

Chapter XVII

To Be Lost and To Be a Loser Through the Web

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss findings from a study of students' information seeking and use for a learning assignment. The overall interest is to describe the coherence between differences in the quality of students' information seeking and the quality of their learning outcomes and to relate this to issues of information literacy in the Knowledge Society. The study was framed within a sociocultural perspective of learning and adopted an ethnographic approach. Analysis of data resulted in the identification of two major categories of competences related to information seeking and knowledge formation, one of which involves serious shortcomings in meaningful learning through information seeking. There is little evidence that ICT conclusively supports the development of new knowledge in terms of seeing the world differently. Conclusions are that the school system tends to produce 'information illiterates' which may entail unwanted consequences for both individuals and for maintaining a democratic Knowledge Society.

INTRODUCTION AND AIM

The purpose of this chapter is to present and discuss findings from a study of students' informa-

tion seeking and use for a learning assignment. This study is part of a larger research project in seven schools (Alexandersson & Limberg, 2003, 2005; Limberg & Alexandersson, 2003).

The overall interest is to describe the coherence between differences in the quality of students' information seeking and the quality of their learning outcomes. The discussion of findings is linked to aspects of information literacy and democracy in the Knowledge Society. The chapter opens with some considerations concerning the human competences related to information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as consideration of problems linked to information literacy education. The next section presents the design of the study followed by a presentation of findings. The concluding section of the chapter discusses the findings by focusing on issues related to information literacy in the Knowledge Society.

BACKGROUND

It is evident that during the last decade, conditions for and ways of learning in schools have changed dramatically. These changes are partly due to the introduction and breakthrough of ICT in schools and partly to new requirements caused by the globalisation of national economies as well as migration. One characteristic of the current changes is its associated rhetoric, which is pervasive and loud. How many times have we not heard the rhetorical claims of the Knowledge Society or the new demands of the Information Society concerning the possibilities offered by ICT for our professional life as well as for our leisure time and as citizens? ICT is increasingly used as a medium to influence citizens' attitudes. In this perspective, the development of various competences, especially the ability to critically evaluate information sources, and also the ability to take an active part in the virtual debate, emerges as important requirements for the citizen. In the debate about school education and ICT, the issue of students' insufficient information competence and thereby the risk of becoming second-rate students is often raised. Will this create a new

form of class system? Without a deeper sense of information literacy, we assume that students will hardly be able to generate meaningful knowledge and to understand complex contexts. If not all students are given the chance to acquire this basic competence, the gaps between students will probably become wider.

LITERACIES AND ICT

In their annual Education Policy Analysis (EPA) the OECD (2002) treated the question of human competences in relation to economic growth as well as to private and social well-being. Competence is included in the conception of "human capital," and the OECD have suggested broadening this definition to include competences such as critical thinking, collaboration ability, self-reliance, and the ability to solve problems—and require that all of the mentioned be observed more emphatically when planning educational policies. In some countries, educational policy initiatives have been taken that recognize the importance and benefit of the development of other competences than the traditional basics: reading, writing, and arithmetic. One important competence, pointed out by the OECD (2002), is the ability to seek and use information effectively. Often this competence is referred to as "digital competence." Since the focus of this chapter is on *what* and *how* students learn through information seeking—an issue that we define with the concept *information literacy*—we want to point out similarities and differences between these two concepts. Neither concept is originally grounded in empirical research; they were developed in politically oriented educational contexts. One major difference between the concepts, however, is that the term digital competence is more oriented to issues about learning to handle digital tools and multimedia formats for various purposes, while the term information literacy implies seeking and using information for learning or other purposes,

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