Inclusion or exclusion?

Nanny Hartsmar and Katarina Schenker
Lärarutbildningen, Malmö Högskola (Sweden)

Introduction

According to the Swedish Higher Education Act[1] (2001:1263) universities should actively work to broaden their recruitment of students, so that the variety seen in our society is mirrored to a greater extent in higher education. While universities are now taking in more students with non-academic backgrounds, or with non-Swedish educational backgrounds, at the same time the new teaching in education demands that studies become more academic.

One of the aims of this paper has been to separate the complex situations that arise within higher education, which has a single-sided approach to what is referred to as 'language difficulties', and limits the neutrality of the reading and writing tests contents, where the subject is tested in his/her ability to decode. The entitlement to special educational support during higher education studies is currently based on test results. We are searching for strategies which allow the student's own description of their individual problems to be followed through in the education process, so that the support given is in harmony with the view of language written (both explicitly and implicitly) in the university's course plan.

Background

In 2002 the Act on the *Equal Treatment of Students at the Universities*[2] was implemented. This Act was intended to support equal rights for all students in higher education, and work against discrimination on the grounds of sex, ethnicity, religion or any other belief, sexual preference or disability. However, a problem arises from the definition, in the *UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*[3], which exempt cases where the surrounding environment cannot accommodate the disabled person's requirements. Discrimination laws can be translated as to say that functionally impaired students have the right to special educational support in those cases where the study situation handicaps the student. Students with Swedish as a second language are also covered by the discrimination laws, but second language difficulties are not defined as a disability. These students therefore do not have the same rights to educational support. The specific definitions of *functional impairment* and *handicapped* and their relation have been given great significance.

We will question whether students must be pathologised in order to obtain support. In their study of participants and the exclusion of new students at university, Schuetze and Slowley (2002) discuss how teacher training may require different strategies when it

---

[1] http://wwweng.hsv.se/en/CollectionServlet?view=0&page_id=446&expand_tree=134
[2] http://www.ho.se/start.asp?sida=2088
[3] http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre00.htm

comes to planning. Problems that influence can be identified in terms of attitude and the culture within higher education institutions (Education Department, 1998). The institutional policies are the determining factor in the student's failure or success. In the following discussion, we restrict ourselves to language problems.

Language as a part of culture

The university's interaction with students, and the students' interaction with one another in different teaching situations, is coloured by inter-subjectivity, communication and complexity. Irrespective of the contents and layout, the interaction in the teaching process concerns revision and understanding as meaning is constantly being negotiated.

Several studies show how students from backgrounds without an academic tradition, and/or with a background outside the majority language feel alienated by the academic language and the specific university culture. (Kvalbein 1998; Read *et al* 2003; Lynch and Riordan 1998). Hartsmar (2003) illustrates how the teacher expresses difficulties in dealing with students from cultures with hierarchical traditions, in addition to experiencing problems with students in reflecting on course content, reading lists and scientific theories. One student made it clear that forms of speaking - over and above 'the Swedish language' and 'the academic' - covers even includes 'the way people are'. Carlsson (2002) takes the basis of Bourdieu's language analysis (1991) and argues in her study on *Swedish for Immigrants* that language is not an autonomous, homogenous and neutral phenomenon.

> Spoken interaction can be seen, however personal or insignificant, as a trace of the social structure, to which it both gives an expression and a help when reproduced. Those who dominate in society can, through an officially recognised language norm, reign over the dominated ... Consequently, language's socio-cultural base is in focus ... (p.235, our translation).

The number of students diagnosed with reading and writing difficulties/dyslexia in higher education is increasing each year. These students have the right to special educational support. Students with Swedish as a second language are included in the laws relating to equal rights, but second language difficulties are not described as a disability. These students therefore do not have the same rights to educational support[4].

Writing at higher education level can be regarded as a social act, in which the author engages in discussion with the reader (Dysthe 2002). Carlsson (2002) illustrates in *Swedish Language Courses for Immigrants – Bridge or border?* the discourse of the

---

[4] Special pedagogic support can be an alternative form of examination such as an individual test on the computer, an oral test; extended time for examination; examining the suitability of the course plan and timescale; part-time study; literature through the Library of Spoken Books and Braille; note taking help and computer aided support; extra guidance, proofreading, counselling in writing with both self-help and support from the tutor.

'communicative language ability' which may be found in both local and national school documents in addition to prominent research. A concentrated focus on the knowledge process is documented.

Excluding as a companion to including

Providing testing and offering possibilities of support for students with disabilities should be seen from a perspective of democracy and fairness. If everyone, irrespective of their background, should be welcomed into higher education, then it must be made accessible for those who may encounter problems, and risk being excluded without support.

What does this mean? We can identify problems where 'a language problem' tends to concern exclusively where issues of reading and writing of formal materials are not addressed.

The already polarised debate on dyslexia has intensified - it now seems that a neurological issue lies behind the problem. Helldin (2003, p 206) summarises the instrumental rules: firstly point out; secondly, accurately define; and thirdly implement measures to remove the problem. The other main issues raised in a number of debates has been called *normalising pedagogy* (Hjälme 1999), which is deeply rooted in educational, subject-related and sociological research. *To leave school with a straight back* (SOU, 1997, p 108), discusses educational and subject-related solutions to reading and writing difficulties. The authors emphasise that the content and the study situation in itself create problems for the individual.

This debate must be seen in the light of the battle for resources within the educational sector, and also, as Börjesson & Palmblad (2003) point out, the result of a clear identity policy. Through the demand for a diagnosis and a step-by-step program, the individual risks being branded as 'different' from the norm. At the same time, it demonstrates the individual's rights for increased resources and support measures. Including and excluding are counterparts, and we see this as a problem: being seen to differ in order to be included. Börjesson and Palmblad write: 'Exclusion becomes necessary for normalising what is different' (p 97).

Students who have been proven to be dyslexic in junior or senior school have an automatic right to special educational support, and students who find they are dyslexic but do not have a formal diagnosis are tested by the university. The form of educational support to be used is decided in a meeting between the student and personnel from the Student Health Department. The diagnosis of dyslexia seems to be made in connection with both the phenomenon as such and an explanation of it. It is phonology conscience and ability to decode that are tested. The test differs from the view of language which is explicitly and implicitly seen in course plans.

Those who are found to be dyslexic are given access to support. What happens with the reading ability of those who do not need to read? What will it mean to receive a colleague's notes from the lecture? Is your colleague expected to take notes from

memory? What happens then, with the scribe's own possibility to write reflections on that which was said? If the scribe works just in the form of reflection notes, that gives the recipient of the lecture notes a totally different form of text; the reader is left to a greater or lesser extent to translate the scribe's reflections.

What is the relationship between *language* and *content*? One question which must be asked is what consequences this difference in the view of the language has for the diagnosed student's learning. Is there a risk that they identify themselves with their own diagnosis?

Are the tests and measures adequate?

Several researchers are critical of neutral contents and quantitative tests. Faulkner & Blyth (1996) point out that if qualitative classroom observations had been used, the situation that we have today, in which both the students and system have been badly served, could have been avoided. The system is fooled if inaccurately diagnosed students consequently receive incorrect resources for support. To obtain a diagnosis based on inaccurate facts can mean that the student accepts his/her 'disability' and reduces his/her ambitions concerning reading and writing competence. In this case the university risks supporting exclusion instead of inclusion. In Sweden quantitative reading and writing tests have been criticised, as the focus of the tests are on reading and writing as a system and not as a process of communication (Pehrsson & Sahlström, 1999). Liberg (1993) suggests that it is only the neutral contents language ability which is tested in the standardised tests.

Reading and writing competence in higher education

In those studies referred to at the beginning of this paper, 'language problems' are not simply synonymous with difficulties of sound and decoding. Language concerns are subject-specific and often contain 'heavy' concept-based language. For many students they are synonymous with meeting a foreign language.

In going through a number of course plans and course structures within different subject areas at Malmö Teacher Education we have seen that reflections and argumentation when reading and writing are required, and in dialogue with others we have heard that the meaning should be negotiated and differences be clarified. For example, in the course 'Development and Learning', which is read in the first term, various scientific perspectives relating to the development of knowledge are highlighted and consequences that arise in practice are discussed. The socio-cultural perspective has a prominent position. Language and knowledge development is seen as an intertwined process. The complexity in the diagnosis of reading and writing difficulties/dyslexia in combination with a student's view of his/her learning is examined below in an authentic case.

After her first term, the student went to see the course tutor, and informed her that she was dyslexic and had difficulty in sitting still and concentrating on her own work. The

course tutor asked the student to describe a situation where everything works as well it could.

Student: Yes, if I for example sit and search for something on the internet, that I wish to find out, then I can sit for however long it takes. Then I'm so into it that it works well.
Teacher: What is it that works well?
Student: I can read and concentrate, and I find it interesting.
Teacher: How can you cope with reading the text that you have received?
Student: O.K., but it's quite often that I search for something on, for example sport or entertainment, and then I can read it quite easily. There is nothing strange to understand.
Teacher: You started by saying that you were dyslexic, and had difficulty concentrating. You have just described a situation where you can concentrate 'for as long as you want', and at the same time read material relating to examples of sport or entertainment. What is it that makes you call yourself dyslexic?
Student: I know that I am going to have problems with course books, and I want to know what I need to do in order to obtain help with them. It's my right. There are exemptions for dyslexic people.
Teacher: Why do you mean that you are going to have problems with the course books?
Student: There are a lot of difficult words and they take me longer to read. This means that I'm not going to have time to read all the books.
Teacher: What do you mean by 'exemptions'?
Student: Eh, reading course literature and stuff.

The student was tested by the Student Health Service after a hard term, and failed twice during the first term's written examination, which was in the form of a written home exam. When the spring term started she had received her diagnosis and therefore access to spoken course literature as well, but a third version of the home test was a fail. A new meeting between the course leader and the student was arranged.

Student: I am actually very annoyed. I don't understand why I failed again. There should be special exemptions for dyslexics.
Teacher: How did you use for example spoken literature? Have you listened to the tapes?
Student: No I haven't. I have the right to exemptions when I have these problems.
Teacher: Can you explain to me what you mean with exemptions? Exemptions from what?
Student: I can't read books like this, and therefore there must be someone who can grant me exemptions.

According to her own testimony the student has no great problems with the formal ability to read when the contents are concerned something she has experience and understanding of. The keyword is in the remark '*There* (our emphasis) is nothing strange to understand'. When it comes to the course literature with unfamiliar text, then her previous experiences are seen as negative. She has given up in advance, and does not use the opportunities she has been given to listen to recorded literature. The student says

she is reading slowly when she reads 'books like this' and she appears to have interpreted with 'exemptions' as excusing her from addressing the course literature. Here it seems that support in terms of recorded course literature on its own establishes those who are simple to diagnose as reading slowly and having problems with decoding. The student does not understand that her reading ability is a hindrance: that she does not understand what she reads indicates that the university doesn't have a strategy.

The question is whether or not the measures taken by the university maintain the student's difficulties rather than stimulating her to read 'books like this', and stimulate the development of reading ability when it is a question of *understanding*. We will now consider how in ordinary educational activities we can include a study environment which is supportive and developing.

New types of language support for all students

At Malmö University there are two so-called language workshops in progress, where all students can seek help with text in various formats. They have the possibility to discuss genre and academic language in the workshops, which Dysthe (2002) terms as written specialist literature. Here they get help with 'how to help yourself' with for instance correct spelling and grammar. Seminars on academic language are in development

In the spring of 2002 *Digital Access Support*[5], DAS, was started at Malmö University. This workshop is a result of a co-operation between the library, IT, and Study Administrative Department/Handicapped Service. DAS's services can be used by *all* students whose studies are made easier with IT support. All students should be able to choose to use the IT support that makes it possible for them, together with other students, to take part in education, and to take full advantage of the resources and references to which they have access.

Examples of DAS are computer workstations for students with defective vision; those for students with reading and writing difficulties are located in the library. The central idea is that students should have the possibility to study *together* with other students in spite of functional hindrances/difficulties. Information on DAS is given to all students at the university.

Other forms of support take their starting point as the importance of dialogue and meaning in the learning process. In the department Nature-Environment-Society there is a discussion group for students with a foreign language background. The purpose of the group is to provide an opportunity to speak as much Swedish as possible in authentic situations. The students themselves decide what is to be discussed. The group is led by a teacher from the department.

In an ongoing study at the teacher training college in Malmö, questions relating to accessibility in higher education are highlighted (Malmberg & Svingby 2004). Preliminary analysis of the students' dialogue in computer aided education questions

---

[5] http://web.bit.mah.se/dtv

gives a greater insight into the term 'accessibility'. The pattern of interaction between students discussing over the internet gives new pictures of how the learning processes can be seen when they are supported by others.

Conclusions

We established by way of introduction that the university's interaction with students and the students' interaction with one another in various teaching situations is characterised by intersubjectivity, communication and complexity. The students bring a body of experience and competence to higher education. University education should bear the stamp of polyphony in the true meaning of the word. Accessibility demands that universities develop a capacity to see multiplicity as a corollary of access, and to create possibilities for the individual in dialogue with others. A single-sided focus on that which the law defines as handicapped, which can lead to pathologising of students, implies an altogether narrow view on inclusion and accessibility to higher education.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Börjesson, M. & Palmblad, E. (2003). *I problembarnens tid. Förnuftets moraliska ordning*. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag.

Carlsson, M. (2002). *Svenska för invandrare – brygga eller gräns? Syn på kunskap och lärande inom SFI-undervisningen*. Akademisk avhandling. Göteborg Studies in Sociology.

Dysthe, O. et al. (2002). *Skriva för att lära*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Faulkner, J., & Blyth, C. (1996). Dyslexia in higher education: an abuse of the system? *Educational studies,* 22(3), 357-367.

Hartsmar, N. (2003). 'She told me to develop my reflections', (211-216). I A. Ross (ED). *A Europe of Many Cultures*. London Metropolitan University. Konferensrapport.

Helldin, R. (2003). 'Specialpedagogiskt perspektivseende, humanvetenskaper och etik', (203-232). I (Red.) Jonsson, B. & Roth, K. *Demokrati och lärande. Om valfrihet, gemenskap och övervägande i skola och samhälle*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Hjälme, A. (1999). *Kan man bli klok på läsdebatten? analys av en pedagogisk kontrovers*. Akademisk avhandling. Uppsala universitet. Solna: Ekelund.

Högskolelagen (2001:1263)

Kvalbein, I.A. (1998) *Laererutdanningskultur og kunnskapsutvikling*. Det Utdanningsviten-skaplige fakultet, pedagogiksk forskningsinstitutt, Olso: Universitete i Oslo.

Liberg, C. (1993) *Hur barn lär sig läsa och skriva*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Lynch, K. & O'Riordan, C. 1998. Inequality in higher education: a study of class barriers. *Brittish Journal of Sociology of Education*, 194, pp. 445-478.

Malmberg, C. & Svingby, G. (2004). Students' communication and learning in computer supported dialogues. Konferensrapport, NFPF, Mars 2004.

Pehrsson, A. & Sahlström, E. (1999). *Kartläggning av läsning och skrivning ur ett deltagarperspektiv. Analysverktyg för alla.* Göteborgs universitet: Institutionen för specialpedagogik.

Read et al (2003). 'Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of 'Belonging' and 'Isolation' at a post-1992 university.' Forthcoming in *Studies in Higher Education*, 28, 3.

Schuetze, H.G. & Slowley, M. (2002). 'Participation and exclusion: A comparative analysis of non-traditional students and lifelong learners in higher education.' *Higher Education* 44: 309– 327.

SOU (1997:108). *Att lämna skolan med rak rygg*.