

So I Sat Down With My Mother: Connectedness Orientation and Pupils' Independence

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Abstract: Swedish educational policy underlines the importance of independence. In this paper we use socio-cultural theory and Foucault to explain how pupils' independency is transformed into something else in their work. Our results derive from analyses of filmed sessions and entries in the pupils' logbooks. Our findings demonstrate that the pupils' definitions of independence differ from those of the course plan in several aspects: i) the use of certain resources is not considered to show lack of independence, ii) doing things yourself is considered being most independent and iii) to follow instructions, even if this means violating your unique personal thought, is considered a prerequisite for passing/getting good grades and as such a necessary adaption to the school context, sooner than a sign of dependency. Consequently we argue that pupil independency should be regarded as a phenomenon chiseled out within a community of practice rather than a personal capacity.

Keywords: Independence, Project work, Foucault, Instructions, Community of practice

1. Being Independent in a Collaborative Assignment?

X, Y and Z are planning their project. They have had some trouble getting started. In the transcript represented by the video-frame above, X comments on suggestions included in a mind map present on their computer screen. He claims that most of the suggestions in the mind map are the result of a brainstorming session he and his mother carried out that morning as he sat down with her and talked about their project. His way of speaking about his mother's assistance, demonstrates that this mode of working with school assignments does not present a problem. The only problem appears to be whether parents can spare the time.

X's accounts of what it means to him to carry out work align with the widely-held view that work in a knowledge society is carried out in collaboration. In Sites 2006 [1] this view is presented as a move in policies from a traditional orientation to learning towards a LifeLong Learning or a Connectedness Orientation. Connectedness orientation means learning from local as well as international experts, and from peers at a student's local school as well as in distant locations. Students

need to form “social networks” or “communities of practice” in order to perform well and information and communication technology facilitates this.

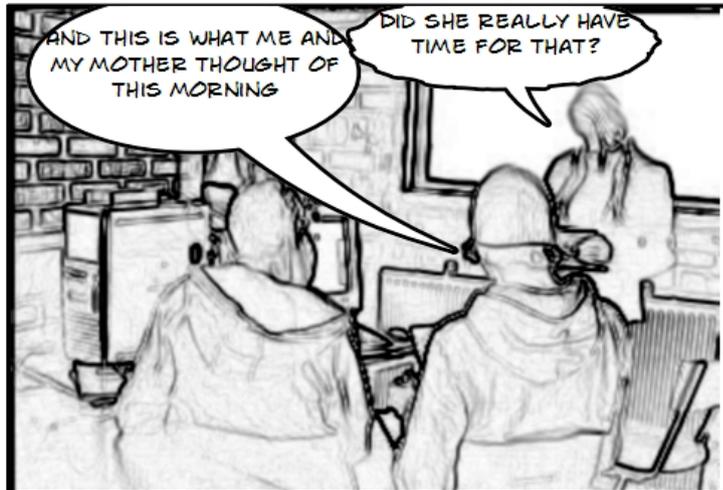


Image 1 External assistance

An equally important assumption is that people living and working in an information society need to be able to perform independently and take on individual responsibility for assignments. In the Swedish school system project work is a site for training how to work collaboratively but students doing project work also need to be assessed and graded according to signs of independence. Here we have decided to translate the Swedish word *självständighet* as independence. However the meaning of being independent while working collaboratively seems problematic for both pupils and teachers. What counts as a sign of independence when you are working in a group with a global connection? How can we account for independence with respect to being aided by humans or human artefacts such as digital technology? Is it self-regulation or maybe doing things individually? Should students come up with creative solutions or appear as original authors? This suggested paradox forms the starting point for our study, where we attempt to elucidate how students reason about independence in the context of school-related project work.

2. Situating Students’ “Own Work”

Students’ “own work” has become an important issue in the current discourse on Swedish education, as represented in bills, curricula and policy documents while becoming an important catch-phrase in media. Researchers use the phrase to categorize a mode of work that has become more common in all stages of the Swedish education system. Österlind [2] argues that *students’ own work* is a mode of working that affords freedom for those with an upbringing that fit such a value system but also increased pressure and dejection (p. 99). In political debate students are often

considered left on their own to learn and the absence of the teacher is criticized. Sometimes it is literally treated as working individually. Students involved in “*own work*” activities are supposed to master liberty of choice and to take on a high degree of responsibility for planning and carrying out assignments “*independently*”. “*Own work*” stands in contrast to traditional work forms which to a greater extent are planned and supervised by the teacher. Rather than being an individual, solitary activity however students’ “*own work*” can be understood as often embedded in a collaborative activity where the students rely on a number of resources. Their management of these resources may in itself present difficulties and the students often spend considerable time on the Internet searching for information [3] and reasoning about the meaning of assignments and instructions [4].

Looking at project work two trajectories can be seen. The first trajectory is related to Dewey [5] and the progressive pedagogy movement which suggests that pedagogical objectives should: i) be anchored in real activities, ii) be formulated by students and iii) allow students to work with methods that align with the formulated objectives. This credo can be clearly seen in the course plan for project work.

Project work aims at developing the skill of planning, structuring and taking responsibility for a larger piece of work and providing experience of working in project form [6].

The other trajectory emphasizes that project-oriented work forms are becoming more common and are appreciated by employers. Project work is thus seen as a positive response to labor market demands. Viewed from this perspective critical remarks are made by authors who ask for whom and under what circumstances this direction is beneficial (cf [7]; [8];[9]).

3. Independence in Project Work

In compulsory as well as higher education in Sweden independence, individual responsibility and self-regulation are required (Higher Education Ordinance,[10];[11];[12]) and students are supposed to be assessed and graded accordingly. The difficulty that presents itself is what exactly it is that is to be assessed and this difficulty can be assumed to be a concern for teachers and students alike. One issue of concern for psychological research is what the nature of independence is. To what extent can they be seen as practical achievements that exist “in doing” and are displayed in practice? How can students display independence and how can independence be measured let’s say by teachers?

From a socio-cultural perspective (Wertsch,[13]; Säljö, [14]) speaking of student independence or autonomy as a quality of human action presents a difficulty, as categories such as independence generally are considered situated, culturally, historically and socially and hence are preferred to be regarded as subjects of discussion rather than qualities having an essence or fundamental nature. If one adopts a connectedness orientation independence becomes something of a paradox since learning takes place under circumstances where students are networked and knowledge exists and is transformed under the very same circumstances. In conclusion the notion of being skilled is also constituted under these circumstances.

Lave and Wenger [15] suggest that the meaning of such categories is negotiated through participation in practice and through reification of meaning into object like constructs. From this perspective independence can never be regarded without consideration for the local discourse or artefacts that contribute to learning.

4. Research Context and Methodological Considerations

Foucault [16] argues that subjectivities (such as independence) can be regarded as discursive positions within an order of discourse and as such principles rather than essential human traits. In his later works Foucault [17] argues that individuals engage in self-forming activities and draw on discourse orders to turn themselves into particular subjects, which has induced us to ask questions about how students are invited to recognize being independent as an obligation in our analysis. Other questions being: What ethical issues do they raise? (Students are for example, as we see it, bound to ponder over if and how different activities in group work and different uses of technology are linked to being independent.) How are students invited to recognize being independent as a moral obligation? Do they turn directly to course plans or are these issues raised in tutoring sessions and discussed with teachers or has networking meant giving another meaning to independence?

Questions such as those above are best answered by studying students in action. In this study students in two theoretical programs directed towards natural science or social science in a Swedish secondary school have been video recorded. They are working in groups with assignments related to a course called, PA 1201, Projektarbete. The course was established with the explicit purpose of “developing the skills of planning, structuring and taking responsibility for a larger piece of work and providing experience of working in project form [6].

Our data consists of 60 hours of video filmed interaction collected over a three-year period, additional data being instructions along with entries from the students’ individual and group logs. Narrative techniques from sequential art were used to represent interaction. We argue that this technique allows us to describe the dynamics of interaction more efficiently. Transforming films into sequential art strips involves several analytical considerations [18]. However we contend that the analytical considerations made when using sequential art strips are not radically different from those made when using more conventional transcripts. It boils down to decisions about how renderings will influence our analysis.

5. Independence within a Community of Practice

Students’ lack of exposure to teacher instruction being left without the proper guidance is often presented as a negative aspect of students’ own work in the present political discourse. Using technology to connect to other sources of support however is generally constituted as positive in policies and this view aligns well with a Lifelong learning and Connectedness orientation.

In one session from the video recordings students are working on the introductory part of their project work. In the instruction they are given advice on what and how much to write.

During the session group members left the room to compare their solution to that of other groups asking “how can they have done that?”. They consult others on seven occasions. Problems discussed concerned instruction and technical aspects of word processing (rather than writing). Peers are important for project work. Students sit grouped by the computer, move between groups and networks using different media. Solutions are compared and discussed every step of the way. Consulting other students is rarely turned into an ethical substance and not constituted as being dependent.

6. Other Collectively Accessible Resources

All our data (videorecordings, audiorecordings from tutoring sessions and notes from student logs) clearly demonstrate that students are supplemented by many resources in their work. In some cases students are invited to use these resources through the formal framework provided for project work. This seems to be the case with tutoring sessions and instructions which have been reified as scaffolds in the formal school environment. Occasionally, such as under what conditions they are allowed to use texts, visit websites or draw from other sources, the use of resources constitutes a difficulty that needs to be discussed, (cf. [19]). Consulting parents, peers or distant experts however is rarely reasoned out as threats to independence. External resources come in handy when students have technical problems. In a log notation friends are described as; one who “helped out with the front page”; someone who is “good with Internet pages”; while a father is described as being “good with computers”. Students frequently refer to Anders, the researcher who monitors the video-taping. One group complains over having poor computer skills but they “fix things with a little extra help from Anders”. Another group accounts for their participation in the research project stating that “that way they could get help from Anders on different occasions”. The student logs are accessible to the teachers but such supplementation does not appear to be accounted for as being dependent.

7. Instructions and Independence

Instructions play an important role in students’ own work. Instructions for project work can be located through the school network and students carry printed versions with them. They are always connected to these instructions so how can they appear independent of them? In the transcript below a group of boys start their writing of the analysis section by checking the instructions on the web. The first boy states that they have to use their hypothesis. New information should not be inserted in this section. The second boy indicates that he is in agreement. The first boy states that then they can “just start writing.” Independence does not appear to present a difficulty to reason about.

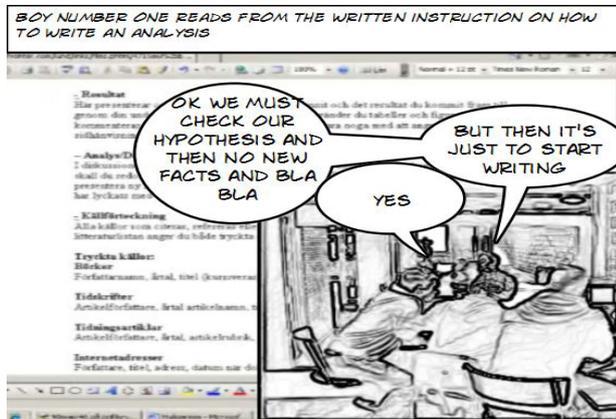


Image 2 Instruction as a path

limited by the duty to follow instructions. Even though they are in agreement that the alteration improves the text, they decide to reduce their uncertainty by moving their text to “the discussion”. One may say that they are invited by their concern for their readers to present a readable text and by their way of constituting “following instruction” as a demand to follow to the letter. The difficulty is resolved through the suggestion that they present the alteration in the discussion, a genre they construe as one where they can write more freely and use their own voice.



Image 4 Instruction as a challenge

In the next strip three boys reason out an oral instruction that the teacher X has given. Boy number one suggests that they have been given instructions by X to the effect that every main question (hypothesis) should have a special section in their report. The other boys oppose, but not on the grounds that X’s instructions should be interpreted differently. Instead they assert that it is a stupid way of structuring their writing. They argue that their structure is superior to that of the instruction and should be used.

It would be tempting to argue that the last group of students shows a considerable amount of independence towards the instructions. We would claim however that all of the students engage in self-forming activities that involve considering independence but they are differently invited. They constitute instructions as clear cut. They them as a foundation for ordering work that needs to be reasoned out. They draw on the teacher’s assessment of the quality of their present design as rather cool

as a means to reconcile their preferred design with the teacher's verbal instructions and hence reach the conclusion that they can keep their original structure, and possibly get high grades.

8. Connectedness Orientation and the (In) Dependence Paradox

Students working in the course PA 1201 are supposed to be graded on independence. The purpose of this study has been to study what the independent student becomes, treating independence as a practical achievement that exists "in doing", leaving aside philosophical and psychological concerns about "the nature of independence". A demand that students demonstrate independence however is also a demand that they demonstrate dependence. We would like to call this the (in) dependence paradox.

We find that students are governed in the name of independence rather than dependence, but it is a highly situated form of independence. Our results clearly demonstrate that the students working in different phases of "the project journey" make use of a number of resources, primarily human actors, but also electronic devices. Making use of external human resources is rarely constituted as being less independent. Jackson [20] argued that "learning to live in a classroom involves, among other things, learning to live in a crowd." From a socio-cultural perspective it may be differently stated. We spend most of our time in organizations, acting within organizational structures communicating with institutional categories. Learning in itself is overwhelmingly to learn in collectively organized settings with the help of resources provided in these settings. What has changed since 1968 seems primarily to be what students consider to be accessible resources hence what space that can be referred to as their classroom.

Governance in the name of independence does not seem to prevent "our students" from using human or technical resources to supplement their learning. They do however have to consider their relationship to different sources in order to manage impressions. Students clearly indicate that what they need is to appear independent in their relationship with teachers. This demand becomes more pressing as they progress through school. Our students however are not seen as invited to risk challenging teachers' assessments of their work. One might argue that the ultimate proof of independence on the part of students would be to challenge their teachers' opinions but teachers' assessments do not surface as something to reason . The impact on grades when disobeying instructions does.

The political rationale behind the introduction of PA 1201 can, as we claimed earlier, be traced back to Dewey and his credo that pedagogical goals should be anchored in real activities, be formulated by students and allow students to work with methods that align with the formulated goals but also in normative political claims about preparation for work life. The need for collaboration can be anchored in Vygotsky's [21] claim about supplementation, i.e. that learners cannot reach as far on their own as they can with the help of a more experienced tutor, is important to learning. This almost symbiotic dependence, such as in apprenticeship or being part of a dialogic inquiry, is generally favorably presented in literature on pedagogy and aligns well with discourse on use of technology and connectedness orientation. Being

a part of a community of practice, a discourse community or an epistemic community is almost solely considered conducive to learning. There are claims that such ideas are common in western policy documents on education and that they give rise to forms of work that stress students' own work, self regulation and independence.[8] There are also claims that such work forms satisfy other needs, anchored in the necessities of schooling such as the need for control as demonstrated by Österlind [2].

In the "prepare for work life trajectory" governance in the name of collaboration is as important as governance in the name of independence. Howard [22] makes a principled claim that there is a difficulty with the constitution of agency within collaborative theory that presents itself clearly in discourse on writing. We see Howard's claim as relevant to a discussion of our students' practice doing project work. She argues that the "prevailing episteme" of the independent *cogito* holds sway even in collaborative theory". It is precisely at this point, she argues, that social constructionism falls prey to the fallacy of the autonomous agent (writer), and we would venture to any form of autonomy. The notion of students' "own work", thus remains firmly embedded in social constructionist theory as described by Howard. It provides the basis for regarding independence as "doing individual work" and also for a connection to notions such as entrepreneurship in "the preparation for work life trajectory." From such a perspective it seems reasonable that our students' most important displays of independence concern independence as "doing".

If one, as in socio-cultural theory, takes into account that individuals in human cultures are supplemented through the use of artefacts ranging from institutions to single devices the construction of independence in collaborative, settings appears to provide a dilemma. The difficulty that presents itself in much project work is that students are expected to perform their work collectively in intimate collaboration with their peers but they are supposed to be assessed based on their individual contribution and mastery. The suspicion that individual students hide behind the collective presents an argument for scaffolds to be put in place that force students to demonstrate independence. In Brown and Cambione's [23] programme called Fostering Communities of Learners is an application of social cohesion theory that the authors claim to be beneficial for learning. What is somewhat intriguing are the requirements for independence. Students form groups in order to master a disciplinary area of expertise. Aronson's Jigsaw method is used in a manner that forces students to independently master this area and as their group is divided they have to report on their area of expertise to the new group.

Governance, albeit in the name of preparation for work life still takes its lead from governance in the name of independence. A difficulty presents itself. How can one be independent in a context where one is required to follow instructions and where one's work is assessed based on a number of criteria present in documents and mediated in different practices? Being graded on independence seems to impose a limit on independence of such a magnitude that it seems fair to ask whether students are not forced into dependence. Students in our material are invited to become independent but only within the limits of policies and written and verbal instructions.

For students doing project work in Swedish schools this governance presents difficulties to be reasoned out. Student accounts clearly suggest that they need to be careful in their appearance. Does this mean that they actually need to be careful in their appearance? Students need to get help, but at the same time they declare that

asking for help may be perceived of as displaying dependence. They need to be supplemented in tutoring sessions but they declare that they have to demonstrate that they are independent, by leading the discussions and by not giving the teacher too much talk-time.

In the course plan and commentary material independence can be seen to be treated as an essential concept, transcending history and culture. It presents a mode of subjection as a moral absolute, a higher value and a significant quality providing a discursive position that the students are invited to subject to. In Foucault's terms it would seem appropriate to speak of subjection in "the name of work-life." Students need to be prepared for a modern society. Independence in our material however is displayed in doing. The (in) dependence paradox as we have called it is expressed in the independence students' show in doing. Being independent is achieved in acting on others. The limitations that are imposed on their independence are maintained by the very context that is supposed to foster independence. The contextual constraints seem to turn the students' efforts to answer the call for independence into merely another strategy for receiving as high grades as possible.

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