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New media in the classroom : challenged notions and transformed practices?

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Introduction

The focus for this paper is how information literacy is taught and practiced in Swedish upper secondary schools. Special attention is paid to the critical evaluation of the credibility and the authority of documents, which has been identified as a particularly difficult topic for students (Alexandersson & Limberg, 2003; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Julien & Barker, 2009; Limberg & Sundin, 2006; Merchant & Hepworth, 2002). The aim of the paper is to present an investigation of information literacy conceptions that are expressed in syllabuses and by teachers and librarians in the Swedish upper secondary school and how conceptions are translated into educational practice.

Background

In late modern society, individuals are expected to take significant responsibility for their choices (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1990). Increasing individualization combined with expectations of personal reflexivity are said to lead to the questioning of experts and their authority. Current pedagogical models in the educational system also encourage students to make choices about their own learning. This includes producing, seeking and using information in various, often digital, media. These trends in current society and school culture lead to questions about how reflexivity and a questioning of expertise are actually talked about and manifested in the classroom.

Even though teachers and librarians constantly highlight the significance of information literacy, it has proven difficult to treat it as an object of learning (Limberg & Sundin, 2006; Merchant & Hepworth, 2002). Teacher education does not always equip the future teachers with a didactics for teaching information literacy (Lundh & Sundin, 2006). A study by Louise Limberg (Limberg & Sundin, 2006) showed that practices in school environments often included recommending specific sources, demonstrating tools, or discussing the information seeking process. Information literacy education was primarily treated as being about generic competencies (Limberg & Sundin, 2006; cf. Lupton & Bruce, 2010). The critical evaluation of the credibility of sources was seldom addressed in the teaching because it was considered too difficult for the students, but teachers and librarians mentioned that it was important. Furthermore, when the students' information literacy practices were assessed, the teachers often looked at how information had been used rather than how it had been sought and found (Limberg & Sundin, 2006).

Theory and method

The analysis in the paper is guided by an interest in a socio-cultural view of learning. One of the consequences of this perspective is a focus on how people appropriate and interact with tools which mediate their learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Säljö, 1999; 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

A description of the information literacy-related goals stated in the syllabuses for Swedish, History, and Civics forms a background to an analysis of how upper secondary school teachers and librarians view information literacy, in particular concerning the authority of information sources. The analysis is based on interviews with teachers and librarians concerning their views of information literacy and authority and their descriptions of how they teach information literacy. It aims to capture collective conceptions among teachers and librarians. Five focus group

interviews with 8 teachers and 9 school librarians were conducted between spring 2008 and fall 2009, and six individual interviews were held with two librarians and three teachers in 2008. The teachers work in fairly similar schools, but represent different subjects and study programmes. In the interviews, Wikipedia in particular became a generator of the discussions of authority, expertise, and control of information sources. It evoked reflection and discussion which illustrated ways of relating to expertise and authority in environments with a low degree of traditional teacher control.

One of the problems identified in previous research is that information literacy conceptions do not necessarily correspond to how information literacy is taught and assessed in school environments (Limberg & Sundin, 2006). As an exemplification of how information literacy is assessed in school, an ethnographically oriented classroom study is revisited in the paper. The class was taught by teachers and librarians who took part in the individual interviews (Francke, Sundin & Limberg, in press; Sundin & Francke, 2009). The material that is analysed in the context of this paper has not been previously analysed and published. It concerns particularly how the teachers assessed and graded the students' work and focuses on aspects of information literacy.

Results and discussion

The results section presents different ways in which teachers and librarians view information literacy as an object of learning, in particular when it comes to critically evaluating the credibility and authority of sources. Teachers often view this as something that takes place continuously in the classroom, whereas librarians view it as part of information seeking and use and thus feel they have much to contribute in the field. The conceptions of what constitutes a credible source are located between two radically different views of what is reliable and legitimate knowledge. On the one hand, there is the view that most free Internet sources are easy to produce and possible to manipulate and that digital subscription sources or print sources, generally produced by acknowledged experts in their fields, are the more credible option. On the other hand, there is the view that the flexibility of web sites such as Wikipedia invite perspectives which are not authoritarian or elitist, a 'knowledge of the masses' which should be as highly valued as that of the 'elite'. Different positions in relation to these views will result in different approaches to the acceptance of social media as sources in school. Furthermore, teachers and librarians view the Internet as the students' primary information world and feel an obligation to introduce them to print sources. The discussion focuses on the relation between established media and social media, the various practices connected to them in relation to credibility, and some of the challenging consequences social media entail for information literacy. Previous research has shown that students are often left on their own to make credibility assessments, largely without the support of teachers and librarians. This study indicates that teachers and librarians are also often on their own, without up-to-date training and substantial professional discussion.

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