Message posting Or dialogue? On the dialectics of on-line practice in adult education

David Hamilton, Ethel Dahlgren, Agneta Hult and
Tor Söderström

Umeå University, Sweden,
Email: David.Hamilton@pedag.umu.se

Abstract

This paper examines on-line communication in liberal adult education. It highlights the problematic space between message posting and the promotion of dialogue. Conference software in Swedish adult education is widely based on message posting. But can message posting also foster the democratic practices associated with reasoned discussion or dialogue?

Introduction

> Space is not a background for events but possesses an autonomous structure
>> (Albert Einstein, 1879-1955, quoted in Clarke, 1973, p. 198)

> Reading makes the full man, conference [discussion]
> a ready man, and writing an exact man.
>> (Francis Bacon, 1561-1627, *Essays*, 1625)

In June 2001, the European Distance Education Network (EDEN) held a conference in Stockholm. Its theme was 'Learning without Limits: Developing the next generation of education'. Twelve months later the EDEN conference was held in Granada (Spain). Its title was similarly grandiose: 'Open and distance learning in Europe and Beyond: Rethinking international co-operation'. Its keynote speeches extended this optimistic atmosphere, with titles like 'towards a global metacampus', 'The learner and (teacher) of the future', and 'Building a collaborative eWorld on a human scale'.

The titles of these presentations, however, are problematic – at least from a scientific perspective. They are utopian since they seem to offer eternal salvation. Unwittingly, too, the theological tone of these titles is reminiscent of a potent biblical image in European history - the Garden of Eden. According to the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve were given the opportunity to acquire the fruits of knowledge for all humanity and for all time. In return, they were barred from eating fruit from a particular site - the tree of good and evil. Encouraged by a serpent, however, they ignored this restriction, consumed the apple of wisdom, and were banished from the Garden of Eden.

EDEN conferences can also be understood in these utopian, salvationist terms. ICT is the Garden of Eden; and the conference publicists share the serpent's outlook. They assume, uncritically, that everything in the garden is of equal

value. Accordingly, they are reluctant to distinguish the good and evil of on-line learning. Such a perspective, however, is understandable. It reflects the European reach and global ambitions of the sponsors, organisers and members of EDEN. Nevertheless, the ideological baggage of the biblical 'Fall' weighs heavily on distance education. Modernist recovery and redemption are to be achieved – at almost any price.

In the process, modernist arguments for e-learning are suffused with four problematic assumptions:

1. That the impact - or uptake - of technology is unmediated by social phenomena;

2. That e-learning is isomorphic with earlier forms of learning;

3. That e-learning can be used as a substitute for other forms of teaching and learning; and finally

4. That there is no difference between change, progress and revolution. (Change is desirable; desirable change is progressive; and technique-fostered change is desirable, progressive and revolutionary).

Adult Education and eLearning

This paper revisits these assumptions. It arises from an investigation of pedagogical practices associated with the use of *forum* (or conferencing) software in adult education. In 2001, the Swedish National Council of Adult Education sponsored a programme of research on the uses of ICT to promote discussion and dialogue among citizens. This initiative embraced an educational form that, in the Nordic countries, is known as folkbildning and, in English, as citizenship or liberal education. It is linked, therefore, to civil society rather than to the market place. Typically, it comprises courses in foreign languages, leisure activities (e.g. music groups and choirs), crafts (Mediterranean cooking, wood-carving); and topics of contemporary interest (e.g. globalisation, the rights of women, European Union policies).

Adult education of this kind has a long history in Scandinavia (see, for instance, Korsgaard, 2002). Originally, folkbildning was a self-help movement started at the end of the nineteenth century by workers organisations, temperance organisations and religious congregations outside the state church. It was based on a sense of common educational purpose, collectively negotiated. There is a widespread assumption that this educational form strengthens active citizenship and, as a result, safeguards democracy.

Folkbildning promoted social improvement for those who did not have access to higher levels of schooling. Initially, it favoured men over women. Subsequently (1920 onwards), folkbildning was also expected to promote social cohesion or active citizenship. Most recently (in the 1990s), it acquired a third purpose - social inclusion. Target groups for social inclusion include single mothers, people with disabilities, people who live in remote areas, people raised and educated outside Sweden and - a diminishing category – people with limited experiences of formal schooling.

Within a wider educational context, Folkbildning is deemed to be student-centred, participatory and constructivist. It is student-centred to the extent that it takes account of students' circumstances and prior knowledge. It is participatory insofar as it encourages students to share and exchange ideas. And it is constructivist because it hopes that students will shape themselves in accordance with the content and purposes of the course.

Nordic folkbildning, therefore, overlaps with the German Enlightenment's *Bildungsideal* of self-governance and self-formation, and with 21st century

ideas about *flexible learning* – the conventional Swedish characterisation of ICT-based education. How - or whether - these aspirations are also evident in the inner life of adult education is, however, a separate question. Recent software developments, however, provide opportunities to address this question and, in the process, throw further light on Swedish adult education, distance education, and on-line practices.

Conferencing Online

The website (www.thinkofit.com/webconf) - a self-claimed ' comprehensive guide to software that powers discussions on the internet'- distinguishes 'forum software' from 'web conferencing'. In December 2004, it listed 132 forms of forum software and 173 forms of conferencing software. Suitably configured, forum software also retains a record of on-line linguistic behaviour. Assuming ethical safeguards can be met, such behaviour can also be traced and analysed.

Problems remain, however, with the analysis of these data. The software preferred in Swedish adult education - *FirstClass* - is *not*, strictly, a conferencing medium but, rather, a forum or message-posting system. Nevertheless, it is possible to conduct a frequency analysis of the postings: How many? When were they made? Who made them? And so on. Discontinuous messages have their own integrity and can be legitimately studied in this manner.

Yet, such analysis also has limitations. It overlaps with another form – or level - of analysis. A message can be regarded as free-standing; but it can also be regarded as an *utterance*, a 'link in a very complex chain of other utterances' (Bakhtin,1986, p.70). From this perspective, each posting serves as a signifier for one link in a chain of utterances that, collectively, link earlier and later messages.

In short, message posting can also be analysed as a dialogic process. From this perspective, messages or utterances are part of an extended discussion. Moreover, such exchanges may include more than two participants - the conventional English denotation of 'dialogue'. Etymologically, dialogue does *not* denote two people speaking with each other. Rather, the Greek prefix *di* means 'through' (such that diaphanous means 'see-through'). In this latter sense, dialogue means 'verbal interchange of thought between *two or more* persons' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, emphasis added). This connotation applied when Francis Bacon wrote about 'conferencing'; and it still applies in the Swedish word *samtal*.

Nevertheless, any discussion is a group process. It must be examined in terms of the intentions and expectations - perhaps unspoken - associated with utterances, which, in this case, are posted. Thus, when separate postings form part of a dialogue, more sophisticated analysis is needed (see, for example, Hamilton et al., 2004). 'Is silence an utterance?' becomes, for instance, a telling question.

In the remainder of this paper, we outline some of the issues that arose in our work. For the same of convenience, we build our commentary on some of the first-order, descriptive features of on-line communication; viz:

Message-posting is:

  i.   An asynchronous, round-the-clock (24/7) activity.
  ii.   A fusion of presence and distance

iii. Written, not oral

iv. Permanent, not transitory

v. Conducted face-to-interface not face-to-face,

vi. constrained by specific features of the interface, and

vii. Steered by norms that are defined by the course providers and course leaders that, in turn, are inherited from earlier discourses of adult education.

Asynchronous communication

The 24/7 phenomenon in on-line distance education (the fact that messages can be posted at any time of the day and week) raises questions about conceptions of time in flexible learning. If a message is posted to provoke a response, how do the participants handle waiting time and turn-taking? Can there be 'just-in-time' or 'just for me' practices in an asynchronous learning environment (cf. Jochems *et al.,* 2004, pp. 1-2)? Do these practical or egocentric conceptions of time and space replace Newtonian or Cartesian conceptions? Is *real time*, therefore, replaced by *any time* or *my time*? Can flexible learning operate with hybrid conceptions of time? Or do *any time* and *my time* practices mean that on-line teachers become a species of call-centre workers?

Convergence of Distance and Presence

Space can be analysed in a similar way, as a hybridisation of social-psychological and physical phenomena. Fontaine (2002), for instance, has written about 'presence' ('co-presence' or 'remote presence') in on-line learning, where participants feel close to each other despite their physical separation (see also Shin, 2002). By contrast, Moore (1993) relies heavily on the notion of 'transactional distance' in adult education.

Fontaine and Moore treat space metaphorically rather than physically. Like Einstein, they accept that space is more than distance. It is also about social differences as well as geographical separation. Personal or pedagogical configurations of space and time can be manipulated to create new *ecologies* of time and space (Fontaine, 2002, p. 41). Inherited assumptions about social space, social distance, social separation and social difference become, as it were, post-modern phenomena. They display the 'liquid-modern' transience of lifestyles where the 'mass of accumulated knowledge' is represented as sites of 'disorder and chaos' (Bauman, 2003, pp. 41-42).

The measurement and calibration of cultural *separation* and *difference* depends, instead, upon cultural scales that are embedded in specific value frameworks or paradigms. Further, as Pierre Bourdieu repeatedly argued (e.g. 1970), social distance may also be an indicator of differences in social power. For this last reason, message posting can also be subjected to 'critical discourse analysis', where:

> Power is conceptualized both in terms of asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacities to control how texts are produced distributed and consumed. (Fairclough, 1995, p. 1-2)

What dimensions of separation and difference, for instance, can be discerned in the unspoken practices associated with message posting (and flexible learning)? When is a response too late (or too inflexible)? And, as suggested, can silence be an intentional response to an earlier utterance? Not least, what

does this view of asynchronous communication mean for the promotion of democracy through adult education? Do 'political truths' emerge from the 'clash of pre-established interests and preferences' and/or from 'reasoned discussion about issues involving the common good' (London, 1995, p. 34)?

Oral and Written Voices

The difference between written and oral forms of literacy is widely noted (for example, through the seminal work of Walter Ong, e.g. 1958). The general view is that written and oral forms have their own codes of practice. Yet, a problem arises if dialogue is regarded as an oral form, a form of conversation. Should postings mimic oral utterances, or should they follow written conventions? Further, it is sometimes accepted that spoken (or face-to-face) communication is much more dependent upon tone and body language. The scale of tone/body variations is difficult to calibrate; but a recent *Handbook of Online Learning* offers a model:

> The loss of face-to-face contact, both formal and casual, carries a great impact. Studies show that in face-to-face discussions, a message is conveyed 55% by body language, 38% by tone of voice, and only 7% by actual words. In telephone conversations, a message is conveyed 87% by tone of voice and 13% by actual words'. (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002, p. 367)

Thus, should online postings be regarded as oral or written forms of communication? How, paradoxically, should participants' voices be read? For the reasons already given, on-line is a bi-modal medium. FirstClass software displays, indeed supports, this bimodality. From a written perspective, it is forum or bulletin-board software, not a conferencing facility. Yet, from an oral perspective, users may expect it to be responsive in a dialogic or conversational manner. And from a hybrid perspective, participants may resolve their uncertainties by switching between oral and written voices. At times they seem to be speaking while at other times they adopt a epistolary, letter-writing stance. A further indication of this bimodality is that signifiers of body language and tone are inserted using typographical devices (keyboard symbols (!), icons (smileys) and capital letters (shouting)?

Permanent Transience

One of the enigmatic features of on-line conferencing is that, as suggested, it echoes both written and oral forms of communication. Yet, when dialogue has an educational purpose, tensions can arise between the cultural ground-rules that regulate permanent and transient communication. For example, there may be an inherited assumption that course participation is *oral* while course assessment is *written*.

Forum software, however, removes this distinction because *all* public communication is shared, stored and open to subsequent review. In other words, all of it is potentially public. Does this mean that on-line communication re-aligns the *public* and *private* dimensions of educational practice? And what does this mean for the integrity of the participants? Does the realignment silence them? Does it attenuate their communication? Or do they seek other channels where they can communicate privately (e.g. email, phone)?

Face-to-interface

For reasons given above, distance-based adult education (i.e. flexible learning) may not be the same as face-to-face adult education? If so, are these

differences a matter of degree or of kind? In other words, is flexible learning qualitatively different from previous forms of adult education?

Certainly, it is mediated in new ways that change the environment of communication and learning. Yet the impact of these new mediations on the social-psychology of learning is neither widely-examined nor understood. In questioning this neglect, for instance, Wertsch has commented that:

> We may need a more radical alignment of our analytic approach. Rather than viewing the introduction of a new cultural tool as making an existing form of action easier or more efficient, it may be important to consider how it introduces fundamental change - something to such a degree that we can question whether the same form of action is involved at all. (2002, p. 105)

In part, this neglect arises for the reason given earlier - a widespread quasi-theological belief in technological determinism. But there is another possibility. Mediation effects may be present but they may be mis-represented as undesirable side-effects. They are regarded as a kind of background noise, which will be eliminated in the next release of the delivery system.

The message and the Medium

Nevertheless, forum conferencing is always mediated by the architecture of the software that is utilised. *FirstClass*, for instance, offers the possibility of more than one site for message posting. For instance, *cafe* sites may be included for off-task messages; while other sites are allocated to topic-related postings. Data from the courses examined in this paper suggest there is wide variation in the targeting of these sites. There is extensive cross-posting or, what amounts to the same thing, evidence of participants' failure to distinguish off- and on-task messages. Other forms of software, presumably, allow other forms of deviant or innocent cross-posting.

One explanation of cross-posting is that assumptions built into the software may not be shared by course members. In short, the ecologies of time and space intended by software engineers and educational technologists may not correspond to the ecologies co-constructed by course participants and tutors who choose - wilfully or innocently - to 'squat' in the spaces created by the engineers.

Cultures of communication

Despite the constraints embedded in FirstClass, tutors and participants have considerable scope to reconfigure its architecture. Our data suggest that the same forum software can embrace widely different ecologies of time and space and, as a result, cultures of communication. If this is correct, there is no one-size-fits-all forum software.

Discussion - Back to Eden

This paper has focused on difficulties that can arise in the study of on-line teaching, learning and communication. It derives from a study of the inner-life of a small range of on-line courses in Sweden. To highlight these difficulties, the paper contrasts two views of ICT-based adult education. One of the viewpoints is close to technological determinism; while the other regards on-line adult education as a pedagogic practice that should be consciously saturated with the inherited values of liberal adult education (or folkbildning).

The embedding and advancement of flexible learning in Swedish adult education has been troubled by these different perspectives. While it pays homage to a transmission - or delivery - model of ICT practice, it also wishes to affirm the inherited values of folkbildning and their assumed contribution to democratic forms of life in Sweden. In short, a belief that the inner life of liberal adult has been, and can still be, a cradle for democracy is deeply implicated in public investment in on-line adult education.

This paper was originally built on data from a small-scale project. More recent work, however, suggest that its cautionary comments are not merely relevant to Nordic experience. They also emerge in a seven-page 'policy paper' prepared by the On-line Distance Learning (ODL) Liaison Committee created by the member networks of the European Distance Education Network (EDEN). The paper has the title *Distance Learning and eLearning in European Policy and practice: The vision and the reality*. It was issued on 17th November, 2004, and the full version is available at www.odl-liaison.org/pages.php?PN=policy-paper_2004 .

As suggested by its title, the policy paper contrasts the vision and reality of eLearning, echoing the experiences of the Umeå project. It notes, for instance, that the prevalence of 'very low quality and simplistic promotional messages' in European policy allowed critics to 'build their case' against eLearning. It suggests that use of the term 'blended learning' as a 'panacea concept' has become a recognition that 'ICT-supported learning' can embrace 'different learning strategies' yet, at the same time, the use such labels also serves as a rhetorical device to 'hide' resistance to eLearning innovation.

The EDEN document attempts to evaluate the European eLearning initiative, recognising 'positive' features as well as 'weaknesses'. Positive features include high levels of national mobilisation and cross-national networking, and the gradual 'evolution of the rhetoric of eLearning' away from 'just computers, connectivity, competitiveness and cost-effectiveness...towards content, context, collaboration and learning communities'. On the other hand, identified weaknesses include sustained 'simplified visions and over-optimistic statements' that 'resulted in the interruption of a dialogue [between ICT and ODL] that, a few years ago, was starting'.

The EDEN document concludes that in the knowledge society some level of use of ICT in learning activities 'cannot remain the exception' and that, therefore, a 'new vision' is needed, one that distinguishes between 'innovative and merely substitutive use of ICT in different learning contexts'. Such, then, is the new sense of change and progress offered by a section of the EDEN community.
At the time of writing (December 2004), no response has been circulated, via the EDEN network, from the other sectors of the EDEN community – policy-makers in the European Community or representatives of the eLearning industry. If the optimism shown in the various titles of the 2001/2 EDEN conference represented a *thesis* about ICT and ODL, the response of the EDEN liaison committee is its *antithesis*. Meanwhile, like many others who find themselves between heaven and hell, we work towards a synthesis.

Note

Knowledge and Competence Foundation (KK-Stiftelsen). The Project director is ethel.dahlgren@pedag.jomu.se This email address is being protected from spam bots, you need Javascript enabled to view it and the project website is http://alfa.ped.umu.se/projekt/folkbildning/

References

Bahktin, M. M. (1986). *Speech Genres and other Late Essays (ed. C. Emerson & M.Holquist; tr. V.W: McGee)*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1970). *La Reproduction : Eléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Clarke, R.W. (1973). *Einstein: The life and times* . London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The critical study of language.* London: Longman.

Fontaine, G. (2002). Presence in "teleland". In K.E: Rudestam & J. Schoenholtz-Read (eds.) *Handbook of Online Learning: Innovations in higher education and corporate training* (pp. 29-52). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hamilton, D., Dahlgren, E., Hult, A., Roos, B., & Söderström, T. (2004). When performance is the product: Problems in the analysis of on-line distance education. *British Educational Research Journal,* 30 (6), 841-854.

Jochems, W., Merriënboer, J. V., & Koper, R. (Eds.). (2004). *Integrated E-learning: Implications for pedagogy, technology and organisation*. New York: Routledge/Falmer.

Korsgaard, O. (2002). A European Demos? The Nordic adult education tradition – folkeoplysning – faces a challenge. *Comparative Education,* 38(1), 7-16.

London, S. (1995) Teledemocracy vs. deliberative democracy. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology: An electronic journal for the 21st century*, 3 (2), 33-55. Retrieved 3rd June 2002 from www.helsinki.fi/science/optek/1995/n2/london.txt .

Moore, M. G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In D. Keegan (Ed.), *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education* (pp. 22-38). London: Routledge.

Ong, W. J. (1958). *Ramus, Method and the Decay of dialogue: From the art of discourse to the art of reason*. London: Harvard University Press.

On-line Distance Learning (ODL) liaison committee of the European Distance Education Network (EDEN). (2004). *Distance Learning and eLearning in European Policy and practice: The vision and the reality: Budapest: EDEN* (available at www.odl-liaison.org/pages.php?PN=policy-paper_2004)

Rudestam, K.E. & Schoenholtz-Read, J. (eds.) (2002). *Handbook of Online Learning: Innovations in higher education and corporate training*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shin, N. (2002). Beyond interaction: The relational construct of 'Transactional presence'. *Open Learning, 17*(2), 122-137.

Wertsch, J. (2002). Computer mediation, PBL, and dialogicality. *Distance Education, 23*(1), 105-108.