Tracking Values in Web Based Student Teacher Exchanges

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ABSTRACT

When vocational student teachers communicate on a virtual platform in a combined campus and web based university course they focus on the contents of teaching and learning. However, in communicating professional teacher knowledge they implicitly express their personal values too. Without giving it much thought, they embed values in their verbal entries and they assess embedded values in their peers’ texts. This article introduces a soft systems model for categorizing the influence of values on web based interactions.

Keywords: Communication, Interaction, Relations, Soft System, Values

INTRODUCTION

Reflective thinking, introspection and contemplation seem to activate people’s consciousness and act as a catalyst for ethical behavior. People’s moral conscience suggests what, when or how things should be done for whatever instrumental, economical or personal reasons. People’s conscience is called upon in times of trouble, dilemmas and misfortune; for example when a certain activity, decision or process is instrumentally distant, economically damaging or morally harmful. This is when an individual process of ethical reflection (Brusling & Strömqvist, 1996) begins. So, values materialize when people put rational thoughts into action and explore social interaction as dialogical relations, empathic feelings and ethical standpoints.

Western ambitions on democratic education aim at promotion of spiritual and moral growth. Typical fostering themes cover values clarification (Kirschenbaum, 1977), character education (Lickona, 1993), moral development (Kohlberg, 1981) and ethical literacy (Lovat et al., 2002). The Swedish upper secondary school curriculum (Department of Education, 1998, p. 10) explores social and cultural growth, saying (transl. by this author): “schooling should establish abilities in the students to understand and/or perform ethical commitment; respect for other people; protest against oppression and abuse; help the suffering; develop empathy for others; protect the local and global environment.” The national wide ranging objectives are however often referred to as “curricular poetry” and it is far from clear if the general objectives help transform people’s attitudes into motivating operations and moral practices.

Ethical problems in education like lying, plagiarism or bullying seem to attract the teachers’ attention. On a global scale people consider both factual knowledge and publicly acknowl-
edged values as they deal with starvation, pollution and global warming. But believing that textual knowledge alone (Hansson, 2006) could provide a solution to ethical issues is an illusion. Teachers need to complement informative data, facts and truths with an awareness based on justice, integrity and self-control. According to Munro (1999, p. 527) this is an accepted contemporary paradigm, sometimes described as “technologies of the self”. It covers compassionate holism, i.e. the idea of a personal dedication to help people cooperate, balance rationality with intuition and connect with the world. The purpose of learning about technologies of the self is that people are ready, willing and able to appreciate and act on moral themes, provided they experience a sense of social control along the way.

It makes sense that we should learn to establish a relational dialogue (Dysthe, 2003) regardless of contexts, power relations or values. It is also a fair assumption that people make collectively just decisions when hidden values, normative assumptions and judgmental manipulation are brought to the surface. Therefore educators must exercise pedagogical leadership and learn to establish – through ethical reflection – an actionable dialogue in which each step of the exchange is illustrated, motivated and negotiated. Some mediators have fine-tuned their skills and turned this process into inter- and intrapersonal work of art.

Development of modern ICT-software enables for qualified interactions. Focus on the mediating technology is relevant for the study of virtual communities of practice. However, many communicative qualities found in old post exchanges and modern (Blackboard) learning management systems interactions remain. Ngwenyama and Lee (1997, p. 149) mention: “The filtering out of social cues” and the “lack of personalization”. They make up relevant foci whereas “feedback, channel and language” are left aside.

It would be an achievement if educators provided a practical perspective on Internet ethics or socially attractive netiquette (Shea, 2007) about an optimal input for practicing values in education. However, generous and ethically valid communication makes up a complex dimension of higher human cognition. It is also reasonable to assume that a collective of student teachers interacting on a LMS would generate “productive” verbal exchanges and increased performance for all. On the impact of LMS-exchanges, Ngwenyama and Lee (1997, p. 152) say that actors share every aspect of the organizational context and: “The context also defines the power, authority and status relationships of the individuals within it.” Both young “native” and adult “immigrant” Internet users look for, find out about and act on ethically secure communications as they practice in virtual contexts (Coutaz, et al., 2005), developing their personality, team roles and relations (Buber, 1988). In such situations their behavior is compatible with their expectations on personal, workplace and democratic values. Finally, the student teachers assess educational norms, the situation related to the task and the orientation of the peer whose written text they are expected to critically evaluate and respond to.

**PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

In an attempt at clarifying implicitly expressed intentions between US-university students, Pesendorfer and Koszegi (2006) confuse values with behavior in a study of synchronous and asynchronous negotiations. The authors’ approach is too simplistic to form a basis for further analysis. Rather than clarifying values, they combine (ibid, p. 144) loosely defined characterizations like “spontaneous and unreflective emotional behaviour”, “emerging emotions”, “flaming”, “impoliteness” and “constrained self-awareness”. As could be expected from the design, the authors (ibid., p. 149) conclude that the interlocutors stick to protocol and produce text-specific contents during asynchronous communication.

It is difficult to extract hidden, implicitly understood and intuitive values from textual LMS-entries. But it is equally hard to measure values with the help of questionnaires. Yet,
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