Social media in the classroom

Different perspectives on young students' use of blogs and digital cameras in their school work

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Abstract

In this paper I will, from a multimodal perspective, examine how social media may change the relationship between students' own-produced texts and the school subject that is studied. I will also discuss some empirical observations from learning settings and argue that use of photographic practices combined with the publishing of students' school work in social media stimulates students' written text production. This way to create multimodal texts, also changes the language, away from the facts list, and in favour of narrative.

With the introduction of user friendly and cheap digital cameras in the classroom, together with computers, the opportunities for students to combine their own photos with written text, changes drastically. From multimodal and design theoretical perspective, school work can be seen as text production (in the widest sense) and a transformation of others texts and students' own experiences to new forms of text, a process that also involves a performance where the student's knowledge is reflected. With the class blogs and wikis students are able to show their work for an audience that not share all the knowledge and experiences described in the text; something that otherwise usually is the case in a classroom when the text is submitted to the teacher.

Keywords: Pedagogy, young students, children, social media, class blog, photo, camera, multimodality, storytelling.

Introduction

Today, with a majority of the adult working population in the Scandinavian countries active on social media web sites like Facebook[1], most teachers and parents have their own experience of learning and socializing on line. The notion of the impact of social relations in a learning situation is at the same time of course also widely spread, not to say a solid ground for the understanding

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[1] An assumption dawn from statistics telling that around 50 % of the population in Scandinavia is active on Facebook alone.

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of learning, in our school system. The leap over to a full understanding of the potential of using
social media in the classroom is now just a short step and we are not far away from a situation
where it is difficult to understand how we can be without them in a learning situation (Chao,
Parker, & Fontana, 2011; Hargadon, 2008). But to understand the potential is one thing; to
understand what to do with tools like Google Docs, Facebook, blogs and Skype in a specific
learning situation and what impact this has to all students[2], is something else. In this arena, all of
us are beginners, and from a more scientific standpoint we know very little.

Introduction social media in classrooms raises a range of questions both about applicability of
previous curriculum to the future needs, and the kind skills and knowledge that must be
developed to prepare the students for the future. If we believe that social networking on the net
will be a part of nearly everyone's everyday life and that this way of communicating with other
people will be crucial for every student when and if they will be accepted on a labour market as
well as in common social relations, this must be one of the most important things the school has
to deal with today.

The most obvious skills and information that students should possess are computer skills and
copyright laws, but also how to be public on the net, how to handle sensitive information etc.
From a teachers perspective these questions are rather new and call for retraining of some
teachers who are digital immigrants. Together with this, mediated communication on the net has
to be regarded as a (new) form of multimodal language, where texts must be seen as a
combination of modes like letters, typefaces, colours, images, photos and layouts; where all
matters (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 2010;
Selander & Kress, 2010).

A research and development project in four classes in Karlstad

In an attempt to understand the learning challenges for young students when parts of their school
text production is published on the net, I started a Skype and blog project in four classes, year
four (ten year old students), together with their class teachers in August 2010[3]. The purpose of
the research project is to investigate how students' looks on their own school work when the
teacher is no longer the main receiver for their work.   Since the collection of empirical data is still
in the process, the examples here are not presented as results, instead a starting point to raise
some relevant questions.

All the four classes have one class blog each based on the Wordpress software; a simple to use
publishing tool where the students have their own log in and where they can write and upload
images without any permission and where the teacher at the same time can has full control over
what is published. The class blog is fully public and the students can log in and add written texts
and images from home. In their classrooms two of the classes have one computer per four
children, the two others have got a carriage with computers enough for everyone – but only for a
couple of hour a week due to they are shared with other classes. Normally there are one to two
computers per class in year four classes in Karlstad, a situation which is quite normal in a Swedish

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[2] In this paper I use the word *student* for all children and youth in the school system.
[3] as a part of a PhD-project

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context, but a situation which is questioned by many and everyone seems to believe that a *one to one situation* will be the normal case in just a couple of years[4].

In addition, writing skills of students in the age group (10 – 11 years old) is varying greatly both between classes and within the same class. At this age, a teacher confronts students who may not nearly read and write at all, to those who have already turned into avid readers and who are using Facebook and blogs on a daily basis. While it is expected that many children in this age group have a personal computer at home, connected to the internet, there are others who use internet and computers only at the school. In one of the classes a majority of the class members comes from families with an immigrant background. No one sees any of these classes as special; it is just normal variations as it can be in a city with different socio-economic status in different areas. At the same time this implies that the students do not have the same opportunities in using social media as private persons and the teacher's intention, by taking part in this school development program, is of course to increase everyone's knowledge and at the same time reducing disparities in this area.

As a way of trying to expand the use of social media in the classroom, the teachers decided to try to develop contacts on a regular base with other schools and classes via Skype. The idea behind this was partly to get the students to get to know other children in a *live contact*, in this case other Swedish speaking classes in other countries (e.g. the Swedish school abroad and schools in Finland), partly to get a new and expanding audience for their class blogs. After one school year only one class has succeeded to have common meetings on the net with help of Skype, here with a Swedish speaking school in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia (which works very well technical); the plans continues for the other three classes[5].

One of the immediate experiences in the beginning of this project was the lack of digital cameras. When planning the project, we were counting on the children's own cameras in their mobile phones. This was not a viable solution since young students are not allowed to use their mobile phones during school time. Furthermore, even if this problem could be solved, the next problem was to get the images files from various phones over to the classroom computers. Despite many attempts with Bluetooth and cables, we never managed.

After many attempts, in December 2010 the project got a positive response on an application[6] that included funds for cameras and camera-equipped loupes and microscopes. After discussions with the teachers, we decided that following characteristics would determine the choice of cameras; that they should be easy to use, that they would look like *real* cameras and preferably a bit bigger than the smallest one (not to be forgotten in the pocket) and that they would be far more advanced than simple mobile cameras. In March I could finely deliver 23 rather advanced but easy to use cameras, plus six microscopes and six camera-loupes.

By March, almost nothing had been published on the class blogs. Much effort had been done both by teachers and students to make even the slightest on the computers and to manage logins on

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[4] That is the reason why the community of Karlstad invested 350.000:- (~35.000€) in to the project.
[5] If you are planning for this, you should not underestimate the problems with scheduling meetings in an school environment …
[6] From Internetfonden – http://iis.se

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the local network, to organize the charging of the batteries, save files in the right places and to be able to move files between different accounts. Although the publishing tool was easy to learn, it still took several weeks, especially for the classes with only one computer for every four student, before all students had had time to try to write even a short text. But the hardest task was to create written texts without photos or images.

When the cameras arrived, the teachers and I, to our surprise witnessed an explosion of creativity. The publishing tools where on place and now their fantasy and creativity could take form in a combination of photos and written texts. Of course, we had expected that the cameras and microscopes could provide children with new tools for their storytelling, but hardly to the extent that now have occurred. This experience is the base and inspiration for this paper.

The social media concept

Social media as a concept is relatively young and has a clear link to the notion of a broader freedom of speech, to Internet and mobile phones and probably most people associates it to social media web sites like Facebook and Twitter. But there is no need for a more extensive search on the concept (e.g. in the net) before you can see a much wider understanding ranging from different kind of two-way communication to public performances where you want to have as many listeners, viewers or readers as possible. The concept of social in this context connotes social interaction and something you do for social reasons and the concept of media to that it has to do with the use of a technical tool for communication and interaction between people. This broad definition of *social* and *social media is* inclusive of everything from e-mail, SMS and MSN to blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, Skype as well as Facebook and Twitter. Since social media is a communications technology that supports social interaction, where the content is mostly user-generated and where the content is not posted on behalf of someone. One could argue that even ordinary personal letters, photographs, and the cord-bound phone are media and used for mostly social reasons, which both shows that the phenomenon is hardly new, and at the same time shows how drastically these new social media increased our ways of communicating. Conversely, one can argue that blogs, text messaging, YouTube and Skype are very much used for the purely commercial and administrative purposes, and hardly any of these new media is used exclusively for either social or administrative/commercial purposes. So even if the concept of social media is reasonably possible to identify, it can hardly be defined precisely.

Affordances

The internet social media user gets more utilities in his/her own multimodal toolbox. The user-friendliness of the internet and social media, allows the users a variety of ways to express, which was earlier reserved for a few experts and professionals. Hutchby (2001) views these new possibilities as the user's communicative affordances, a way of understanding the use of the net which has been widely spread concept by scholars over the last ten years (compare e.g. Rostvall & Selander, 2008). The multimodality in social media also brings the possibility of experiencing variation in the learning situation in the school and at home, both in terms of the way you can produce the content and in the way you can communicate it, which might include e.g. your own facial expression in front of a web camera.

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Possibly, a Hutchby (2001) inspired model of an Internet full of new affordances is too general to be used as a base for the understanding of mediated communication in a school environment. But indirectly, Hutchby is pointing at extremely complex phenomena behind the extensive popularity Internet has among school children. Gee (2007a; 2007b; 2008) argues for instance that computer gamers develop new ways of learning and co-operation skills but this does not explain blogging and its potential. Equally, boyd's[7] thoughts about young people using web communities (Boyd, 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b), cannot give the explanation why chatting is so frequently used, the fan-fiction phenomenon (Jenkins, 2006a; Jenkins, 2006b; Parrish, 2007) or why YouTube is so enormously popular; and so on.

E-learning platforms vs. social media

Many schools now use the various learning platforms and more sophisticated intranets with personal logins, where the class can communicate internally, teachers and school leaders can post information and instructions, and in some cases is possible to communicate with parents. Intranet and e-learning platforms have their advantages. Learning platforms changes the administration of how teaching can be conducted, but it seldom create new recipients for the students work and the task has the same challenge and the final text has probably the same content. In contrast, schoolwork published on social media, where schools have worked with public resources as blog tools or wikis, the output is very different. Here, the students' works will be visible to everyone who has access to the web and who are interested in what these particular students and teachers publish. This changes the challenges, the receiver and the content. For that reason, I will not include school or municipal website, intranet, learning management system or regular e-mail in the concept of social media in this work, especially because they are not essentially media for social interaction and they do not support the individuals' freedom of expression.

A search on Google for *"class blog"* or *"social media" & school* creates millions of hits. A quick review of the first about five hundred hits indicates that the free blogs with weekly updates of what has happened and what will happen in the class, are very common[8]. But you can also see that several teachers have found that these tools are excellent to use for publishing video clips, radio programs and more advanced school web journals. There are plenty of examples to storybooks, collections of reviews and internship reports where the class has just used a free blogging tool and wiki tools.

Multimodality and authentic receivers

Interpersonal communication is nearly always multimodal. A person's voice over the phone can be described by words, language and vocabulary and a variety of other modes where the voice tone, strength, intonation and tempo is included. Often, a combination of several different modes of expression is used, such as when two people are talking in the same room e.g. facial expressions, gestures, voice and various forms of staging. A written text can be described with modes such as character set, typeface, colours, paper quality, background image etc. A website allows for more modes than a written paper and a movie can use more modes than a radio show.

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[7] boyd usually spells her name with a lowercase b
[8] A couple of hours work in March 2011 when I was looking at both Swedish and English language websites to get an overview

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(Faux, 2008; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2010; Selander & Kress, 2010)

In a social medium the recipient is always *authentic*, i.e. the sender does not look on the audience as designed (the rest of the class) or fictive (compare Svensson, 2008). In a dialogical perspective, a text is always a response to an earlier text or a statement (Bahtin, 1975/1991; Dysthe & Nilsson, 1996), factual or fictional. Concepts such as "imagine that you shall write a letter to someone in Iceland", does not exist in social media, but in school. Students' text production in school are complicated also because of the fact that the teacher are both the creator of the task, the receiver and the assessor and the student therefore produces its text based on what he/she perceives as the teacher's standard and something that is consistent with the task description (A. Kronholm-Cederberg, 2005; 2009). It would therefore perhaps be said that the teacher is an authentic receiver of texts produced in school settings, but the term *authentic* is not used in this way here.

Authentic situations

The main argument teachers put forward for letting their students publish their school work on the net, is that students this way will become involved in authentic situations beyond the teacher as a receiver (Åkerlund, 2008). The schools' lack of authentic situations for student's texts are a major factor to why so many students do not crack the idea behind the concept of studying (Nilsson, 2002). The consequence of publishing students work on the Internet is not only that the author/photographer/video-producer will get other readers/watchers than the teacher and their classmates; the image of the school itself will change. In this public text universe the stories and pictures made by the students become the image of the students themselves and the school, which means a shared responsibility for all involved.

Quite often, the fact that the school's official website is in second place in the statistics of school web visitors when there is an alternative class blog or school web paper, can be seen as threatening by colleagues, and school boards and municipal information offices. Many teachers working with blogs and wikis can witness about situations where they have to promise the headmaster or the school board that they will supervise and prevent that any kind of negative or criticizing material towards the school ever will show up on the class blog. The lack of trust of teachers' work and of students' intentions and the lack of confidence for the concept of responsible freedom of speech, and thereby also some democratic values, are sometimes evident. Even these latter things are part of the objectives for Swedish education (Åkerlund, 2008).

Stories

When we in the school context are talking about stories, it is mostly about fictional stories. But on these class blogs described above, or in the contacts with other schools via Skype, fiction is very rare. These written texts combined with photos have almost always the story's structure; an event or a timeline (beginning, middle and end) and they are populated, not infrequently by the students themselves. At the same time these stories also contains facts and thereby they act as repetition and reminders.

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Social anthropologist Robin Dunbar has devoted his research to human language development. He argues that the desire to tell and to listen to others' stories is genetically determined (Dunbar, 1997). Dunbar says that we can deduce from the language's social functions why the story was important for our ancestors, and why it is important for the youth of today to tell in order to maintain social relationships.

Gärdenfors (2006; 2008) writes that narratives can help us to create meaning in our life, mainly because the story helps us to plan for the future. He emphasizes (with reference to Dunbar ibid) that our brains are built to remember stories. By remembering the narrative, we also remember facts related to the story's inner and external context. Therefore, he is a promoter of a pedagogy that uses stories more often.

Cameras, storytelling and blogs

As soon as the cameras were introduced, and students recognized the possibility of using pictures to tell a story, almost all students were bursting with ideas about what they would like to blog about. Of course, this way to tell a story was new and exciting and it certainly put its mark on the enthusiasm. On the other hand it is already possible to see new opportunities for the students' written and visual storytelling.

Cameras and photos are not new in the school context; without scientific evidence, I think I can say that almost every class in Sweden has access to a digital camera in some form. I have encountered numerous examples of what we in journalism mention as return information or feedback, like when the teacher is shooting in the classroom or on excursions and then afterwards displays the images for the students; sometimes for the parents at parent-teacher meetings (this has always been highly appreciated). Occasionally also students' own private shootings have been accepted in an assignment given by the teacher. Local newspapers (in Karlstad, Sweden) have also reported from a secondary school where students have taken photos of experiments and laboratory work as a way of documenting the results, photos which have been included in the students' laboratory reports to the teacher.

The first aspects that I noticed in these classes I work in when introducing the cameras, was an immediate understanding among the students that images uploaded to the blog, must always be accompanied by a written text. The photo has in many cases been the actual cause for the writing, in some other cases a written text or a poem was given a complementary photo and was therefore possible to publish (in the eyes of the children).

Three examples:

Several of the classes I work in have been to the theatre in recent weeks. They have been writing about this on the blog - of course with illustrative images. Here, the photo has a function of making the blog post more interesting for the supposed readers; it works as a comment to the text and a proof that they were there.

A Great spotted woodpecker (Dendrocopos Major) one day sits, during a math lesson, in a tree outside one of the classes' classroom window. Some of the students see this and ask the teacher to quickly grab the camera lying on her desk and take a picture. It became a

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really good picture and some students immediately asked if they could write about the bird
(which none of them knew the name of before). A day later a short article is on the class
blog with a description of the background to the picture and some facts about the bird.
Here the picture is a kind of proof of what they saw and it was the image and the blog,
rather than the birds' appearance outside the window, which helped them to learn more
about the woodpecker.

In one of the classes, there was a spirited debate when the cameras for the first time were
introduced. "Then we can show others what it looks like in our school on our blog...", "We
have to take photos of our hens ..." (the school has its own hen run), "We can interview a
hen ..." (laughter). The idea to interview a hen - a totally brilliant idea - had never occurred
without the possibilities to take photos in a combination of an existing class blog. (Several
articles are now underway about the birds.)

When students combine written text on the blog with photos of their own

Fiction stories and fiction writing has a strong position in the Swedish school system (Skolverket,
2011). At the same time teachers who teach in the early school years often have their greatest
expertise in the humanities and social sciences and tend to put less emphasis on science
(Andersson et al., 2005), which is not a specifically Swedish condition (Osborne & Dillon, 2008).

The syllabus for Swedish (mother tongue) in the Swedish compulsory school (Skolverket, 2011)
emphasizes the importance of this school subject in expressions like "meet students' needs to
express what they feel and think", "cultural heritage", "to express views of their own", "develop
their imagination and desire to learn by reading literature", "understand the thoughts of others"[9],
and be able to reflect and discuss the content of literature, theater, film and photos. While the
literature[10] and fiction is mentioned 21 times in the syllabus text, non-fictional texts are
emphasized only once and then in one sentence in the description of goals for year three which
says that all children should be able to write simple factual texts. Neither the link between
children's own pictures, nor written text is concerned, although this is a very common type of
texts in the school's first year – hand-written texts with the child's own drawings[11]

Even though the connection between fictional writing in school to *Image/Picture* (Sw. Bild) as a
school subject (a mandatory subject which in practice rarely is anything other than drawing and
painting) is strong, we do not find this relationship in the curriculum. Maybe the fictional writing,
with children's illustrative drawings, has a strong position in the first years in school because it
relates to a literary tradition? The children's literary world revolves around the tale and fairy tales
in book form rarely includes photographs. Fact books for children can sometimes include
photographs and have often the function of proving that what is illustrated in the drawings and
paintings, also can be reality. Animated films for children are almost entirely fiction, while the
moving photo of course, both can describe fiction and facts. Perhaps it is simply the lack of

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[9] My own translation
[10] Fiction novels
[11] A genre as comics (comic books) is not included in the curriculum.

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cameras and a non-existing photographic tradition that made the first year of reading and writing training so strongly linked to fiction?

Yesterday's camera technology with film and film processing has from a practical point of view been almost impossible to use in the school context. Although the economy in some cases could allow some photographing, the aspect of time is especially crucial. Children in their first school years have a different perception of time than later in life (Lee, Lee, & Fox, 2009); what matters is here and now. With the new technology with digital cameras, the image-making changes into something that is immediate and creative in a totally new way. Perhaps this opens an entirely new relationship between children's own photographs and their written texts, mainly because the time between image production and the finished (multimodal) text can be shortened drastically?

This digital photo technologies and that it is now possible to show photos to an audience who did not participate in the school activities themselves – in other words that there can now be authentic receivers outside the school for the school texts – may change the relationship between fictional writing and the more factual or concrete writing. To tell the parents, friends and other people interested in what the class is working with on the class blog, e.g. what games the children are playing in the schoolyard (including rules), which insect or frog that was found in the lake next to the school, which bird species that breed in the bird nest that was constructed in the school workshop, who wrote the theatre play you just saw at the theatre or how to bake "the world's best buns", are all factual texts and gives quite different demands on the narrator – not at least in getting good photos. When there is an authentic audience, you can never get away with "this you understand anyway", a statement not only known by teachers who teach young children.

Conclusion

My preliminary thinking on students' digital written texts, when these texts are combined with their own digital photos and posted on a class blog (which will be further investigated) - now looks like this:

> Class blogs without pictures have a less reading value for the audience which class bloggers are appealing to and the students are very aware of this.

> Photos that describe the class activity can quickly be spread to a larger group. Students' perception here is that images require a written text.

> Arrangements outside the classroom (visits to museums, trips to the forest, theatre visits) will be one of the most important tasks to document with photos, simply because students want to describe these special events on the class blog to a larger audience. This also creates new opportunities for self-reflection back in the classroom - the teacher will need to discuss the children's experience to support them in the writing. Additional facts about what they experienced must usually be added (perhaps taken from books or from the internet) and this will also be a natural repetition opportunity.

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Similarly, the work in the classroom can be strengthened. Laboratory experiments or projects are documented, not only facts but also in the form of meta-reflection on how the work was designed and what and how you learned it. A story is not a story without the people involved.

Cameras and blogs open completely new ways of organizing the learning process. The assignment to the students in traditional teaching is often based on production of written texts that are submitted to the teacher and/or presented to the class. With blogging from and the use of cameras inside or outside the classroom, the mission can be to tell a factual story in words and pictures … for example how a pizza maker in the shopping center is baking a pizza, or how to repair a puncture on a bicycle ... and tell an audience outside the classroom without the knowledge students have received (knowledge that students know that the teacher probably has). Students' experience of the meaningfulness of school work will change with these kind of activity oriented assignments, as will the role of the teacher and the image of the school as an institution.

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