like ‘Bambi on slippery ice’!*”

The teachers’ absence in the discussion fora conflicted with learners’ expectations in two ways: their learning process was severely inhibited on the net and both their individual and group work was seriously impaired. Since there was no interlocutor for student questions, no discussion partner or any online guidance, etc., the students felt abandoned by their teacher and this led to a loss of confidence in them. Within such an incongruous conduct of the programme, the examination was - once again, as in most conventional courses - critical and decisive in itself for student success or failure.

Another conflict emerged between the Board of Education for teacher training and the course leaders/teachers, which arose due to the fact that SÄL, in some cases, was not carried out as a distance education programme.

The findings from the study suggest that the following structural features, or characteristics of the structure of the activity, are very important in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching in a distance programme:

- the organisation of the activity, revolving around dialogical activities and group work;
- the duration of the activity, including the total number of contact hours and the span of time over which the activity extends;
- the extent to which the activity is participated in by the teachers.

Two other core features, or characteristics of the substance of the activity, seem to be:

- the degree to which the activity provides teachers with professional learning opportunities;
- the degree to which the activity promotes coherence in teachers’ professional development by incorporating experiences that are consistent with teacher goals and aligned with institutional systems of evaluation and reward.

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