Chapter 53
A Historical Materialist Analysis of the Debate in Swedish Print Media on Mobile Phones in School Settings

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ABSTRACT

The use of mobile phones for teaching and learning in schools has been a controversial matter. In this paper the debate in two Swedish newspapers on the use of mobile phones in schools is analysed using a historical materialist framework. The results are discussed in relation to contemporary research on mobile learning. The analysis reveals that the debate has been a consequence of a conflict of control of the process of learning in schools. Statements from the stakeholders in the debate indicate that it primarily has been a conflict between those who rule school, the legislators, and those who are ruled, the school staff and the pupils. Knowledge of this could contribute to the understanding of difficulties occurring when implementing a mobile learning concept in the educational system.

INTRODUCTION

Since the middle of the 1990s the use of mobile phones has penetrated every layer of society. In education, this process has been perceived both as a threat and as an opportunity and the debate has from time to time been intense. The use of mobile phones in schools can be dealt with as an extra-curricular problem, but it can also be put into the context of how a technology is taken up and adopted for pedagogical purposes, as a question of mobile learning (Sharples, 2002). Understanding how mobile phones are becoming tools in the traditional arena of education – the classroom – is an important research topic. This matter has many layers and can be regarded from different perspectives, e.g. educational, technological and political (Kukulska-Hulme, Sharples, Milrad, Arnedillo-Sánchez, & Vavoula, 2009; Traxler, 2007). As Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2009) pointed out, political approaches are important for implementation of mobile learning in the educational

system. This paper focuses on the interaction between educational and political aspects, as it is revealed in the public debate in newspaper articles of the past. The approach is similar to Karlsohn´s (2009), who analysed the rhetoric surrounding the introduction of ICT in Swedish schools during mainly the 1990s. The aim is to understand societal forces that are of importance for how mobile learning is dealt with in schools.

The overarching research question in the study presented in this paper is:

- What conflicts regarding the use of mobile phones in school can be traced in the public debate in the press?

Analytically a historical materialist perspective has been adopted.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Historical materialism is based on a Marxist viewpoint on society. The structure of a society is regarded as being constituted in three levels. On the first level, the foundation, are the forces of production; tools, techniques, raw materials and labour power. On the second level are the relations of production; division of labour, cooperation and subordination to sustain the production. On the third level, the superstructure, are the legal and political institutions and their supporting ideologies (Tosh, 2002).

According to the perspective of historical materialism, the development of the human society is determined by the struggle for control of the forces of production. This implies a conflict between those who exercise control over the means of production (the superstructure) and those who carry out the production (the forces of production). The conflict is situated in the relations of production, through which the superstructure and foundational level influence each other.

With its affinity to Marxism, historical materialism is often interpreted as only being concerned with economy. Historical materialism is, however, not to be comprehended as only revealing a capitalist economical struggle. The relations of production do also constitute many aspects of culture, law, and other domains (Van Apeldoorn, 2004).

The traditional classroom is organized for optimizing surveillance and execution of control over the learning process in a mass educational setting. With its rows of benches, chalkboard and routines it is designed mostly for transmission of knowledge from the active teacher to the passive students (Cuban, 1986).

Using this comprehension, the classroom is a unit suitable to be placed on the foundational level of the historical materialism model since the classroom has a clear division between those who rule and those who are ruled.

In this analysis the model of historical materialism is applied with the educational system understood as the foundation (Figure 1). The forces of production encompass all parts of the educational system; ICTs, teachers and learners etc. What is produced is to be understood as learning.

Politically affiliated newspapers are parts of the superstructure as subordinates to the political institutions (Gramsci, 1999).

Historical materialism has been criticised for being deterministic. This analysis does not, however, measure societal development as whole. In this paper the theory is applied only to a small part of the society, during a short time. It is only the model that is applied in the analysis, not any other Marxist doctrine of the societal development.

Historical materialism is applied as a theory for analysing the historic process of interest since it provides a model for comprehension of the reciprocal relationship of structure and action (Tosh, 2002; Van Apeldoorn, 2004).

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