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Questioning a discourse of information literacy practice in Web -based tutorials

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Abstract

Introduction. A number of Scandinavian Web-based tutorials on information seeking mediate a kind of discourse of information literacy practice by combining the two themes, written academic assignment and information seeking. The aim of the paper is first to examine students' experience of the pragmatic value of two of these Web-based tutorials, 'VIKO' (www.ntnu.no/viko/english) and 'UB-testen' (www.ubtesten.dk), and second to discuss the discourse and its way to contextualise information seeking in the particular Web-based tutorials.

Method. Individual interviews with twenty-seven students have been carried out in 2011.

Analysis. In the analysis, concepts from Schatzki's practice theory (2002, 2012) and an ideal typology from Halkier (2010) have been applied.

Results. The analysis indicates that there is a gap between, on the one hand, the intended use of the Web-based tutorial seen from the perspective of the discourse, and on the other hand, the students' reactions to the same tutorial during interviews about

their study activities. The result of the analysis is a questioning attitude towards the written assignment as a way to contextualise information seeking in the particular Web-based tutorials.

Conclusion. The study contributes to the discussion about what kind of contextualisation is needed in Web-based tutorials on information seeking.

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Introduction

In the last ten years Scandinavian university libraries have offered students Web-based tutorials on information seeking: *VIKO* ([Pathways to Information Literacy](#)), *UB-testen* ([University Library Test](#)), Swim ([Streaming Web-based Information Modules](#)), Søk & Skriv ([Search & Write](#)), Råd&VINK (Hints and Advice) (closed in 2011 (described in [Schreiber 2010](#))). These Web-based tutorials have been produced with the intention of teaching students how to find information, assess it critically, and how to write an academic assignment. Searching for, evaluating, and using information is seen as part of the practice of writing academic assignments. The target group of these tutorials is first of all undergraduate students from different academic disciplines and faculties at university. The creators of these tutorials' have chosen the activity of writing academic assignments as a way to contextualise 'information' and 'information seeking'. The intention is to mediate an understanding of how information and information seeking acquire meaning ([Markless and Streatfield 2007:28f](#); [Skagen et al. 2008](#); [Thornes 2012](#)). However, usability studies have revealed that some of the Web-based tutorials mentioned above (*VIKO*, Søk & Skriv, and Råd&VINK) have not been used by the students in the ways which were expected ([Hyldegaard and Lund 2012](#); [Lund and Pors 2012](#)).

In this paper, the combination of the two themes, written assignment and information seeking, are seen as a discourse of information literacy practice. A central question is whether the context-dependency involved in this discourse is sufficient to satisfy the needs of the students. In the following, two of these tutorials are taken into closer consideration, namely *VIKO* and *UB-testen*, with the intention to examine students' experience of the pragmatic value of the tutorials and in that context to discuss the discourse's way to contextualise information seeking in the particular Web-based tutorials.

Web-based tutorials on information seeking have earlier been investigated in regard to their approaches to information literacy. In an empirical investigation of 31 Scandinavian Web-based tutorials Sundin ([2008](#)) identified four approaches, which were seen as expressions of librarians' knowledge claim and further, as discourses that involved contested concepts in librarians' professional practices such as 'information', 'information seeking' and the 'user' ([Sundin 2008:30](#)). One of the approaches identified was the process approach. The process approach focused on information seeking processes from the perspective of the individual user, based on a cognitive and constructionist tradition ([Kuhlthau 2004](#)). Typical elements of the process approach were the two themes, written assignment and information seeking. The two Web-based tutorials, *VIKO* and *UB-testen*, represent a process approach.

In this paper, the structure of genre analysis proposed by Miller and Shepherd ([2004](#)) is applied in the examination of students' experience of the pragmatic value of the two Web-based tutorials. The

structure of Miller and Shepherd's genre analysis (2004) consists of three levels, i.e., a medium's substance, form, and rhetorical action. A genre analysis may draw the conclusion that a particular medium performs a rhetorical work in so far as all three levels involve features and elements which made the medium recognizable and functional. The two first levels of the analysis, substance and form, represent the discourse of information literacy practice as it is presented in the particular Web-based tutorials. The third level, rhetorical action, concerns what pragmatic value as social action the tutorials have. This level is investigated by looking at the students' statements concerning their (potential) use of these tutorials as tools for carrying out some of their study activities.

If the analysis shows a gap between on the one hand the intended use of the Web-based tutorials described at the two first levels, and on the other hand the students' reactions to the same tutorial during interviews discussed at the third level, it is not accurate to think of the particular Web-based tutorials as a genre current in the students' everyday life. The intention is to investigate whether the analysis indicates such a gap. The gap will involve a questioning attitude towards the discourse represented in the two Web-based tutorials. This will have implications for the discussion about how to contextualise instructions given in Web-based tutorials on information seeking.

The paper has the following structure: First, a presentation of substance and form of the two Web-based tutorials. Second, a description of elements from Schatzki's practice theory. Third, the method and analysis are introduced. Fourth, the analysis of the level concerning the pragmatic value in relation to the two Web-based tutorials is carried out. Finally, the paper draws conclusion about the written academic assignment as a way to contextualise information seeking in the two Web-based tutorials.

The first levels of the analysis: substance and form

The Web-based tutorials in question are [VIKO](#) and [UB-testen](#). They are both information resources produced with a stable, unified presentations format and pre-defined information content.

The Norwegian tutorial *VIKO*, developed in 2004 and hosted by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, is a Web-based interactive course consisting of seven modules. In 2011, the Web site was organized by a menu on the left side of the screen giving the opportunity to choose between the following topics: defining research topics, information sources, finding books, findings articles, finding Web pages, evaluating information, writing papers. The list of the seven topics illustrates the process of writing an academic assignment. The first module starts with a definition of 'a scientific paper'. The tutorial gives advice of how to find the topic, e.g. by defining the research topic. Further, it explains that the research question determines where to look for information and which sources to choose or how to search. During the last module a description of the structure of the paper and the different styles of reference lists are presented. Taken together the tutorial presents a model for carrying out scientific work following seven modules in a linear and progressive process from first finding the research question, next finding and evaluating the information, and finally writing the paper.

UB-testen, developed in 2007 and hosted by DEFF, Copenhagen University, University of South Denmark and the research libraries of both the universities, is a Web-based interactive test. The Website has one main entrance to five topics. The user chooses one of the five topics and each topic involves six multiple-choice questions. Each question implies three options of reply, and the users have to give their answer. The choice of an answer is carried out by a mark and the next question arrives automatically. The answers are divided into three categories: the right ones, the wrong ones

and the neutral ones. The user gets a feedback in an elaborated text mediating the right answer. Some of the questions in the multiple choices are specifically about how to work with the written assignment. Questions with relation to the written assignment are '*How can you define your topic?*' or '*What can you do in the introductory phase of your paper writing?*' etc. The mentioned questions involve different proposals like getting help from the information resources of the library. One of the proposals is that the student makes an overview of the literature dealing with the topic and through this process he may find the research question. Thus the answer suggests that the information seeking may support the activity of finding the research question to complete the written assignment.

As shown, the two tutorials have very different structures. Where the one has the structure of seven steps in the process of writing the academic assignment, the other has the structure of a game of asking questions. The similarity is that both give advice about information activities in relation to the process of writing the assignment. Both tutorials emphasise the information activities in the specific meaning of using the digital information resources, the search language and –techniques in relation to the written assignment process.

Theoretical foundations

The primary message of the discourse to students as users of the two Web-based tutorials is to improve their routines of writing assignments, searching for information and so on, in order to act as the tutorial say. Students can react in many different ways to this message. They can ignore it, discuss it or comment upon it. In the reactions they are interacting with the discourse. However, the discourse challenges students in a normative way concerning their study activities.

Schatzki's practice theory emphasises the processes of carrying out activities ([Schatzki 2002, 2012](#)). To do something is constituted by a flow of actions and agency processes. Therefore, normative regulations of study activities and practices are a continuous practical and discursive accomplishment among practioners. A practice involves normativity in the meaning of 'oughtness' and 'acceptability' ([Schatzki 2002](#)). The concept of practice is defined by Schatzki as an organised constellation of activities. A practice is a set of doings and sayings, which are organised by practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structures, and general understandings ([Schatzki 2012:15](#)). The practical understandings concerns the knowing how to carry out actions. By rules he means explicit formulations, principles, procedures that may direct the actions. The teleoaffective structures are normativised and hierarchically ordered ends which are linked to normativised emotions. The general understandings are senses of the worth, value or other abstract understandings expressed in people's actions. In sum, through the rules and the teleoaffective structures, normativity shapes what makes sense to people to do. At the same time, the normative is being constructed in the social processes, which therefore influence values, rules, and structures.

A practice involves both doings and sayings. Schatzki described 'sayings' as a subclass of 'doings'. Doings as well as sayings are bodily activities. Therefore, sayings are also actions a person performs. I have chosen Schatzki's practice theory for the empirical analysis of interviews with students about their experience of and expectation to the Web-based tutorial. The intention is to analyse students' statements as they are presented during individual interviews, and interpret these as activities which form part of negotiations of the normatively acceptable way of talking about the Web-based tutorial and its (potential) use. By saying something about the Web-based tutorial in the interview, students are 'doing' positions in these negotiations. Therefore, the result of the analysis has to be seen in perspective of the negotiations.

Method and analysis

The analysis is based on an empirical material consisting of individual interviews. In 2011 two empirical studies were carried out. In May 2011 seven students from a Norwegian University were interviewed about their written assignment practice ([Schreiber 2014, in press](#)) and as part of the interview the students were asked about their experience of the Web-based tutorial 'VIKO'. All students came from the same academic discipline under the Faculty of Humanities. In June 2011 twenty students from a Danish university and a Danish university college were interviewed about their written assignment practice ([Schreiber 2014, in press](#)). As part of this interview the students were asked about their expectation to the tutorial 'UB-testen'. These students came from humanities, social science, pedagogical science and health science. In the case of *VIKO* the students had used the tutorial during their everyday study life, while in the case of *UB-testen* the students met the tutorial at the interview for the first time. All the Norwegian and most of the Danish students had been studying from one to three years of a bachelor degree. Four of the Danish students had continued education at master level. To support that the student in the particular interview got the opportunity to respond to and negotiate the Web-based tutorial the informant did a walk-through of the tutorial. The interview extracts cited in this paper have been translated to English and anonymised, and pseudonyms used in place of real names.

In the first phase of the analysis of the meeting between informant and Web-based tutorial, relevant parts of the interviews, which concerned the students experience of or expectation to the Web-based tutorial, have been extracted. These parts have been coded according to the informants' statements concerning the two themes of the discourse in question. In the next phase of the analysis, an ideal typology has been applied, inspired by Halkier (2010). The argument for using this ideal typology is to achieve a kind of methodological generalization in relation to the empirical material ([Halkier 2010: 41ff](#)). The typology consists of three levels: The ways of handling the particular Web-based tutorial may be understood firstly as identifying, which means that the informants' statements are in line with the tutorial as a genre. The premise is that the informants have explicitly presented the use of the tutorial as activities that are integrated into their study practices. Secondly the way of handling the Web-based tutorial may be understood as appropriating. This implies that the informants make the tutorial to their own by adapting and negotiating the tutorial in relation to their own situated context. The discourse is not normatively rejected, but the presented activities may develop in another direction than the message of the discourse prescribes. Finally, it may be understood as distancing, which is the opposite of the identifying way. In this case the Web-based tutorial is rejected by the informant during the interview. Here, the informants' reactions are not at any point a kind of negotiation of the discourse as it is in the appropriating ways ([Halkier 2010:61, 170ff](#)).

This ideal typology is used in the following discussion with the exception that the category of identifying is not involved. It has not been possible to find an identifying way of handling the Web-based tutorials in the interviews. In the coding process there were only identified two of the three categories, i.e., the appropriating and distancing ways.

The third level of the analysis: rhetorical action

The analysis below categorises the informants' ways of handling the Web-based tutorial into two different reactions, firstly the appropriating way, secondly the distancing way.

1. Appropriating

In the first place we look at *VIKO*. The doings and sayings of the seven students from the same discipline at a Norwegian university (Faculty of Humanities) showed an appropriating way of handling *VIKO*. All the students remembered being introduced to *VIKO* during their first year at university on a course which gave an introduction to academic writing. The teachers called *VIKO* the 'writing tool'. They presented *VIKO* to the students as a tool they could use during the writing process.

At the beginning of the walk-through almost all of informants were clicking on the 'Writing papers' button, i.e., the last one of the seven modules in the menu on the start page. They knew that they could find links to reference styles and information about in-text citation. The informants recognised the text about reference styles and citation rules. However, it appeared that they were not so familiar with the tutorial. They hardly knew that the text described activities such as information seeking and evaluation or that it presented a linear and progressive process of seven modules concerning how to carrying out scientific work.

Many of the informants described difficulties in writing an academic paper, but they did not relate the problems to the tutorial, which was not seen as the place to go when they needed help in practicing the academic genre. The described use of the tutorial was in line with the name the informants gave *VIKO*. They called it 'the checklist'. They did not make any connection to subjects like information and information seeking. Thus, the connection between the written assignment and information seeking and use was never made. The informants had adapted and negotiated the tutorial in relation to their own situated context. They had made it of their own. The activities described by the informants seemed to be intentionally related to *VIKO*, but the informants imagine *VIKO* as a tool for making reference list and citation, and they perform toward *VIKO* on the basis of that. The meaning *VIKO* had for the informants was tied to the practice of written assignment but only to the activities of making reference list or citation, and not to the activity of information seeking. The informants' 'sayings' were organized by practical understandings and rules concerning how to write an assignment mediated by the teachers who presented *VIKO* only as 'the writing tool'.

Secondly, we look at *UB-testen*. As described above, *UB-testen* is structured as a game of asking questions. Many of the students met the tutorial for the first time at the interview. Some were amused by the game while others had the opinion that the game caused more trouble than the opposite. As in the case of *VIKO*, some of the Danish informants looked after information about the reference styles or citation rules.

All informants did the walk-through of the *UB-testen*. For a while the game occupied some of them, but they had a lot of comments about the questions and answers in the game. The questions were experienced as being of interest or of no relevance. However, during the walk-through several of the informants discovered elements of the tutorial which gave advice for finding and evaluating information, and many were quite positive about these recommendations. One informant said that he would like to learn how to find books or articles recommended by his teachers:

My problem is that I don't know how to find particular books. I can illustrate this point with a concrete example. Today the teacher told us about one or another researcher who has been writing something, a scientific article or something like that. Then I would like to know how to do a search of it. It is a problem. I would like to know how I could find something written by him. In this case I have to go to the librarian for help. (Chris, male, social science, Danish university)

As shown in the excerpt, the need of an advice concerning search language and search technique was not connected to the practice of the written assignment. Instead it was connected to the social interaction between teacher and student. Thus, the informant negotiated his position in relation to reproduction of the teaching practice. In this way, he related *UB-testen* to another particular practice. The teaching practice seemed to give meaning to advice concerning search language and search technique in *UB-testen*.

2. Distancing

The distancing way was a kind of performance in which the informants did not let the particular tutorial be part of any of their study practices. This type of reaction was only identified in the interviews, where *UB-testen* was involved.

The informants from health science (Danish university college) had the opinion that *UB-testen* did not contain the kind of knowledge they needed. They understood knowledge as primarily evidence-based. Many of them were engaged with collecting evidence for every claim they made in written assignments. In that connection they had been trained to deal with different databases and different kind of information resources. The advice of the tutorial concerning search language, search techniques and names of information resources were not what they felt they needed just now compared with what they already knew. During the walk-through, one of the students from health science found descriptions of databases she did not know, but she rejected the advice by making a reference to those three databases she already knew from her study activities:

I can't see what this has to do with my training to search for literature. It was understandable if it had been a thorough guide to for instance PsycINFO, Cinahl or Pubmed, and if they gave guidance to how to search for information in these databases.
(Line, female, health science, Danish university college)

The health science students had developed their own discipline-oriented terminology for locating material and thereby collecting evidence. For these students the teleoaffective structure of their study practices involved an interest for developing the profession.

I think it is great to gain an insight into evidence-based research, because we are not only trained to be a nurse but also to develop the nursing profession. I have learn how to search for information, how I can increase my knowledge, and I think I used it in my last long period of internship. (Emma, female, health science, Danish university college)

The teleoaffective structure meant that they were engaged in developing evidence-based knowledge, and they wanted to perform information activities on the basis of a discipline-oriented approach and terminology. Their need for a discipline-oriented approach caused them to reject the tutorial. In addition, the databases did in fact support a repetition of the doings and sayings in their study practices.

Another group of students, *the informants from social science, humanities and pedagogical science* (Danish university and university college) complained about the kind of questions and answers used in the game of *UB-testen*, especially questions and answers concerning written assignments. In this case, the informants could not identify themselves with the recommendations of the tutorial. One of the informants, Anne, commented the presented answers on the screen by saying:

This is what they think is most suitable, but you can also do it in another way. I understand the answers, and I know what they mean, but I will not say it is always the right thing to do. (Anne, female, human science, Danish university)

Another of the informants, Peter, is saying: 'People just have different work styles' (Peter, male, human science, Danish university). These informants did not feel they were in alignment with the model of the assignment process which the tutorial indirectly recommended through the selected questions and answers. The informants' practical understandings and the text of the tutorial differed about how to write an academic assignment. Therefore, *UB-testen* did not seem to contribute to the written assignment practice. As it was now, the tutorial was not able to facilitate this particular study practice.

A last kind of distancing way, which has to be mentioned, was connected to the many different social practices the informants were carriers of. Many of the informants described that they did not think they had time for going through *UB-testen* in everyday life. The general assessment was that it took too long to take the test, i.e., the time could be used at other activities. Here many other kinds of 'doings' were attended. The students mentioned not only other study practices, but also leisure time practices, job practices, family practices and so on. The individual carried out multitude of different practices, and these practices might challenge one another, but in the processes the particular tutorial did not seem to have any meaning. It was not offered a place in arrangements facilitating these practices.

Conclusion

The study of the pragmatic value of the two Web-based tutorials has analysed two kinds of reactions: The appropriating way and the distancing way. None of the ways of handling the tutorials represented the identifying way.

In the case of *VIKO*, the *appropriating* way of handling the tutorial indicated that *VIKO* supported very few activities in the practice of written assignment. It was experienced as a checklist of reference styles and citation rules. In the case of *UB-testen*, the *appropriating* way of handling the tutorial suggested that other practices were relevant. Thus, the teaching practice or the social interaction between teacher and student seemed to give meaning to *UB-testen*'s advice concerning search language and search technique.

For informants from health science, the *distancing* way of handling *UB-testen* indicated a need for a more discipline-oriented approach; for other informants it indicated a need for questions and answers about written assignments which would fit better with the ways the informants were 'doing' their assignments. Also in this case, the need can be interpreted as a demand for a more discipline-oriented approach. Finally, for many of the informants the use of the tutorial was experienced as very time-consuming. In addition, it did not directly facilitate any of their practices. Once again, perhaps a more discipline-oriented approach could solve this problem.

As shown, the two tutorials represented a kind of challenge in relation to the informants' practices. The research question was whether the analysis would show a gap between, on the one hand, the intended use of the Web-based tutorials described at the levels concerning substance and form of the genre, and on the other hand, the pragmatic value proposed by the informants concerning the particular tutorial during the interviews. The analysis indicates that there is such a gap. Therefore, the

analysis involves a questioning attitude toward the written assignment as a way to contextualise information seeking in these Web-based tutorials.

The paper draws the conclusion that the context-dependency involved in this discourse is not sufficient to satisfy the needs of the students. The way to contextualise information seeking in these Web-based tutorials has to be changed. Firstly, the changes have to go in direction of developing the contextualisation to be more discipline-oriented. There are many different written assignment practices depending on the academic discipline in question. The production of the Web-based tutorials has to take advantages of this kind of knowledge. Secondly, there seems to be a need for an approach where the written assignment as a theme is replaced by a context belonging to a more specific situation, for instance a kind of teaching activity or another social interaction between teacher and student. This might presuppose the application of a flexible and interactive medium and therefore another medium than the one used by *VIKO* and *UB-testen*. Future research on the use of mobile applications might be of interest.

Schatzki's practice theory appeared to be useful as a tool for analysing the informants' 'sayings' as activities which form part of negotiations of the normative acceptable way of talking about the Web-based tutorial and its use in relation to study practices. As mentioned above, the informants were 'doing' positions as part of these negotiations. However, the analysis cannot reveal what kind of positions they did and how these positions might reproduce or change the particular practices. In that context a reservation concerns the chosen method concerning the empirical material. Only to a limited extent can individual interviews be a substitute for an ethnographic field work, where the researcher more broadly gets knowledge about not only students' study practices but also for instance their media practices and the way these practices are organized. This reservation does not weaken the result as such, but it have to be mentioned that through a field work, informants' experiences of the Web-based tutorials could have been considered as part of the negotiations about different practices and in this way the study could have contributed with further perspectives.

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