MEETINGS BETWEEN STUDENT AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

An extensive material in the form of statements made by students about their post-secondary education is analyzed in the report. The material consists of continuous descriptions and reflections given by the students on their training. The statements in this study which covers one school-year were made by a total of ten students of five different subjects. The conceptions of knowledge and the acquirement of knowledge which are expressed in the descriptions of the form and content of the various educations are related to the conceptions which seem to characterize the students. Two qualitatively different perspectives can be separated according to certain themes. The meeting between individual and institutional perspectives turns out to have different effects on the students' "adjustment procedure" depending on whether these perspectives coincide or collide with each other. The author tries to describe what happens in these two different situations.
Background

A study\(^1\) was carried out in the school-year 1976/77 in which ten post-secondary students representing the subjects history, mathematics, medicine, pedagogics and psychology in the course of their first-term studies every week took down their reflections of the teaching in their subject. At the end of the school-year these students were interviewed in great detail on the basis of their written statements. We used open methods in this study and the interest was focussed on what and how the students reported on their education. There was furthermore an explicit assumption that statements of this kind also give valuable information about the "reporter". The reports of two students on the same education could be related to each other at the same time as these two versions could be contrasted with each other. Extracts from weekly reports and interviews for each of these ten students are presented in the report "Ten Post-Secondary Students - Ten Evaluators - Ten Evaluations" (Franke-Wikberg, 1978). The students' own statements take up much space. The form of the report is supposed to offer ample material for discussion about

\(^1\) The study referred to is one among many pilot studies carried out within the frame of the so called LONG-project (Long-Term Effects of Higher Education - A Longitudinal Study of Students Conceptions Related to Different Lines of Education). The LONG-project is financed by the National Board of Universities and Colleges in Sweden. The author's research work in general is supported by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
central educational problems. It is for example intended to be used for "self-evaluation" at the institutions.

Our aim here is to concentrate on certain aspects in the students' conceptions of their education during the one-year test period, to provide them with a content and to try to offer some possible explanations of the outcome.

In the interaction between the individual and the surrounding world the individual's conceptions are supposed to be reflections of this surrounding world. Individual thinking is thus strongly context dependent which means that it is impossible to find an algorithm for the description of forms and content of thought. The conceptions which are manifested in the content and organization of the education can, on the other hand, be expected to be more strongly reflected in the individual's conceptions in the course of the training. If a student's conceptions of knowledge and of acquirement of knowledge and the conceptions reflected in the training program are analogous the student will quickly and "painlessly" be "adjusted" to his studies. If, however, the student's conceptions differ or are opposed to those of his education the "adjustment procedure" will be long and difficult and sometimes it will fail completely.

Dissimilarities/similarities between student and institutional conceptions of the content and organization of the education
can be one possible basis for analyzing the vast material of statements in the study. It will then be a question of contrasting the student's own conceptions with those of the institution as he sees them. The stress will here be put on the frames of reference on which the students base their interpretations and evaluations of the teaching in their subject.

**Student Conceptions of Knowledge and of Acquisition of Knowledge**

It goes without saying that students do not come to their post-secondary studies as "unknown quantities". Their conceptions of "good" teaching are formed by their earlier experiences. Certain anticipatory conceptions of what it will be like to study the subject in question are formed on the basis of information from various parts and of varying nature. The statements of these ten students all bear initial witness to a great eagerness to learn as much as possible about a subject which is considered to be interesting and meaningful for their future occupations.

Two different perspectives of educational matters can be separated on the basis of the students' statements. There are certain themes which seem to function as dividing-lines between the disparate conceptions. The following five themes are of this kind: 1/ views on knowledge 2) views on group work 3/ the primary function of the teacher 4/ the relation between theory and society/practice and
We call the two perspectives A and B respectively in order to take a closer look at their characteristic features regarding 1-5. The quotations below are statements made by students of history (H1 and H2) and medicine (M1 and M2) respectively.

A. 1. Knowledge is divisible knowledge of facts.

One of the students of medicine (M1) puts it like this:

Knowledge consists of quantitative variables. It is a question of learning as much as possible. You can break it down into particles or whatever you like... then you can of course also have views on their qualitative aspects but that... I think these aspects can only be taken into account when you have enough of quantitative knowledge. That is, enough of knowledge. Only then can you start evaluating the knowledge in question. But I can't question whether it is reasonable to learn, for example, the position and function of certain muscles. I have to presume that it is necessary since we are taught these things.

Statements of H1 on the same matter:

- Still, it is with facts we have to work in the groups. They don't think of that. And then the facts should be in our heads and not as some think in the library in a book.

I am more interested in knowledge of the sort "questions-answers". The group thinks it is ridiculous knowledge. They advocate the modern lax education.
2. **Group work is rejected.**

The reason for M1 rejecting group work is that it is inefficient.

As little group work as possible. It takes too much time, to be quite frank... the group work doesn't change the fact that we have to learn what is on the paper... It's useless.

The reasons for H1 being completely negative to group work are that there are no opportunities for objective ratings, that it is difficult to appear to advantage in a group and that group discussions tend to be irrelevant.

3. **The function of the teacher is to supply the students with the central facts.**

M1 describes the education in appreciative terms:

The content of the course is equivalent to a particular book. The aim is to know the contents of this book. No hesitation, - good. - The teaching follows the book slavishly which is also pointed out by the teacher.

The statement of H1 is also a support of this kind of teaching:

Personally I think it used to be much better before when there were teachers who could make the subject interesting, who could penetrate into it and put questions and answers to the students.
4. No plea for relating the content to society/practice.

5. Position for individual rating.

M1 is positive towards written examinations. He says among other things:

You go home and read something and think you have learnt it, then there is an examination which shows you how much you have learnt and in that respect the examination works, it is accordingly positive in my eyes. In that respect it works very well.

Individual rating in the form of written examinations is, according to H1, the only justifiable way of differentiating between the students. H1 wants to retain the graded marks and is himself from the start completely set on meeting the requirements for the highest mark:

Then the students can decide how you are to get the highest mark which means that you have to kill yourself with work. I think it is far too much work for those who want the highest mark and... owing to the way you study at the university nowadays... My God, there will be far too much to read for an exam, I thought. At least 10 books. It seemed impossible to get the highest mark by fair means. You had to use unjust methods. What the students say during the lessons should not be rated. It is far too subjective.

B. 1. Knowledge is acquired by starting from the whole.

H2 has earlier experience of project-oriented teaching, which he recommends. He wants to take hold of a problem
and analyze it and he is very negative to the type of teaching where facts are piled up with the aim of describing but not explaining phenomena:

This kind of knowledge is dead, a lot of sentences one after the other which you are supposed to learn... It is not ordered or structured.

H2 also says:

It would work if differences in outlook on history, mankind and knowledge could be contrasted in some way. If you instead of smoothing out all contrasts in order to get harmony exposed them and put them against historical problems.

M2 is completely negative to lectures on individual facts which she puts against a problem-oriented teaching where she thinks she actively acquires a large amount of valuable knowledge. The group demonstrations sometimes correspond to M2's expectations of how knowledge can be acquired in a meaningful way.

2. **Group work is recommended.**

H2's form of group work requires interested group members who share their experiences with the others in the group. The teacher must be actively participating in the educational process. H2 does not want a "laissez-faire" variant:

Since they are afraid of dominating us when they try a democratic form they place themselves completely outside everything. They become totally uninspired. They don't say what they stand for and their teaching is almost worthless.
M2 stresses that the group members must be well prepared, that the teacher must be actively participating but not too dominating, that the teacher also contributes to creating possibilities for the group to get to know each other and form a functioning group, that the students are given the chance to participate already at the planning of the work. M2 on the whole wants to give the students more control over educational matters.

3. The function of the teacher is to participate actively in the group.

The role of the teacher in the case of group work has already been hinted at above (point 2). It seems to be easier to state how the teacher is not supposed to act than to give normative examples. M2 says for example that the teacher shall not call his covert lectures group work.

4. Plea for relating the content to society/practice.

M2 says among other things:

*It is exactly this criticism which I think is very serious. That group work is totally ignored and that it seems to be completely disregarded that you are supposed to function in a society which you on the whole know nothing about. And there are probably many who don't know anything about the society we live in since many of us have a very sheltered existence. And this is probably also what the doctors are most often criticised for.*
The organization and the content of the medical training is, according to M2, an example of an outlook which does not have any connections with society. The quotation below is an example of what H2 wants instead.

The knowledge can be interesting in itself, but it doesn't tell me anything about my present situation, my historical origin. You can feel the movement at large but you don't learn to understand that history is driven onwards in a special way. That there are certain mechanisms in society. It is instead concentrated around certain persons, Napoleon... The result is chaos.

5. Position against individual rating.

H2 describes in detail how injuriously graded marks affect the work and points out that it is wrong and contradictory to rate collective work individually.

It is a complete opposition between trying to get collective work forms which will evaluate contributions to group work and which are based on commitment, perhaps another type of knowledge, for example to attain some kind of critical thinking and personal development, and to sit and pass judgment on it, to make individual ratings. Who is better here now then? Better at what? If we have collective work... it is not possible to rate it individually. ...and it controls us, it controls us. You are afraid of your mark, you subordinate yourself. How shall I do in order to get my mark? You don't think: How shall I do this in order to feel satisfied? The mark prevents you from doing that.

M2 also thinks that the marks hamper cooperation:

I then get on to cooperation. There is no such thing. I am
Awfully disappointed. We now have graded marks - all right - they are also relative - we thus compete with each other. How are you supposed to bring about cooperation on these conditions, between the students? It is subconsciously very disagreeable that the relative marks are used on top of the predicted requirements for "Passed". There is much dissatisfaction about this.

The 10 students can roughly be divided among the perspectives A and B according to the following:

A: 4 students (One student of medicine (M1),
    one of history (H1), two of mathematics (Ma1 and 2).

B: 6 students (One student of medicine (M2), one
    of history (H2), two of psychology (Ps 1 and 2)
    and two of pedagogics (Pe 1 and 2).

There are, as has already been shown, qualitative differences between perspective A and B. There are also qualitative differences between individuals within the same perspective. As regards A the students of history and medicine can be said to express the outlook consequently and in a well-reasoned way. Both relate A 1-5 to each other. The statements of the two students of mathematics reflect a "taking-for-granted perspective". Mathematics can, according to them, hardly be treated in any other way than which is now the case. The outlook which is considered to be represented at the institution agrees on the whole with perspective A. Even if minor changes are suggested by the students they stick to the same perspective. It is worth noting that one of the students of mathematics deviates from the others under A on account of his comprehension-directed strategy of learning.
Among the students whose statements place them in category B there is one student (of pedagogics) who can also be characterized as having the "taking-for-granted perspective". The statements of three of the students (history, medicine and pedagogics respectively) differ qualitatively from those of the two students of psychology in that the statements of the former point to a complexity forming a unity which cannot be found for the others.

The two perspectives of knowledge and of its acquirement referred to above (A and B respectively) can be said to reflect two dominant outlooks which have several designations among pedagogues. One designation is the atomistic vis-à-vis the holistic conception of knowledge (Svensson, 1974 among others). Kant's terms for these conceptions are rhapsodical and architectonic respectively (Häyrinen, 1978 among others). The acquirement of knowledge in the first case follows the principle "from the parts to the whole" whereas it in the second case works the other way around.

The organization of the education is often connected with the abovementioned conceptions. The holistic or architectonic view means that the students actively, on the basis of their earlier knowledge and experiences, work through the material under the guidance of the teacher. A problem-solving training which may well be pursued in the form of group work is recommended. The atomistic or rhapsodical view of the acquirement of knowledge is in its turn connected with an education where the teacher often in the form of lectures supplies the students with a given material in
the form of facts. A test will then show you whether "that which is learnt" agrees with "that which is taught" (Franke-Wikberg & Johansson, 1975).

Teaching Characteristics

We shall, on the basis of the statements of the students, make a short summary of what seems to characterize the training in these four subjects. The survey of official curricula which we have also made is not taken up separately in this report. We can, however, mention that it fully supports the descriptions made by the students. The concepts frame and classification can be used in this context (Bernstein, 1975). Classification has to do with the differentiation of the contents. Strong classification means that the various parts of the content are well isolated, whereas weak classification is characterized by well integrated parts. Framing refers to the degree of control exercised by teachers and students over the selection, organization and sequencing of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge. Weak framing means that the student to a large extent can control the selection, organization and the tempo of the acquirement of knowledge.

The training in medicine and mathematics is described by the students as characterized by strong classification and strong framing. The other subjects seem to their outer form to be characterized by weak classification and framing.

The statements of above all the students of psychology
and history but also to some extent pedagogics indicate, however, that the training as it first appeared and as it was described by for example the teachers was not in keeping with how it was carried out in practice. The influence of the students was largely a chimera and the frames were rather narrow according to the reports. The real power and control over the training were hardly in the hands of the students.

Whereas perspective A most closely describes the training in medicine and mathematics and perspective B the training in pedagogics the picture of psychology and history turns out to be more complicated. Even if the basic outlook of most teachers of psychology was that of perspective A according to the students' statements they had reluctantly agreed to try other forms of teaching even if they wanted to return to the "traditional" methods. The outlook among the teachers of history was not regarded to be opposed to their teaching methods but was rather regarded as "unreasoning" and "uncommitted" resulting in a "laissez-faire" variant of teaching.

**Long-term Effects of Higher Education**

The most striking fact about these reflections of the students is the growing passivity and resignation expressed by many students. The statements are to begin with marked by enthusiasm, eagerness and ardour but after a short time this turns into pessimism and hopelessness. What students are affected by this and what are the concrete signs of
the process? What students are not affected by this?

We shall first of all answer the latter question: three of the students belonging to perspective A according to the above classification (one student of medicine (M1) and the two students of mathematics (Ma 1 and 2)) and one student of pedagogics (Pe 1) belonging to perspective B although characterized as having a "taking-for-granted perspective". It should be observed that the individual perspective A coincides with the outlook expressed by the teaching in medicine and mathematics. All students are satisfied with the teaching even if they point to certain defects which should be remedied as, for example, that the tempo is too high in mathematics and in medicine and that the studies in these subjects require too much time. The student of medicine is satisfied both with the teaching as well as with his own performance. One of the students of mathematics (Ma 2) describes the joy of realizing the connections between the separate "pieces of knowledge" which gives her feeling of unity, comprehension and the meaningful in her studies. The student of pedagogics expresses a development which is characterized by increased knowledge of issues which are central to him. He has "found his way" and he has discovered alternative ways of attacking problems. The fourth student (Ma 1) interrupts his studies of mathematics which has to do with failures to pass his examinations. He does not, as his fellow reporter in the subject, understand the connections between the separate pieces of knowledge. Before an examination he thinks that mechanical learning of parts of
the material will be sufficient for passing the examination which, however, turns out to be wrong. But he does not think that the cause of his failure is deficiencies in the training but rather his own insufficiency.

An increasing degree of passivity and resignation can thus be noted for six of the ten students as the result of difficulties to adjust themselves to the training in the subject: the two students of history and psychology and one student of medicine (M 2) and one of pedagogics (Pe 2). One of the students of history (H 1) belonging to perspective A and the student of medicine reprepresent a view on knowledge and acquirement of knowledge which is in glaring contrast to how the training is actually carried out. Both try to change and influence the teaching on the basis of their conceptions but both give up. H 1 tried for example to plead for written examinations, for graded marks, for more lectures, for more knowledge of facts but with little success. He thinks that most of the other students are against him. H 1 finally interrupts his studies:

*I realized that I didn't have any chance among this people to get the highest mark which I need in history and that is why I quit. I might take next course when I begin to find my feet and when I know how it works...Their way of studying didn't suit me.*

M 2 tries, on the basis of her perspective, to take active part in the discussion on marks and other questions related to the education. The non-committment of most of the other students, the benevolent but negative attitude
towards changes, the fact that the power is in the hands of teachers and professors together with the time-consuming studies and the family situation finally make her give up. She says for example:

...this is not a satisfactory situation. Nobody has time to think, reflect and that is not wholesome. The result is that we go home and read and we don't do anything else. We don't discuss things and we don't talk about how we are going to do later on and things like that and how we are going to work. Nobody takes up a position in these things. If we did, the whole education would change!

And then there's the risk that you won't make it and I think that would be very depressing because I don't think you would have time to study in that case or to pass your examinations. And then I think you would be caught in a hopeless circle. So in a way you are actually caught in a hopeless situation.

...us saying things didn't really change anything. It hasn't changed anything for those who have come after us either, the teachers continue in the same old rut. So to sum up you could say that the teachers seem to regard the students as a group who sit and listen and if they protest they get an answer but nothing changes.

I have become absolutely passive. I sleep through the lectures, only the pen moves in my hand. It is as if you couldn't take any responsibility yourself. There is a "top" with a professor highest up who has made the decisions and his subordinates tell us that that's the way it is and that there's nothing to be done about it.

The resignation expressed by Ps 1, Ps 2 and H 2 can be interpreted as an increasing awareness of the fact that their basic conceptions are not shared by the teachers
and that, accordingly, the training is also very limited. Ps 2 and the other three become more and more aware of the fact that their power over the content and organization of the training is strongly limited. It also turns out that several of the conditions for functioning group work are not fulfilled, a situation which the individual student feels he cannot change. Ps 1, Ps 2 and H 2 are very dissatisfied and so is Pe 2 although not to the same extent. The students often say that they learn nothing and that they are confused and insecure when they do not understand why some pieces of knowledge are included or how they fit together.

...I felt so pressed down, we had incredible ideas, certain ideas which could never be realized. But we were pressed down in some way. I can't really explain how (Ps 1).

The students can't improve the training by criticizing because the teachers are very sensitive to criticism. This is sheer madness in a subject which urges us to examine things critically. Grown-ups taking all criticism personally! My God! Perhaps you understand how small and powerless we feel. None of us would ever have the courage to fight (Ps 2).

From the beginning it sounded as if we were going to decide together. But when it came to the sticking-point we might well decide together as long as the teachers got their way or they at least could preserve their clear consciences or didn't have to fear to commit an error in their duties. But I think they are completely wrong in this matter. They simply let us down (H 2).

The teachers said that they expected the students to be very active and critical but one way or the other people became more and more passive and uninterested. The reason can perhaps be that we got a feeling of somehow being
pushed in a certain direction and that we actually didn't have very much power (Pe 2).

It should be pointed out that the feeling of resignation is not the same as being unwilling to work. Some study even more frenetically than before. It is rather a question of giving up the attempts to influence and change the content and the organization of the education in the direction of personal ideals. The students find out which conditions in reality have to be fulfilled and they give up because the obstacles stand out as insurmountable. As students they cannot change these conditions. This discovery can sometimes be a very long process. Anyhow it makes the student give up and become passive.

Does this mean that the students have changed their basic conceptions of which knowledge is central and how this knowledge should be acquired? They have hardly changed perspectives completely from A to B or the other way around. Even if the students have not adopted the dominating ideology of teaching at the institution some of them seem, however, after the long and difficult adjustment procedure to unwillingly have accepted or submitted to it. - An example of learning through practice with consequences for the students' conceptions of knowledge and acquirement of knowledge.
REFERENCES


