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Andreas Fejes, Kristina Johansson and Madeleine Abrandt Dahlgren

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Learning to play the seminar game: Some students' initial encounter with a basic working form in higher education

Andreas Fejes, Kristina Johansson* & Madeleine Abrandt Dahlgren Department of Behavioural Sciences, Linkopings University, Linkoping, Sweden

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Introduction

Research concerning junior students first meeting with the university environment is limited in the sense that it does not take a social interactionistic perspective. McInnis (2001) argues that in this area the research generally focuses on departmental issues or on an institutional/course level. One area of research concerning social interaction within the context of higher education is how to prevent early dropouts from the studies. Moxley et al. (2001), argue that to prevent students in higher education from dropping out a range of supportive practices and strategies is required. Students have to receive the recourses necessary to help them master their roles as students and how to become successful in their studies. Such resources could be emotional support and explicit statements about the required demands. Rickinson & Rutherford (1996) argues that the main reason for dropping out is the students' lack of ability to adapt well into the social and academic demands of their studies within the university environment. A way to try and prevent dropouts is to arrange freshmen (junior) seminars (Howard and Jones 2000).

In this paper the aim is to study the students initial encounter with the seminar as a working form and the negotiation of meaning that takes place in it. We explore the students' interaction with the university as a social and academic environment, i.e. the student's initial encounter with social science as an academic subject. During their first days of their university studies, the students meet demands such as getting used to new classrooms, buildings, subjects, concepts, expectations, pedagogies, peers, etc. (Beynon, 1985).

In an article, Northedge (2003a) discusses the novice academics (junior students) and the challenges they meet at the university. The students need to learn to think and speak the discourse of the different knowledge communities they enter. Through participation in a particular community, they learn its rules and create meaning within this framework. The teacher has a central role in this process as an expert who should support the students in acquiring the tools to be able to create meaning in the discourse (Northedge 2003b).

Anderson (1997) conducted a study of several small study groups (comparable with a seminar) were the aim was to gain a clear sense of the students' perception of what were appropriate, or inappropriate, teaching actions for a tutor to pursue. He concludes that there is a variation in students' conceptions of a good teaching situation and, furthermore, that the process of "academic thinking" takes time and that the tutor could be enabling or constraining.

If we try to conclude this chapter its reasonable to assume that the climate the students' experience seems to be an important feature of the first encounter with the university.

Initial encounters and communities of practice

Our focus of interest in this study is the initial encounter with the university as a learning environment in a series of seminars. The aim is to study the interaction between students and the activities to which they are exposed and how they negotiate meaning in these activities. The teacher is included as an important actor in the process of establishing the learning climate in the course. Our questions were: Who initiates the conversation? How is the conversation initiated? and When do the students talk?

It is during the initial encounter that the classroom order (ways of communication) is established. The teachers cannot hide behind routines; instead, they must be established (Beynon 1985). In this, the teacher stands alone, as Ball argues:

Despite the traditional and institutional authority of the teacher as major significant other in the classroom ad the provision of institutional rules of behaviour, the interaction detail of classroom conduct is broadly left to the individual teacher to establish (Ball, 1980 p. 152-153).

Furthermore, the teacher has to meet more specific and administrative demands such as announcing and implementing rules. The teacher also has to make the demands explicit to the students and establish a social order (Beynon, 1985).

We have also been inspired by the concept of community of practice. According to such a perspetive, the pedagogical practice is a community of practice (Wenger 1998) with its own rules and communication patterns. Entry into this practice can be difficult because the individual does not know how this practice works. To be more precise, we have focused on what Wenger calls negotiation of meaning. He defines this as a process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful (Wenger 1998 p. 53). The negotiation of meaning involves two constituted processes; participation and reification. Participation refers to actors actively participating in social communities. This shapes both our experience and the communities in which we take part. Reification refers to the process that give form to our experience by producing objects that represent this experience. Objects could be an abstract word such as democracy or justice or it could be physical objects (tools) such as a computer or a credit card. These are points of focus around which we organize the negotiation of meaning. The use of these tools changes the nature of the activity in which they are used.

Research strategy

The group of students followed in our study were students attending either a programme or a liberal arts course in Social science. There were 131 registered students, 69 males and 62 females in the class, the age span was 19–42 years and ninety one of the students were 25 years of age or younger. The students had different backgrounds, some had studied at the university before, some came

directly from upper secondary school and some had studied in municipal adult education.

The data were gathered in August – October 2002. Our main data sources consist of observational material combined with semi- structured interviews. We applied a relatively unstructured ethnographic approach to our task (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

First, we collected data by attending a roll call and an informational lecture. Our main focus was to discover what kind of information the first-year students receive, what kind of tools (Vygotsky, 1978) they are provided with.

Then we attended three lectures where we focused on the interaction between teacher and student. We also had informal conversations with a few students during the coffee breaks and after the lectures. These data were collected to give us an understanding of the students' experiences of their first weeks at the university.

After having attended the lectures, we followed one seminar group (one of eight) consisting of 15 students, 8 were males and 7 females. The group was followed during three seminars over a period of three weeks. Semi- structured interviews with 7 students in this group (six of them in pairs, and one alone), and with the teacher were conducted. The questions asked were derived from what we observed during the lectures and seminars. During our observations at the lectures and the seminars, we took field notes and notes were taken also during the interviews and informal conversations. The data gathering was successively planned. The teacher was invited to reflect on our first data analysis. We have taken his comments into consideration in the analysis, but maintained the interpretation from our own perspective.

As regards the interpretation of our data, we faced a variety of problems. Wolcott argues that the researcher needs to differentiate between analysis and interpretation. The researchers have to find a balance between these and the so-called thick description. Another problem is the risk of the researchers' over interpretation of the data (Wolcott, 1994). We chose to focus on the empirical data when we started our analysis process. Firstly, we performed a qualitative analysis to interpret what appeared in the material; thereafter we tried to relate the interpretation to theories, i.e. what is consistent and what is inconsistent.

The data (observations, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews) were gathered in an attempt to address the students negotiation of meaning in their first meeting with the university. From several view points by using these different methods we were able to validate our findings by triangulating data (McCall, 2000, Larsson, 1994).

How can the case presented in our study, be significant to others? One way to address this questions it to reason about validity as above and the generalisability of our study. The results produced in a case study might be able to generalise to other case studies that are produced in a similar context, i.e. with similar prerequisites and conditions and therefore in some meaning could be comparable (Larsson, 2001). Lincoln and Gubas (1999) reason along similar lines when talking about the concept of transferability. Another line of argument is whether the reader can recognise a specific phenomenon that is transferable to a more general level. The idea behind this is that the reader can transfer one formation to other formations. Besides requiring similarities in context, it also requires that the reader be prepared to meet a specific phenomenon/figure. Case studies could thus

contribute to the identification of a pattern, which the reader can use to identify a specific phenomenon. (Larsson, 2001).

Results and analysis

In this section, we will focus on the empirical data from the observations during the seminars and the semi-structured interviews with the students and the teacher. From the analysis three domains where derived concerning the initial negotiation of meaning during the seminar; the how, what and why questions. *How* does turn taking in the communication appear? *What* constitutes the content of discussion? *Why* use the seminar as a teaching form; what is the function of the seminar? The different kinds of data are presented as follows: observations in *italics*; the semi-structured interviews are marked as the student *or* the teacher before the quotation.

Conflicting ideas of freedom and control

In this section we focus on *How* the turn taking (communication pattern) are being negotiated in the seminar.

The design of the seminars was such that the students, already at the roll call, were given a set of seminar questions, which were dealt with one by one at the seminars. The seminar was held in a group room that was furnished in a square made up of 18 chairs. The teacher started the seminars by distributing an attendance list. In other words, the seminars were mandatory. The characteristics of the seminars were a mix between free and monitored discussions. A negotiation occurs when a new group meets in order to establish roles, status, norms (Pennington et al. 1999) and meaning (Wenger 1998). We start with an example from the perspective of the teacher.

During the first seminar the teacher starts by saying:

- The seminar is not an examination; instead it's a free discussion. All groups are different; sometimes I have to guide more than other times. I would like to talk as little as possible.

This makes some of the students laugh. Then he invites all sorts of questions. During the next 15 minutes, the students hold a "free" discussion.

A free discussion on happiness is taking place between several students. Now the students participate with only minor involvement from the teacher. After some time, the teacher intervenes. He sums up the discussion and initiates new questions derived from what has just been said.

Now, something interesting occurs. The students move from a period of time when the turn taking is happening without physical signals to a period when the turn taking is controlled by the teacher (the students need to raise their hands). Now the spontaneous discussions almost completely disappear.

The teacher takes a note, he look up at the students and allows one of the students, who raised his hand, to contribute by pointing at him. He says something and then the teacher points at another student who signalled that she wanted to speak by raising her hand.

After her contribution, the teacher says: "there are several students who want to say something so I will continue to control the turn taking".

About half an hour later, after a relatively guided discussion, the following happens:

The students are discussing freely while the teacher looks in his book. It seems as if the students prefer to have free discussions and the discussion flows smoothly now when the teacher does not focus on leading the seminar. When the teacher shifting his attention from the book to the students he once again guides the seminar.

The students seem to want the so-called free discussions while the teacher seems to want a more goal-oriented discussion. A tension arise between different interests, this tension can also be viewed as an implicit negotiation as the patterns of communication are being shaped by a power play. This is supported by our interviews with the students and we illustrate it with a passage from one of them:

- The first seminar was the best one; yes, it was best because we stuck to what was supposed to be discussed according to the questions that were distributed during the roll call.
- The questions in the first seminar were more concrete than in the other seminars. You couldn't leave the subject.

If we compare the students' view with that of the teacher, there seem to be two contrasting pictures represented in the group. The students felt that the first seminar was more structured or, as they say: You couldn't leave the subject. While the teacher started the second seminar by saying: We pattered around a bit (referring to the first seminar). These two different views represent two opposite starting points in the negotiation of the structures of the seminars and in the creation of meaning. In other words it is a negotiation about the frames for the seminars, i.e. free or guided, in this new group.

Another way of interpreting this situation is by looking at the negotiation of roles. When students enter higher education, their prior history confronts the history of others and through the negotiation of meaning they get/are given a role in this community of practice. Changing this is difficult and requires the support of others.

A concrete example of how a student gets signals about how he/she should develop his/her role can be seen in our data when the teacher confirms that it is appropriate to both raise one's hand and wait to be asked to speak, or just talk during the seminar. This is how a student at a university can act in this specific community of practice.

If we look at the second seminar, we can see how the negotiations continue. The teacher begins the seminar by saying:

> I have prepared some questions as guidance for the seminar. Now we'll go straight to the essence of things in contrast to the previous seminar when we pattered around a bit.

Now a situation arises when some students initiate a discussion by talking without waiting while others choose to raise their hands. There seem to be no clear rules about how the turn taking is supposed to be during the seminar and this is reinforced later on when the teacher says that he wants the students to talk freely when they have something to say, at the same time as he continues to control the turn taking. A way to interpret this is by seeing this as a negotiation of meaning. The students and the teacher all participate in the practice of the seminar where they have different views of how the turn taking should be conducted. There is a process of reification where some students, together with the teacher, create a "tool" for turn taking by raising their hands. Not all the students seem to encode or adapt to this system. Instead, they speak without raising their hands. This is a process that continued during the third seminar but in the end, this pattern seemed to have stabilized. The students were allowed to speak freely, which some of the students did, at the same time the teacher asked direct questions. This way of communicating seemed to be accepted by the participants. In other words, there had been a negotiation of meaning concerning how to communicate during the seminars. This process was implicit and resulted in a specific pattern that was stabilized during the last seminar.

This section illustrates that there is a negotiation going on in the seminar concerning the establishing of rules for turn taking, in the seminar, paradoxically indicating that the teacher stays in control of the process, even though the official message is that students should be controlling the discussion from their own interest and initiative. We will now change focus from *How* to discuss, to *What* to discuss.

Trying to live up to the official message: Should we not discuss other things than what the teacher wants?

Some of the students we spoke to seem to have reflected on the pattern of communication that emerged during the seminars. We illustrate this with an exchange of words between Maja and Lina in one of the interviews:

Maja: - You should discuss other things than what the teacher wants. You should get more time with the teacher.

Lina: - The seminars have been good and the discussions are good. We stick to the questions on the books given by the teacher.

Maja: - There isn't any time for other things.

Lina: - More time is needed because the books make you think a lot.

If we try to distinguish what Maja is saying, one interpretation could be that she questions the structure of questions set up by the teacher. She is not satisfied with the structure of the seminars because there is too little time with the teacher and too few book-related discussions. But at the same time she seems to be aware of the poor timeframe issues. When we look at what Lina says, we see that she expresses satisfaction with the seminars; she does not question the structure or content. Instead, she wants more time to focus on book-related discussions.

Here, a pedagogical implication arises where the question is whether learning benefits most from the seminars taking the students' own questions or the teacher's questions as their the starting-point. Anderson (1997) argues that a wide-ranging discussion can be favourable for some students participating in small study groups, but create a sense of frustration among other students. In our case, this tension seems to be present. However, we have to take into account the fact that the teacher has more than just the seminar to think of when he plans and leads the seminar. The function of the examination is to "measure" the extent to which the students have assimilated the material read and this is not necessarily accomplished during the discussions.

The seminar as a phenomenon contains several complex processes, such as group dynamics and the roles to be taken in the group. In addition, students cannot remain anonymous; in other words, the seminar makes visible the students, their communication patterns and expectations. The teacher's responsibility to lead the seminar and encourage the students is another issue that affects the seminar process. Accordingly, it could be argued that it is very likely that participants could express contradictory views.

When we turn our focus to the teacher there seems to be a contradiction between the interview with him and our observations. In the interview, the teacher says that the seminars are basically guided by the students' questions.

I don't want to go round the table and ask questions directly to all the participants; instead, I want everyone to say something without having to do so. Some I approach if I notice that they haven't said anything. I let anyone who wants speak and I don't interrupt in order to deal with all the three themes that were distributed during the roll call. But sometimes I want to bring up things that I have missed in my lectures.

The contradiction here is that during our observations, we noticed that the teacher, contrary to what he said, makes sure that all the three themes are discussed. On most occasions, the teacher initiates and guides the discussion.

In this passage, we have seen that it is a negotiation about what to discuss. Through a process of reification, the teacher created questions that were to be discussed. It was around these that the creation of meaning should take place. Some students supported this while others wanted to discuss their own questions. Once again, paradoxically, the teacher is in control of the agenda despite the fact that he in the interview expressed it differently; - I do not interrupt the students to deal with all the three themes. These are two aspects of the negotiating process in the initial encounter. Our third focus will be on the negotiation process concerning the function of the seminar – the *why* question.

The seminar as a communicative practice?

The teacher begins the first seminar by pointing out that he will be taking notes during the seminar and that the students should not let that worry them. Furthermore, he says that the seminar is not an examination but a free discussion. He continues:

You can always look away when I'm writing; what I write doesn't necessarily just have to be what people say, it could be for my own sake. (This leads to laughter).

The seminar continues:

A female student now makes her first contribution in the seminar and the teacher loudly ticks off her name on the list (i.e. he "hits" the attendance list with his pencil)

This is a recurring event and gives signals to the students that they have to be active. The seminar has the function of an examination, partly because attendance is mandatory and partly because active participation is demanded. If the students fail to be active, they are given a home assignment, which means that a student "has" to perform within one hour. An interpretation of the situations when the students' names are being ticked off and the teacher is carefully checking that the seminar questions are being covered might imply that this seminar has a control function. The seminar itself is not negotiated in an open manner, the teacher presents the curriculum and the students should adapt to it. But as we will see in a dialogue between two of the students, they react to the curriculum presented when being interviewed by is:

Josefina: -It was scary when the teacher said that you have to attend the seminar, otherwise you have to do a home assignment. It's also scary that he takes notes of who had said something, it makes you feel stressed. But I don't know what you could do instead. All the same, this was a relaxed seminar (the first one).

Here, we can see how the student reflects on the fact that the teacher has a control function. She feels stressed about it but accepts the frames of the teaching situation despite the fact that this function has not been openly negotiated. The dialogue continues.

Maria: - It's uncomfortable speaking in front of other people, even in such a small group as this. I feel some pressure that I have to say something. I think more about what to say during the seminar and when to say it. I think – hope no one else says what I'm about to say.

Josefina: - I agree. I also think about when my contribution would fit in.

Here, we can see how the students focus on what and when to say something rather than following up on previous contributions. This could imply that names being ticked off create a learning environment that focuses on "passing" the examination instead of contributing to and benefiting from a constructive dialogue. It also implies that the students adapt to the function of the seminar, determined by the teacher, instead of starting an open negotiation. This ticking off is a tool around which meaning is created. For the students, it represents examination and control. The tick off also creates a feeling of anxiety and thereby

probably reduces the willingness to participate in the seminar. Anderson, (1997), points to the importance of creating an informal group atmosphere, in order to reduce anxiety and increase the quantity and quality of participation in discussion and listening.

When interviewing the teacher, he gives the impression of having two different approaches to the function of the seminars.

He starts to talk about the seminars: "They are firstly education and teaching events and not an assessment. I want something to happen in the group, that the students notice that there are different interpretations, that the penny drops. I tick the names of those who say something, because then I know which ones I have to directly confront with questions. Then I take notes about what we discuss. I also write down the names of the students who make a good impression. This is also an examination. You have to make sure that everybody has read the literature. There are surely those who just sit there but I can't go after them. I've been criticized in previous course evaluations about ticking off names. But I have to take notes. I know the students experience this as pressure".

Here, we can see an interesting tension. The teacher views the seminar as both a learning situation and an assessment. Therefore the quotation points to the complexity of a learning situation such as the seminar. There is a conflict within the teacher; on the one hand, he has to pay attention to the students' learning and on the other, he has to satisfy the requirements of the university assessment system. How can a teacher be able to assess more than one hundred students in seminars (in this case, spread out over eight groups) with the limited resources at his disposal in the system?

We can try to explain the complexity of a teaching situation by using Wenger's (1998) term community of practice. According to this, a person who is a member of different community of practice has several roles to master, "... She must find an identity that can reconcile the demands of these forms of accountability into a way of being in the world" (Wenger, 1998, p. 160). In our case, the teacher has to reconcile the different forms of membership he has in several communities of practice and the demands placed on him (for instance, professional teacher, researcher, institutional bottom-line demands, etc.). In our observations, there emerges what seems to be a contradictory picture where the teacher is not that explicit in what he demands of the students. There is a lot of research showing that assessments direct the students learning process (for example see Miller and Parlett 1974 or Snyder 1968). Students seek clues in what the teacher says in order to prepare themselves for the examination, so-called cue seeking. It is probably of less importance whether or not the teacher labels the seminar as a learning opportunity if earlier information/actions indicates that it is an examination.

In this section the focus has been on the negotiation on the function of the seminar. We have seen that there is a tension within the teacher concerning the aim of the seminar whether it should be a learning opportunity or an examination. The students seem to adapt to the latter. Once again, an implicit negotiation appears in the seminar and the students do not explicitly object to it. The

negotiation of meaning takes place through the processes of participation and reification.

Discussion

Our aim was to investigate the students' initial encounter with the seminar in a subject new to them. The main interest was how the communication pattern, the aim of the seminar and meaning were negotiated. It is during the first weeks in a new group, course, etc. that the frames for the semester are set (Larsson, 1993, Beynon, 1985, Ball 1980).

We studied how the communication pattern emerged in the classroom and how implicit negotiation took place. The teacher set up a number of communication rules, both explicit (saying verbally) and implicit (by acting). It was around these rules that meaning was negotiated. We observed how a certain pattern of communication emerged in the group we followed. The students seemed to prefer free discussions, but the teacher started to guide the discussions after 15 minutes into the first seminar. This pattern was established during the following two seminars with negotiating mostly being implicit. A reification process was engaged in by some students and the teacher where hand-raising was a tool for turn taking but all the students did not encode or adapt to this. We can see that the teacher's involvement in and guidance of the discussions are essential for the participation of the students. Here, the teacher must ask himself what kind of learning he wants to create in the group? As we can see in earlier research, some aspects are crucial if the aim is to create a good learning climate.

In the second empirical part, we studied how meaning was negotiated related to what the seminar should discuss. Through a process of reification, the teacher created questions to be discussed. It was around this "object" that meaning was negotiated. Some students complied with this while others wanted to discuss other questions. In other words it was the questions set up by the teacher, an object of reification, which was the starting point around which meaning of the seminars content were negotiated.

When we looked at how the aim of the seminar was construed, we found that there was an ongoing process of negotiation of meaning. One of the most obvious observations was when the teacher used a control function by ticking off the names of students when they made a contribution to the seminar. This made the students feel pressured and made some of them anxious, something the teacher was aware of but felt forced to do because of his academic role as a teacher. Some of the students described how they managed to cope with the demands of the seminar, i.e. by thinking about what they were going to say and when they should say it, which probably resulted in them being too focused on their own thoughts instead of the contributions made by their peer students and the teacher. For the students, ticking off was assigned the meaning of examination and implicit control. We could see how a contradictory picture emerged when the teacher both told us that the seminar was and was not an examination. He also told the students that the seminar was primarily a learning opportunity, but the students experienced it as an examination. From a socio-cultural perspective (Wenger, 1998), this could be interpreted as a conflict in the "teacher" himself where he has trouble reconciling different forms of membership in communities of practice. The "teacher" has to consider both the institutional bottom- line demands and his professional identity.

The results in this article points at the complexities in a seminar situation. There is an ongoing negotiation about meaning where many of the students are new to this specific practice. They need to learn to handle the tools created within this knowledge community. In recent research the need for an open, informal and enabling climate where there is trust between students and teacher is still considered important for the students learning. (Curzon-Hobson, 2002, Anderson, 1997)

Some ideas about further research; more qualitative data is needed from an social interactionistic perspective in this area, what happens to the students when they enter a new arena? We have tried to cover a small part of this area of research. In the future, it would be interesting to further explore how junior students experience their first semester at the university, how do the students create their role as a student? How do they experience their initial encounters with different subjects, teachers, peers, etc? What kind of pedagogical environment do they encounter?

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Endnotes

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