
Higher Education as Commodity or Space for Learning: modelling contradictions in educational practices

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ABSTRACT In this article the authors reflect upon and critically examine signs of a contradiction in higher education which they discuss in terms of the tension between 'use value' and 'exchange value'. Use value here represents learning as something valuable 'in itself', whereas exchange value represents learning as an achievement of grades and credits to be 'traded' on a market. Their aim in this article is to present a model based on the concepts of use value and exchange value, clarifying how they might relate to surface and deep approaches to learning. The model is suggested as a device to explore and analyse local tensions emanating from the contradiction. They also argue in favour of a pedagogical philosophy based on the notion of community.

Introduction

At the international level, higher education today is struggling with challenges that have serious implications for educational outcomes. For example, tensions exist between, on the one hand, the conditions of mass education and widening participation, combined with demands for high student completion rates, and, on the other, demands for quality in education, focusing on student learning (Reneland-Forsman, 2009). Policy guidelines and government bills stipulate that higher education generally must fulfil quality assurance requirements, while at the same time reaching and maintaining 'market competitive goals' (Bartell, 2003). Yang suggests that we might experience the 'universities as a site of struggle, where local knowledge meets global knowledge in a battle representing different worlds in different ways' (2002, p. 85). From the European perspective, the objectives of higher education express intentions of increasing mobility and the promotion of employability, all in the light of competitiveness. For example, the goal of the ongoing Bologna Process [1] is to standardise higher education in different countries, to promote mobility, while at the same time attempting to individualise higher education programmes, in order to 'compete'. Political developments also constitute a strong factor, tending towards a reduction in state funding, compelling universities to become more self-sufficient financially (Stromquist, 2002). In Sweden we perceive a wave of privatization of education, which until now has been a state-run enterprise. Private interests approach education as a profitable enterprise. Thus, the debate is frequently informed by powerful political and economical discourses with 'quality' as the leading buzzword. Dahlberg & Moss (2008) argue that quality is a concept with a very particular meaning and inscribed with specific assumptions and values. The concept of quality, they argue,

assumes the possibility of deriving universal and objective norms, based on expert knowledge. 'Quality' is an evaluation of the conformity of a product and service to these norms. It values universality, objectivity, certainty, stability, closure; and presumes an autonomous observer able to make a decontextualized and objective statement of fact. It deploys certain methods, based on

applying templates to particular settings (e.g., rating scales, check lists, standardized inspection procedures). (Dahlberg & Moss, 2008, p. 4)

Examples of policies in line with the Dahlberg & Moss 'quality' discourse are: the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in the USA; PISA (Program for International Students Assessment, in the 2010 edition of *Education at a Glance* by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]) in Europe; and the new law in Sweden (effective in 2012) which states that only certified teachers will have the right to grade students and be given tenure. Although these attempts are presumably aimed at raising standards and improving education, we fear that they will have the opposite effect because the programmes do not problematise and take into account the complex and complicated phenomena that educational practices imply. Several authors suggest that there is a need to fundamentally re-examine the premises for higher education of the future as political and economic systems are becoming increasingly integrated in the development of the higher education domain (Stromquist, 2002; De Vita & Case, 2003; Waks, 2003; Biesta, 2007; Marginson, 2009; Maringe & Foskett, 2010). We have good reason to ask ourselves what the consequences of these developments will be. The model we introduce and suggest in this article attempts to contribute to this discussion by explaining the complexity of education and, in particular, higher education.

The situation outlined above implies that conflicting discourses are operating at the same time in higher education. In more philosophical terms – with reference to Yang (2002), De Vita & Case (2003), Wihlborg (2009) and Svensson & Wihlborg (2010) – the development and advancement of human knowledge can be seen as an objective based on common bonds of humanity, striving for the common good, and learning for citizenship. Historically, such principles have constituted fundamental aspects of the missions of universities. But today, there is an increased perception of developing knowledge as an 'enterprise'. Seen from this perspective, students become 'consumers' and higher education simply a 'commodity' (Biesta, 2007; Marginson, 2009). The fact that contradictory demands and conditions affect students and teachers in higher education is not new. However, such tensions are currently accentuated to an extent where they have come to occupy a central position in a way that might radically alter the role of higher education in the future.

Higher Education as a Commodity or Space for Learning

The contradictions are conceptualised in this article as a conflict between learning and the marketing of a 'commodity'. From a student perspective, the latter primarily aims at obtaining/purchasing 'qualifications' for the job market. We will discuss this tension in higher education using the concept of *use value* and *exchange value*, where the former refers to the capacity of a product to satisfy human needs, while the latter refers to the price of a product on the market – that is, when it is marketed in competition with other alternative products. An example of this tension is the conflict students sometimes experience between their wish to complete their education with top marks and their desire to gain actual and deep understanding of the subject matter. The necessity to choose between 'learning' and 'succeeding' naturally has consequences for the manner in which students approach their studies and the type of knowledge they acquire. A student who develops competence in passing exams – a highly performing 'exam-sitter' – may develop what Marton & Booth (1997) have termed *surface* knowledge. A shallow approach to learning is applied, at the expense of what they call a *deep* approach to learning.

The conflicts outlined above are not only perceptible from a student perspective, they can also be observed from a teacher perspective. For instance, a frequently experienced contradiction is the conflict between student completion rates and quality (Emsheimer, 2007). Student completion rates (the number of students passing measured against those admitted) are often among the criteria used to assess teachers and institutions. Higher completion rates are linked to increased revenues for the school. But the pressure of achieving higher completion rates conflicts with requirements to maintain quality standards as teachers feel they must let students pass, even when they have not attained the required learning outcomes (Alvesson [2008] discusses this in the Swedish context). These kinds of conflicts and the manner in which they are played out in higher education are the focus of this article.

The purpose of the article is to introduce a model based on the concepts of use value and exchange value, clarifying how they might relate to surface and deep approaches to learning, as a device to explore and analyse local tensions in higher education emanating from this contradiction. As Engeström (1987) points out, all human activity in contemporary western capitalist societies involves primary contradictions between use value and exchange value. This inevitably includes educational activities (Sidorkin, 2002, 2009; Lave & McDermott, 2004; Williams, 2008).

We shall start by defining concepts used in this article which are essential in describing our suggested model. We follow this with a discussion of a vision of pedagogical practice within higher education, which Matusov et al (forthcoming) call an 'ontological community of learners'. We argue in favour of such an approach as a possible framework for pedagogical practice in higher education. However, before introducing the proposed model, we will locate the aforementioned contradiction within the context of the historical development of public and elementary schooling in relation to higher education.

We present three cases, taken from the authors' own pedagogical practices, as examples of the discussed contradictions in higher education. We analyse the cases using our proposed model. We conclude by commenting on how the proposed model might be used in research and for didactical considerations.

Exchange Value and Use Value

We propose to use the concepts of *exchange value* and *use value* – concepts once developed by Marx (1990) in his theory of commodity production – to critically examine and assess possible consequences of the tensions described above. More recently, activity theorists, such as Engeström (1987), have used the concepts when analysing learning and development in activity systems as *expansive learning*. Problems in activity systems manifest themselves through tension, conflicts and 'break downs'. If conflicting aspects are dealt with in a creative manner, they may lead to positive developments. Engeström calls the type of activity that aims at resolving conflicts, thereby leading to development, *expansive learning*. In expansive learning, the individual develops as a result of the new activity, but also through the process of changing the activity.

The *surface approach* to learning focuses on what can be called the *sign* - for example, a text in itself (Marton & Booth, 1997). This implies that memorisation, replication and rote learning become the main approaches to learning. A student's attitude rests on the belief that knowledge should be expressed as set answers and that it can be tested in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'. This stands in contrast to the belief that knowledge is constructed through an understanding of complex phenomena and concepts, involving the act of relating previous knowledge and experiences to new knowledge.

Rather than replicating a sign – that is, the tangible symbolic and conventional representation of a given content – a *deep approach* to learning focuses on the question of what is *signified*. The learner would in this case be interested in the meaning of a text, rather than attempting to reproduce its form. The deep approach to learning also focuses on using organising principles to integrate ideas (Marton & Booth, 1997). A number of studies have demonstrated that this approach leads to a more durable and complex set of competencies, skills and insights. In the next section we will describe what Matusov et al (forthcoming) call an ontological community of learners. We think that a deep approach to learning might be cultivated in this kind of learning environment, but also that learning from this perspective can be understood as something going beyond the deep approach.

Community of Learners

The characteristic of an ontological community of learners (OCoL) project, with *ontological* alluding to being in the world, is a redefinition of learning as a communal concept. Learning is viewed as students joining and transforming the target practices and attendant discourses and developing their specific voices. In this manner, they become competent participants in these practices and discourses, through a transformation of their subjectivities, and through reshaping their knowledge. Matusov et al (forthcoming) describe learning in an OCoL as 'ill-defined,

unlimited, relational, polycultural, involving multiple emergent goals, and distributed in diverse times, spaces, people, networks of practices, discourses, and topics, and through diverse mediums' (p. 18). Consensus, agreement and shared understanding are not necessarily seen as a desired outcome. Rather, the goal, besides promoting learning, should be to endorse pleasure in intellectual reflection, making it essential to the lives of participants.

The teacher's role is redefined in OCoL according to Matusov et al (forthcoming). Teachers have to become learners of the academic subject matter as well, and not just pedagogical facilitators of learning. Although there is a division of labour among the OCoL participants, this division is not given in advance, and according to Matusov et al (forthcoming), '[t]he teacher is not the "principal performer", Expert #1, the gatekeeper of the truth, the final authority of knowledge, but a participant in learning'. In OCoL, an 'internally persuasive discourse' (Bakhtin, 1991) is a guiding concept, implying that the participants' contributions are taken seriously by everyone. Participants' voices cannot be dismissed by an authority or powerful tradition. This pedagogical approach does not exclude asymmetry in power, in knowledge or in contributions in the classroom, but it does make these conditions transparent, and thus possible to negotiate and change.

The key to understanding the ontological concept of CoL lies, according to the authors, in the notions of 'learning' and 'learner'. A learner in this approach learns actively and intentionally, not just as a by-product of some human activity (see Lave, 1992). Active intentional learners are characterised by two complementary aspects, according to Matusov et al (forthcoming):

- (1) being puzzled and perplexed by something ... 'having a point of wonder' ... raising an authentic question that seeks for information, and recognizing his or her own ignorance ...; and
- (2) the person's desire to address him or herself, other people, and the inquiry itself (rather than to suppress it or just leave it unaddressed).

The best evidence that a person has become a learner is that the person asks a genuine question. Most of the time in education, teachers do not ask genuine questions – that is, questions they do not already have the answer to – but instead resort to so-called IRE (Instruction-Response-Evaluation) questions (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979). Asking IRE questions is a sign of not being a learner.

In an ontological CoL, instruction is organised around the students' and the teachers' puzzling perplexity and 'points of wonder'. The teacher does not wait passively for these to spontaneously emerge in students, but actively creates situations that contribute to the emergence of the students' inquiry. The teacher prepares 'dialogic provocations' and 'contradictions' for the students and herself. This approach stands in contrast to most forms of mainstream education, where finding the curricular 'big ideas' that can be divided into researchable chunks is the goal. Dialogical provocations and 'points of surprise' are tensions and contradictions that cross between the student's life and the profession/subject she studies. This way, the historically unfolding discourses constitute the points of entry for the student – to surprises, questions, exploration, interest, concerns, worries, needs and even frustration - i.e. to an ontological engagement: 'In this view, the student's existing and emerging interest IS the situated context of the teacher's practice and not academic subject matter per se' (Matusov et al (forthcoming)). The goal is for students to develop, as Matusov et al put it, 'self-assignment, self-determination, self-provocations, self-leadership, and self-journey'. In other words, students engage in activities (assignments, deadlines, etc.) not for the teacher, but for their own benefit - that is, for their use value.

Tracing the Contradiction

Traditionally, university education in the western world has been the symbol of critical thinking, freedom of thought, debate and exploration. However, higher education today is positioned as a national and global entity where competition is a strong influencing factor. The promotion of graduate career opportunities and university status is closely linked to economic and research-based drivers (Marginson, 2004, 2009). Because of this development of higher education, we think it is appropriate to try to understand the tensions in higher education, discussed above, as being similar to those that can be found in and that characterise elementary education. We trace these tensions back to mass education arising in the industrial era.

Looking back, the Swedish researcher and curriculum theorist Lundgren (1979, 1991) relates modern schooling and the modern education system to the development of the modern state. He argues that the school system, as we know it today in the western world, is formed when societies are organised and a visible state apparatus develops. Before this, learning was not institutionalised in this manner but intertwined with production. In other words, learning was directly related to the activity of survival, which usually took place in the realm of the family. In that regard, knowledge was *contextualised*. You learned what it was essential to know in order to produce necessities for life and to reproduce both the material base and the culture of your community (i.e. knowledge, skills and values). This is what Lave & Wenger (1991) call *situated learning*.

Industrialisation radically changed the conditions for learning. Children and young people could not learn from their parents as before, since production no longer took place in homes to the same extent. Reproduction was isolated from production, and thus knowledge and learning were *decontextualised*. Knowledge was separated from its use and applications in both time and space. It was packaged into abstract categories – ‘school subjects’ – which were above all transmitted through texts. When action and activities in the world were replaced by *texts about* (action and activities in) the world, the manner and type of learning changed radically. School learning became above all a matter of learning in the sense of ‘memorising’ or storing information. The learner had to commit to memory something that would later be used in quite a different context from where it was learned. Lundgren (1979) calls this situation *the problem of representation and transmission*. It is at this point that modern curriculum questions began to emerge.

Rogoff (2003) discusses learning as memorising and rote-learning in terms of the internalisation metaphor. The learner is confronted with the task of acquiring knowledge and storing it in his/her mind for later use. Clearly, a number of problems will arise when learning and use take place in different contexts. This issue has been debated in research on *transfer* (see e.g. Sfard, 1998).

A major problem that arises when learning is decontextualised has to do with meaning. We assume, with Lave & Wenger, that a deficiency in meaning is created if meaning cannot be found in the significance of the immediate practice - that is, when meaning is instead expected to be linked to the internalisation of something that can only become useful much later, in quite a different context, and which is not necessarily known to the learner. This deficiency in meaning, related to the delay in relevance, can be understood as the absence of motive of the activity, or at least as problems with this motive. According to activity theory, the *object* of an activity is not exactly identical to the *motive* of the activity, but is certainly closely connected to it (Leont’ev, 1978). An activity may occur whenever a (collective) human need takes shape in a (common) object. This object then continues to motivate action, which in turn serves to satisfy needs.

In the case of education, we have to ask what kinds of needs are involved. Whose needs are being satisfied, and how are they responded to in terms of the object of education? If we analyse the realm of the state-run public school, a common object of the activity seems to be the exception rather than the rule (Nilsson, 2003). The object of the teachers is instruction – that is, to ensure that students learn what is stipulated in official aims (Orlander et al, 2004) and therefore what is also assessed in exams. This in turn means that the students become the object of the activity of the teachers. But are the particular elements of learning which are stipulated in official aims necessarily the object of the students? Do these aims personally engage the students, and thus motivate and direct their actions? If not, how can students occupy the position of a subject?

We argue that in order for students to gain the position of subject in educational practices, teachers and students need to share a common object which transcends the formal object of instruction and pre-defined goals. It is precisely here that we locate the contradiction between use value and exchange value. In principle, meaning might be gained from an exchange-value aspect of the activity - for instance, to ‘pass the exam’. On the other hand, meaning might be gained from a use-value aspect, such as, what we here call ‘knowledging’.[2] Whether the outcome and the common object in school practice will ultimately articulate with ‘passing the exam’ or with ‘knowledging’ depends on which forces dominate the primary contradiction between these values in the practice that is considered.

Bearing this in mind, the interesting question becomes whether we as educators can design our activity so that use-value aspects dominate – and if so, how. Based on the discussion above, it

would be reasonable to assume that this can only be achieved by creating activities where educators and students create and maintain a common object.

All participants need to occupy the position of subject in the activity. It is equally clear that simply teaching the content that is supposed to be transmitted does not meet these demands. Thus, for 'knowledging' to take place, the object of instruction has to be expanded beyond simply aiming to reach stipulated learning outcomes for the course. The teacher must abandon the idea of *transmitting* the content that is supposed to be obtained, and instead, together with the students, create an activity where all involved parties become participants with a shared interest in learning and development. We believe that that is what Matusov et al (forthcoming) have in mind with their 'ontological community of learners'. In higher education we might call it a 'community of academic practice', with reference to Lave & Wenger (1991).

Modelling the Contradiction

The model in Figure 1 is an attempt to represent the contradiction between use value and exchange value, perceived from a student perspective and a teacher perspective, respectively. We take these perspectives on the assumption that teachers and students sometimes have contradictory relations to the object, which, as the model also shows, does not mean that they cannot have shared relations to the object.

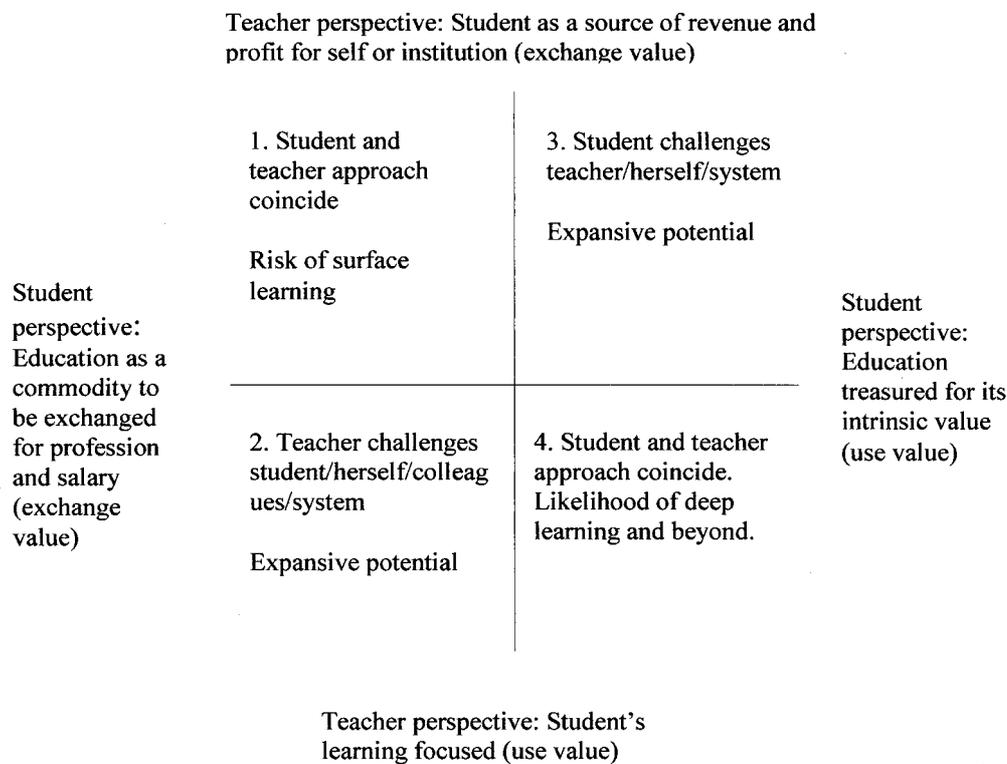


Figure 1. Model depicting learning in higher education as a contradiction between use value and exchange value

The concepts of surface and deep approaches to learning, deriving from original empirical work by Marton & Säljö (1976), are used in the model to represent the kind of learning as a function of whether use value or exchange value dominates the activity. Also the potential for change and development of the very pedagogical practice is present in the model, for which we use the concept of *expansive learning* (Engeström, 1987). Expansion here implies going beyond approaches confined to simply learning what is given by the curriculum represented by text. Instead, expansion entails goals that go beyond curriculum goals, as discussed, for example, in the CoL approach, making the student's life world the context of learning and not an academic subject matter per se. Thus,

expansion involves change and development of the activity itself, which in turn enables the participant to learn and develop beyond the curriculum goals.

In the upper-left corner of the figure (Square 1), the student and the teacher appear to agree on a surface approach to learning. This agreement is not necessarily the result of conscious choices or negotiation, but could be the result of traditions and institutional constraints. In the lower-left corner (Square 2), the teacher challenges the student, herself, colleagues and the system. The outcome has expansive potential - that is, it changes the pedagogical activity. In the upper-right corner (Square 3), the student challenges the teacher, herself and the system. This scenario also affords an expansive potential. In the lower-right corner (Square 4), the student and the teacher are in agreement on a deep approach to learning that also has the potential for 'going beyond' present practices and developing new forms of learning.

Signs of Contradiction

In this section, we shall present three cases as examples of the contradiction between use value and exchange value in higher education. The cases are analysed using the model we propose. All names are fictitious, and we have translated the quotes from Swedish to English.

Case 1

As teachers in higher education, we have all encountered questions such as: What is included in the exam? Which books do we really need to have? Do we need to attend the lectures? The following is just one of numerous examples taken from our own practice, where marks and credits seem more important than knowledge and learning. The following quote is from an email a student wrote to a teacher.

Sorry, but I totally missed the information about our group work??? I really thought I had finished everything a couple of weeks ago. Either we find a quick and easy way for me to solve module 3 and the exam paper, or else I will just have to give up these credits. Actually, I have very little space for studies in my life right now, and that is why I made extra efforts during a couple of weeks in November. Unfortunately I totally missed the group work. How can I repair the miss in module 3? What HAS to be done to get my paper approved? (Email, 22 December 2004, italicized emphasis added)

The next day, a second email arrives:

Hi again

The document is called 'Theme 2' and was published November 17 in the portfolio under the heading Module 3 (that is, my 'group work'...). Hope everything is OK now, so I can feel my efforts were rewarded = more credits in education.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year/Cecilia (Email, 23 December 2004)

The student's reasoning is focused on the tasks in relation to marks and credits. Learning the content does not appear to be a central issue. Her life situation does not allow for more than just barely making her way through the course - that is, getting a pass mark. Her approach is merely a question of what she *has* to do (the student uses capitals to stress this in her message) to be accepted. Moreover, by saying 'or else I will just have to give up these credits', the student is putting her finger on a very sore spot: the conflict experienced by teachers between student completion rates and quality.

One might conclude that the actions of the student in this case correspond to the situation described in Square 1. She approaches her studies in terms of what she *has to* do to pass, rather than worrying about what and how to learn. This could be interpreted as the exchange-value aspect dominating her activity, which leads to a surface approach to learning. Another sign of a surface approach is that the student produces a text overnight. The text is produced to accomplish the task formally required, but hardly reflects a deep approach to learning, in view of the very short time it took to write it.

We do not have enough data to analyse the teacher's perception of the situation, but there is nothing to suggest that the teacher tried to dissuade the student. At least tacitly, the teacher approved.

Case 2

In the following example, the situation is more complex. Teacher Sven receives an email from three students who do not feel that their examination assignment is meaningful and who would like to get another task instead.

Hi Sven!

The task we got from you has not worked for us at all. We were unable to muster any interest for it and we have no excuse for not having completed the assignment but we can't find the motivation to do it. This is why we would like to ask you if there is another task we could complete, so that we can at least get a pass mark. We really tried to make progress with this and since it is stressed in higher education that you should try and we have, therefore there must be something else we can do to succeed. We feel very depressed about this and are sorry to have to tell you how things went. Is there anything else we can do? We would appreciate a quick answer, because we want to get a pass mark on this course, regards Anders, Bert and Claes. (Email, 10 November 2006)

The following day, Sven answers:

Hi!

You can't exchange this task for something else. Lack of motivation is not a valid argument in this context. Besides, it is pretty late to ask about this now, when the assignment is due on Friday. You should instead contact Anna or the student counsellor to see if there is another course you could take. If not, you will have to retake the course next time it is given. Regards, Sven. (Email, 11 January 2006)

Sven also sends an email that day to the course coordinator (Anna), explaining the situation. The same day, Anna answers:

Hi Sven,

It seems that this group has not devoted any time to doing their coursework – and it is really very late to come just before examinations with this strange letter. This is really sad and uncalled for. I have absolutely no experience of what we should do about this matter. Did you set a date for a new examination? (In case I could persuade them to put in some time writing it and handing it in). I shall contact Linda [the student counsellor] and ask her, I am sure she has ideas about how we can try to solve this. Regards, Anna. (Email, 11 January 2006)

To this, Sven replies:

Maybe Linda... can persuade them to complete the assignment. This personally makes me think of 'curling parents' [3], having Linda persuade them to do compulsory coursework, but it might be necessary to keep the students on the program. Regards, Sven. (Email, 22 January 2006)

Anna replies:

Curling is no fun, but something we are forced to do right now. Hear from you soon, Anna. (Email, 11 January 2006)

The students' request challenges the content of the exam and the power relation between students and teachers. The task is not experienced as meaningful; the students want a task with different content. This request also contains a challenge to the assumption that teachers are the ones who decide the content of assignments, an assumption that is otherwise taken for granted. At the same time, it is possible to interpret the students' action as an attempt to find an easy way to get a pass mark. Facing this situation, the teacher's position is to try to maintain quality, by refusing to accept

'the demands of the curling kids' (conversation with Sven), and he therefore partly comes in conflict with the course coordinator, who depends on the students for the programme to survive.

The clash between exchange value and use value is present at several levels. It can be observed in the students' wish to have a meaningful task versus getting a pass mark on their course. In the latter case, if we interpret the students' reaction as a sign of laziness and a request for an 'easier' task, it would fit into Square 1. However, interpreted as a request for a more meaningful assignment, it would imply students challenging the teacher (Square 3), and thus would have expansive potential. From the exchange of correspondence, it seems that the teacher interprets the students' request as wanting an easier task. He does not approve this request (Square 2) because of his aspiration to maintain quality, as defined in the objectives of the syllabus. This again implies expansive potential, but contradicts the demands for high student completion rates. One might ask what would have happened if the teacher had interpreted the students' message as a call for a more challenging undertaking (Square 4). Or one might also ask what would have happened if teacher Sven had maintained his position toward his colleague (Square 2). The tension might have forced a crisis, potentially, but not necessarily, leading to change and development of the system in some direction - that is, it might have led to expansive learning. Regardless of the interpretation adopted, we may conclude that the situation in Case 2 had an expansive potential, in which the students had the chance to become participants and transformers of their educational context.

Case 3

Our last example is from an e-seminar, in which an assignment that was posted on the learning platform is discussed. The seminar starts with the teacher asking if there is anything anyone wants to discuss concerning the course. The student Barbara takes the cue, and expresses her opinions about one of the assignments. To make her criticism comprehensible, we shall first briefly describe this task, and the accompanying process.

The assignment was designed as a forum discussion. The task was to explore and discuss three central concepts from the readings. Questions such as 'What is meant by...?', 'How do you interpret...?', 'Which arguments can be made for...?', 'How can this be related to...?' were posed by the teacher. The task also included the following instruction: 'Naturally, you may add any other issues that you find interesting and relevant to the discussion.'

One of the participants, Anna, opened the forum discussion by answering Question 1. She explained one of the concepts. This contribution was then followed by twenty other contributions over a period of three weeks. Some answered the various questions. Others contributed with items of personal interest and their own experiences. This brings us back to the e-seminar and Barbara's criticism. She says that she thinks that the way of working on this course is difficult - that is, posting contributions and answering the questions in the forum. Her perception is that it is difficult to do something really good - something that feels genuine - in this way. She says that she does not know what to write on the forum once detailed responses to the questions have already been made - that is, once the required concepts have been explained. She points out that you get a lot of repetition, even if you 'come with different points of view'.

Barbara has been thinking about how she could deal with this situation, how she can make something meaningful out of the task. In the e-seminar she says: 'If I am to participate in this form of study, I must have something significant to say, not just participate to show that I am on the course and am doing my homework. I have to feel that it has weight, that it actually contributes something to others.'

After the teacher has spent quite some time listening to Barbara, and also trying to get the other participants to express their opinions, the teacher describes the original intentions with the assignment. The purpose of the questions, she says, was to stimulate discussions, thoughts and reflection. They were not intended as 'school questions' that everybody had to answer to get a pass mark. The point was 'to get a discussion going, to start different conversations'. She remarks that she should have made this clear, which she obviously did not, and also that everyone did not have to answer all the questions, as long as the discussion was experienced as meaningful. She adds that she realises now that the participants perceived the questions as something that each student had to answer individually, and she understands that this is a reasonable interpretation of the task. One of

the participants in the e-seminar confirms: 'Well, this is something that is rooted within us, if someone puts a question then each of the students answers.'

Barbara comes with a suggestion concerning how the question could have been designed. She thinks a different design would have allowed working with the assignment in a way that might have led to a deeper treatment of the issues. She says to the teacher: 'If you had presented the questions, and we had chosen, this is the question I would like to work with... then it would have felt more like deepening the issues.' And then Barbara continues, 'Although, I must admit that I got deeper than ever before – more than all of the other courses I have taken. It forced me to deepen my reading, and I must say that feels really good.'

Some of the students respond to the assignment by providing the correct answers, not to express their engagement in the topics. Barbara, however, finds it difficult to relate to the assignment for two reasons. She wants to do her homework; at the same time, she refuses to be reduced to the status of a 'student doing her homework'. She is struggling with the assignment as a 'school task', as opposed to the assignment as a challenge to deeper learning. In that regard, she challenges both herself and the teacher (Square 3). She contributes to an expansive situation.

The teacher faces the other side of the same dilemma: she tries to oppose 'schooling behaviour' (Square 2), yet she has to give the students assignments. Even if the teacher's intention with the assignment was to emphasise its role as a tool in the 'knowledging process' (Square 2), the exchange-value aspect of the assignment is present in the situation. Nevertheless, in the discussion, the teacher realises that she carries a heavy responsibility for which aspect will dominate. All the more so because 'if the teacher asks, the student will answer', as one of the students remarked in the e-seminar. This reflex is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the students. Despite these constraints, the student takes the initiative, and is also given the opportunity to propose alternative ways of designing the assignments, with the aim of deep learning (Squares 2 and 3). In other words, we could say that the teacher and the student negotiate a change and development of the activity. 'Expansive learning' is taking place to the extent that the object of the activity is expanding from representation and transmission, towards an approach with features of what Matusov et al (forthcoming) call an ontological community of learners. Another sign of expansive learning and a sense of the development of a CoL is that the student explains that it was the dilemma she experienced which led her to get 'deeper than ever before – more than all of the other courses I have taken'.

Concluding Remarks

We are concerned about the future of higher education. We believe that if the exchange-value aspect is permitted to dominate pedagogical practice, higher education runs the risk of becoming nothing more than a running track. A number of hurdles, in terms of courses and tests, simply need to be passed for the student to reach the goal: an exam that can be exchanged on the labour market. The student is thereby encouraged to engage as little as possible in genuine and deep learning, or with what we, along with Matusov et al (forthcoming), could term 'ontological learning'. At best, some knowledge may be acquired on the way, enough to become a peripheral participant in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). But without genuine engagement, even this is soon forgotten.

We wish to see a different scenario for higher education. The approach adopted in this article is to assume that students and teachers have the possibility to turn education into a space for learning - an ontological community of learners, or what we could also call a 'community of academic practice'. This implies that students and teachers negotiate and take part in intrinsically meaningful activities. Such activities might, for example, consist of research, investigations, outreach work, debates and dialogues (see e.g. Cole & Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006; Matusov, 2009; Nilsson & Sutter, 2009). Students would be encouraged to develop and enter what we tentatively call a *learning mood*. By this term, we have in mind a wish to immerse oneself into the knowledging activity, and thus be responsible for and in control of one's own learning and development. In such a mood, one presumably asks questions like, 'What books would you recommend in order to approach this issue' instead of, 'Do we have to buy all the books?' However, this last scenario supposes that existing tensions are made conscious, so they can be

negotiated and discussed. We assume that students' and teachers' possibility to gain some *self-power* and control over their situation increases when contradictions become conscious and visible. One aim of the model introduced in this article is to support such efforts. As such, the model has a didactical purpose. It is intended to identify questions about pedagogical practices such as the following: How to handle the conflicting aims of education? How to turn exams and credits into tools enhancing the use-value side? How to challenge students to take a deep approach to learning? What might expansive learning and going beyond the deep approach imply in a local higher education setting? We believe that these kinds of questions need to be discussed and negotiated in higher education. They might support students and teachers to powerfully and jointly immerse themselves into meaningful processes of knowledge construction and learning.

A second purpose of this model is research-driven. We tested the model by analysing three cases. In forthcoming research, we intend to use the model as a device when interviewing teachers on a broader scale on their experiences dealing with contradictions. But we also attempt to use the model to analyse ethnographical data, such as recorded observations of interactions in the classroom and different kinds of texts, such as emails, student papers, forum discussions, etc. We are interested in getting a multifaceted understanding of the problems facing higher education, which, we argue, result from the contradiction of values. The purpose is to contribute to research that can deepen our understanding of how aggravated tensions and contradictions in education affect the activity of higher education, and particularly students' and teachers' approach to the complicated and complex concept and act of learning and teaching.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported in part by a grant from the Gyllenstierna Krapperup's Foundation, Sweden.

Notes

- [1] The overarching aim of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) based on international cooperation and academic exchange that is attractive to European students and staff as well as to students and staff from other parts of the world. The Bologna Process is named after the Bologna Declaration, which was signed in the Italian city of Bologna on 19 June 1999 by ministers in charge of higher education from 29 European countries. Today, the Process unites 47 countries (see <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/about/>).
- [2] In this context, we prefer to talk about *knowledging* – that is, active involvement in the creation of understandings through reading, writing, exploration, discussions, etc. - rather than 'learning', since learning connotes all kinds of transformations - for example, how to instrumentally succeed in school.
- [3] Augustsson & Forsberg (2005) have discussed a tendency of adults in Sweden to 'clear the path' or remove obstacles for the younger individual as 'curling'; this term is also used in higher education.

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