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Where identity meets information: teacher trainees' performance of identity positions and information activities

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Introduction

As digital tools such as Facebook and blogs are introduced and used in higher education, new information activities emerge and new venues for identity positioning are offered. To date, some research within Library and Information Science has examined the relationship between the identity of learners and the information activities they perform (eg. Lindberg, 2015; Lloyd, 2009; Sundin, 2002), but not in the context of teacher training. Teacher trainees are interesting to study since they are both students within higher education and future teachers. Most university students have used digital tools, such as Facebook, during their adolescence and young adulthood. As soon-to-be teachers, they will soon mediate ways of using these tools to children in pre-schools and schools. The way teachers use technology is connected to experiences of technology use in teacher training (Tondeur *et al.*, 2012). While teacher identity is highly influential on experiences, beliefs and practices of teachers (Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons, 2006), there are still few studies that examine teacher trainees' identity formation in digital settings (Lu and Curwood, 2015). This paper reports findings from an on-going analysis of how teacher trainees position their identities, as learners and future pre-school teachers, as information activities are performed. The analysis is based on results from an ethnographic study at a teacher-training programme at a Swedish university.

From a socio-cultural perspective, which emphasizes the social and contextual nature of learning and information (Lupton and Bruce, 2010), information activities are situated, social activities. These activities are shaped by institutional norms and traditions (Lundh, 2011) and can include searching, assessing, producing and sharing information (Limberg, Sundin and Talja, 2012). Information activities represent how information needs are articulated and how information is shared to others (cf. Savolainen, 2011). Socio-culturally informed research from the field of information literacy suggests that identity is closely related to the ways that information activities are performed. For example, Lloyd (2009) shows how the professional identity of ambulance drivers is connected to their use of information sources, and Eckerdal (2013) analyses how information literacy practices when choosing contraceptives are part of young women's identity construction.

How students position their identities when using digital tools, such as Facebook and blogs, in academic settings and how this is connected to the information activities performed is an area of research that needs to be explored. To better understand this connection and how information activities unfold as digital tools are used for information sharing in teacher training, the following research questions guide this investigation:

How do pre-school teacher trainees perform identity positions and information activities when they use digital tools for information sharing?

How can the performance of identity positions be connected to the performance of information activities?

Conceptual framework

In this paper, information activities are analysed in relation to learning environment, digital tools and individuals, using the concept identity. By taking human action as the focus of analysis, here empirically described as information activities, *'we are able to provide a more coherent account of identity, not as a static, inflexible structure of the self, but as a dynamic dimension or moment in action, that may in fundamental ways change from activity to activity [...]'* (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995, p. 84).

Penuel and Wertsch (1995) present four points of departure that can guide research with a socio-cultural approach to identity: it is necessary to study identity in settings where identities are formed; cultural and historical resources both empower and constrain identity formation; mediated action is the principal unit of analysis (not an inner sense of identity); identity is understood as commitment in three domains as described by Erikson (1965, 1968): fidelity, ideology and work. The three domains represent commitment to people you can trust, to an ideology that explains the world and your place in it with a sense of optimism and hope, and to a career choice that may realize this hope. By merging these domains together to a coherent whole, an individual constructs an identity that is positioned through a selection of who and what to commit to. This is an on-going process that is connected to social, cultural and historical contexts (see Flum and Kaplan, 2012).

Penuel and Wertsch (1995) stress that identity is a type of action that is flexible and mainly rhetorical: you convince yourself and others who you are and what you value in different situations and with different purposes. This view echoes how Giddens describes identity in terms of a "capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (1991, p. 54), but the socio-cultural view emphasizes the importance of cultural tools when individuals position their identities.

Previous research

Though not designed for learning, Facebook is attractive to use within higher education since most students are accustomed to the tool and its features and spend more time on Facebook than on any other digital platform (Manca and Ranieri, 2013). When Facebook is used in higher education it is primarily to support discussion and co-learning among students (e.g. Divall and Kirwin, 2012; Hanell, 2014; Lampe *et al.* 2011), but also for sharing resources – including external resources outside of the curriculum (Manca and Ranieri, 2013). Research on teacher trainees' educational uses of Facebook suggests that the tool can provide valuable means of communication and enhance learning (O'Bannon, Beard and Britt, 2013) and nurture relationships between teachers and students (Hanell, 2014).

Identity is a multi-faceted concept that has been researched for a long time within several disciplines. A great deal of identity research on Facebook has been carried out, although mainly concerned with user profiles (see Wilson, Gosling and Graham, 2012). In Library and Information Science, research on identity covers several empirical fields

such as development of professional identities (Lindberg, 2015; Lloyd, 2009; Sundin, 2002), reading practices and social identities among sexual minority groups (Rothbauer, 2004), and children's identity construction in virtual environments (Meyers, 2009). Josefsson and Hanell (2014) discuss how teacher trainees and teachers perform and negotiate roles in Facebook Groups, but in general, Library and Information Science has not yet produced much identity related research on teachers or teacher trainees.

Day *et al.* (2006) suggest that identity is a key factor that influences experiences, beliefs and practices of teachers. Accordingly, research on teacher identities has developed into a field of research by its own right (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004). Lu and Curwood (2015) present the first study where the identity formation of teacher trainees is studied in a non-course-endorsed online setting. They find two categories among the teacher trainees using a closed Facebook Group: one category express identities of identification towards each other by being reliant, helpful, supportive and sociable, while another category express resistance towards social norms of group participation (Lu and Curwood, 2015).

Research design

This paper presents an on-going analysis based on research conducted at a pre-school teacher-training programme at a Swedish university. Using an ethnographic approach, I carried out online and offline participant observations and interviews during a study among a class of 249 students who started the programme in 2011. Between November 2013 and January 2014, I interviewed 9 students and 4 teachers and conducted participant observations online and on campus. I analysed the interviews with students and teachers comparatively, marking transcripts with empirically generated codes, to contextualize and validate the findings from the online interactions (cf. Davies, 2008). The design of the study aims to provide thick descriptions with high validity rather than a high degree of representativeness.

This paper mainly draws on material collected from two digital sites: a Facebook Group created for discussing issues concerning teacher training where 210 students and several teachers are members, and a blog created by one of the students. In the current analysis, 147 conversations from the Facebook Group are closely read and thematically arranged in order to identify ways of positioning identity and information activities. Two scenarios from the Facebook Group are analysed in detail since they include a high number of posts and comments where different identity positions can be observed in the performed information activities. The first scenario portrays the efforts and the discussions surrounding a blog created by a student to share childhood memories. The second scenario describes how the students were assigned new groups and how they reacted to this decision. In the analysis of these two scenarios, I have identified three types of identity positions through comparative and thematic analysis: *discussion-oriented learner*, a position that echoes the officially sanctioned view at the training programme on learning as co-learning; *goal-oriented learner*, where learning is understood as instrumental; and *customer-oriented learner*, a position with a view on teachers as service providers and students as customers. These positions are fluid and the same student can assume different identity positions in different situations.

These three types of identity positions are presented in the following section, with empirical examples from the two scenarios. Conversations from the Facebook Group are labelled x:y, where x is the number of the conversation and y is the number of the comment. All quotes have been translated from Swedish.

Results and analysis

Scenario 1: Sharing childhood memories

On 11 November 2013, during the evening on the first day of the course 'Childhood and learning', Irma posts to the Facebook Group. She wants her fellow students to share something from their own childhoods and posts this request to share information:

To approach a perspective on our own childhood can be a good way to be able to approach the children of today's perspective on their childhood. I suggest that we start a thread here where everyone is welcome to contribute with something small (or big) that in some way characterizes his or her childhood. [...] Everything is allowed, so let us be inspired by our own childhoods now with the course start at hand, since these will have an infinite number of colours to offer! Go – sharing is caring!
Conversation 5, 11/11/13

The will to share and to inspire each other are typical of the discussion-oriented learner identity position. In this position, the learner seeks to use Facebook as a tool to share information and foster discussions. Savolainen (2011) asserts that online discussion forums can facilitate problem solving and information sharing. Similarly, a Facebook Group facilitates swift and convenient dissemination of information to a large number of people.

Irma argues for the importance of sharing information and develops her argument about why co-learning is essential: it is not only about sharing, it is also about taking responsibility for developing your own learning. On 6 December, 9 persons have shared information and posted a childhood memory or a story on the blog (two of them are educators) despite four written requests to share posted to the Group. Irma has encouraged information sharing by commenting on every blog entry. In this scenario, Irma illustrates the discussion-oriented learner identity position in her sayings and doings. She expresses a strong will to create a space for the students to share childhood memories and to learn from each other. Why did her attempt not succeed better?

In the interview with Karl and Erik, they both express concerns about how the content posted on the blog would be used. Erik speculates in if Irma was going to use content from the blog for her essay. In the interview with Elisabet and Isabella, the students express how they just did not feel like contributing to the blog:

Elisabet: I just felt – I couldn't be bothered.
Isabella: It's like this, some do, like, perhaps a little extra...
Elisabet: Mm. A little too much.
Interview with Elisabet and Isabella, 14/02/14

Karl, Erik, Elisabet and Isabella do not seem to be committed to the co-learning ideology or to Irma as a fellow student whom they trust. By questioning the purpose and showing a clear lack of interest in this extracurricular activity, these students position themselves as goal-oriented learners, and do not engage in the information activities suggested by Irma and the discussion-oriented learner identity position.

Scenario 2: New groups and student protests

In the second scenario, the teacher trainees react against a decision to divide them into new groups for the next course, starting in mid-January 2014. Unfortunately, information about this change has not been distributed as planned. On 26 December, Magdalena posts a document from the Virtual Learning Environment with a list of the new groups to the Facebook Group. Most of the following comments are critical to the change and to the fact that no previous information has been given. Jimmy declares that he has written an e-mail to the course leader protesting against the decision. Digital tools allow the students to find and share information about the training programme at any time and place. They are also able to act on this information spontaneously, for example by quickly writing an e-mail with a formal complaint.

During two days, more than two hundred comments are written. Some students express a positive attitude towards the changes. Echoing the discussion-oriented identity position, Irma argues that new groups can provide students with opportunities for new perspectives and develop their learning. The vast majority of the students are, however, negative to the news. Students encourage each other to send e-mails to the course leader to protest. Jimmy, who wrote the first e-mail to the course leader, posts a link to an online protest list in a comment with the words '*I like democracy.*' (Conversation 98:39, 26/12/13). In this way, dissatisfaction with the decision to form new groups is manifested as information activities when e-mails are sent, arguments presented and an online protest list prepared. The students utilize different digital tools to voice their discontent. To mediate critique in a qualitative manner, e-mails are sent to the course leader. The protest list enables the mediation of the quantitative dimension of the criticism by allowing the students to conveniently sign a digital petition. Some students comment that the discussion and the protest list are absurd, but most students seem to agree with the critique against the teachers, especially the course leader. In one comment Laila explains her dissatisfaction:

Usually I get in to new groups pretty fast, but I'm worried about HOW the school handles this. I have taken study loans, about three hours commuting (my own choice!), family etc. I buy a service from the school that's about my education and my future. When I buy something I want to be happy!
Conversation 109:23, 27/12/13

In this comment, Laila positions herself as a customer who is dissatisfied with a purchased service. Student influence and information provided in good time are aspects that are meant to be included in the purchase. As a customer-oriented learner, the student expects the university and the teachers to provide her with a service that makes her '*happy*'.

In the first scenario, Elisabet and Isabella positioned themselves as goal-oriented learners. But when Isabella realises that the new groups would mean a separation from

Elisabet, a close friend she is strongly committed to, anxiety and irritation lead her to assume the customer-oriented learner identity:

Isabella: But where things got turned upside down for us, it was that we were divided into groups where she belonged to group 4 and I to group 1, so we weren't going to see each other.

Interviewer: Mm.

Elisabet: Mm.

Isabella: And we are kind of each others safe bond, or something.

Interview with Elisabet and Isabella, 14/02/14

This exemplifies the fluidity of the identity positions: the same students can assume different identity positions depending on the situation and the type of commitment in play.

Discussion and conclusions

The students perform different identity positions that are expressed in information activities depending on the intentions of the student, the tools appropriated and the situation. Three types of commitment described by Erikson (1965; 1968) help us to understand the positioning of identity expressed in the information activities.

The discussion-oriented identity position represents commitment to an ideology, co-learning, with a view on learning as something that happens in the meeting with others. This position is similar to a deep approach to learning (see Entwistle and Peterson, 2004). The co-learner ideology entails a view of students and teachers as learning partners, so commitments can be made between students but also between students and teachers. Vital information activities connected to this identity position are open discussions, sharing of ideas and critical questioning. To embrace this view is to position your identity according to the ideals conveyed by the training programme about the proper attitude of a pre-school teacher.

The goal-oriented learner identity position can be observed when students neither commit to the co-learning ideology nor to discussion-oriented students and teacher. This position does not emphasise commitment to an ideology, but to a career choice (pre-school teaching). Learning is understood as instrumental, and the goal is to achieve a certain grade or to complete a certain (compulsory) task. This view of learning resembles a surface approach, or a strategic approach, to learning (cf. Entwistle and Peterson, 2004). In the goal-oriented identity position, open discussions can still be considered valuable but important information activities are connected to completing tasks and finishing the training programme.

The customer-oriented learner identity position can be seen as an expression of neoliberal ideology and a commodification trend originating from free-market logic (Saunders, 2014). In this position, students commit to a career choice and to a neoliberal ideology that views education as a commodity. The position implies that the students are customers who have paid for an education and the teachers are expected to deliver a training programme that results in a diploma, preferably without unnecessary inconveniences. In this position, there is a strong divide between teachers, as service

providers, and students, as customers. Information activities connected to this position include presenting arguments against teachers' decision, presenting protests to teachers through e-mails and creating a digital protest list.

Identity is constantly under construction and transformation (Flum and Kaplan, 2012), and the same student can assume different identity positions depending on the situation. This fluidity can partly be explained by what type of commitment is emphasised. The notion of commitment nuances what Lu and Curwood (2015) describe as identities of identification towards each other. The results in this paper suggest that a socio-cultural understanding of identity positioning is valuable for understanding how information activities are performed. Further research, in other settings, is needed to better understand the connection between identity positions and information activities and the fluidity of identity positions.

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