Approaches to learning

In an experiment conducted by Marton and Säljö in Gothenburg, students of pedagogical studies were given a 1400-word newspaper article, knowing that they were going to be asked questions about the text afterwards. Afterwards they were asked not only about the contents of the text but also about how they had engaged with the assignment. The article was written by Urban Dahllöf and dealt with the so-called UKAS-reform and is summarised like this in the book “Hur vi lär”:

“By conducting a re-analysis of empirical data from an investigation commissioned by UHÄ, Dahllöf comes to conclusions that differ from those of the original investigation. In the latter, the throughput of students at the faculties of humanities and social sciences proved to be very low. The throughput rate was considerably higher within vocationally orientated fields of study such as medicine, technology etc. Accordingly, the conclusion was that there would be an increased throughput if a number of fixed combinations of subject fields were implemented with the aim of making studies in the “free” faculties more like their vocationally orientated counterparts.

In his analysis, Dahllöf works from the premise that many students who embark on higher studies do not intend to take a degree but only want to study a particular subject for a couple of terms. Dahllöf excludes students over the age of 25 in his empirical material and assumes that by that age they have already completed some kind of post-secondary schooling and want to complement this with a few terms of university studies. Although these categories of students have officially discontinued their studies, that notation does not correspond to their study intentions. Additionally, Dahllöf divides the data into sub-categories regarding place of study, gender, subject field and average mark from secondary schooling. Hence, he finds that there are great differences between the different sub-categories. Some have a low throughput and some have a throughput which resembles that of medicine and technology. Dahllöf comes to the conclusion that if the purpose of the reform is to increase throughput rates in the humanities and social sciences faculties, directed measures rather than general ones must be taken. Thus, the bases on which he questions the sense in the reform are that a closer scrutiny of the empirical data shows that the situation is satisfactory regarding several groups of students and exceedingly problematic regarding others.”


“Try to summarise the article in one or two sentences. In other words, what is the author trying to say?”
It was possible to identify four different conceptions of the intentional content of the passage in the students’ recall of the text and in their answers to the summary question. There was of course, considerable variation in the words used by subjects to recall and summarise the article, but the variation in basic conception of what the author wished to say seemed to fall into the following four categories or levels of outcome.

*Level A: Selective Measures.* Meaning that measures were to be taken only for those groups of students that did not fulfil the necessary requirements.

*Level B: Differential Measures.* Measures are to be taken which allow for differences between the various groups.

*Level C: Measures* are to be taken.

*Level D: There are differences between groups.*

The students were divided into the following categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of outcome</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quality of understanding can be describes as:

\[
A > B > C = D. \text{ (C and D are on the same level.)}
\]

or as:

There are differences between groups (D) for which measures must be taken (C) that recognise differences between the various groups (B) and that only apply to those groups of students that do not fulfil the necessary requirements (A)
After having summarised the article the students were asked to describe how they had engaged with the article. Some quotations from the students’ descriptions follow below:

- ”Well, I just concentrated on trying to remember as much as possible.”
- ”There were a lot of different lines of thought to follow and to try and memorise.”
- ”It would have been more interesting if I’d known that I wasn’t going to be tested on it afterwards, ’cos in that case I’d’ve more, you know, thought about what it said instead of all the time trying to think now I must remember this and now I must remember that.”
- ”...I tried to look for...you know, the principal ideas...”
- ”...and what you think about then, well it’s you know, what was the point of the article, you know.”
- ”...I thought about how he had built up the whole thing.”

The first three comments indicate a surface approach to learning. The students focused on the discourse itself or the recall of it. The last three comments indicate that students had concentrated on what is signified, i.e. what the discourse is about. They had a deep approach to learning.

Marton and Säljö categorised how the students had engaged with the assignment on surface-level, deep-level or as not clear and related these results to their understanding of the test:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Outcome</th>
<th>Level of processing</th>
<th>Sub-totals</th>
<th>Surface-level</th>
<th>Not clear</th>
<th>Deep-level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Surface-level</td>
<td>Not clear</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Marton and Säljö have explored the question why students arrive at such qualitatively different understandings of a text and express it as follows:

“What we found was that students who did not understand ‘the point’ of the text failed understanding it because they simply were not looking for it. The greatest difference in procedure that we found had to do with whether the students concentrated on the text itself or on what the text dealt with; the author’s intentions, the main points, the conclusions. […] Some quotations illustrate the first [surface approach] way of perceiving the learning situation:

I just thought that now I need to hurry up. It was like, I read a couple of sentences and then I couldn’t remember what I had read, just because I was thinking all the time that now I need to hurry up to get through this. I thought the whole time that I must remember this. What I’ve read now, how am I going to remember this now and I won’t be able to remember anything. That’s kind of how I was thinking in several places. […]

You get distracted. You think “I have to remember this now”. And then you think so hard about having to remember it: that’s why you can’t remember anything.”

(Translated from Swedish; Marton, Hounsell, Entwistle, 1984, p. 61)

References