Learning, Literacy and LIS
A Thesis Conversation

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Abstract: This position paper deals with the notions of learning and literacy in the context of studying Library and Information Science (LIS). More particularly, it addresses the learning and literacy involved in, and manifested by, its own production. It is about writing this particular master’s thesis in LIS – the persons involved, the forms and terms used, the expectations met or ignored. It converses not only with itself but also with the academic system which is its *raison d’être*. It is maintained that this conversing is inherently tangled and that the irresolvable disorder is literally glossed over via language.

The argument relies largely on linguistic analysis, linking discourse and conceptual levels to their etymological foundations. Elements of action research and autoethnography are used in an attempt to capture and communicate the competitive conversing which propels and frustrates both personal learning and the development of a disciplined thesis. Standardized presentation forms are challenged and modified in order to highlight the underlying, and ongoing, interplay rather than the finished product. It is suggested that this tangled, tentative, personal/institutional conversing characterizes not only learning but also libraries and LIS itself. It is further suggested that literacy of whatever variety remains a matter of *reading*, of being able to continuously and competitively assess, converse and thereby commune. LIS has good reasons to highlight its inherent, transdisciplinary association with the human capacity to read.

The paper includes a critical self-assessment and concludes with a presentation of the quantitative and qualitative data generated by its own production.
# Table of Contents

**Prelude**  
3

**Introduction**  
4  
*Learning, literacy and LIS*  
4  
*Learning, literacy and this particular learner*  
5  
*Formatting the study*  
7  
*Research objects and objectives*  
8

**Orientation – research questions and methods**  
10

**Background**  
11  
*Conversation 1 – Capturing multitasking*  
11  
*Flowing and explaining*  
13  
*Controlling the interplay – definitions, methods, materials, process*  
14  
*Conversation 2 – An etymological interlude*  
14  
*Constructing*  
17  
*Reading*  
19  
*Conversation 3 – Sociology as literature as sociology*  
21

**Metathesis – reintroduction and conclusion**  
27  
*Executive Update*  
27  
*Conclusion*  
29  
*Foreground*  
30

**Metametauppsats – sammanfattning och kommentar**  
32  
*I runda siffror*  
33  
*Som samtal*  
35  
*Diskussion*  
39  
*Slutsatsning*  
40

*Postlude*  
41

**Reorientation – research results**  
42

*References/Bibliography*  
45  
*Footnotes Appendix*  
49
**Prelude**

This extended essay is a self-conscious record of a personal learning event. The event is the writing of a master’s thesis in Library and Information Science (LIS) worth twenty units of academic credit. The value of these twenty units has been given both quantitative coordinates corresponding roughly to twenty weeks of fulltime work and a product of forty pages and qualitative coordinates corresponding roughly to prevailing academic standards, that is, scientific rigorousness manifested in both form and content.

It is not the usual practice, but this particular product is substantially about its own making. It is about learning as this particular event. It is about literacy as dealing with this learning event. The interplay of the people and institutions involved, the conditions encountered and negotiated, the ideas expressed and (especially) the terms used to express them provides the empirical data upon which this report is based. And since this interplay is also, presumably and arguably, the (often unspoken and undocumented) concrete happening which informs the making of most such reports, it is hoped that some of the descriptions and insights encountered here may also contribute to a broader understanding in LIS of learning and literacy in general.

Put another way, the focus of this report is this particular researcher’s researching. And since both the researcher and the researching are, presumably and arguably, ongoing projects rather than stationary subjects, the documentation of the event is bound to reflect a somewhat inconclusive, idiosyncratic affair. This may be taken as a fatal flaw in what should be an orderly, standardized presentation of methodically-obtained results, or as an honest finding raising honest questions about how a given person’s learning and literacy are to be treated in an academic research context.

This also means that the researcher’s personal presence in this document is greater than is usually considered proper. The reader may find this vaguely discomfiting, as if having been forced into something more than a strictly professional relationship (or a strictly monetary transaction). The playwright has not only written himself into the script, but also given himself a role in the audience and thereby given the audience an active role in the play. And just as the researcher is both acting and observing his acting and thereby rewriting the script as he goes along, so also the reader is encouraged to project herself into the (inter)play and thereby rewrite her own role.

This active experiencing, I have already begun contending, is what learning and literacy is all about. It goes beyond sitting back and enjoying a vicarious experience. It goes beyond analysis and commentary. It means joining the fray. It means, as I hope not only to say but also to show, competing. Playfully and seriously. Creatively. Metaphors taken from the theater and sports arena will be evoked and entangled frequently in this paper as a contrast to those terms more at home in straightforward industrialized processes and economic transactions. Succinctly put: the play’s the thing, so let the games begin.
Introduction

The notions of learning and literacy have come to play prominent roles in academic discussion concerning the information society. Phrases such as “lifelong learning” and “information literacy” have not only animated research programs, but have also become standard policymaking instruments used to define the present and steer the future. The library world has been quick to utilize the present marketing value of such phrases, highlighting its authoritative historical connections to the theory and practice of learning and literacy.

This paper will return to the roots of the notions themselves, evaluating their fitness for the synthetic explanatory roles they have been assigned. What are the premises and parameters of their interface with library and information science? And how might I practically apply them to and in this particular thesis?

Learning, literacy and LIS

What do learning and literacy have to do with LIS? First, libraries are generally considered not only cultural depositories but educational resources where individually-structured information gathering is facilitated. They have traditionally (in the United States) also been centers for adult literacy training, working with general (reading) competency development rather than specific knowledge transmission. Both of these emphases – individually-structured information gathering and general competency development – are stressed in contemporary notions of learning and literacy.

Second, these terms continue to underlie and be routinely evoked with regard to the role of the library in a democracy. The library provides public access to a wide range of information in order to promote and sustain an informed, politically literate citizenry. Expanding this mandate from the world of print to the online world has been considered self-evident: providing public access to the Internet and expert guidance in navigating it is a growing feature of library service.

Third, another growing feature of public library service in Sweden involves dealing with the increasing number of adult students engaged in distance education programs. These students, for practical reasons, regard the nearest town library as the most suitable depot for necessary study materials and often turn to librarians for study help. This affects textbook acquisition decisions and database subscriptions as well as the academic literacy awareness of the librarians. The public library has become a center for formal learning and advanced research skills, with a “study librarian” on staff. A parallel situation exists at the secondary school level, where individually-directed and problem-based learning techniques have created the job title “teacher librarian”.

Fourth, the library remains a potent example not only for online information collecting and organizing, but also for electronically-facilitated learning. In this paper I talk extensively about learning, so much so that it has been suggested that my thesis belongs more properly in the pedagogy faculty. But I am more interested in showing that libraries have always been in the education business, and that LIS can do no better than to highlight notions of learning which can be drawn from, and are somewhat unique to, the library’s role as information storehouse. The informal, personal learning that libraries enable, simply by being there, is
directly applicable, both theoretically and practically, to today’s online world of hyperlinked information and serendipitous exploration and discovery. In the same way, studying online information organization and behavior can affect stodgy, knowledge-transfer notions of learning and literacy applied within LIS. I see no reason for LIS not to emphasize the personal, eclectic, cross-disciplinary, fluid, dynamic *conversing* which libraries facilitate. It is cutting-edge pedagogy.

**Fifth**, LIS is itself an educational enterprise. Under the auspices of the university it is the *de facto* credentialing authority for prospective librarians. What is its own approach to facilitating learning and literacy among its students? To what extent is it affected by the institutions of the academy vis-à-vis the requirements of the job market, by available resources vis-à-vis individual needs? Is the pedagogical role it practices commensurate with the pedagogical role of the library it preaches? LIS has a vested interest in how the notions of learning and literacy are defined and applied within its own concrete educational system.

**Sixth**, the notion of information literacy and its connection to general academic learning skills and performance has been promoted widely by and within the LIS community, generating a scholarly market infrastructure of articles, journals, conferences and websites. It has been incorporated into credit-bearing coursework, tried out as a free-standing basic skills course, and even been suggested as being mature enough to form an academic discipline of its own. Many academic librarians and LIS scholars have found a calling in teaching and writing about information literacy and learning. Are they standing on firm ground?

Webber and Johnston (2000:393f) stress the need to present/teach information literacy within a defining academic discussion and not merely as a list of practical skills. In this way both students and faculty can be stimulated to regard information literacy less as a mechanical study support and more as a reflective, adaptive, individually-designed and crafted study style. They can see themselves (and be regarded) less as information system users and more as information management agents. Promoting and applying this personally proactive view of learning and literacy lies at the heart of this paper.

Marcum (2002) questions the cogency and continuing applicability of the notion of information literacy in today’s online, multimedia world. He sees a needed shift in focus away from content-based information transfer to individually contextualized and enacted learning, and from an academic print-based literacy perspective to a practical “sociotechnical fluency”. But he admits that the established marketing power of the information literacy label makes it hard to dislodge. I would go further. “Literacy” is one of the few terms to which LIS can lay relatively undisputed claim; to question it too closely could easily harm the interests of the discipline as a (shaky) whole. In what ways, instead, can the term, and the identity of the discipline, remain vitally anchored in *reading*?

**Learning, literacy and this particular learner**

If managing the notions of learning and literacy is intrinsic to the viability of both the what and the how of LIS, it is also of immediate personal, practical concern to me as a teacher and student. I am the user, the who interacting with the LIS system, and in this particular situation I can regard myself to a certain crucial extent as both doctor and patient. As teacher, student and adult, I have well-rooted opinions about how best to treat the learning and literacy I am expected to demonstrate in this thesis, and these experience-based opinions are bound to
affect both the interacting and the demonstrating. I am reminded of being with my midwife wife at the hospital for the birth of our first daughter, watching her compete with the system of which she is a professional part. It was important for her then, as it is for me now, to undergo the experience to a satisfactory extent on her own terms, to be able to apply and demonstrate her understanding and competence experimentally on herself, by herself, for herself. She is, after all, the living proof of the experience.

I have found the midwife/mother interaction a useful metaphor in several respects. In practicing contemporary theory, midwives, like teachers, have been encouraged to adopt a user/consumer perspective, to see childbearing as a natural event centered on the mother and her needs, capabilities, feelings, reactions and wishes. The midwife is not the stork (or system manager) delivering the baby nor even primarily the coach laying out the game plan, running training sessions, motivating the players and calling the plays. She is more an in-house consultant than a process supervisor, ready to listen and provide the companionable advice, observation feedback, technical backup and emotional support which further the mother’s own proactive staging and experiencing of the event. The midwife herself best represents the system as a participating who, sharing personally in the collective experiencing and thereby enriching it while also cultivating her own competence.

Put provocatively: learning and literacy are not to be confused with the insemination, gestation and delivery process nor with the birth certificate or even the baby itself – they are the mother. They are a living, personal happening, not an institution or process, not a product or label, not a skill or item of knowledge, not a thing or a static noun, but an interactive verb. The mother is not a ‘learner’ or potential ‘literatus’, a generalized, system-defined subject such as a ‘patient’ or ‘client’ or even ‘user’, but a highly specific, ongoing, unpredictable, intricate happening. She is the initiating, self-exploring project, and this is how learning and literacy are to be considered in this paper – as the mother, the living, experiencing, using, growing who.

And since the more specific this mother is the better, reflecting effectively on learning and literacy leads back logically and practically to me. I am the concrete matter, literally the childbearing mother. I am, for the purposes of this particular LIS faculty, the information using.

My wife has never forgotten how, at that first birth, her request to do things in a certain way was met by an authoritative “I’m the midwife here now!” The woman assigned to her case left no doubt that she intended to be in charge and, more importantly, that things were going to be done by the book. Having come directly from working in the delivery ward of another hospital practicing a more user-friendly form of treatment, my wife was a bit shocked and disappointed. But, to her credit, she literally stood her ground and managed to form a working, albeit uneasy, compromise partnership with her case worker and the system she defended/represented.

Given that, as the mother, the event was about her and that, as a midwife, she had good insight into what was involved, my wife had little choice but to insist. She had so looked forward to the experience both personally and professionally that to do anything else would have been to betray all her plans, expectations and convictions, to adventure her self-respect. The memory, directly related to the learning experience involved and personal literacy gained, would have been bittersweet and repressed at best rather than alive and empowering.
Formatting the study

I have already suggested that since this project is about a particular researcher and his ongoing research, the documentation of the event is bound to reflect a somewhat messy, inconclusive affair (à faire). Messy inconclusiveness, however, is not an academic virtue; problems are to be identified, purposes stated, procedures defined and conclusions come to. Documented scientific research is to be clearly situated and effectively ordered, packaged into a communicable product. The unpresentable must, Potemkin-like, be made presentable in order to pass official review.

Or be officially overlooked – considered trivial, constitutive givens. As defining, frame-of-reference terms, learning and literacy are immune to the conditions of analysis which they themselves help to provide. To get at them involves taking apart the discourse which they authorize. Having done so, there is nothing meaningful left to find – the façade is all that can be talked about. And if I wish to talk about more than the talk, then the generating, defining frame-of-reference is this messy, personal happening.

This puts me, and my personal presentation of learning and literacy, into a bind. Presenting the messy happening in an orderly linguistic fashion sends a mixed message and tends, in the end, to reinforce the authority of the linguistic format – the verbal façade is that which is remembered. Presenting it in disorderly fashion risks sending no message at all – the scene is incomprehensible or dismissible; it neither fits nor follows. Either way, the format is decisive. How, then, am I to format myself?

As der rote Faden. Goethe’s metaphor for the connecting, characterizing thread of a narrative was taken from the supposed custom in the British Royal Navy of twisting a red thread into its rope along its entire length in order to identify the rope as the real thing. This served not only as a mark of quality, but also as protection against loss or theft. Cutting the rope into shorter lengths would not eliminate the identifying thread. To extract it would mean having to unravel the rope.

In Goethe’s novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), the narrative to which the metaphor refers is highly personal – a diary – and the connecting thread is the writer’s affective disposition and attachment, her Neigung und Anhänglichkeit, informing and enlivening the various remarks and observations and sayings of the diary, making it her own. The red thread is the writer’s presence linking the various linguistic fragments together and giving the document a communicative immediacy, a personality. It is not the writer’s methodically-mediated message leading the reader, like Ariadne’s thread, along thematic or argumentative lines back out of the labyrinth.

Having said that, I find the red thread metaphor appropriate for more than Goethe’s idea of putting the writer’s presence and self-expression at the heart of a document. The red thread may identify the rope – authorize it – but it does not hold it together more than by the artificial force of name or personality. The rope is held together by the twisted tangle of all its fibers, none more, or less, important to the rope’s integrity than any other. The red thread is itself twisted of many fibers; the red thread of itself does not a Royal Navy rope make.

I am thus back to the twisted tangle – the interplay – which is the rather messy, runny source format which we must continuously learn to read. And since I need a leitmotiv, then the red
thread metaphor itself will serve. Three fibers taken from the metaphor are twisted together and run throughout this narrative on learning and literacy and LIS: the twisted tangle of the rope, the personal presence of the red thread, and the connecting, animating, characterizing red thread function their interplay performs. Providing a modicum of stability, if not direction.

The remainder of this project is dominated by a rather motley Background, presenting various bits of information and making various proposals, followed by a Metathesis bringing the event up to date in summary and concluding fashion. A succinct Foreground then takes a relatively dispassionate look at the thesis as a purported academic object. The follow-up Metametauppsats, written in Swedish, takes a look at the data produced by the project and discusses its relevance to the following research problems, purposes and questions. These, in turn, are complemented by a clarifying orientation to the paper’s research questions and research methods in point form.

**Research objects and objectives**

The primary research question pursued here is a particular application of the widely-marketed notions of **learning** and **literacy**. Rather than discussing the use of the terms based upon a highly arbitrary selection of sources from the vast literature available or studying someone else’s information behavior, I have chosen to do a word study of my own and observe my own information behavior. The academic value of this choice is very much a part of the problem under consideration.

Yet my interest in learning and literacy is more than academic. I am personally involved not only in the talking about it, but also in the doing of it. I am a teacher; I have a master’s thesis to complete. The confounding of theory and practice underlies my interest in documenting this particular thesis writing task itself, exemplifying and evidencing learning and literacy as (most importantly, if one is to follow contemporary theory) my individual interaction and as social transaction.

Put another way, the research interest here is in the competing of interests as the basis of learning and literacy. My interest is nominally at stake, but hardly alone or decisive. To what extent can it be extricated from the others involved? Having nominally taken the initiative, how can I keep from losing it? To what extent can I imagine my own learning and validate my own literacy? What is my experience of this thesis-writing project and how might it be communicated?

To reach such ends, literary sleight-of-hand will be attempted: using the magic of words to change a thesis into myself, successfully persuading the certifying reader that the person – not merely the individual or the user or the student or the writer, but this person – is a major variable in the research process and perhaps its most concrete product. A person worth attempting to account for, and satisfactorily accounted for in the idiosyncratic attempt.

The trick is to capture the twists and turns of the **conversing** involved. The primary purpose of this thesis is to fulfill degree requirements. Theoretically this involves demonstrating LIS literacy by making a scientific contribution to the discipline. Practically this involves the conversing of a discipline, a student, technical mediators, a research object, a written document, a thesis supervisor, a peer opponent, and a professional examiner – to name but the...
most obvious (inter)players – in such a way and to such an extent that a “common meaning”, a communicating, is negotiated and the requirements are considered fulfilled.

In parallel fashion, LIS involves the conversing of a variety of players attempting to communicate in such a way that the requirements of a coherent and sustainable field of research are considered fulfilled. Yet as the compound discipline title suggests, Library and Information Science (or Studies) suffers from a split personality, attempting to hitch a quiet, everyday institution onto the gravy train of a fashionable academic discipline. There seems to be no corresponding need, for example, to distinguish ‘hospital’ and ‘medical science’ since the hospital and its related occupations are a manifestation of medical science. ‘Library’ and ‘librarian’ may have come first in some sense, but they can just as clearly be classified under ‘information science’. On the other hand, medical science, unlike information science, has a rather well-defined, tangible object of inquiry – bodily health. It is ‘library’ which provides a concrete focus for research – effective document storage and retrieval and its role in society – and ‘information’ which is scientifically subordinate, even redundant. Why does ‘library studies’ need ‘information science’ to give it academic credibility? If the library, as commonly perceived, is perhaps too trivial as a study object, then information is perhaps too vague and diffuse as a disciplinary taskmaster.

The tendency to unravel is evidenced in Borås, where the LIS program is divided into four semi-independent “research themes” competing over general identity and funding issues. Only one of them mentions the library and this largely within the framework of cultural policy studies. The other three profile themselves in connection with managing, organizing, and using “information” (or “knowledge”). Can they survive cut off from their roots?

If the interplay of my personal presence and a thesis conversing is the red thread of this document, what is it that performs the red thread function connecting, characterizing and animating LIS? The concluding purpose of this essay is to propose a reply to this question based upon the fundamental, yet cutting-edge notion of the reader herself at the heart of theses and libraries.
Orientation – research questions and methods

To put it more clearly, this paper takes up the following research questions and uses the following methods to address them.

Questions:
- What are the salient features of this personal/institutional thesis writing event?
- What is my experience of this event and how might it be communicated?
- To what extent can I imagine my own learning and validate my own literacy?
- In short, how does this thesis writing event interact with my particular learning and literacy, and does this have any general application to learning and literacy in LIS?

Methods:
- **Theoretical argumentation.** Non-linear forms of learning are highlighted in connection with the personal aspects of thesis writing and contrasted with the institutional demands of a linear presentation of what is to be researched and what has been learned. The underlying, self-reinforcing linguistic basis of these demands is explored and questioned.
- **Practical argumentation.** Non-linear forms of presentation are presented in an attempt to capture the personal aspects of learning and literacy and bring the theoretical argument to the surface of the paper where it must clearly be addressed in connection with the linear institutional demands. The central role of the person as a theoretical concept in information studies is illustrated by its practical instantiation. Observing this practical confrontation, both in my own writing process and in the institutionalized course process, functioned as a major generator of research data.
- **Case study.** As noted in the following Background section, I find Amanda Spink’s case study of a single individual engaged in multitasking behavior simple, straightforward, effective, and scientifically wanting. Unlike her I do not hope to provide a baseline for further scientific research, only explore the applicability of observing and noting personal learning and literacy aspects in LIS thesis writing.
- **Action research.** The reflective, collaborative, data-collecting and problem-solving process of this paper continuously interacts with its own emergent structure. The goal is instrumental but the governing variables are contested and the feedback loops are multiple.
- **Autoethnography.** This thesis is culturally situated, and observing the writing of it involves noting and examining and resisting and promoting my own enculturation. This includes highlighting personal aspects and responses and viewing the writing of the thesis itself as ongoing subjective research inquiry rather than completed objective summarizing report.

Data collection and capture has involved, quantitatively, tracking text production relative to time inputs and, qualitatively, keeping a diary and taking notes and maintaining records of direct contacts with the institutionalized course process. Taping the various seminar interactions for subsequent analysis would have been preferable – in my notes much of this interaction is too emotionally and/or theoretically compromised and has therefore been left out. Most sociopolitical aspects of the thesis conversation, while fascinating and perhaps the most valuable research object, have also been deemed too sensitive for inclusion.

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*See Paul Hildreth’s & Chris Kimble’s (2002) article on the hard/soft “duality of knowledge” for a typical example in connection with the theory and practice of Knowledge Management.*
Background

Whenever the standard research and documentation process itself comes under scrutiny, there are several problems which inevitably arise. First and foremost is the theoretical issue of whether this can be done. If to be scientific is to follow a standard process and validation requires being scientific, then validation requires following, not questioning, the book. Can one question how the game is played by playing it? Or does participation undercut the force of the questioning? This depends on to what extent the game has become ritual.

In this paper, I do not question science as such – it is, after all, the knowing interplay at the root of consciousness but I assume that questioning how science is to be represented and formatted is an important aspect of the game. I assume that science is more than a given application and mode of expression, and that the scientific game can be played in different ways, at least one of them involving me. I assume, fundamentally, that questioning – the quest, the inquiry – is more fundamental to scientific progress than establishing.

I see my effort here as little more than a local variant of the tactic used by the human sciences over against the natural sciences, supplementing explanation with understanding, a few quantitative methods with many qualitative ones. All in the name of a science appropriate to the object of study. And since this social science assignment puts me squarely on the Protestant side, I can see no compelling objection, apart from political and economic reasons, to my exercising a sectarian tendency of my own.

As long as it can be done scientifically, appropriate to the object of study. I have already begun giving reasons for why this thesis writing project itself can serve as a highly relevant user study, but the initial, and lasting, formative impetus came from a rather disappointing encounter I had with an LIS ‘empirical research’ article a few years ago, soon after starting this degree program. Choice of the article was due entirely to its proximity in the randomly-selected database listing to a much more attractive, but unacceptable for the assigned task, ‘theoretical research’ article. Since the topic of this article gives a practical twist to my interests, and the research methods employed remain something of a model for my own approach, a closer look at the article and my response to it is warranted.

Conversation 1 – Capturing multitasking

Amanda Spink’s (2004) article involves a study of “multitasking information behavior”, certainly a timely topic in a world where people drive cars while talking on telephones and thinking about what to buy for dinner. Technology has simplified life by allowing us to do more things simultaneously. It has also facilitated many of the things to do. Dealing with the increase in possible engagements and their attached gadgets/techniques, seemingly all at once, is one reason we have begun talking about the need for “multiliteracies”.

Spink is concerned that search system design concentrating on single sequential searches is not keeping up with the reality of concurrent multitasking information behavior. She offers a case study of a single individual engaged in such multitasking behavior online and hopes thereby to provide a baseline for further research using a larger sample. Other specific goals of the study are to both examine how the individual goes about multitasking and what patterns emerge, as well as test the adequacy of the observational, diary and interview data collection techniques used. The notes generated by these techniques were qualitatively analyzed using
grounded theory, leading to Spink’s classification of operative information behaviors and identification of the factors affecting those behaviors, especially with respect to information task switching.

The bulk of the data analyzed seems to come from the volunteer information seeker’s diary, in which she recorded the process involved in searching for information on four different topics during two different visits to a public library. The search involved both electronic and physical resources. Follow-up interviews after each visit clarified details in the diary record and brought out reasons for the switching between the various tasks. The researcher’s own discreet observation notes are not cited, and are presumably of marginal importance as data.

Several things struck me about this article. First, the boldness of the enterprise – focusing on the behavior of one person and attempting to tease out reasons for that behavior. As a philosopher I was amazed that finding non-putative reasons for anything, much less for largely ‘internal’ events such as task switching, could be taken for granted. The stipulations are built-in and therefore somewhat trivial, or embedded after the fact and therefore suspect. Second, the article’s pedantic style – entire blocks of text, such as that defining an “information task shift”, are repeated in close proximity to each other, copy-and-paste style; sections conclude with a short, one-sentence paragraph introducing “The next section of the paper…”, immediately followed by a shortened version of the same information in the next section’s heading. As a literature major and composition instructor, I found the reliance on formula-writing uninspiring at best and clumsily counterproductive at worst. It should not be assumed that a given medium per se communicates a given message, much less rationally reinforces it.

Third, that despite this pedantry the text is littered with obvious flaws, both of a grammar/copy editing nature and, more seriously, concerning the clear presentation and consistent interpretation of the data. Abbreviations used in diagrams are explained on subsequent pages; the number of task switches is confused with the number of search episodes, garbling Table II; “serendipity browsing” is defined as involving “other” information tasks while also being used to label a browsing episode very much involving a primary information task; “topic interest” and “domain knowledge” factors are combined into one reason, instead of two, without specifying the interrelationship. Such shortcomings lead one to question the reliability and validity of Spink’s research in general.

They also, fourth, highlight the fundamental research problems of interpreting and labeling; a quick reference to grounded theory is hardly sufficient. Spink’s methods are simple and straightforward, but the levels of retrospective interpretation are numerous compared to cognitive science’s attempt to monitor the relevant brain activity directly. It is not clear, for example, when the diary entries were made. If during the search process itself, then they must also be considered one of the process’ information behaviors: an extra and rather foreign task which heightens the research effect. If after the search session was terminated, then there is the problem of inaccurate reconstructions.

This problem must also be taken into account when interpreting the post-session interview data. A case in point involves the interview-based “Reasons for information task switching” section. At least three major hermeneutic layers lie between the reader of this section and the information seeker’s reason for a given task switch: the seeker’s own verbal/written translation, the researcher’s own verbal/written translation of this translation, and the
researcher’s analytic/academic translation of this translation of a translation. This last layer is meant to be explanatory, but can easily cause added confusion instead. The interviews were not audio-taped. What did the seeker actually say? Were her responses shaped by researcher-oriented categories and leading questions, despite the claims of grounded theory? How much is the researcher also affected by the research effect? Can task switching occur for no reason?

If getting inside the head of a human study object necessarily involves penetrating and analyzing several major interpretive layers, then Spink might just as well have studied her own multitasking information behavior and eliminated an interpretive layer or two. If the seeker also records task switching reasons in her diary (and thereby provides more controllable primary data), then there is also little need for clarifying interviews. The seeker-provided evidence can be taken at face value for subsequent coding and categorizing, and the researcher can avoid one of the many tempting opportunities to fish for reasons on her own terms.\textsuperscript{17}

My strong reservations about the level of science achieved in this article are, upon reflection, directed more at social scientific pretensions in general than at how well Spink carries them out. She does not evaluate her mix of methods, despite stating this as one of her goals, but I find their presumptive application to learning and literacy in particular, worth a closer, if more self-questioning look. Why not thesis writing as multitasking? Why not study myself, keep a diary? Why not push the innocent emergence of grounded theory? Thus this thesis attempt.

\textit{Flowing and explaining}

If the argument here is that, in theory, I ought to be able to speak and approximate myself better than I could someone else or someone else could me, this brings up the practical issue of how my mirror-gazing is to be satisfactorily accomplished. If the object of study is a living, moving target how can the study be satisfactorily accomplished? To catch up to it would be to disappear into it, to no longer be able to see it.

The allusion to Einstein’s illustration of looking into the mirror while traveling the speed of light is intentional. I consider consciousness a defining given, and catching up with myself, disappearing into myself, a concrete approximate ideal. I also take this ideal to underlie not only aspects of Eastern mysticism and flow theory\textsuperscript{18}, but also the notion of Verstehen in the social sciences. To understand information behavior as holistically as possible moves beyond, ideally, multifaceted empathetic description and letting the object speak itself to seeing it from the inside, to becoming it.

The problem with going native – whether with apes, other humans or myself – is not so much the loss of a supposed scientific objectivity; it is the loss of ritualized communication\textsuperscript{19} via subjectified scientific language.\textsuperscript{20} Being there need not be, cannot be, expressed: Verstehen is, at its ideal limit, silent knowing. Words are non-native impositions; they lead away from the human meaning event to other words and standardized explanatory discourse frameworks.

This has commonly been considered a reductive tendency, simplifying the complex happening into manageable, bite-size terms.\textsuperscript{21} Whether these terms are considered more fundamental or context-independent or theoretically-grounded, communicative precision outweighs holistic recall. The classic movement in the human sciences from description to explanation, from copying off the object on its own terms to flattening it out in other terms, is
illustrative: descriptive reduction should be avoided, while explanatory reduction is considered normal practice and ought not to be seen as a challenge to the object’s own version. The former taints and truncates the scientific inquiry while the latter is a natural extension of it, translating the description into applicable scholarly data.\footnote{22}

Seen in this etymological way, reduction is assumed in explanation – “flattening out” – but not in description – “copying off” (\textit{OED} 1989). “Descriptive reduction” amounts to explanation. Proudfoot (1985) speaks of the difference as a matter of timing, of not stopping the game before it is sufficiently well underway. For my purposes here, I might call this sense of timing the scientific art of avoiding premature explanation. And add that, like all art, it is based on illusion\footnote{21}: the artifice of explanation is already well underway when description supposedly first gets the game going. To describe is to reduce, to explain. Description operates within an explanatory framework – a context – which is itself a product of descriptive/explanatory interplay.

The trick is to make the interplay seem orderly, a matter of positions and transpositions, transforming the tangle into a weave so seamless that the object seems a natural part of it. This involves selling the idea that the world is essentially an ordered place – or that it can be made orderly – and this conviction is promoted and reinforced by the technology of language.

\textit{Controlling the interplay – definitions, methods, materials, process}

Language, via conceptualization and words, is humanity’s primary artificer and artifact. If consciousness – the interplay of our scientific knowing – is a silent ideal, then language is our way of publicly approximating the interplay – capturing it, imaging it, voicing it, evidencing it. It is the means to communal meaning,\footnote{24} generating and embodying the shared virtual reality, the wor(l)d of handy linguistic things, which has become humanity’s most characteristic and effective cultural tool. Language allows us individually and collectively to turn the world over in our minds and re-imagine the interplay. Creatively imposing this virtual reality on the interactive complexities of the world – mapping the interplay onto the model – has given us the comforts and opportunities of the artificial world we live in today. A world not only captured in concepts but also conceived by them.

How language manages to do this can be illustrated by noting the root meanings of several ordinary defining, frame-of-reference terms. Like all terms, they are loaded – they \textit{refer} and \textit{relate}\footnote{25} – but what they refer to is the control function of language itself. Using them as a matter of course in communicative practice effectively reinforces the conviction that things are under control. To problematize this control it is necessary to expose how it is assumed in the very use of terms, and in the very terms used, to establish and maintain the illusion of order. If language is the method and the material, then a closer look at the etymological interplay at its historical surface is warranted.

\textit{Conversation 2 – An etymological interlude}

My obvious preoccupation with etymology in this paper is simply that – my preoccupation. It reflects the conversing which has engaged me most in this project and which, understandably enough, I would most like to capture and highlight. This way of going about things, however, is not considered standard scientific practice and therefore demands further justification.
I find the interplay of the root meanings of words interesting for several reasons. **First**, as with any topic, it is a way of putting the discussion in historical context: the present flows from the past. **Second**, in most cases the lineage is straightforward and easily traceable: the original meaning is still highly applicable. Not that the present use of the term should be confused with the root meanings – the etymological variant of the genetic fallacy – but if the current use is far from settled, and if the root meanings shed light on the controversy in a creative way, then etymological considerations should not be trivialized. They are potentially useful observations, telling data buried in the endnotes.

**Third**, in the present case of defining, frame-of-reference terms, etymological considerations are perhaps the only way of getting around the definitional immunity such constitutive terms enjoy. This is a primary reason for using etymology in this paper, attempting to avoid meta-formatted discussion about the discussion of these terms and get at them under the skin of the discussion. Take *learning* as an example.

I have suggested that the learning that I am engaged in here cannot be captured in words, only re-presented. This first-order represented learning is metaphorical – transferred, translated – but observable and explainable as a linguistic artifact. The subsequent explanations are also metaphorical but purposive, attempting – if learning is to come into the discussion at all – to give a coherent shape to the second-order term *learning*. This transfers metaphorically to third-order learning theory – the term now taken as a happening in its own right, its use in the discussion analyzed – which supervenes on the learning considered at the previous levels even to the point of replacing, indeed possessing, the indefinable, personal, silent learning which – I am empirically convinced, given my interest in the matter – continues to sustain and perplex the defining, fourth-order black box learning edifice which has emerged.

As already noted, once *learning* is well-established as a defining, frame-of-reference term, the intricacy of the learning happening need not be dredged up. Once captured (*conceived*), broken down (*analyzed*), dragged out (*abstracted*), terminated and woven into an orderly narrative (*contextualized*), *learning* disappears into the woodwork and can be evoked freely to validate the discourse, without fear of messy specification. My point, however, is that the term is understood, and thus discussable, whether or not it appears, since learning is always involved in the representative document (and is thus conversing with *learning*).

This point also applies to even more opaque meta-formatting theoretical terms such as *concept*, *analysis*, *abstract*, *context*, and *term*. They are there holding up the general scientific discussion, but while their semantically-operative claims are hidden or largely immune to conceptual analysis(!), their root meanings get a telling version of the story out.

*Theory* itself is a good example of the self-validating inflation involved in turning highly abstract terms into effective black boxes. But like *method* (a “meta-way”, a “together with way”), *theory* is also deflated neatly by its Greek roots in ?e???a, a “spectating”. The “with” and “between” of *meta-*, like that of *con-* and *inter-*, is an expression of the “to-gathering” of the basic interplay. *Meta-*, like the spectating of *theory* and shared journey of *method*, is already at play in the knowing together of *cognition* and *consciousness* and prefixing it adds nothing but more talk. Its use is symptomatic of meta-talk.

*Learning*, it turns out, also comes with a similar deflating linguistic twist. Much of its high-profile contemporary force is due to its being an English term, not only because English is the
dominant academic language, but also because learning is already distinguished from teaching in English and it has been relatively easy to take advantage of their pendulum interrelationship by swinging the spotlight over to the less-explored virgin territory of learning. Settlement and development of the territory has been rapid, and not without conflict or a certain continuing lawlessness – competing theories and methods must be sorted out – but few question the inherent meaningfulness of the enterprise. Acting and talking under the banner of learning is warrant enough.

Nevertheless, for all the liberating, civilizing talk about the central role of the learner and non-hierarchical learning processes, it is thought-provoking to discover that learning can never really escape its subordination to lore – learning as being taught, learning as transmitted and acquired thing, learning as passively received. Learning remains subordinate to the docere, the “teaching”, of documents, and teaching will always “show” the way. We may as well content ourselves with the straightforward “leading” of education; learning, as the Germanic Doktorvater reminds us, is hopelessly wedded to the system, deeply rooted in it.

Much too deeply to be uprooted and disposed of without toppling the entire system. Instead, aware of our discursive simplifications (and their institutionalized reifications), stymied and sustained by the interplay defying and breeding our neat models and carefully constructed processes, we have become rightly critical of authoritarian, linear thinking and talk more subtly and holistically of how complex things are and of how important it is to put things in context. Indeed, I might generalize this grandly and say that the irresolvable complexity of the interplay itself remains the warp and weft of the human context, and thereby evoke the venerable, yet cutting-edge metaphor of weaving, say, threads of information into nets and webs and tapestries of knowledge (or individuals into communities). It is telling that the literal weaving together of context has always had a linguistic twist to it – texts are the threads of the human narrative cloth. We weave words into worlds.

Weave, weft, and web come from the same Indogermanic root; Sanskrit uses it in “wool-weaver”, or spider. To say that reality is complex or complicated is to say literally that things are plaited or folded together; they are interwoven. To characterize the weave of complex, the OED primarily uses the “holding together” of comprehend, comprise, connect and embrace, or the “placing together” of consisting of, composite and compound. Complexity remains under control, co-ordinated.

Order is perhaps the key controversial term in my discussion here. If we humans do not find order, we create it. We need a thread to follow, a pattern, a grid upon the tangled interplay. Thus it is noteworthy that order (rooted in the Latin ordo) is also most probably related to weaving, denoting “a thread on the loom”, perhaps cognate with ordiri “to lay the warp before weaving, to initiate (an enterprise)”. The association is richly illustrative – a mere thread bringing the artificial mechanical productivity of the loom to life, yet also a longitudinal warp thread twisted hard and fast to the loom to provide stability and continuity, an initial “cast of a net, a laying of eggs” (Old Norse varp, cf. Swedish värpa), not to mention “a twist or bending” in everything from wood to mental states to space and time. Order as rank-and-file structuring, yet subject to possible “wrong bias”, curving, distortion, obliquity – the twist remains.

Knowledge spun from the fibers of life and woven into comprehensive systems symbolizing and controlling it may continue to be an enticing metaphor for learning, but it also illustrates our mechanical, linear limitations in trying to capture the interplay. Our files do not contain
learning; learning is not a filing process, woven on and by individual mental or sociocultural looms. Even complexity is an attempt to catch up to learning and express it in a quadratic, flattened-out sort of way. But learning cannot be caught: it is not text or even context, but ambient. Learning is in the running — the occurring (literally “running to meet”, “presenting itself”, “turning up”), the concurring (“running together”), the to-and-fro, give-and-take of discourse and intercourse; it is in the competing (literally “striving together”). It is not universing, but conversing.

Fourth, as these examples are also meant to illustrate, etymological interplay is itself a concrete example of conversing. It is an animated gathering of words, a conventing full of richly communicative meetings, renewed acquaintances, unexpected turns and new insights, a conferring not unlike that happening which is life or the Internet or the library.

In fact, the original Latin conversari meant “to turn oneself about, to move to and fro, pass one's life, dwell, abide, live somewhere, keep company with”. Conversing involved a personal “living with”, “communing with” long before the sense became limited to talking and communicating, and it is the original fullness of meaning which gives the discursive turning at least some sort of axis in the tangled interplay which is me.

Likewise our mediating language signs converse amongst themselves and with the world they co-create in similarly tangled fashion; they too are interforming actors. The trick is to read words and world and actively commune.

Constructing

Conversing is characterized by asides, parenthetical comments, associative leaps, conjecture, role-play, hidden agendas, unacknowledged values and emotional undercurrents as well as by orderly discussion and formal presentation. And the detours are perhaps more illustrative of the turning than the well-engineered highway, and often more important in the end. For the highway, in my reading here, is an illusory product of the detours, the ongoing twisting and turning and finding a way together, methoding. Conversing structures itself as it goes along — constructing is part of the game, and the game is in the playing.

Highways, institutions, languages, rules, systems, plans, results, selves and other edifying edifices are constructions abstracted from and imposed upon the constructing. The term’s roots in “layering” and “piling up” reveal a disarming honesty which makes it more applicable than ever in a world of information overload while de-constructing its theoretical and architectonic pretensions. That we construct is trivial; constructing something of our constructing is a parlor game. Our ziggurats, however, tend to take themselves too seriously to be left unquestioned. What is it we have piled together, and why? Is it a mausoleum or a bridge? And whose conversing is involved?

Teasing out some answers to these questions in connection with this particular project is the focus of the (apparently) concluding Foreground section to this paper. No more pretentious edifice is needed, and a dose of de-constructive self-analysis is always a healthy basis upon which to start locating and evaluating knowledge in “the co-construction of situated meanings” (Kapitzke 2003:48).
But this is to slip conveniently into orderly, idiomatic social science speak. Intentionally – to illustrate again that even for post-structuralists(!) like Kapitzke the reliance on modernist scientific order to get the message across tends to undercut critique of the hierarchical effect of that order. She begins her article with the introductory heading “Libraries as Contexts for Literacies”, evoking the weaving metaphor to locate her own discussion, then a few pages later explicitly condemns use of the metaphor as evidencing a positivist epistemology. Yet it appears again in “webbed cyberspace” and “intertextuality” challenging “linear and hierarchical approaches” (Kapitzke 2003:37,40,47). The effect is more words on the same pile.

Despite her criticism of the “order” associated with libraries, Kapitzke concludes (2003:53) by stressing connections rather than collections as “the material and social bases” of contemporary school information work, structurally “tying things together” rather than simply “gathering” them. And since young people are growing up in a hyperlinked, hypermediated digital culture, only a “hyperliteracy” will do to keep them included, that is, “informed”.

As noted previously, I do not find the hype adding much value to the discussion. In the idiomatically-controlled academic environment the post-s and meta-s and hyper-s are meant to distinguish but serve mostly to connect. They are meant to say something new but often bury the operative term under yet another obscuring, embedding layer of talk. Kapitzke’s contrasting of connections and collections illustrates the confusion one can bring upon oneself: the library, as she has critically pointed out (2003:46), is hardly a mere collection, but highly connected both materially and socially via classification and shelving systems and texts and mediating librarians. Connections depend upon collections and collections are always connected in some way; the dispute is over how and why and to what extent. Kapitzke and her article “dispense order” as intentionally and efficiently as do any of her straw librarians.

I suggest that both post-positivist scholars and positivist librarians are preoccupied primarily with staking out an academic/professional claim and accumulating knowledge capital. Given the relatively low status of LIS and libraries, they are bound to overcompensate by being hyper-academic/professional, each in their own way, and attempting to keep up with what they perceive to be the latest and best. That the scholar finds herself a bit ahead of the librarian in terms of theory is hardly surprising – it is part of the job description.

Kapitzke (2003:42) is obliged, despite inherent theoretical objections, to fix her meanings within “a shared conceptual language and practice” in order for her critique to be heard. In the academic world to which LIS strives to belong, science is the common idiom into which the discourse participant’s personal experience is expected to be translated. This common scientific idiom is grammatically structured, classically, by the empirical methods used in the natural sciences. But since qualitative sociological studies, for example, deal typically with rather more intractable human data and explanatory polyphony, the common scientific idiom is not, figuratively speaking, Latin or mathematics but likens rather the Indo-European language family. Various overarching methodologies of receptivity and interpretation express themselves in a plethora of scientific idioms structured by a variety of methods (Wang 1999:57) in continuous interaction with local tribal conditions.

Classically, what holds the family together despite its multifarious manifestations is its semantic organization around the scientific attempt to establish a coherent (Budd 2001:214), systematized level of theoretical discourse corresponding to relevant, but highly contingent
and value-laden empirical data. Success in this enterprise depends upon methodological refinement (Wang 1999:84) and is measured by a given idiom’s methodical ability to generate and express new insights (Widerberg 2002:188).

I have suggested that such meta-thinking is trivial at best and protectionist at worst. To follow out the language family metaphor, semantic structure lies not in controlling, explaining meta-narratives but in the word roots common to the dispersed idioms. Further, it is not only the specific concepts but the conceptualizing of language itself which is the controlling, explaining narrative. Scientific ordering – relating, connecting, structuring – is what language does. The sociocultural meta-narrative of “a shared conceptual language and practice” is a hyper-language response, and further contribution, to the tangled interplay we seek to control.

It is science – the process/progress of knowing, of discovering and creating and maintaining a collection of orderly connections – which is the lore of learning and the book of literacy. The library is often regarded as one of its most tangible symbolic edifices, and extending the metaphor and mandate of the library to the more sophisticated sociotechnical world of the Internet is seen as given. Kapitzke (2003:53), with her concern for correspondingly sophisticated competencies promoting inclusion, concludes her article by viewing the Web as something for librarians to rule.

Reading

If the library is to remain a potent symbol in an online world, then may it be less as imposing edifice and more as communing artifact welling up from and upon itself. This means toning down the architectural science of connections and collections and highlighting the performance art of connecting and collecting involved. The library not as meeting place, but as meeting, a conversing of documents, personas, techniques, and other tangled narratives.

The wild, communicative hothouse of digital culture gives the library, learning and literacy a chance to reinvent themselves. Not by trying to tame the hypermediated Net along classical cultural/academic lines or by hitching a ride on the black box bandwagon of information science, but by returning simply and clearly and radically to their roots in reading. Not to their material manifestations in books, buildings, information, knowledge, stories, systems or other containers, but to the matter of attending to and thoughtfully considering the flow of events, interpreting signs, deliberating, taking and giving counsel, caretaking, controlling, getting and giving the meaning of – in short, reading as competitively communing.

Libraries and librarians and learning and literacy are all about reading – off, into, onto, through – the wor(l)d. Reading is what we are doing with libraries and as librarians and in learning and via literacy, promoting a culture of proactive communing amongst mutually questioning, competing people. In terms of lifelong learning and literacy, reading involves anticipating, and anticipating keeps us in motion, always potentially one step ahead of ourselves. Reading a situation means anticipating the next move. Flowing.

Further, the interforming interplay of reading, underlying and sustaining the information of texts mediated in various ways, is the concrete happening which is LIS. I suggest that for LIS, reading is the red thread connecting, characterizing and animating the enterprise. It runs through theory-making and policy-making and librarian-making, as well as information using, sharing, organizing, seeking and managing. It runs through libraries and cyberspace, through
cuneiform and hypermedia. In the academy, LIS is positioned to provide the primary reading of reading.

Whether reading is hip enough to make waves within the discipline or without is, of course, highly doubtful. But it is at least deeply rooted and still broadly relevant. It is not meant to hold things together but serve as a mark of quality referring to a venerable, tangible, powerful institution – the institution which is inherent in the enterprise. And surely reading remains a rich, if too obvious and ordinary, expression of the interdisciplinary thread running through the university corresponding to LIS’s presumed profile and role (as well as its application in information literacy instruction).

In addition, the Swedish läsa provides its own twist to the discussion with its Teutonic roots in “plocka” (pick) and “samla” (collect). Given the jumbled juxtaposition of artifacts, events, ideas, and styles which the digitized online world presents, picking and choosing is what reading nowadays is very much all about. Indeed, the transient, contingent, idiosyncratic assembling of bits and pieces characterizes both the façade of digital culture and our personal reading of it. Frohmann (2004:155f), citing the work of Latour and others, sees a similar pragmatic assembling of various material scientific cultural fragments, not the processing and communicating of conceptual information, as characterizing scientific knowledge production.

My reading is that the relatively ephemeral, idiosyncratically gathered artifacts, styles and personas of reading also brings literature, that unclassifiable heart and soul of many libraries and librarians, back into LIS. The interpreting and constructing is hardly individual – the collective connecting is built-in – but personal and authorial. Reading has always involved a co-authoring of the narrative, making it one’s own, and this convening tends to increase the less one lectures and is lectured to systematically, and the more one appeals to and is appealed to personally. Reading is involved in both, but holistically the relatively linear, mechanical ordering of the former has difficulty competing with the organic tangle of the latter. If digital culture is helping to break down authoritarian patterns and promote personal authoring, then the art of literature will once again come to be an important complement to the science of knowledge.

Frohmann (2004:184) concludes his section on the narrativity of scientific practices with the statement that “scientific narrative is the intermeshing of specific stories drawn from a shared field of narrative resources.” It is sufficient for the coherence of scientific practices that this shared field “provides resources for contested stories rather than a single coherent story”. Replace the word “scientific” in these sentences with the word “life’s” and you have a working characterization of the literary authoring of the arts and humanities as well as of the sciences. Replace further the “shared field” not with “canon” or “discipline”, but with “library” or “wor(l)d”, and academic pretensions are both specified and trivialized. The library in LIS is the competitive communing, the reading, at the heart of any conversing.

Rather than sketch out a coming dissertation on the ramifications and possibilities of employing a resurrected notion of reading in the discipline, let me illustrate and conclude this background with a recycled, patchwork narrative of my own. If nothing else, it manages to hang together a bit better and a bit longer than the recycled, patchwork thesis narrative which it is surrounded by yet reflects.
Life, for humans, is art. It is “a branch of learning appealing to the imagination” and involving the practical application of human skills. Using artifice we create artefacts – from pictures and languages to machines and social systems. These artefacts in turn re-create life. The world, for humans, is artificial, a plastic virtual reality continuously re-forming itself. Artfully.

Yet as artlessly as possible. The value of the artifice used and artefacts created lies in their seamless incorporation into the artificial world’s continuous re-forming. They ought to function as naturally and effortlessly as the world which they re-form. Sticking out, they signal the world’s artificiality and their own inadequacy at maintaining the illusion of naturalness and approximating the ideal of effortlessness. For most of us, happiness is a videocall which simply works, which puts the person we are talking to beside us in the same room. How the world works, the cost involved, is irrelevant, a mere technical curiosity. Best left to the creative artifice of the technicians – sociopolitical, mechanical, or divine – enthroned upon their black boxes of given traditions, systems, values, things. All those artefacts that have come to be taken for granted, that have become part of us, part of life and its possibilities. Given the relatively seamless and virtually all-encompassing ‘nature’ of our artificial/artefactual world – the very givenness of a modern cityscape and its sociotechnical organisation, for example – it is not surprising that the synthetic, applied creativity of “imaginative learning” has become a matter of techne while ‘art’ has taken on a subcultural role, from the romantic to the deconstructivist. Art as provocation, ripping apart the seams, revealing the illusion, analyzing the artifice. Self-conscious, exhibitionist, critical.

It is in this sense that the sociology of literature is more art than science, more literature than sociology. Not a feat of academic techne, attempting to methodically explore and re-form the artefact, the “literature society” of which it itself is a constitutive part, but an artistic act, an opening of the sociotechnical black boxes of the literary artefactual world. Not yet, despite Svedjedal’s (1997) attempts to ‘interdiscipline’ the discussion, an organised power constellation of its own, a properly fenced-in “field”, but a transdisciplinary gadfly. The sociology of literature still ranges freely, pestering holy cows wherever they be found.

And critics of the status quo are attracted to the calling, questioning objectified forms of knowledge and practice, problematising artfully the sanctity of culture itself. They tend to have an agenda: exposing the givens of racism, sexism, elitism and other power relations is the first step towards renegotiating them. Hebdige (1988:1-19) takes Genet’s tube of Vaseline, processes it via Barthes’ “second-order semiological system” and the “naturalized” ideologies of Gramsci’s hegemony, and comes up with subculture as participating – defiantly, legitimately – in the “struggle for possession of the sign” (p.17). Anna Williams (1997) challenges the exclusion of women from the male-dominated and dictated literary canon yet finds little solace in the hard-won development and recognition of ‘women’s literature’. It, too, remains marginalized as a ‘category canon’ and runs the danger of becoming a discriminatory selective ranking of its own. Radway (1987) turns the tables on the academy by lifting one of literature’s despised subcultures, the popular romance, out of the shadows and placing its ordinary, female readers – active, creative, constructive individuals – “at the heart of our interpretive enterprise”. She finds the consumption of such mass-produced objects an “oppositional practice” inasmuch as it reflects a “real dissatisfaction” and “utopian
longing” which can potentially be channelled into “creating a world where the vicarious pleasure of [romance] reading would be unnecessary” (p.220-222).43

Viewing literature from the more mundane perspectives of ‘article of consumption’ and ‘produced object’ is itself characteristic of the sociology of literature’s anthropological, rather than aesthetic, cultural tendency.44 Focusing on production and actual consumption brings the popular to the fore. Instead of allowing academic gatekeepers to define the national literary legacy, Gunnar Hansson (1997) suggests that simply looking at what was in fact most widely read at a given time provides a much better criterion for selection. Broady (1998) introduces Bourdieu’s analytic model of various sorts of ‘capital’ distributed competitively within autonomous ‘fields’. Producer-specific “consécration” tends to be plotted against economic profit in the ‘cultural field’ and its subfields,45 and while Bourdieu’s study of the late 19th-century literature field in France documents a high point for the ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ pole, the contemporary movement has been toward the profit margin. Gedin (1997) bluntly announces the withering away of Escarpit’s ‘cultural cycle’ (in favour of the ‘popular cycle’) along with the bourgeois reading public upon which it was based, and Mählqvist (1997) traces the effects of free-market retailing on the ‘literature’ which is actually made available to today’s consumer.46

But the freest market of them all – challenging standardisation, distribution channel monopolies, copyright laws, and institutionalised arbiters of taste – is being opened up by the Internet and driven by the hypertext economy of the World Wide Web. Pandora’s black box of terrorist and other special interest groups, pornography and other freedoms of speech, bloggers and other global exhibitionists – neither sociology nor literature will ever be the same. The residual “aura” of Benjamin’s (1997) original work of art is on its way to becoming McGann’s (1997) “radiant textuality” as we all participate in the continuous re-forming of Borges’ Word Database World.47 Chartier (1999:304) notes that the shift from codex-form to computer screen, from the bound to the unbound text, gives the reader the chance to actively intervene and “co-author” a radically transformed text. Hemmungs-Wirtén (1998) shows, however, that “transediting” is already a well-established practice in connection with the globalisation of popular English-language romances, and Escarpit (1997:173) points out that “creative treason”, ‘conforming’ a text to fit a given audience, is necessary to ensure its survival in a varied, changing world. Despite Adorno’s (1993:248) reassurances, every reading of a text “intrudes” upon it imperialistically.

Which is what I propose to do here, using Laurence Durrell’s The Alexandria Quartet as sociological quarry. But also as methodological model. Svedjedal’s (1997:72-75) three research subcategories – society in literature, literature in society, and the literature society – will be addressed, but the ‘objective distance’ premise underlying them, literary phenomena as sociological study object, should be complemented by a self-reflective fourth subcategory. Sociology not only of, but as literature itself, as “creative writing of recognized artistic value”.48 In studying the social phenomena related to literature isn’t the sociology of literature itself primarily a literary phenomenon, a body of written documents reflecting imaginative learning? Problematising artfully, translating creatively, as artlessly as possible? Communicating from a highly contingent, highly particularised standpoint? Relativistically.
One of Durrell’s aims in writing *The Alexandria Quartet* was methodological: to create a non-linear layering of perspectives rather than a conventional *roman fleuve*, interpolations rather than a sequence. He uses a variety of narrators and narrative forms, embedding them within each other in continuously shuffled fashion. Texts speak to texts: the second novel, *Balthazar*, is Darley’s rewrite of ‘his’ first, *Justine*, based upon information received back via Balthazar’s interlinear annotated copy of *Justine*; it concludes with a letter from Pursewarden to Clea within a letter from Clea to Darley. The narrative competition is the method used to analyse Alexandria and its denizens; both form and content exemplify literature as sociology. Social phenomena as literary study object. Juxtaposed narratives as a way of getting at the holistic *Verstehen* to which qualitative sociological research strives, interacting with texts within the field while attempting to incorporate others obtained from without, all the while critically conscious of the effect of one’s own situatedness and the intervening interpretive layers, of imposing linear plots upon a circling story or, conversely, granting sovereign independence to each narrative. Relatively.

Durrell calls the whole “‘a word continuum’”, an axis from which an indefinite number of books could “radiate” in any direction, and includes at the end of each novel a number of his own potential “workpoints” upon which to build. These post-text workpoints, along with pre-text epigraphs and a number of endnotes, both scholarly and explanatory, manifest Durrell as the external enunciator, one of the artificers of the book. And though he does not introduce himself directly, a cursory background check – itself, via literary criticism, a traditional ‘linked’ aspect of the artefact – reveals that he has extensive personal experience of living in Greece and in fact served as a diplomatic officer in Cairo during World War II, where he met a certain “Eve” to whom he dedicates *Justine*. This is not to say that the work is autobiographical, that Durrell is Darley, the ‘primary’ first-person narrator whose storytelling and own story dominate much of the book, but it does locate and ‘authorise’ a fundamental narrative layer – the enunciator is personally involved, reliable and, most importantly, calculating. The ‘realism’ of the text is scientifically underwritten, supported by ‘external’ documents circulating in a ‘larger’ network. The narratives are not incommensurable, but commonly calibrated and mutually translatable; their juxtaposition may seem haphazard and farfetched, but the effect is potentially cumulative and applicable. Transformed information.

Here, then, is my enunciated take on *The Alexandria Quartet* and ‘society’, what I have won in the telling: transformed information added to my database. Here, at the same time, is my delegated report back to the academy: transformed information added to the academy’s database, won in the receiving (if applicable). The degree of resolution (detailing) is, despite the appearances, extremely coarse. Unscientifically so, perhaps. Which, again, is the point: sociology as literature, more art than science.
Field Report

Location
WGS84 Lat/Long: N 56° 5’ 39.73” E 14° 1’ 42.16”
RT90: X=6219912, Y=1389413

Time (start)
Tuesday, 3 October 2006
13:11:43 GMT

Situation/Instrument/Network
-- Middle-aged Northern European male: born and raised in California; extensive cross-cultural experience living abroad; married, father to two daughters; teacher, gardener.
-- Computer with broadband connection, online database access, public library access.
-- Farmhouse in southern Sweden: semi-private workspace, landscape view, strong social net.
-- Distance course, Literature and Society, class assignment: seven page minimum, “en på god beläsenhet i teoretiskt material grundad belysning” of a literary work, self-directed learning.

Sirs,

For this assignment I have chosen to re-acquaint myself with a work first read some 27 years ago while living and working in the Sahel region of West Africa, Laurence Durrell’s The Alexandria Quartet. Its effect on me then – bringing the desert around me to life, awakening a longing to visit Alexandria itself – continues to colour my view of Africa. One of my neighbours at the time was an Egyptian medical doctor, and through his auspices a few years later I did, in fact, visit Alexandria while living in Cairo. Durrell’s book played a role in putting me on the plane to Egypt. This time round, fittingly enough, it had to be specially fetched from the ‘out-of-circulation’ storage vault at the local library and I re-read it while visiting the island of Crete, itself a venerable European outpost in Durrell’s “absurdly small sea”, the Mediterranean (p.213, all unspecified page references are to Durrell 1962).

Prior to happening upon The Alexandria Quartet, I had also made acquaintance with several of Henry Miller’s novels. Their bohemian frankness served as a backdrop to The Alexandria Quartet’s cosmopolitan polish, and it was interesting to learn subsequently that the two had a long-standing friendship. Energetically challenging the sexual mores of their day seemed a common priority, Miller leading the way in terms of banned books (and wives). Each in his own way self-consciously promoted the romantic image of the artist. As a Californian with European sensibilities, I found myself caught up in their creative tension.

Within The Alexandria Quartet this tension and the romantic image of the artist is embodied especially in the competing narrators Darley and Purswarden. The former’s narrative dominates space-wise, as does his ‘life’, but this advantage is continually undercut by Purswarden’s less-inhibited style and more incisive insights. Plot-wise this is symbolised by Purswarden, without trying or even desiring it, also getting the girl Darley believes is his. And to complete the classic image, Purswarden commits suicide and achieves posthumous literary fame while Darley more moderately withdraws to creative isolation on a remote Greek island. Despite their narrative influence and ‘presence’, the book’s artists (including Clea, the painter, and Arnauti, Justine’s first husband and ‘biographer’) are little more than the usual cultural ornaments on the upper-class Alexandrian scene.

They contribute, along with the other expatriates dominating our attention in the book, to the European sheen which has marked the city from its founding. Alexandria is an outpost of Greek civilisation in the Middle East, a multicultural meeting point, “the only city left where
every extreme of race and habit can meet and marry” (p.216). It is this meeting Durrell sets out to describe in his lush, poetic prose, casting his own romantic sheen over “a shabby little seaport built upon a sand-reef, a moribund and spiritless backwater” (p.731) – a description still fitting the city I myself found some years later. Alexandria remains more important for what it represents than for what it is, and Durrell and I (in my turn) unabashedly build upon this symbolic artefact.

The viewpoint is inescapably, patronisingly European. Edward Said (1997:302-303 et al.) might say that Durrell and his primary narrators presuppose a geographic hierarchy in the city of Alexandria itself – an important “here” in the financial district and European Quarter against the backdrop “out there” of the Arab Quarter – which is internalized and self-reinforcing. European excursions into the Arab Quarter are treated as expeditions to a foreign land, risky, in need of a guide. The place is full of a “sweating Darkness” worthy of Conrad (p.767), entering the story in connection with child prostitution and exiting it with a wild neighbourhood festival centered on a forgotten Muslim shrine brought back to life, tellingly enough, by the spirit (and bathtub) of Scobie, a homosexual English merchant seaman.

Geopolitical European interests also provide a dominating framework for the story, with Alexandria as “the Asiatic capital of Europe” (p.509). Durrell’s personal experience in Egypt was a direct result of, and coloured by, WWII. At the time of writing a decade later, the Suez Crisis highlighted the historical, but crumbling influence of England and France in the region, and this is reflected in the political plot of the book (set, for the most part, pre-WWII). When Mountolive, the professional British diplomat, learns of Coptic involvement in Zionist gun-running to Palestine, he must balance his personal attachment to Nessim and his mother Leila, scions of a leading Coptic family, against the reality of the Muslim Memlik Pasha’s despotic rule in the country. Here, too, Durrell reflexively reinforces the usual stereotypes, managing (especially according to today’s inflamed standards) to both insult and trivialise the ‘Arab’ world: Mountolive’s noble internal struggle to do his duty despite his friendship with Nessim is contrasted with the tasteless indolence of the corrupt Memlik, who prefers to be bribed with rare, exquisitely decorated copies of the Koran stuffed with money. It is his Italian barber who has the wits to actually solve the diplomatic problem, and when Memlik appears again at the very end of the narrative, he has fallen completely under Justine’s power, being led along “like a poodle”, hungry for the company of “white women” in the social circles of Alexandria.

Actual deformities are used to mark the only two Egyptians who actively participate in the Europeans’ world – Darley’s servant, one-eyed Hamid, and the hunchbacked barber, Mnemjian – and this gratuitous predilection carries over into presenting the in-between world of the “Christian Orientals” (p.422), the Copts, embodied in the Hosnani family. Rich, urbane Nessim runs the family’s city-based financial branch and is thoroughly at home in the highest circles of the European community. His country squire brother, Narouz, remains a brutal force of nature more at home with the Bedouin. While both are fervently dedicated to the Copt cause, Narouz’ foreignness is seen on his face in the form of a grotesque cleft palate, and it is he who is made to take the fall for his brother’s diplomatic indiscretions. Their mother, Leila, denied higher education as a woman, greedily absorbs European culture for years vicariously through Mountolive at his various postings, literally embodying Europe’s magnetic pull on the novel as a whole. Yet when the two are at last reunited, her (in the meantime) smallpox-scarred face fills him with disgust and his long-cherished feeling for her vanishes.

In general, the women in the book play their stereotyped, subordinate roles – baubles, sexual objects, or fussy hens (the solicitous wives of Mountolive’s diplomatic corps, p.634). Those
who play leading roles are, of course, beautiful (even Leila in her time), and in the case of Justine, a classic femme fatale, the attractiveness increases proportionate both to her exotic Jewish bloodlines and, when she agrees to partnership with Nessim, to “the perfect submissiveness of the oriental spirit” (p.555). (Balthazar, the European-bred Jewish doctor, is also given an appropriate dose of exoticism via his dabbling in the Cabbala.) Melissa is a nightclub dancer and mistress; noseless Semira is Amaril’s Pygmalion project. Only Clea escapes elements of the female/exoticism typecasting, but then she is thoroughly European, independently wealthy, and an artist.

Having said this, not too much should be made of The Alexandria Quartet as a presentation, slanted or otherwise, of a particular society. As evidence for an inbred societal viewpoint, it is easily mined but hardly remarkable. Durrell himself seems most interested in the typically romantic view of the awakening and inspiration of the individual artist: the tetralogy concludes with both Clea and Darley for the first time recognising the hand of Art upon theirs. Society, even in the form of passionate ‘love’, is simply a backdrop, or at most a colonial source of plunder for the artist’s empire of one.

Yet Darley is interested in using words to capture what has happened, to make sense of it all. And if his first version, Justine, attempts to round the story off neatly as an episode in his life, ‘close the book’ on it, the sudden intrusion of Balthazar’s Interlinear forces him to re-open the case and keep it open. The ‘case’ itself is no longer simply his – the Alexandria he seeks to describe and understand becomes instead a field of competing narratives. Nor is it simply a case, a situation which can be labelled and analysed, but rather a new happening itself, growing upon itself from below. To Darley’s credit, he finds the competition invigorating and, more importantly, complementary. He incorporates large, unedited chunks of other versions into his revised text, including those which make his own seem downright naïve. By the end, he is content to let these overlapping, competing layers be the story, be Alexandria in its multifarious guises.

With his “Workpoints” added to the end of each book, potential extensions to the story, Durrell reinforces the idea that even the Alexandria of then and there is still growing. Clea may have introduced time and sequence into the narrative, but only to bring things up to date, that is, back to the beginning of the co-creative communicative interplay between the writer, the reader, and their various embedded narrators. The Alexandria Quartet populated Alexandria in my own mind, put it on my map, extravagantly but ‘realistically’, as a work of art, a living whole. Plucking at its seams in connection with this assignment revealed some of the less desirable qualities of the Seville Row cloth from which it was sewn, but also a coarse and sturdy structural integrity – compellingly reminiscent of that holding our own personal narratives alive – based upon competing, complementary narrative interplay. It is chiefly the latter to which I recommend your attention in this report.

Sincerely, Dustin Anderson

Time (finish)
Saturday, 7 Oct 2006
13:02:43 GMT
Metathesis: reintroduction and conclusion

Location
WGS84 Lat/Long: N 56º 5' 39.73" E 14º 1' 42.16"
RT90: X=6219912, Y=1389413

Wednesday, 5 September 2007
07:46:25 GMT

Time (start)

Situation/Resources
-- Elderly student, househusband, farm caretaker, athletics coach, board member of the local historical society.
-- Pending master’s thesis in LIS, work resumed on an overtime basis after missing spring deadline and taking a three-month summer break.
-- Continuing doubts as to the acceptability of the work completed, regarding both subject and presentation; doubts as to the degree’s relevance both personally and professionally.
-- Computer technology, online connections, supportive family, friends and administrators, two additional fulltime weeks, a text.

Executive Update

Meeting two practical structuring demands has kept this thesis alive. The first fittingly gave me – a philosophy and literature major – a structuring metaphor with which to play. And upon closer analysis the “red thread” provided just the personal twist my stubborn anti-structuring reasoning craved. The second – writing an abstract – brought me back into the project after a long summer break and against my own inclinations. That I was able to write one has ironically lured me into believing that there is a marketable message in the mess. Thus this concluding attempt to package and sell it.

For, of course, the particular conversing of a thesis must be artificially defined and subjected to external review. It must, in the end, be institutionalized. And as far as the institution is concerned, once the nominal and temporary conversing includes the review and validation procedures, it stops. Learning is a written document added to the library; literacy is a seal of approval. Conversing has become information, a statistic, perhaps a credit to the discipline. An academic – not a mere librarian – has been produced.

The thesis in whole or part may provoke comment in the discipline or wider public domain, but this is neither necessary nor to be expected. Most likely, the only readers of the final text will be the thesis advisor, an outside examiner and a student opponent – all simply doing their duty. The lonely vulnerability of the student’s learning and literacy – the living, personal conversing which is the thesis – can be painfully evident when matched against the crass institutional reality of fulfilling the final, and major, degree requirement. The Borås LIS thesis writing handbook (Edström 2001: 4-5), in politically correct fashion, attempts to downplay this decisive authoritarian advantage by maintaining that the chief importance of writing a thesis lies in the student’s own preparatory development as a critical thinker, project manager and future report writer. This is, of course, rather disingenuous – the degree is the ticket to employment consideration; the importance of writing a thesis is getting the degree. As long as the degree is the primary job qualification, the conversing is a secondary industrial process even for the person animating and characterizing the text.

To try and counterbalance the weight of the institution, I have incorrigibly exaggerated the anarchic role of this person, this conversing resisting formatting and narrow purpose. I have
piled rather than constructed, twisted harder instead of unravelling, followed detours leading far from the main road. Re-reading the text puts even me to sleep, but it stands as a document over an ongoing happening, abstracted for and shaped by the demands of a specific occasion. It is too idiosyncratic, but it drives the point underlying the handbook’s caveat to political correctness: I am the artful happening preceding, at the heart of, and continuing beyond the thesis occasion. The text read dutifully by a few and quickly filed away cannot, and should not, be mistaken for the student.

I have given reasons for why the powerful voice of the institution ought not to be allowed to dominate the conversing, yet inevitably does given its roots in the effective institutionalizing force of language itself. Awareness of the defining artifice of conceiving is necessary if one is to question the definitional authority of reified concepts. Conversing in an orderly fashion is to subscribe to ordering and be unable to move beyond the surface issue of “On whose terms?” when greater subversion is in order.

As I feel it is in this case, not only with respect to the personal/institutional conversing of learning and literacy, but also with respect to libraries and the identity of LIS. Viewing the library as conversation moves the phenomenon beyond the organized storage and use of documents to treating it as a primary document itself, a cognitive system interacting with other cognitive systems. This, as Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson (2006) note, both allows for a more nuanced evaluation of the library’s socioeconomic contribution and creatively expands the ways in which the library can imagine its participation in the ongoing, self-structuring conversation which has come to characterize the online world. Similarly, LIS can be viewed more precisely as a coordinated collection of connected conversations, as well as more grandly as a conversational partner in the academy.

But this is not enough; being a conversation is not enough. The belaboured, seemingly trivial point made in this paper is that a conversation is not to be confused with conversing. It is too defined, too static, too late. And it tends to catch up and compete with the conversing by falling back on its authority – a conversation becomes the conversation, stifling the competition or being forced out of the game. The latter fate is more likely for the library and LIS, given their vulnerable diffuseness and the current momentum of the open-ended, self-generating conversing – hardly an organized conversation – which is driving the expansion and de-institutionalizing influence of the Internet.

I suggest, rather, that the library and LIS play to their humble strengths – their relative lack of territory to defend combined with a transterritorial calling – for it is just this vulnerable diffuseness which promotes the inclusive curiosity and reliance on shared ownership/responsibility which characterizes conversing at its vital best. In a very real sense it is the transterritorial calling of the library and LIS which is their territory, and while this means giving up their claims to represent an authoritative conversation, it positions them well at the key sociotechnical hub of exemplifying, enabling and mediating conversing. In an online world such a service role is more cutting edge than ever. Managed wisely, it speaks silently for itself. And participates in the constantly creative subverting of the status quo.
**Conclusion**

Despite the hype of lifelong learning and the very real demands of the knowledge economy, academic study remains something of an ivory tower luxury. For those, like myself, who enjoy researching, pondering and discussing, this extended thesis project (not to mention the four-year program period) has often provided a holiday from everyday practical concerns, a ready-made excuse. Yet the time, energy and money expended must be accounted for, especially given the virtual absence of specific, hands-on career training. My long-suffering wife and family demand an explanation. Preferably something tangible. And more than a pile of papers or helpful online navigation tips.

But all I have to show for it is me. I have taken the personal aspect of learning to an extreme, using even this thesis opportunity selfishly, risking the only tangible that counts – the degree. I have followed my own long-standing interests, focused on my own actions and reactions, represented and summarized my extended conversations with this LIS program. I have written in dense, rhetorical English and taken standard scientific communication norms lightly. I have promised more than I have kept. I have indulged myself.

Am I a more literate person for it? Certainly with respect to practical online skills and theoretical librarianship concerns. Have I contributed to the LIS conversation beyond writing papers temporarily engaging a few dutiful readers or participating actively in various group projects and course seminars or increasing all-important program statistics by one? Only if it’s mostly about me.

That is why I have indulged myself, and made a point of it. I have records of the hours spent, the difficulties encountered, the feelings experienced, the thoughts entertained, the ceremonies undergone, the changes made, the words and worlds left on the sidelines. I could analyze these records and produce a set of new records on the personal and sociotechnical aspects of thesis writing. I could discuss the submitted text in terms of action research or auto-ethnography and ground a theory to add to the discussion.\(^{61}\) There seems to be much more to add to this thesis conversation. But really, when it comes right down to it, I’m all that’s left. I am the remainder of the conversation, the living product of, and contribution to, the cause.

This morning a white car appeared suddenly and swiftly out of the fog, swerved at the last moment, and just missed me. Also something to think about. And keep moving.
**Foreground**

Reading through this thesis has been a challenging and, at times, rewarding experience. Anderson writes in a demanding, intense way, often substituting bookishness and allusiveness for clarity and consistency. He makes few concessions to the reader, following neither a standard format nor a straightforward line of argumentation. The few signposts he does lay out seem to be added as an afterthought and the main text is often overwhelmed by the footnotes. He insists that the reader enter his world of personal anecdotes, abstruse theoretical concerns, abrupt linkages, recycled texts, and etymological obsessions.

Anderson is all too aware of what he has gotten himself into. Indeed, he deliberately sets himself a seemingly contradictory task: to write a thesis which is not too thesis-like in order to question the institutionalized theory and practice of thesis-writing in general. He maintains that this is necessary if we are to get at the intricate, even hopelessly tangled, learning involved. For Anderson, this learning is not some definable thing, much less an orderly process or carefully organized system. It is the student herself.

To support this position—and, despite his anarchic tendencies, he does try to support it—he refers in passing to learning theories stressing the individual and to self-reflexive research methods. But the bulk of the argument is carried by a virtual vortex of etymological references, sucking in the seaweed of *tangle* as effortlessly as the single turn of *universe*. The initial emphasis is on exposing what he regards as the artificial structuring authority of everyday academic words such as *concept* and *context*. Seen etymologically, the uncritical use of such words naturally reinforces the presumption, easily abused, that the object of discussion can be controlled in orderly fashion. Anderson maintains that authoritarian discursive power can hardly be undermined using its own constitutive weapons.

But he also revels in sharing his discovery of the many collaborative, open-ended terms which we can subversively employ instead. He emphasizes verbal forms to try and keep the interplay moving, and finds surprising strength in such traditional notions as *conversing* and *competing*. Literacy, he eventually remembers to include and just as swiftly concludes, continues to be aptly served by the attentive, anticipatory deliberation of *reading*. The linguistic enthusiasm is unshakeable (an appendix with further detailed insights is provided). By the time he winds down enough to attach a slightly more orthodox presentation of and plea for literary artfulness amidst narrative interplay, it seems as if the entire thesis has been sucked dry. Anderson himself is the final unexamined, rooted word.

Two practical questions immediately arise: As all that is left, is he worth examining? And how are we to evaluate a thesis which tries so hard not to be a thesis? I can only assume that Anderson welcomes the conversational competition. Like it or not, I too have a goal to defend. I may find his presentation interesting and informative, but neither hustle nor fancy footwork necessarily scores any points. The roots I have to go on are limited to what is demonstrated in this paper. Here is my read.

Despite his criticism of the tradition, Anderson has definitely written a thesis. He puts his foot down and tries to make a point. He starts a highly controlled discussion, complete with a guiding theory of irresolvable interplay, extensive etymological evidence, and a method of discursive subversion. The complexity and wordiness of his writing style is, if anything, hyper-academic. He plays the parlor game of constructing something of our constructing well.
The problem is that Anderson’s own piled ziggurat is too much of a mausoleum. For all his talk of conversing, he essentially holds an extended, authoritarian monologue. As the “red thread” he tends to come through as a royal “we”. By disdaining the standard academic social skills of proper presentation and orderly progression, he risks the negotiations over a “common meaning”. He is all too often simply a royal bore.

He seems to throw in research questions and methods as a matter of careless duty, rather than with any intent to follow up on them. What happened to grounded theory? He reproaches Spink for her casual reference to it, then does the same himself (pp. 11-12). Where is the promised capturing of the evidence generated by the “competing of interests” (p. 9)? His wandering thoughts are hard to follow (what does the Nobel Banquet have to do with the war in Yugoslavia in footnote 90?). Worse, his logic at times does not follow (library is not to books as this paper is to paper: footnote 34). And he concludes with a rather emotional appeal. Anderson delivers an op-ed piece just as much as serious research.

To improve the conversation, I suggest he make a few concessions to protocol.

- Edit the etymological references ruthlessly. Etymology may be interesting, but it is ultimately trivial to the established discussion. A look, via discourse analysis, at the role structuring concepts play in thesis-writing discourse is to be preferred.
- Convert the footnotes to endnotes. They are often too fat and distract the reader from the main line of thinking. Better yet, banish the tangential lot to an appendix.
- Keep the research objectives focused and the evidence concrete. A suitably-framed analysis and discussion of the conversational data generated by this project would improve the quality of the thesis and provide a more valuable contribution to the discipline.

There are nuggets of insight and learning to be found amongst the long, rambling passages characterizing this paper, and the whole certainly illustrates Anderson’s tangled anti-thesis thesis. It is debatable, however, whether this is sufficient, whether all the communicative effort, his and mine, has been worth it. But then that too, perhaps, is the point.

Submitted by Dustin Anderson

Time (finish)
Monday, 17 September 2007
11:59:57 GMT

[Editor’s note: The thesis version to which this commentary refers has been substantially altered, according to several of the suggestions offered, into the present version. Footnote 90, for example, no longer exists. An added presentation and brief discussion, in Swedish, of the production data generated by this project follows.]
Metametauppsats: sammanfattning och kommentar

Förhandlingarna pågår, men processen har kommit så långt att vi kan sammanfatta och diskutera vad det handlar om och vad som har hänt. I och med att uppsatsen har haft med sin egen uppkomst och sitt eget utförande att göra, har det varit viktigt att först iscensätta processen för att sen kunna analysera det forskningsunderlaget som uppstår.


Trots det akademiska systemets auktoritära maktposition, öppnar uppsatshandboken för dialog. Det är också ”min uppsats” det handlar om. Lokala avvikelser får förekomma, och här har jag valt att provocera i min tur. Hur långt får man avvika? Får man till och med utmana dessa ”vetenskapliga normer”, inte bara i teori men också i praktik? Hur då kan ett rubbande av ordning ordnas?


I och med att en standarddisposition verkar saknas i uppsatsen (av förklarligt skäl – dispositionens roll står under luppen), förses den gransknande läsaren med följande kortfattade, något desperat index. Hänvisningarna är till sidor där jag tycker dispositionsämnet berörs, där jag har antigen försökt motsvara förväntningarna eller tagit upp standardrubrikerna i diskussionen. Tydlighet (också under luppen) kan ändå inte garanteras – uppsatsen förblir allt för mycket min.

Inledning: s.3, 4; Bakgrund: s.10-12; Val av ämne: s.4-6; Problembeskrivning, -avgränsning och -formulering: s.3, 6-8; Syfte och frågeställningar: s.8-9; Tidigare forskning: insprängd överallt, s.40; Litteratursökning: inte nämnt, huvudsakligen distans resurser; Litteraturgenomgång: insprängd överallt, s.40; Teori: s.6, 8-9, 10, 12-13, 14-15, 29, 32, 35-36; Metod: s.7-8, 10-12, 13-18, 21-22, 29-30, 32, 35-36; Arbetsätt: s.1, 3, 7-8.

Jag avslutar med en kortfattad framställning, analys och diskussion av det oöverskådliga forskningsunderlaget som uppsatsen är. En ”autoetnografi” har jag kallat den, mest för att termen har en gnutta legitimacy som ”postmodern” teori/metod men också för att idén att kunna betrakta och berätta om ens egen kultur ”inifrån”, att kunna auktorisera och associera till ens egen erfarenhet, verkar själveklart för mig som praktikant och teoretiker inom lärande och läsande. Jag utvecklar mitt eget argument för denna synpunkt i (och med) uppsatsen och har därför inte anlitat eller diskuterat autoetnografi per se, men kan rekommendera Irma McClurinins (2001) nyanserade introduktion till den enkla sammansättningen av jag (auto), kollektiv/nation (etno) och skrivande (grafi) som också tilltalade mig. Forskaren och forskning inom forskningsvärlden bildar alltid ett (oftast dolt) samspel mellan jaget och kollektivet och skrivandet som kan betecknas som och utforskas autoetnografiskt. Här försöker jag inte bara synliggöra, men också göra det.

I runna siffror

Uppsatsen kan kvantifieras på följande sätt (både strikt bokföring och grövre, väl-i-underkant tagna uppskattningar ingår i tidsberäkningarna):

Tid
Produktion


Tidsåtgång och sidproduktion bokfördes under den första intensiva arbetsperioden (november 2006 – januari 2007). Under 67 dagar och 404,5 timmar arbetstid (netto) färdigskrevs 18 sidor. En datakartläggning, med skrivning av en sida optimerade till 10 timmars arbete, visar att arbetstiden fördelas jämnt stigande under perioden (6 timmar/dag i snitt) medan sidproduktion i bara några enstaka, tidiga fall när optimum och avmattas rejält efter de första 20 dagarna. Dag 20 hade 9 sidor skrivits efter 121,5 timmar arbete; 47 dagar och 283 timmar senare hade ytterliga 9 sidor skrivits.

Slitage
Svårbedömt, förstås, men byte av ett utbränt grafikkort i datorn och ökad användning av läsglasögon kan nämnas. En relation (till respondenten) brändes också tydligt under min tjänst som opponent.

Kontaktyta
Hela slutdokumentet omfattar runt 50 sidor och över 22000 ord; datafilen tar upp ungefär 350 kilobytes. Projektets samlade pappershög mäts till drygt 5000cm³; tillhörande elektroniska filer upptar minst 75 MB på datorn.

Mitt etappseminarium gästades av 4 personer. Två personer – min handledaren och en vän – har hittills läst uppsatsen mer ingående. Eventuellt skall en opponent, en examinator och en vän till också göra det. Förutom mitt deltagande i 10 etappseminarier och ett slutseminarium, har uppsatsens gång haft direkt, dagligt påverkan på min fru och våra två döttrar.

Övrigt
Ett tag provade jag ordbehandlingsprogrammets verktyg som följer ändringar i dokumentet. På en sida, under ett arbetspass, registrerades det 15 ändringar i formatet, 7 borttagna textbitar och 20 nya, insprängda textbitar. Ändringarna påverkade hälften av sidan, men motsvarar uppskattningsvis bara en liten bräckdel av dem möjliga ändringarna hjärnan hade bearbetat under tiden. I slutdokumentet har sidan mestadels försvunnit; vissa bitar har omplacerats.

Jag har inte räknat hur många koppar te som har druckits, hur många gånger datorsystemet har strulats till eller hur många webbsidor har besöks, men en samling sådana siffror hade inte varit oväsentligt i sammanhanget. De registrerar händelser som har påverkat uppsatsen och som man kan ta ställning till.
Som samtal


Runtomkring

Jag har familj, ett jobb och en social och fysisk miljö som kräver uppmärksamhet och skötsel. En dryg fjärde del av de kodade hänvisningarna har med livet runt omkring själva uppsatsprojektet att göra. Oftast är dessa korta inslag som handlar om väder eller läxhjälp eller en fest. Ibland leder en sådan betraktelse till en jämförelse med skrivandet, som i den följande posten med typiskt blandat inslag:

Date: 22 Nov 2006
Duration: 5,0 hours (2 morning, 1 afternoon, 2 evening)
Written: 0,0 pages
Events: morning additions, word-by-word; phone call to register myself in the program for this term and regain access to ebrary database; teaching before and after lunch; made an ugspannkaka for the gang for dinner, then hembygdsföreningens styrelsemöte; returned to find Karna high jumping in the barn late – she wouldn’t give up until she had cleared 125, and it took quite a frustrating while; couldn’t resist diving into a footnote late myself, and wouldn’t give up until I had it right.

Trots antalet runtomkring hänvisningar, tar de inte mycket plats i texten, varken reflektions- eller känslomässigt. Samtidigt skall deras funktion som skapare av ett visst tonläge i posten inte negligeras. Posten för 6 Dec 2006, till exempel, avslutar med ”at least I managed to buck a stiff headwind in to teach – my only accomplishment”.

Känslor

Känslomässiga uttryck förekommer i över 40% av posterna i loggboken. Ofta är känslan uttryckt på ett indirekt sätt – ”hung up on”, ”as if I might actually succeed”, ”sign that it might hold”. Tre grova koder för positiva, negativa och blandade känslor har använts. Av dessa står positiva känslor för 12% av anmärkningarna, negativa för 45% och blandade för 43%. I likhet med runtomkring noteringar, ansas en stor värld utanför projektet som påverkar med inte syns. Trots att en av målsättningarna med loggboken var att kunna fånga den affektiva aspekten, kan jag bara konstatera att tendensen till underdrift är stor. Det kändes som om känslor inte hör hemma i vetenskaplig forskning, inte ens på metakognitiva nivån, inte för en man.

Date: 4 April 2007  
Event: Managed to send off a draft to my supervisor for last-ditch attempt to catch the last-chance-for-this-term seminar sequence. Hope the mechanical process doesn't work out so I can forget the whole thing. The writing has actually been enjoyable at times, but I can no longer kid myself that it’s becoming more disciplined, submissive, submissible. My recurrent half-dream of not being able to finish school, missing classes, ignoring an entire subject (did this really happen or not? – I remain unsure…), dropping out, dropping off, is playing itself out. I seem powerless to effect another outcome. Nor does it seem to matter. Time has been spent with little to show for it except for the personal growth from having participated – sounds like life.

Skrivandet  
Flera koder försöker kartlägga hänvisningar, 70 totalt, till den skriftliga produktionen bortkopplat från reflektion över produkten. Det kan handla om tillskott, ändringar och konkreta exempel. Hänvisningar till tidsåtgång gentemot produktion tilltar, av förklarligt skäl, i samband med olika ”sista leveransdagar”. Ofta knyts en påföljande betraktelse av mer personligt eller teoretiskt slag an till dessa relativt neutrala skrivproduktionsnoteringar:

Date: 28 March 2007  
Event: Have fallen behind on my timetable and am looking for excuses to give up, but still writing bit by (at times, unconnected) bit. It’s the lack of direct, orderly connection which interests me as fundamental to learning, and especially e-learning, but maintaining and demonstrating it as such will be my downfall. Am in the midst of a good example, having started with catching up to myself, Einstein and flow, then coining empathetic understanding for Verstehen leading to a google search bringing me to Proudfoot and reductionism via Thursby at ufl.edu leading me to recursiveness and attribution and Lakoff’s embodied mind, on the one hand, and via Song Ren to Rappaport and religious ritual on the other, with an extra check via Sosis and Ruffle. It is the vital but innocuous and quickly forgotten via link which fascinates me for not only practically enabling second-hand citations but also leading the learning/writing. My lit list from a year ago has not played a role in the writing, Dewey and Latour have become bit players at best, while total unknowns Gibson and Lakoff stare me in the face. Learning must be disciplined to be effective, eller? In the e-learning world the academic sects are enabled and marginalized by cross-disciplinary perspectives, by the inter of the net. LIS should and could be poised to catch the wave, having a shallower trench to climb out of…

Sociotekniskt  
av givna, osynliga ”sanningar” på vilka praktikens synliga samspel och maktutövning vilar, de artefakterna som har blivit fakta.

Jag har pratat om uppförandet (eller snarare uppstaplandet) av ”common meanings” och tagit en reflexiv- eller autoetnografisk tolkningsgrepp an, där effekten av uppsatskrivandets sociotekniska samspel på mig dokumenteras och framställs. Jag har drivit Latours tänkande till sin spets med fokus på språk och själva ordbildningen som människans främsta upprätthållande sociotekniska ting, med de samspelande människorna och, i slutändan, jag själv som artefakten. Under rubriken socioteknisk här tar jag upp hänvisningar till de samspelande människorna, medan sista kategorin ägnas åt reflekterande kring mig själv.

De 76 hänvisningarna under denna kategori har med relationen till skolan och datorn att göra. Inslag handlar om både vardagsadministration (”register myself in the program”, ”graphics card gave up the ghost”) och mer personliga kontakter (”my supervisor has already pointed out”, ”only to be brusquely reminded by the computer”). Relationen till datorn, inte oväntat, verkar vara närmare men mindre känslosladdad än den till skolan: datorn är dagens distansstudents reskamrat, skolan studentens avlägsna matchledare. Både betraktas som någorlunda egensinniga, kontrollerande verktyg, men datorn känns mindre hotande. Jämför ”I put up with a pop-up reminder/request appearing in the middle of my screen every ten minutes for the rest of the day and evening, fascinated at my own helplessness/indifference in dealing with/mastering the intrusive technology” med ”the department secretary was consulted and her response reminded me that the right time was when the handledare had decided it was ready”.

Är det bara att man inte kan bli alltför upprörd av en maskin? Eller är det att datorn anses möjliggöra där skolan begränsar? Följande post ger en mer nyanserad bild:

Date: 20 Jan 2007
Events: starting to skip over days and have stopped counting the hours, feels like I have enough of that sort of data and starting time to measure things certainly interrupts learning, might be useful with an extended weekly (?) entry framöver; never made it to Borås due to the weather, but managed to contribute via e-post during the morning, an effort appreciated by the seminar leader, and it actually felt as if I were involved given the simultaneity (suggested using Skype as well, but that’s a bigger step for them to take);done some infolit reading – real books, nice break from writing; still trying to wind up etymology section – always new, interesting angles popping up…impossible to mark/metadata/time the incremental footnotet changes I still engage in constantly back and forth throughout the text – that which is the writing (Word “seems” to have learned, p17-18, to simply leave a larger gap on the page and move the entire paragraph with its expanding footnote to the next page, saving me the trouble of trying to make it fit, layout-wise, by adjusting text length, leading of course to new additions and subtractions, an example of layout affecting content. Discovered Track Changes in Word (see “impossible” above) – will run a trial documentation.

Av de 18 tillfällen där handledaren (eller ”supervisor”) nämns i loggboken (inklusive bifogade e-post brevväxlingar) hänvisar mer än hälften i snabb förbigående till en ren byråkratisk funktion: ”send off a draft to”, ”have not scheduled time with”. Av de resterande benämningarna handlar de flesta också om att gå ett visst struktureringskrav tillmötes, nu i samband med texten: ”create a red thread for my supervisor to follow”, ”handledaren’s wise comments about structuring and too extensive footnotes”. Den inledande kulturkrocken mellan min ståndpunkt – ”synd att du måste läsa igenom det överhuvudtaget” – och handledarens – ”du ska naturligtvis få ha en handledare” – står kvar. Den speglar uppsatsens konkurranterande system/person samtal tema i sig: ”To what extent can I imagine my own learning and validate my own literacy?” (s. 10) gentemot handledarens slutgiltiga ”Den är alltför avvikande från normen…”.

**Reflekerande**

Frasen ”interesting to see” dyker upp flera gånger i loggboken och signalerar ett visst analyserande objektivitet i samspelet med systemet, en viss självdistans. Det vanliga ”it will be interesting to see how it is received by others” kompletteras av ”be interesting to see how I react to the reaction”.

Loggboken själv är, förstås, denna ”reaktion till reaktionen”. Som ett avsiktligt metakognitiva dokument präglas den av reflekerande inslag – funderingar över och kopplingar till själva skrivandet, lärandet och det personliga. Över en fjärde del av koderna och de kodade hänvisningarna hamnade så småningom i denna kategori, alla 125 inslag som rapportera om avvikelser eller avviker från strikt reportage. Om allt i loggboken har med mig att göra, så förtydligar dessa hänvisningar att jag är medveten om det.

Under koden ”tangering” (15 stycken) uppmärksammas noteringar om tid och energi som går åt i samband med tangerande intressen eller alltför finslipning av detaljer: ”Highly interesting, but terribly impractical. Who cares? Even if it is fundamental…”. Lärandet som sker vid sidan om (”externt”, 17 stycken) eller som är delvis användbart (”blandat”, 18 stycken) noteras ofta av liknande skäl: ”not sure if the last four hours should be counted – checked out Time’s person of the year (You) article, online, and found out about You Tube, MySpace, Flikr and other web phenomena being co-created by us all, reader/user directed Internet pages bypassing experts and authorities”.

Kategorin började forma sig runt reflekerande kring skrivandet (36 stycken) – ”the text is imploding, wanting to write footnotes to footnotes”; ”the backtracking is actually moving things forward by improving what I am saying and how I am saying it”. Sen kom den till att innefatta associerande till personliga händelser och egenskaper (28 stycken): ”sitting here ruining my eyes reminds me of my time doing editing work in Hong Kong in the late 80s”; ”it has always taken time for me to get up to cruising speed”. Sist uppmärksammades personliga associerande som leđde tillbaka till kommentar om skrivarbrettet eller textens innehåll (11 stycken): ”village dinner and dancing in the evening, learning to salsa, transferring process to feel and body knowledge, reverse engineering Vygotsky”.

Loggbokens betydelse som både bolplanck och skriftligt surrogat för den personen som uppsatsen speglar summeras i de två följande citat:
Date: 6 Nov 2006
Duration: 6 hours (4 morning, 2 evening)
Written: 0.25 pages
Events: starting to add comments to this daily log during the actual writing rather than retrospectively at the end of the day; started working on the “main” text, soon shifted back to adding to the footnote which has been the focus of attention the last couple of “non-productive” days, which then shifted me to the log book (9:25) – perhaps the log book will become the footnotes to the footnotes, and who knows which of these may eventually be shifted (over rather than up!) into the main text; the various forms of expression are, in any case, starting to become as entangled as my thoughts, experiences, and practical writing decisions quite naturally are…[…]

Date: 13 September 2007
Events: Re-read this logbook for the first time with a mind to selectively populating another appendix. Sit here now emotionally awash with vital, oh-so-well captured and fitting memories. As I guessed – the logbook is the qualified record, the inhabited evidence. Worth conversing.

Den speglade, reflekterande personen är jag. En användare, ett samtal, ett animerat föremål, en uppsats.

**Diskussion**

Om analyser plockar isär, så krossar diskussion bitarna ännu finare. Är det något av mig kvar i dessa statistiker och kategorier, så kommer det att blåsa iväg efter behandling med flera ord. Men ändå – hur ser jag som socioteknisk ting ut? Och är tingen av något vetenskapligt värde för disciplinen?


I dagens elektroniskt uppkopplade värld har studentens kontaktyta fått en mer omfattande och mindre förutsägbar innebörd. Jag har noterat och grovberäknat de vanliga ytorna vid skrivbordet och i skolan, men deras inblandning är minimalt jämfört med alla de webb-baserade kontakter jag har levit mig in i. Att spåra och kartlägga denna virtuella yta skulle ge en mycket mer talande bild av uppsatsen som lärande, snurrande, mångfaldig ting.


Frågan kvarstår: Har vi haft mer än ett tidvis intressant tidvis frustrerande samtal? Har vi förhandlat fram en ”common meaning” som bidrar till biblioteks- och informationsvetenskap? Har jag visat upp en tillräckligt tillfredsställande akademisk kompetens?

Och då blir mitt korthus en hög igen. För över svaret råder bara disciplinen.
**Slutsatsning**


Jag har påstått (s. 34) att det tillfälliga kan systemet inte ta större hänsyn till, medan det personliga borde ackommoderas. Men om personen kännetecknas av det unika och tillfälliga och systemet söker för effektivistens skull en hög grad av enformighet och regelbundenhet, hur skall det personliga kunna uttryckas i ett system?

Flera praktiska förslag har visats upp här: dagboksöver, egen utvärdering, uppläggning av dispositionen efter produktionsprocess, införlivande av ett mer autoetnografiskt och litterärt synsätt. Andra kan läggas till: munligt prov baserad på ens samlat erfarenheter och prestationer under studiens gång, införlivande i texten av ett metakognitivt lärandeapportmoment, uppsats som ”hands-on” praktik eller som praktisk uppfattning av varierande färdigheter. Alla dessa förslag kan utforskas vidare och bidra till utvärderingsunderlaget för programmets egna pågående lärande.

Det som behövs är inte så mycket nytänkande som nypraktik, inte mer prat om individens lärande utan öppenhet inför personliga lärande- och examensformer. Stöd för ett citerande som sätter igång istället för bygger in.65 Anders Wilhelmsons (2007) arkitektoniska tankar om utformningen av Stockholms nya stadsbibliotek skiftar böckerna från bokhyllans fasta bestämmelser till sökmojorns mångfaldiga kopplingar:

Bilden av ett tillfälligt, av ingivelserna ordnade bibliotek träder fram, en plats där människa möter människa, inte bara läsare möter författare, i en kontinuerligt dynamisk process. En ordning där slumpen och det rationella äntligen får lika spelrum även offentligt. En helt ny form av byggnad.

Postlude

I am a tired but satisfied thesis writer. I have been tired but satisfied with this project for a year now, ever since rounding off my unexpectedly rich and intensive conversation with the *OED*. And starting the struggle to artfully conform.

A task faced silently and heroically by all thesis writers. In voicing and subjectifying this struggle, however, I am not entirely alone. A post-research search of the Internet and Borås databases using the combination ‘autoethnography “thesis writing”’ turned up two exemplary articles: one (Noy 2003) appealing to autoethnography and journey metaphors, the other (Fisher & Phelps 2006) based in action research and staged as a play. Both resonated.

Noy notes how a thesis can seemingly take on a mind of its own and drift away from its proposed path. He wonders if this “different work” amounts to a “different researcher”: “Are we not in writing ourselves changing, transforming? Could we understand the dissertation as a journal, as a scholarly diary of sorts?” He hopes that his “readers would transform from commentators or critics…into readers who moved along ‘with’ the work…following how [he] was trying to create meaning and meaningfulness, however idiosyncratic and fragile the path.” He finds himself unable to bring the “messiness” of the work into line, yet hopes his readers will not only be able to bear it, but perhaps also enjoy it and even benefit from it.

Fisher and Phelps’s drama succinctly presents the tensions and problems I have faced and attempted (in my own bullish, messy way) to address. With a few minor modifications and LIS-specific additions, their abstract should, perhaps, have been mine:

This article explores the tensions and incongruities between conventional thesis presentation and the principles of action research. Through the experiences of the authors, alternative approaches to thesis structure are proposed which are argued to be more congruent with the epistemological, methodological and ethical aspects of action research. Consistent with our arguments, the article is presented as a play. Act I considers the tensions facing research students wishing to write up their action research in the context of conventional thesis writing requirements. Act II consists of four ‘scenes’, each of which illustrates a key learning arising from our own stories: writing in the researcher as central to the research; staying true to the unfolding research story; using metaphor; and finally, weaving literature throughout the thesis. Act III considers the challenges of examination in the face of breaking with tradition. We conclude with a ‘curtain call’ from the narrator that offers a reflexive engagement with the main themes of the article.

But it wasn’t. And I have now had my curtain calls.
Reorientation – research results

Now that this thesis has been aired and discussed, though not approved, at a final seminar, it can be fairly said that the results of the recursive research process are in. Following my thesis defense, and certainly despite it, I was asked to provide a clearer formulation of my research questions and methods (see the Orientation section, p.10) and clearly delineate the results. This implies, as was also made clear at the final seminar, that while my practical argumentation attracted (disapproving) attention, the theoretical argumentation underlying it was considered irrelevant, if not simply unacceptable.

The paper was not seen as "rational"; it was "art, perhaps, but not science", an example of "literary criticism". The implications for the discussion of the art in science (whether "litteraturvetenskap" or "informationsvetenskap"), and thus my general point regarding the person inhabiting the "individual" in the study of learning, literacy and the "user", was not taken up at all. Since, from my perspective, the theoretical/practical discussion is perhaps the most important element of this (or any) thesis – the sociology of literature section using The Alexandria Quartet, for example, is part of the underlying Background argument, not just another cute, doll-inside-the-doll artistic touch – it was clear that I had failed to make my point. On the other hand, by instantiating the point in the text’s somewhat tangled form I succeeded in generating data, confrontationally, for my research into the superficial thesis-writing process focused on the, that is, this individual. And also generated a short, superficial theoretical/practical discussion of sorts. These results were as expected.

The demand for a clarifying, beginning-and-end supplement also implies, quite rightly, that my autoethnographic perspective lacks even narrative form – a basic expectation taken for granted by Stapleton and Taylor (2004) in their otherwise critical analysis challenging "positivistic" thesis structures in the context of the present "crisis of representation" and the "literary turn in qualitative research". And while I have not merely been telling a story here, I must concede that even personal happenings, to be told, start and end somewhere. Here is my summary of the journey, taking each interrelated research question in turn.

What are the salient features of this personal/institutional thesis writing event?

The primary feature of this event has remained unchanged from the beginning: the unscientific goal of writing a master’s thesis is to get it done. Other relatively unchanged features include incompatible theoretical stances resulting in the use of incompatible languages, conflicting views of the role of the thesis supervisor, and a general adversarial relationship between the system and the individual. All of these features, unfortunately but unsurprisingly, can be linked to a view of the thesis event as an obstacle to be overcome rather than as a learning opportunity to be nurtured. They can also be characterized, as in all schooling, as cultural conflicts involving the adaptation of the person to the conditions imposed by the system.

* Though one always hopes to make an interesting point, thus the continuing labor of hours over this text. Having tried to make it previously in a similar context, I am used to the (lack of) effect made. Fortunately, a professional academic friend of mine, with extensive experience of my ideas and their relation to my approach, has also read and discussed the thesis with me. It would be hard to overestimate the energizing effect his brief, focused, and entirely unexpected engagement had on this project during its final stages.
Other features have undergone modification. My initial interest in what I wanted to investigate and say – in thesis content – has gradually been replaced by virtually complete focus on how to go about investigating and saying it. This change reflects adaptation to both the formal impositions of the system and, on a much more challenging level, my self-imposed attempt to talk about personal learning and literacy while radically questioning the adequacy of talk to capture it. Taking on these related challenges – talk, too, is a formal imposition – has led painfully but satisfyingly (even now) to new insights and competencies. These are taken up under the next research question.

What is my experience of this event and how might it be communicated?

Given my theoretical concerns and writing standards, I expected a long, drawn-out process. Nonetheless, the indefensible amount of time I have been willing to persevere with this conversation is evidence that I have found the experience educationally worthwhile. On a practical level I have become much more at home with the online world and its possibilities – certainly the most applicable “job-experience” qualification arising from this program, apart from the Handbook’s (Edström 2001:5) suggested “förmåga att...skriva rapporter m.m. på ett fullödigt sätt”. More importantly, I have also found ever more nuanced and diplomatic ways of expressing my ideas at the word, phrase and passage levels – from mining the richness of conversing and reading as competitively communing to attempting an enunciator’s coordinating calibration of frames of reference (see footnote 54 and its application to pages 23-25 as well as the Metathesis section).

My emotional experience has been complex. As an irritated, over-the-hill student “förståsigpååre” I have not been able to forgive the program for its often simplistic, industrialized processing/validation procedures, be they a crude reckoning of approved references and seminar appearances or a reliance on formulaic writing. Unsurprisingly, I have been most at ease when off learning on a tangent and most irritated when reminded of my academic duties. Since the duties have dominated – constantly struggling to find the words and the overall form – I have found myself having to discipline my reactions and attempt to channel them productively. A great learning challenge at any age, and not to be belittled as a research factor and learning result – thus this thesis attempt.

How the experience might be communicated is the thesis: rather tangled, not very linear; flashes of emotion, rhetorical flourishes, openly competing, self-questioning, personal. I have employed slightly varying frameworks and styles and voices, included various metacognitive devices and layers. To little avail. The how of the communicating has been considered inappropriate, and I have instead been assured that my point can be made in more standardized form. Just standardize myself a bit more.

To what extent can I imagine my own learning and validate my own literacy?

In rather exaggerated fashion I have attempted to take a large measure of control over my own learning, even to the point of supervising myself. This has proven untenable and confusing, too foreign to the system. The phrasing of the question itself illustrates the problem: in thesis writing the learning is delineated, not imagined; it is not my own, but is defined in terms of the discipline. My validation is perhaps of greatest importance to me, but it is only mine. This research question cannot be taken seriously; it involves a misunderstanding of the task.
In short, how does this thesis writing event interact with my particular learning and literacy, and does this have any general application to learning and literacy in LIS?

I have made every effort to link this thesis writing event to my particular learning and literacy. I have gone too far and disqualified it from having any general application to the discipline. But the how of the attempt, from the trivial to the subtle, is still worth noting.

- The demand for a thesis, and my desire to meet that demand, creates the event.
- The event, whatever its conditions and outcomes, propels learning and literacy.
- I have deliberately used this event to pursue my theoretical interests.
- I have been obliged to conform these interests to the constraints of language and in dialogue with the interests of LIS.
- This conforming has successively shaped both the thesis text and the thesis writer, and thereby expressed my learning and literacy in a particular form.
- I consider both the textual and personal expressions of this particular form concrete pieces of research evidence.
- I consider the unconventional, organic textual expression at best an intellectually and aesthetically satisfying, superficial, necessary evil.
- I consider the personal expression to be the more important, exhaustive and representative development.
- From the evidence, this development can be characterized in volitional terms (perseverance, willingness to dialogue, willingness to compete), emotional terms (writing my feelings into the text, showing and stifling myself in the event), and intellectual terms (heightened poetic, scientific and diplomatic communicative sensibilities).
- These expressions, both textual and personal, have general applicability to learning and literacy in LIS only insofar as the system can practically incorporate not merely the idea of the person, but the living, unconventional, organic reality of particular persons into its academic processing.
- There are too many barriers – scientific, technical, economic, political – to this happening on a large scale without the discipline undergoing a major identity shift.
- Applying small, incremental changes is not, however, unthinkable.


46


Footnotes Appendix

1 Webber and Johnston (2000:395) see information science, not librarianship, as the logical home for a non-vocational discipline of information literacy. Since LIS is hardly a vocational training program these days and is ambivalent about openly advertising its library roots, perhaps information literacy can take over the “L” slot: if not Literate Information Science, then Information Science and Literacy (ISL).

2 See, for example, Palmer (1998:10) on the importance of teacher vulnerability, of making one’s self available, if one is to “connect” with students and “serve” learning. Or Lendahls & Runesson’s (1996) collection on teachers as learners.

3 Verbal noun forms based on the present participle will be used extensively and tactically in this paper in order to try, quite literally, to keep things moving. The effect is illusory – words are meant to hold the world in place – but not altogether innocuous if I am to evoke an ongoing happening and doing. ‘Learning’ seems, at least, less easily reified and manipulated than ‘learner’. And if this means that the generic actor haunting these programmed roles also disappears, so much the better.

4 matter, n.1: Oxford English Dictionary Online (hereafter referred to as OED), Draft Revision Sept. 2003. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the root meanings of the words italicized in this paper are taken from the online version of the OED, based on the 2nd edition (1989) and subsequent revisions. One way of dealing with loaded theoretical terms is to see what they were originally designed to bear. Matter leads to mother and the trunk of the tree. Concrete involves “growing together”. I hope the reader will also find this tactic surprisingly straightforward and enlightening, turning matters into mothers and making the concrete sprout.

5 So why not give birth at home and minimize the potentially disturbing role of an outside system, with its set ways and demands? Societal assurance comes with bureaucratic conditions and validation remains an official prerogative. If you need it, you have to deal with the competing expectations that come with it.

6 Fluently, according to Marcum (2002), as befits the watery element being read. Note that mess has the same “sending” root as message and mission (Latin missus) based on a serving of food. Certain stews were considered unpalatably mixed together. Are not most messages already mixed even before being encoded, channeled and decoded? Is it only the electrical signals or digital bits or printed words we read?

7 In the Swedish Navy a blue thread was used, and in the English language, where “the red thread” is not a commonly used metaphor, the idea of a leitmotiv is expressed by “the golden thread”.

8 Note that problem, proposal, purpose, project and presentation all mean and do virtually the same thing: “put” (or “throw”) forth something for consideration. The substantive form is rooted in the verb, the doing, so that a question originally meant the action of “questioning”, information the act of “informing”. Given the fluid, interactive, communicative nature of the doing, it is no wonder that reified things like problems, purposes and information are proposed (to format the talk), yet hard to pin down.

9 In the Swedish Navy a blue thread was used, and in the English language, where “the red thread” is not a commonly used metaphor, the idea of a leitmotiv is expressed by “the golden thread”.

10 Engeström (1987) speaks of the “futility of learning” when one is given problem-solving and structuring tasks or when user-friendly systems are patronizingly facilitated. While one is learning to cope with changes that have come, new changes are already on the way. The skills being learned to deal with one’s “life context” become quickly obsolete. Unless the learner/user is enabled to lead change by actively redefining her own possibilities “expansively”, learning and literacy will always lag behind.

11 Furner (2004) argues that the label ‘information’ is an unnecessary (non-distinguishing) addition to already well-established conceptual categories such as ‘data’ and ‘communication’.

12 The trend, of course, is to drop ‘library’ altogether from the program title. Two creative alternatives, which also avoid pairing ‘information’ and ‘science’, are Dokumentasjonsvitenskap in Tromsø and Information Management & Systems in Berkeley (now School of Information and marketed hiply as iSchool).

13 From the Latin scire, to know. Note, again, the verbal root of our weighty substantives (see footnotes 3 and 8). Pask (1975) similarly stresses this grammatical distinction in his Conversation Theory, preferring “knowing” to the “construction of knowledge” since it highlights the dynamic quality of the interaction and its personal root in a “knower”.

14 A consequence of considering movement more fundamental to scientific inquiry than states (even though a state may be considered more fundamental to scientific explanation). Inquisitive knowing enables the potential establishment of new knowledge, while established knowledge tends to inhibit inquisitive knowing. Thus the repeated emphasis in this paper on learning and literacy as happening.

15 See Clayton (1989) for a serious attempt to keep the social and natural sciences on the same scientific continuum. His latest work deals with regarding consciousness as an emergent property.
Another is that “multi” conveniently bundles the exploding array of basic skills which we have been told we need to survive nowadays. Even general labels such as computer literacy no longer suffice. In the academic discussion there is digital literacy and e-literacies and multimodal literacies, to name but a few. Literacy has become a general suffix, reinforcing how competently multibusy we consider ourselves to be.

The major premature grounding stipulation would, of course, already have been made – asking the seeker to fish for and record reasons for her behavior. But at least this data comes more reliably from the seeker.

See Csíkszentmihalyi (1990). As an athlete, I have always been fascinated by those rare, timeless moments of seemingly effortless performing when one is “in the zone”, when one interacts seamlessly with the demands and opportunities presented. Extensive preparation may be involved, motivation and anticipation may be high, the zone of proximal development may be calibrated just right, but these conditions are neither necessary nor exhaustive. They are subsequent explanations, qualitatively different from the event. At best, they translate the silent happening into a noisy process (as Csíkszentmihalyi does, and I am doing here).

Note Rappaport’s (1999) work on the defining role of religious ritual in human development. Ritual promotes group solidarity by enabling reliable communication. In connection with writing this thesis, I have been repeatedly referred to the liturgical order and practice laid out in the handbook. Part of the confirmation proceedings includes attending a certain number of meetings and having my participation book signed. Not following the ritual leads to communication problems, and failure to communicate reliably results, naturally enough, in excommunication.

For perverse reasons of clarity, I have insisted on using object as the initial, relatively independent “interposed” focus of attention before it becomes the “subjugated” subject. Compare the literal “thrown under” force of the Swedish underkastelse and note a similar stance of submission in understand. In the human sciences, especially, one might want to speak of the described object and the explained subject, of the researcher as being initially subject to the research object before subjecting it to her own ends: Verstehen precedes Erklärung. But there is no sequence; to describe involves using explanatory terms. Research objects are inevitably relatively subjectified projects.

Our abstracting has hardly reduced complexity, in the modern, wishful thinking sense of simplify and diminish (except temporarily or by force). When we humans abstract from the living, interactive, concrete (“growing together”) complexity, we must specify it (“see it”), generalize it (“birth it”) as some kind of thing consisting of different kinds of things. This kinship engenders, introduces the entire extended family involved: to conceive is not only to capture, but also to breed. Kind emphasizes relationship; to abstract is to create a relative. Complex never really becomes simplex, despite our psycholinguistic sleight-of-hand; it becomes another complex relationship to be grasped.

The original sense of reduce is, of course, to bring or lead back, and that boomerang effect is what reducing the complexity practically amounts to (note the similarity with the literal bending or turning back of change – more properly, exchange or, even better, interchange). Reductionism has, for reasons inherent in the intractable interactive complexity, a negative connotation in the modern discussion – the solution proposed is naïve or simplistic or too general or coercive. But that is a socio-semantic irony arising from our own linguistic manipulations, themselves entangled. In the modern sense it should be considered positive, not negative: we are intentionally trying to analyze and solve the interacting, literally undo it, and thereby make things simpler and more effective. Isn’t what we really want and need a complex redux, “indicating the return of an organ to a healthy state” in pathological usage?

Note also the translation process – both involve carrying, bearing, “ferrying”. Thus the hermeneutical translation embedded in any linguistic transfer, be it explaining, understanding or meaning.

The sequential ordering implied here is an arbitrary reconstruction, but hardly trivial. It bequeaths the interplay with the aura of process, “moving it forward”, giving it a purpose, turning it towards an end. The use of the terms “artifact” and “black box” in this paragraph gives a linguistic twist to the work of Bruno Latour (1998) on
the sociology of things. Human relationships are inevitably mediated and maintained by artifacts which have become “invisible”, taken for granted. In Latour’s provocative phrase: “teknik är samhället som gjorts hållbart”. And language, again, is humanity’s primary sustaining “sociotechnical” thing.

27 Metacognition is a currently productive variant. Davies (2005:10, footnote) explains the idea under the section heading “Metametametacognition”, referring to “how this book considers people’s use of metacognition”. This means that my use of Davies adds at least two more meta-s to the chain – my thinking about Davies’ thinking about, and my writing about my thinking about Davies’ book about... Hermeneutical layers again. Façades.

28 Taking the side of the system user, the consumer, the oppressed. The teaching/learning interplay seems natural enough – interacting with others, we rub off on them and they on us. In interforming each other we are both teaching and learning as we respond to and create the interactive flow of feedback. But when we conceptualize teaching and learning, we stop the interaction. The modes of teaching and learning are treated as distinct and the teaching/learning interplay tends to become a sequence. Analysis and explanation create points on a line, locking teacher and learner into hierarchical roles defined and maintained by the economy of knowledge. Change is no longer seen as “exchange” but as development. Thus learning as a controlled, product-oriented process, an orderly programming of the learner within a given authoritative, institutionalized discourse. See Säljö (2000:47-48) for another concise version of this ‘development’ of the natural teaching/learning interaction.

29 Learning, in this case, is the discursive, systemic matter. Information seems to have achieved a similar status, but its roots are much shallower.

30 Based colorfully on the Norse tung (Swedish tång) – “seaweed” – presumably caught up by and wrapped around an oar.

31 From Latin fil-um, that is, “thread”.

32 Literally “going round about”, “environing”. See Gibson (1986) for a particularly rich theoretical application of this term in connection with visual perception.

33 The Latin vertere, “to turn”, is the root here, of course. The single turn of universe is often defined relative to system (“all things...considered as constituting a systematic whole”), and the “set up with” of system has been used as a synonym for universe. System has, like thesis, roots in musical rhythm (Greek στ ?μα – an interval, ?s ? – the downbeat) emphasizing relative placement. Converse, on the other hand, emphasizes relational interplay – the ongoing turning and comming.

34 A book is literally the material upon which we write, originally perhaps the bark or wood of the beech tree (thus the double-duty of the Swedish bok). The same is true of the Latin root liber, or “bark”. To say that libraries are about books, then, is akin to saying that this paper is about the paper upon which it is written – all too true perhaps, but uninspiring. Even in LIS, books still tend to be regarded as inscribed physical surfaces, rather than as animated tokens, or documents. See Frohmann (2004) for an interesting discussion of many of my concerns here, but in connection with the use of documents in scientific research.

35 Note the Swedish cognate råda, and even the Sanskrit radh-: to succeed, accomplish. The various related expressions are also telling: reading something into a situation/text, reading between the lines, reading over and reading through, reading off a measurement, reading up on something, reading out and reading in data, taking a reading, giving a reading, sight-reading, proofreading, reading one’s fortune, reading for a degree, reading in the pattern onto the loom, Do you read me?.

36 For those concerned about “visual literacy”, note the “drawing” of the Swedish rita still lurking in writing. Are words and literacy and the library primarily alphabetical phenomena?

37 Old English lesan – “gather”, “glean” – retained in the dialect form lease (Hellquist 1922, OED 1989). Note also the lice nitpicking found metaphorically in the colorful Swedish expression “läsa lusen av någon” (to give someone a dressing down) and literally in the English sailor slang, “to read one’s shirt”.

38 Taken from Thorndike-Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary (1951), p.76: art 1,7,8.

39 The use of the terms ”black boxes”, “artefacts” and “sociotechnical” here comes from the work of Bruno Latour on the sociology of things. See, for example, the introductory collection of essays translated into Swedish, Arterfakterns återkomst: ett möte mellan organisationsteori och tingens sociologi (Latour 1998).

40 Following Latour (1998:33-35) one might simply point out that sociologists themselves are merely one of the many actors in the “Leviathan” which has been created. And by limiting their study to ‘the social’, playing their role, they leave the structural authority and influence of the institutions involved, built upon a variety of other successfully sealed black boxes, undisturbed.

41 In analyzing the relations between literature and society, systematising and clarifying are meant to ‘discipline’ the discussion (Svedjedal 1997:72f). Svedjedal (1997:68) cites Šklovskij on art’s unnatural nature and alienating function but sees the sociology of literature’s own “deautomatising” role based on a hermeneutics of suspicion and the maintenance of a scientific, analytic distance. Yet Latour reminds us that this stance and its products are equally ‘unnatural’ and artificial – artefact resulting in an artefact.

42 My tendency, however overstated and idealized for the occasion, ought to be clear by now: the sociology of literature should strive for nothing more than graffiti status itself, making its point stylishly, subversively.
43 Despite her own consciousness-raising project, Radway has yet to free herself entirely from the patronizing Marxist (scientific-socialist) ideology of the academy. If only more “real people” women would see the light and throw their support behind the Feminist Initiative. Note that while Hemmungs-Wirtén (1998:191) similarly argues that romance writing does not necessarily lead to “social passivity”, she also emphasizes the complex, “everyday life” motivations involved quite beyond the labels of “literature” and “feminism.”

44 Or should we more accurately say, judging from the reading, the sociology of literature’s liberating, Marxist, materialistic, socioeconomic view of culture, rather than the elitist, patriarchal, subjective, authoritarian norm?

45 As Broady (1998:15) notes, the ‘cultural field’ is more accurately labeled ‘fields for cultural production’ such as the ‘literary field’ or the ‘science field’ which, in turn, can encompass subfields such as ‘theatre’ or ‘sociology’. My take on Latour here explores the idea of sociology possibly being a subfield of literature in the same way that theatre could be a subfield of science.

46 Adorno’s “Kulturindustrie”, of course, sums up much of this development. See Danielsson & Lennartsson (1999) for a concise, yet comprehensive, introduction to the actors and trends in the Swedish book marketplace, including the looming changes being brought about by digitization, hypertext, and electronic publishing.

47 My spin, of course, but that’s the point. Benjamin (1997:105) identifies an art work’s uniqueness with its integration in a given tradition via cultic (now political) expression. Anna Williams (1997:197-198) takes up Ezell’s ‘anti-canón’ idea of simply creating a database over all known women’s literature texts, thus bringing out more of the “chaos and diversity” inherent in the literary past. But what happens when tradition itself is a thing of the past and Borges’ library has been put through the shredder?

48 Taken from WordNet at http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=literature [2006-09-30].

49 Why not, even, sociology as poetry of Boye’s (1935:52) sort, “organiskt vuxit fram ur individens samlade upplevelse…det stänk av liv och den droppe människa, som ger mottagaren kontakt med ny verklighet”? The value of the information interacting in the Word Database World will continue to depend on ripe drops of honest humanity, imaginatively applied.

50 Justine itself interacts both internally with an extensively quoted earlier book on Justine (who herself must continue to interact with the ‘Justine’ presented therein) and externally with de Sade’s Justine, liberally referred to in Durrell’s epigraphs. Hollywood’s addition to the Durrell artefact, a 1969 filmed version of Justine, gladly latches on to the sex-laden de Sade angle, presenting Justine simplistically as a classic hooker-adventuress.

51 See his preface to the first collected edition (1962, London: Faber and Faber). McGann (1997:281-282) echoes Durrell, in his preface, roughly compares the form he has chosen for the book to the “relativity proposition”. He feels that in an online world, scientific research will come to be characterized typically as “work-in-progress”.

52 Not to mention the other solid traces left commonly by the codex-form: title page, table of contents, preface, dedication page, chapter breaks/headings, back cover review blurbs…Other major (undifferentiated) artificers involved in the artefact are, of course, legion: editor, publisher, printer, paper producer, friends, family, fatherland, ‘society’, ‘the reader’, reviewers, critics, ‘the marketplace’…


54 Durrell, in his preface, roughly compares the form he has chosen for the book to the “relativity proposition”. Indirect references within the book are also numerous: for example, Balthazar’s annotated reference to Pursewardsen’s idea of “sliding panels” (p.338) or the idea of Alexandria itself as the “invisible author” (p.828). I have taken up here in my choice of vocabulary Latour’s (1998:89-144) interesting discussion of the tension between relativism and relativity in Einstein’s thought and how this relates to stylistic realism and the border between scientific and literary writing. Simply put for the purposes of our own artful problematising in this paper, there is no ‘social context’, no ‘external referent’, only other texts emanating from their particular “centres of calculation”. The ‘big picture’ is only big in the tiny unmediated kingdom of the solipsist (relativism – information deformed); projecting it beyond our little selves involves linking it, obligating it to a long series of mediators. The size is in the projection, that is, in the myriad supporting details of the network; and it is the enunciator’s finely-tuned calibration of the frames of reference used to report these details which enables a subsequent comparative layering/matching of the reports generated (relativity – information transformed). The highly tenuous difference between presenting realistic fiction and scientific reality lies not in the construction and quality of the narrative’s “internal referent”, but in a shift of the narrative boundary to include matching reports from artefacts in the enunciator’s own milieu (the “underwritten referent”).

55 In one of the program’s first lectures it was proudly noted that librarian training no longer involved learning how to manage interlibrary loans, and indeed practical librarian skills – even classification and cataloguing – do not figure among the required subjects in Borås. The problem is that librarian job listings over the past four years tend to highlight experience qualifications (IT-systems, Book-It!) as strongly as degree qualifications. Yet though the master’s degree was rarely mentioned among desired qualifications a few years ago, it is gradually coming into its rightful status as an efficient criterion for sorting out job applications.
At my required mid-term stage seminar, four readers showed up: the seminar leader, the two students who were next in line to present their collaborative project, and the thesis advisor of those students.

Dealing with the abstract convenience of this “I” is, of course, also an important part of the game. In the context of conversing there is no single, definable conversation with myself isolated from the societal conversation, no societal conversation living a life of its own. There is no inner conversing and outer conversing, no intra- and extra-, no inwards and outwards, no me and you, no us and them – just inter-, just togetherwards, just conversing, just us. In light of this I have taken to using the pronoun “we” instead of “I” to bring out the tricky personal intricacy involved, not as a plural capable of being analyzed into its constituent parts, not as a usurping, unifying royal we, but as happening, conversing, environing, living, learning. A “we-is-ing”, or the hoarse, self-deflating, stage-whispered aside of wheezing.

Their report takes up the “Library 2.0” variant of “Web 2.0”, especially in connection with technically facilitating user-generated content and networking.

Nor is the academy and its venerable authority immune. Note that even well-established information technology giants such as Microsoft are being affected by the move from pre-packaged software solutions to online “permanent beta” software conversing. Google is the new, so far benevolent, enabler.

This may seem to apply more to the library in its given mediating societal role, and less to LIS in its adopted academic one – LIS has more to lose. But I have suggested in this paper that LIS can possibly play a similar mediating role in the academy. Not, perhaps, as a discipline in its own right – the subversion must begin at home – but as an enabler of learning and literacy across the disciplines, championing the hub science of reading.

The piles of cross-referencing notes generated and continually modified by the improvisational acting out of this thesis are ready and waiting to tell their story. But I am not ready to abstract categories and generalize the message.

An “open-ended term”, he would delightedly point out, is self-contradictory, and promptly add a footnote.

Things, as noted in footnote 23, are always real, yet illusory. Thing is rooted in a communal activity, a general judicial assembly called to address some matter (cf. Swedish ting). It incorporates an appointed time, a meeting, and an object/affair/concern. For our purposes here, a thing is a fixed point of focus, a freezing of the flow, yet also an object of ongoing communal judgment (though quickly subjugated: see footnote 20).


Learning implies moving away from the known, out into the foreign forest beyond the walled-in park. The latter two words are linked via the Latin foris and foras (“outside”), while the first is related to the Gothic framis (“forward”). In Swedish these ideas are directly linked in från, framåt and främmande (Hellquist 1922:159-160); in the German Fremde, as in the English from, the originally associated affective notion, notably enough, is not that of outside threat and fear, but of bravery, strength and competence (see Alsop 2002 for an interesting auto-ethnographic look at Heimat und Fremde). Learning involves conversing with the unknown, a going out from and coming in from – a froming, a foreigning.

It is in this sense that I might also want to talk of citing – “to set in motion, excite, summon” (Latin citare, ciere). Not the mechanical, walling-in of the park via reciting – a defensive, authoritative staking out of the boundaries – but an inciting to and fro over common ground, conversing, froming.

Fokus betyder ”härd” på latin, och visst har den öppna elden alltid varit ett blickfång i mörkret och en lockande värmekälla i kylan. En plats där människor samlas, umgås, rådslås och berättar sina historier.