

## **CoLIS 7**

### **Information Literacy Research Seminar 2010**

#### **Position paper**

#### **Learning Trajectories: Becoming Information Literate across Practices.**

In recent years several researchers has highlighted the importance of understanding information literacy as being context specific and related to practice (e.g. Lloyd, 2010a; Sundin & Francke, 2009; Tuominen, Savolainen & Talja, 2005). Based mainly on socio-cultural approaches and practice theory also an understanding of information literacy as a social practice has emerged. Seeing information literacy as a practice ties the process of becoming information literate to specific practices and social sites of knowledge. Lloyd (2010, p. 256) states that: "As a social practice information literacy practice reflects the specific knowledge's and specific ways of knowing that are central part of a social site". Hereby information literacy is seen as situated knowledge, and learning to be information literate is broadly speaking about getting to understand the information landscape (Lloyd, 2010b) of a specific practice. Research by Lloyd (2009, 2010a) and Hedman, Lund & Sundin (2009) has for example shown that the focus and understanding of information literacy is different in educational and work contexts. Therefore these two contexts can be described as separate information landscapes. However this is when we observe information literacy from a practice perspective. What happens if we move the lens and observe the individual-in-practice? People do not solely belong to one practice. As individuals they move across different practices and information landscapes and engage themselves with variation in different communities of practices (Wenger, 1998). Seen from an individual-in-practice perspective this movement can be described as developing a path or trajectory across time and practices. Persons who participate in different communities of practices in different ways will develop different trajectories in different directions as a result of personal and inter-subjective negotiations of meaning in social practice. This means that people learn different things which are related in varied ways to their ongoing personal trajectories of participation.

The above raises an important question about how we can broaden our understanding of information literacy to include ideas about how individuals become information literate, not only in relation to one particular practice, but across different practices. If we believe that people develops knowledge about how to deal with information in different ways in different contexts, then how do we understand and reflect on the possibilities and constraints related to transferring, or maybe rather connecting, this situated knowledge across contexts (e.g. in the transition from education to working life)?

From a situated perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991), knowledge is not transferred as a learner e.g. moves from task to task, but instead there develops patterns of participatory processes as we move among various contextual settings. Learning is about increased involvement in a social practice and is not directed towards developing increasingly abstract representations of the world. Therefore notions of generalization lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of past and future events in relation to the meaning of present circumstances in practice (Nielsen, 2009). The idea of learning trajectories has been introduced by e.g. Jean Lave (1999), Dreier (2003), Nielsen (2009) and Tanggaard (2006) who focuses on analyzing learning as personal trajectories of participation across practices. This research is especially concerned with the concept of personal learning trajectories, coordination, conflicts and differences in learning across contexts. Instead of studying learning in isolated contexts, the main theoretical and empirical concern is to study how people combine, modify and connect learning across places, and how, for example, they may replace earlier forms of learning by something new (Tanggaard & Elmholdt, 2007).

In a recent research project, I have analyzed individuals learning trajectories as personal trajectories of participation in and across practices (Moring, 2009). The project investigates newcomer information practices and is looking at how newcomers in an organizational setting seek information in their learning process from being new participants to become competent participants in a community of practice. The empirical material was collected during an eight month field study among newly recruited sales assistants in the company DSB S-trains in Denmark. The sales assistants are responsible for selling products and services in kiosks and ticket-offices located at train stations in Copenhagen and its suburbs.

In the following I will give a brief example of this kind of “patterns of participatory processes” by using the concept of learning trajectories to describe how a newly appointed sales assistant experiences connections/disconnections in her learning process as she moves between practices. As it is just a small example it should be considered as a fragment of a larger whole.

When appointed the sales assistants had to complete a one month sales course, before they are allowed to work in a ticket office. The course is focusing on sales training, regulations and procedures related to selling tickets to trains and busses in Denmark, and include both educational and practical training. At the course the sales assistants were introduced to all rules related to selling tickets, and they were told to be very careful about following these rules in practice. However one of the newly appointed sales assistants, named Sissel, experienced during her training in the ticket office that some of her more experienced colleagues in some cases were “bending the rules”. She seeks information by asking her colleagues if this is a normal procedure, and got the answer that it depends on the customer or the situation. Sissel is confused about this lack of connection between what she was taught at the course, and the concrete sales practice in the ticket office, and the

episode causes in the larger picture a dilemma which influences her learning trajectory. She is forced to decide whose knowledge to trust and which practice to adapt too at this stage in her development. She decides to stick to the rules as she can not foresee the consequences of not doing so. So even as Sissel experiences a disconnection between educational and sales practice, the situation forces her to questioning the community of interpretation in the ticket office, and hereby she contributes to the ongoing meaning negotiation in practice. In that sense the situation pushes her learning forward and becomes an experience that, among many others, forms her specific learning trajectory as an individual-in-practice.

Summing up the concept of learning trajectory focuses on learning across time and contexts, on the potential conflicts and differences that might occur, and on what consequences the possible connections or disconnections between contexts have for the individual learning process. I suggest that future information literacy research could seek to go deeper into analyzing the relationship between (information) practices and the individual learning trajectories in and across these, to gain more knowledge about the possibilities and constraints related to becoming information literate.

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