

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228967735>

How to configure classification and framing in distance teaching

Article · January 2008

CITATIONS

0

READS

191

1 author:



[Thuridur/Puríður Jóna Jóhannsdóttir](#)

University of Iceland

17 PUBLICATIONS 78 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Teacher education and school based distance learning: Individual and systemic development in schools and a teacher education programme. [View project](#)

Thurídur Jóhannsdóttir

University of Iceland

School of Education

email: thuridur@hi.is

How to configure classification and framing in distance teaching

Paper presented at ECER

The European Conference on Educational Research

10 - 12 September 2008 in Gothenburg

Introduction

Ever since possibilities opened up for distance learning with advanced information and communication technology, questions have been raised on how this mode for learning and teaching would affect student control over their learning. The premises were that technology would allow students to control sequencing and pacing of their studies and increasingly they would select the content they wanted to learn at each time.

The study presented in the paper is a part of a larger study on teacher education in a distance programme in the former Iceland University of Education (now merged with University of Iceland – as the School of Education). The study is based on ethnographic data collection by visiting student teachers enrolled in the distance programme several times during a three year period from 2003-2005. The students were working as teachers in local schools in a coastline district in rural Iceland while taking initial teacher education. In addition to the ethnographic fieldwork several distance courses have been observed and both online and on campus sessions transcribed and analysed. In this paper the interviews with the distance students form the backbone of the data that will be drawn upon while the course material is used as a background.

Basil Bernstein's theories (2000) are used to explain and interpret the task faced by distance students when the platform for teaching and learning is on the Internet. The benefits of increasing student agency in controlling learning will be discussed and teaching methods which can enhance agency will be considered. The paper explores whether and how Bernstein's theories, especially the concepts 'realization rules' and 'recognition rules' can shed light on the position of distance students.

Bernstein's theoretical framework

Bernstein put forward a sociological theory on pedagogy which can be used to describe the complexity of the role and function of schools in the society especially the complex system of symbolic codes that are used to control schools. There he explains how the teaching methods are based on communicative

rules and traditions that have been formed within institutions during history and conceptualizes the regulative discourse. In traditional schools the ideology included in the regulative discourse is not explicit but students recognize it by reading into different clues where the space, place and time, and attitude play an important role (Bernstein, 2000).

Key concepts in his theory are classification and framing.

The concept classification is used to describe how social space is constructed. Classification can be seen in how categories are bounded, e.g. subjects in schools or different categories of groups or agents, e.g. teachers and students, school and home. Power and power relations are displayed in boundaries between categories that can be clear or blurred which is referred to as strong or weak classification. Where classification is strong there are strong boundaries between categories which build their powers upon keeping it strong whereas weak classification aims at blurring the boundaries and thereby weakening the power of the relevant category. Classification may also be identified within categories. Connections between categories are the relay of power relations.

Framing refers to the control over communications in pedagogic relations as e.g. communication between teachers and students. It turns around who controls the selection, sequence, pace and criteria for knowledge to be attained; e.g. control over the social base for transmission (Bernstein 12-13). Framing relates to control and is used to describe the nature of the social relationship used to realize what is to be transmitted, it is about who controls what. Framing is different depending on if the control is closer to those who transmit or those who receive what is transmitted (Bernstein, 2000).

In schools framing is strong when the control is definitely in the teachers' hands while weak framing gives more agency to the students. Strong framing emphasises the positions of people in communication while weak framing decreased the role of hierarchical positions of people and brings out the personal. Framing describes how control of communication between different categories is organized, e.g. Between teachers and students, school and home, and between subjects in schools (Bernstein, 2000).

Classification relates to what is taught in schools and framing how it is taught. Classification relates to power and framing relates to control and is used to describe the nature of the social relationship used to realize what is to be transmitted, it is about who controls what.

The *pedagogic discourse* carries with it the ideology that decides the mode of teaching – teaching methods. It includes two different discourses that are closely related where the one the *instructional discourse*, is about competence and knowledge while the other the *regulative discourse* is about *social order* (Bernstein, 2000). The instructional discourse is about the selection of objects of activity, the sequence and how they are dealt with, pacing and criteria for which knowledge is accepted as relevant in the respective context and how it is assessed. The regulative discourse transmits the rules of the

pective institution on matters that concerns general manners and ideology. It includes criteria for which values are relevant, such as conduct and manner and which kind of characters are valued in the institution. The regulative discourse creates the rules for the inner organization of the instructional discourse and makes the pedagogical ideas on which teachers base their instructional methods not only a selection of mode of performing their work, but a part of the regulative discourse.

“Regulative discourse communicates the institution’s public moral practice, values beliefs and attitudes, principles of conduct, character and manner. It also transmits features of the institution’s local history, local traditions and community relations.” (Daniels, 2005)

The instructional discourse is always embedded in the regulative discourse which is the dominant discourse (Bernstein, 2000). It is possible to identify (analyse) weak or strong framing over each discourse separately in the social field being researched. The discourse, or the ideology of pedagogy is dependent on the principles of classification and framing on the field.

When entering a social field people’s access is dependent on how well they read the circumstances. Bernstein explains the accessibility of social arena by analysing them in terms of classification and framing values. When it has been demonstrated how the school as a social field rests upon interplay of complex code systems, the question of how pupils/students interpret the code system and learn to act as students becomes important. What is needed in order to be able to learn in school? Bernstein presents two concepts which help to understand that.

The first is *recognition rule* including to be able to read into (be literate) and interpret the code system that directs the communications and actions into accepted channels. The second is *realization rule* which make the students able to act according to what is accepted in the respective context. The recognition rule help students realize what they are supposed to do, what characterizes the respective context and what kind of behaviour and what kind of discourse is appropriate and accepted in that special context (Bernstein, 2000). The realization rules then helps students to act and communicate like they are supposed to do. The principles on classification and framing regulate recognition rules and realization rules but managing both is a prerequisite for being able to take advantage of school going.

The study explores how distance students are supported in recognising and realizing appropriate behaviour when communicating and acting online? The importance of the framing of the pedagogic discourse when traditional cues are absent is discussed.

In the first years of distance teaching (starting 1993) the student group was pretty homogenous as people having experience of teaching and holding job as teachers where there was a lack of teachers were dominant (Jóhannsdóttir & Skjelmo, 2004). Accordingly most of the student teachers were working as teachers in schools in rural areas and had a similar background and experience to build upon. Now the situation have changed and access to the distance education programme is open to students regardless of their former experience. The student group does not any more have a common experience to unite them and that makes the making of empathy that enhances agreement on rules of communication and collaboration more difficult.

Online learning demands students literacy on code systems

Online teaching and learning demands students to be literate – able to read into code systems. The student teachers study and work on their learning tasks mainly within an online learning management system. There they have to be able to read into the environment there and recognize how to act without having the clues normally present in traditional schools. They need to understand the regulative discourse that directs the school culture and make students able to act according to accepted rules in the space of the school (Chien & Wallace, 2004). In schools in general, students learn to interpret the atmosphere present in the school building, as well as specific customs and way of communication practiced in the school. Obviously this is more complicated when students only stay for few days in the school building in face-to-face sessions before they start their studies. It is therefore suggested that a special effort have to be made in order to support the recognition rule which is the prerequisite for recognition rule which make students capable of acting as students (Bernstein 2000).

In the following I want to use Bernstein's theories to look at two issues related to that. What supports students in learning to become distance students and second the affect of different teaching methods (instructional discourse)

What supports students in learning to become distance students

In order to be able to work on learning tasks in a legitimate way, i.e. accepted in the respective context, students have to have recognized the regulative discourse. In other words they have to be able to read into the code system which relays what is relevant, legitimate and acceptable regarding communication and conventions in the respective context. For the instructional discourse to function, students need to have an understanding of the regulative discourse. Bernstein (2000) explained how specific weak or strong values of classification and framing affect how easy or difficult it is for students to adopt the recognition rules and the realization rules. Since the regulative discourse is

implicit and latent it is important to ask and research how distance students come to adopt the recognition rules where the clues that can be interpreted in traditional school environment are lacking. My interviews with distance students give an interesting insight into this matter

This distance student thinks that meeting in face-to-face sessions supports students in learning to communicate online. But then it is important that face-to-face sessions are organized in a way that students have an opportunity to meet and to meet their teachers and talk together. That would be part of enhancing their recognition rules, understand what is legitimate when communicating in the context, since that is a prerequisite for gaining realization rules, i.e. being able to act as student. Students generally emphasize the importance of meeting their peer students in informal situations where they get an opportunity to chat. They also emphasize the importance of meeting their teachers in classsize groups where there is possible to talk together. On the other hand they often mention that they find lectures in big auditoriums useless.

... sitting in a lecture room getting transparencies that you know that you will be reading on the screen in a while, listening to the teacher reading the text on them. Some teachers are just saying exactly what is written on the transparencies. So this is really a waste of time. But maybe the teachers think they are transmitting, they are so used to this form that if they don't do these they may feel like they are not doing their job properly.

A lecture, like the one described here is an example of strong classification where roles of students and teachers are clearly bounded (separated) and a strong framing where teachers are in control of the communication which is based on one-way communication. This form for teaching gives little or no space for students' agency. The form students wish for is characterized by weak framing that gives an opportunity for personal communication with teachers as well as peers. In a similar way they feel that a weak framing of the instructional discourse that gives space for personal communication enhance them in learning to be distance students.

By emphasizing that students' personal contributions are legitimate and important as part of the learning (studies) weakens classification of students and teachers and diminishes the hierarchical positions. The classification between theoretical contributions and contributions based on everyday experience is weak in the outset of the course. This kind of weakening of classification gives the students more agency in their studies and more control over the space which is the field for learning. Ana Morais (2002) argues that when framing over communication of teachers and students is weakened by emphasizing the personal rather than the formal side, it creates a space for collaboration and discussion between students and teachers that supports students' learning.

I really like when the teachers encourage us to contribute in web-discussion with our own experience. [...] It gets the discussion going. And then the teacher has to interfere and bring

the professional side into the discussion, link it to the learning material. And bit by bit we start to do it ourselves and say like – I was reading this article and then I saw it was related to that and started to think... It is important when the teacher arrives doing this kind of things. In the beginning we need a freedom to talk about ourselves, to get a feeling of ownership over the space (April 2006)

In the example here, the role of the teacher is clearly defined as he/she is the professional guide that gives the students criteria for what it means to add professional knowledge to the personal based on experience. This is in coherence with Morais research (2002) that claimed the importance of keeping strong classification between theoretical and not theoretical discourse in educational settings. However a close connection between theoretical and not theoretical discourse open up for making the knowledge more relevant (significant) and more understandable and therefore easier to learn (Morais, 2002).

Bernstein argues that the regulative discourse is to certain extent included in the instructional discourse (Bernstein, 2000; Daniels, 2001). The ideas and values underlying the teachers' performance (the regulative discourse) influence how the teaching is organized; they include the teachers conception of students (the receiver) as well as their ideas of the role of the teacher (the transmitter); On the basis of ideas and values teachers assume some kind of context where there is a certain competence for communication relevant for the context of schooling.

Teachers' ideas on learning and teaching control consciously or unconsciously how learning is organized and thereby they can either support or constrain students in learning to read into and interpret the code system that on the one hand transmits the regulative discourse and the instructional discourse on the other that in turn makes it possible for them to act according to legitimate rules.

Different teaching methods and their affect

The courses that were followed and analysed reflect that in general teachers presume that students collaborate and they encourage them to discuss and work together. The possibility for threaded discussion provided for in the learning management systems have made contribution to discussion looked upon as a matter of course in distance learning. This was evident in interviews with distance students.

Data both from the analysed courses and the interviews reflect that the framing of the instructional discourse in the distance teacher education programme is in general rather weak since students often get considerable agency to select their objects of activity within specific frames as well as how to approach their tasks. Usually the teachers set rules on the sequence in which the tasks are dealt with

but the timeframe that distance students have for working on learning tasks are more flexible for distance students since they are not following a schedule that presumes them to be in the classroom at a certain time. This gives them increased agency in their learning.

Weak framing on behalf of teachers have increased students agency to have control on the online learning spaces, where they have compromised on acceptable rules of communication. The first year in the programme they adopt the recognition rules which make them competent to perform as distance students. The prerequisite for that competence is the ability to interpret the code system that transmits the regulative discourse of the respective institution which is normally latent (not explicitly stated) but they have learned to read into e.g. In face-to-face sessions and in the teaching methods of individual teachers that reflects it.

This has often been demanding and not without emotionality. However the realization rules that have been learned in a complex interaction of students and teachers and institutional factors are in general based on students mutualism where they constructively support each other and communicate politely. The students seem to have realized that this is the foundation of school culture on which learning and teaching is based. However students describe different teachers attitude which reflect in their communication with students very different ideas on learning and teaching as shown in following examples.

I will now present three different methods that teachers use to frame the instructional discourse.

And there they managed very well you see. The teacher was really motivating, but she did not need a long time for that, you were immediately interested. And the assistant teacher had such a good control on WebCt so that as soon as you asked you would usually get an answer the same day. That is wonderful. There they had a perfect control while we worked on our assignments. In a way it could be said that we [the students] had to little agency because we got so clear instructions: You are supposed to do this and this in that way, interpret this and that. So they used very well the technology in this course. If that is well done then – it is a bit of a good feeling some times to let go the control. But then you have to trust the teacher (January 2006).

In the first example students perceive clear messages on the hierarchical roles of teachers and students and no doubt about the teacher being in control as a professional. At the same time, regarding personal communication students feel like they have easy access to the teachers who would answer quickly and carefully and adress them as students who are keen to learn. In that way they create a trust between students and teachers which made the students feel well.

This is in accordance to Morais research (2002) that showed that when framing is weakened in a way that decreases the emphasis on hierarchical differences of students and teacher, it creates situation and atmosphere where students felt like they could ask, discuss and share ideas.

Then there are teachers who are exactly those who are so definite on facts. They often misread what you write, become mad because of something you have written on the WebCt and come down on us and we get like just a fulmination. And well, yes, just like dressing us down and send exactly misleading messages like: Don't be afraid to ask and then you ask and then we get like: 'Why are you asking about this' reactions. Of course you ask because you don't know. If we had got an explanation before then we didn't understand. Then you need to reformulate not just repeat. And you very soon get the feeling that the teacher does not trust you. However, the teacher is not in control (January 2006).

In the second example the classification of students and teachers is strong (or the boundaries between students and teachers are strict); students think that the teachers are tough on facts that indicate that they see their role as the holders of the truth, clearly demarcated from the role of students. From the quotation it may be concluded that he is basing his instructional discourse on different kind of discourse than the dominating discourse in the distance community, and the students have learned to interpret as a legitimate way of communication. When communicating with students he does not respect rules on manners and respect and students feel distrust in the way he addresses them. However students don't accept this kind of power and would not let the teacher control their actions.

But then there are teachers who make it clear from the beginning that we are going to dig. [...] It is different how people react. People say: What am I supposed to do? Then I say: you are supposed to dig. And then you have freedom and may put in whatever comes into your mind. And then he sometimes answers [...] People get really offended. But he is provoking our understanding and there we need to take responsibility; I am going to say my opinion in this discussion. And when it gets air under the wings it becomes like really dynamic groups [...] like what about this and that and yes what – and this becomes like much alive. Yes, sometimes he needs to monitor (watch) better what is going on in the WebCT. He definitely should be more active. But he says that he is afraid of controlling too much and directing our discussions so that we would try to do what we think the teacher would like us to do. I understand his point of view. So we dig through it on our own. But he is like almost too little in charge (January 2006).

The third example describes weak classification between teachers and students and a weak framing over the instructional discourse. Here the students seem to have freedom, both regarding selection of content and how to work on it. The teacher iterates that the students are supposed to be responsible for their studies, but since both classification and framing are weak it is difficult for the students to

recognise what is legitimate and acceptable as a contribution in the context of the course and thereby they lack a prerequisite for acting – i.e. they don't have a realization rule to support their actions and they get insecure and frustrated.

Researches have identified the importance of configuring the relation between different factors when classification and framing is weakened in order to enhance responsibility and initiative of students (A. Morais, Neves, & Pires, 2004; A. M. Morais, 2002). Following them it is important to keep a strong framing on criteria for knowledge, i.e. criteria used for assessing students' work should be put forward explicitly by the teacher who has the professional authority and responsibility to decide which objects of activity are legitimate and if the sequence does matter in the respective subject matter.

Conclusion

In all teaching it is important to realize how much is implicit in the school and how very demanding it can be for students to perceive the complex code system that regulate the school work in order to be able to live up to the demands that learning in school does.

Basil Bernstein's theories on sociology of pedagogy have opened up for enhanced understanding of this matter and made it possible to analyse and understand how the relation of specific factors needs to be configured in order to support students' learning. The paper has only touched upon how his theories might be useful for understanding distance teaching and learning online. However they have shed a light on some implicit characteristics of the code system on which a school bases its practice and of which those who organize distance education should be conscious.

References

- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic control and identity. Theory, Research, Critique* (Revised Edition ed.). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC.
- Chien, R., & Wallace, J. (2004). *The Use of Bernstein's Framework in Mapping School Culture and the Resultant Development of the Curriculum*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference, Melbourne.
- Daniels, H. (2001). Bernstein and Activity Theory. In A. Morais, I. Neves, B. Davis & H. Daniels (Eds.), *Towards a Sociology of Pedagogy* (Vol. 23, pp. 99-112). New York: Peter Lang.
- Jóhannsdóttir, T., & Skjelmo, R. (2004). Flexibility and Responsibility in Teacher Education: Experiences and Possibilities in Iceland and North Norway. In L. Pekkala, W. Greller, A. Krylov, L. Kullerud, S. Mýrdal, O. Snellman & J. Spence (Eds.), *On top of It. Overcoming the Challenges of ICT and Distance Education in the Arctic*. (pp. 85-98). Rovaniemi: University of the Arctic Press and University of Lapland, Faculty of Education.
- Morais, A., Neves, I., & Pires, D. (2004). The *what* and the *how* of teaching and learning. Going deeper into sociological analysis and intervention. In J. Muller, B. Davis & A. Morais (Eds.), *Reading Bernstein, Researching Bernstein* (pp. 75-90). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Morais, A. M. (2002). Basil Bernstein at the Micro Level of the Classroom. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(4), 559-569.