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## Online dating and education

### **Yvonne Fritze and Yngve Troye Nordkvelle**

Department of Education and Social Studies

Lillehammer University College

Email: [Yvonne.Fritze@hil.no](mailto:Yvonne.Fritze@hil.no), [Yngve.Nordkvelle@hil.no](mailto:Yngve.Nordkvelle@hil.no)

### **Abstract**

*Taking its inspiration from Luhmann's communication theory, this article looks at online dating from the perspective of teaching and education. While Eros obviously plays an important role in regenerating the desire to communicate, this ardour is often absent from the domain of net-based teaching. The article explores those features of online dating characteristic of distance dialogue, and discusses the extent to which these can be transferred to communication in the teaching context. We further argue that participation in online dating increases communicators' competence and self-reflection.*

**Keywords:** communication theory, net dating, erotic conversations, distance education

### **Introduction**

For some years now, there has been a discussion as to what measures are conducive to the success of e-learning systems, including what factors stimulate a high level of communicative activity. The qualities of the teaching materials, the quality of the response and the content and character of the dialogue have all been suggested as critical success factors. Other factors such as students' ICT skills, their level of education and how this relates to everyday experience and the social climate have also been suggested as being significant. Questions of a more ethical and moral nature have also been raised in the context of whether the establishment of a code of practice or "netiquette" may be pertinent to this type of communication.<sup>1</sup>

Learning is unpredictable and difficult to plan. Teaching is therefore the form of communication more conducive to changes in learning. Net-based teaching is generally accepted in research theory as an effective and popular method of organizing instruction. However, in reality it is often a different matter, and many teachers concede that it is difficult to arouse students' interest in participating. In learning management systems (LMS), communication seldom functions as planned or anticipated. One likely reason may be an inflated marketing rhetoric, which has exaggerated the promise of inter-student communication (Grepperud & Haugsbakk, 2004). Furthermore, most teaching programmes via LMS in Norway fail to make full use of the system's communicative possibilities (Rønning & Grepperud, 2006). The findings from a Danish doctoral thesis confirm that few students participate productively

(Rattleff, 2001). Jonassen, Carr and Yueh (1998:30) claim that this low level of competence relates to students' general lack of conversational skills, including an inability to assess their audience and give appropriate responses because during their years at school they "[...] have been too busy memorizing what the teachers tell them. So, it may be necessary to support students' attempts to converse".

The empirical study comprising the background for this article originally came about because we were interested in learning more about how to avoid interruptions to pedagogical communication in distance learning. A key problem for Luhmann and the present study is *how to maintain communication in these systems*. Since the aim of many people taking part in online dating is to find the One and Only, this is clearly a strongly motivating factor in this particular form of communication. This motive may therefore also provide clues as to why it is apparently so simple to sustain communication in an online dating arena, as opposed to what happens in net-based teaching. There is a great difference between participating in an academic discourse restricted in its subject content and being party to personal communication of a more romantic nature. This study has accordingly also sought to determine whether it is at all possible to separate romantic communication from its original context, with a view to transposing some of its elements to pedagogical communication.

The article is based on results from an empirical study of communication on different online dating sites in Norway and Denmark. The core of the study comprises eight qualitative interviews with persons who have some experience with online dating. All the interviews were recorded on an iPod and subsequently transcribed. We have additionally collected quantitative data via a questionnaire survey with 56 responses.

Taking this as our point of departure, we set out to investigate how romantic communication can be described and if love and Eros can have any bearing on teaching, learning and education.

## **Has romantic communication a special capacity for maintenance?**

In seeking insight into romantic love as a phenomenon and communicative form, we have turned to Luhmann and his interpretation of the concept. We have also re-visited the ancient Greeks and investigated love in relation to the Eros myth. In the context of these descriptions of love, we ask if the concept contains any particular possibilities for communicative reproduction and system maintenance.

### **Love according to the Eros myth**

In Greek mythology, Eros was the child of two gods: Poros, the wealthy and resourceful god, and Penia, the hungry and impoverished god. Penia visited the drunken, half-asleep Poros and conceived Eros. Love was therefore the offspring of both plenty and hunger, united in Eros as the desire to satisfy unfulfilled needs. Eros was neither benign nor intelligent, though his sole purpose was to identify a need that craved satisfaction. Being imbued with the impelling power of love and seeking the consummation of its needs means possessing an energy that the Greeks believed should be cultivated and nurtured. In Plato's interpretation, Eros should ideally be directed towards the search for wisdom and the good. Eros is the instrument that seeks and identifies needs and generates the energy to fulfil them. Identified in these needs is what one yearns for as being worthy of one's desire, understood to mean that the object of desire possesses a special beauty in the eyes of the desirer. In this search, creative power is released: "It is the paradoxical power

of genesis that mediates between Being and not Being”, as Jim Garrison puts it (1997:9). Through this process of creation, Man makes himself immortal by producing offspring – or re-creating himself in a cultural sense. Teaching is a way of recreating oneself through imparting to children or others the cultural meaning of life. The procreation of children means the continuation of the human race. The communication of cultural learning makes one immortal in a wider sense: “The two go together naturally” (Ibid:10).

According to Greek mythology, love is a self-generating force. The creative drive associated with Eros means that in romantic communication there is the inherent means of reproducing this communication. In our argument, it is therefore important to ascertain how the erotic drive is activated – not solely in the search for love in a physical sense but also with regard to a love of learning, education, wisdom and culture. Online dating sites can teach us more about dating as a formative strategy, while also providing stimuli for how to realize e-learning’s erotic potential. For example, the reproductive possibilities from the physical meeting can be preserved and refined through written communication.

### **Love in a Luhmannian perspective**

In system theory, an important aspect of communication is that it always takes place via media. Media are seen here as an answer to the three improbabilities of communication: the improbability of the communicators *understanding* each other, of the communicators *establishing contact* with each other and of the communication being *successful* in the sense of the communicators acting, thinking or processing information in accordance with what has been understood (Luhmann, 2000:201). Included in the latter category are the symbolically generalized communication media, understood as the code or optic that may be selected for a communication, e.g. a financial, ethical or educational message (Luhmann, 2000:202).

As Luhmann sees it, love can be understood as a symbolically generalized medium, one that simplifies communication by using a specific communicative code. This medium is undifferentiated, with the aim of making communication probable and creating understanding through overcoming a threshold problem.

The romantic medium is not in itself a feeling but on the contrary a communication code, according to whose rules we can express, form, simulate, ascribe or deny feelings to others and with all this accept the consequences this will have when a corresponding communication is realized. (Luhmann 1995:60)

In the romantic code, communication is of a highly personal nature:

By highly personal communication we understand communication whereby the speaker seeks to distinguish himself from other individuals. This can be done through the speaker making himself the subject, i.e. talking about himself; but also in the context of factual discussions by making his attitude to the topic the pivot of the communication (Luhmann 1995:61).

Romantic communication can thus be described as a special form of communication that seeks to overcome the threshold problem by adopting a highly personal form of communication. The interlocutors also attempt to distinguish themselves from others by making themselves, their feelings and their attitude to factual topics into the subject and pivot of the communication. Moreover, it appears that this particular form of communication taking place within the romantic code may have its own inbuilt motor:

Love may, paradoxically speaking, intensify communication by largely foregoing communication [...]. The classical code therefore also includes “the language of glances”, together with an affirmation of the fact that two lovers

can talk to each other indefinitely without really having anything to say to each other (Luhmann 1995:66).

Romantic communication can apparently be sustained indefinitely without any particular direction or need for meaningful information. It is perhaps this point that distinguishes pedagogical from romantic communication and what may present a problem in any attempt to transfer communicative features from the romantic to the pedagogical code.

### **Flirting – the prelude to love**

Without physical proximity between the interlocutors, romantic communication will be perceived as lingering in a preliminary phase generally described as “flirting”. On one of the major Danish online dating sites, flirting is explained thusly:

Flirting can be the introduction to much more, but may also go no further than innocent dallying. Flirting is the preliminary manoeuvre we employ to make contact with a new partner. If you're game for a flirt, don't hold yourself back on our pages (scor.dk).

As well as being the prelude to romantic communication, the flirt itself is described as a light-hearted erotic courtship or casual romance<sup>ii</sup> according to a major Norwegian encyclopaedia (Store Norske Leksikon), i.e. a much less committed and risky form of romantic communication. Online dating can therefore be regarded as a forum for the prelude to romantic dialogue, the flirt.

### **The flirt as communicative drive**

As well as being the preamble to the romantic dialogue, the flirt can also be described as the driving force behind the desire for further communication. In other words, it is a function that may be included in a description of the romantic dialogue's autopoiesis (the system's self-production).

For example, the English version of Wikipedia<sup>iii</sup> says this about flirting:

People who flirt may speak and act in a way that suggests greater intimacy than is generally considered appropriate to the relationship (or to the amount of time the two people have known each other), without actually saying or doing anything that breaches any serious social norms. One way they accomplish this is to communicate a sense of playfulness or irony. Double entendres, with one meaning more formally appropriate and another more suggestive, may be used.

The flirt can therefore be described as a form of communication that signals a sexual or romantic interest in another person, often hinting at a closer degree of intimacy in the verbal interchange than the relationship actually warrants and often constructed as an ambiguity or double meaning.

The Danish online dating site scor.dk distinguishes between flirting and a web flirt. During a web flirt, the interlocutors normally cannot read each other's facial expressions or body language. Little hints and “reading between the lines” therefore play an important role (scor.dk).

Approximately 80% of the informants in the questionnaire survey state that they flirt on the Internet. When we ask them to be more specific about what web flirting actually entails, the answers fall into three categories: compliments, humour and double meanings. In our view, these categories are not the sole preserve of online dating, but apply to flirting in general.

In relation to the use of compliments, the informants state:

- I make it clear that I like the person and pay him lots of compliments. Tell him

- I think he is nice and interesting and that I enjoy getting letters from him.
- Compliment him on things he's good at, or on his looks if they're good.

As we can see from the statements quoted above, compliments often function to excess and signal a greater degree of intimacy than the relationship (here a physically separated one) actually justifies.

The informants make the following statements about flirting with humour:

- Difficult to answer but I suppose it's possible to flirt a little by being ironic.
- If contact is good, there's a lot of nonsense talk and cuddly nicknames and so on.

Humour therefore appears to be a function that can be used to overcome barriers and encourage communication to move in a more intimate direction. Humour and compliments are frequently mentioned as twin techniques when online daters are flirting and trying to get closer to their opposite number. According to Luhmann (1999), trust capital can be accumulated through the use of humour. In turn, this can increase confidence in one's own self-presentation and encourage the speaker to move towards more personal forms of communication.

Intimacy arises when increasingly more of a person's personal experience and physical behaviour become accessible and relevant to another person and when this relationship is mutually developed. This is only possible if double contingency is operationalized through personal accountability (Luhmann, 2000:269).

As the third explanation for how flirting develops over the Internet, the use of double meanings is mentioned, including smilies as a means of expression:

- We always try to present ourselves in the most interesting way, of course. Send lots of emoticons on msn, like winking smilies and so on.
- We like a bit of role-play.
- Use "between the lines" talk and "snappy answers", with double meanings where possible, if that feels the right thing to do.

When we employ double meanings in communication, it means in reality that we are "speaking with two tongues". Luhmann sees communication as a chain of three selections: information, message and understanding. In the context of romantic code, the choice of the first two will often be a conscious desire to confuse understanding (the third selection). This can be done by the communicator choosing a piece of information, which in association with the form of the message, creates an ambiguity. For example: "Are you going into town this evening? ;=)". This can be understood as a simple request for information, but with a smiley attached it can also mean that the sender would like to meet the person in town. The other person may reply for example: "Oh no, it's bed for me this evening ;=)". This remark can be understood as an assertion that he/she can't be bothered going out and possibly needs to sleep. But an accompanying smiley can create interest in further communication, for it perhaps means that this person would like to meet the other in bed instead of in town. Whether or not one is interested in either of these possibilities, the double meaning can create interest in continuing the dialogue.

The use of such ambiguities in romantic dialogues can have two functions. It can help to arouse interest in the receiver, and because of uncertainty about the sender's intentions, the receiver will join in the communication to obtain certainty. For the sender of the double meaning, it can function as a safety net, in case the receiver "misunderstands". If the receiver does not accept the sexual and underlying side of the message, the sender can always refer to the information aspect. Double meanings can thereby serve to maintain the system by double-guaranteeing communicative reproduction. If she won't go the one way, we'll take the other.

The use of negation [of the sexual element] may appear in the medium's linguistic realisation as an "ambiguity", but as an element in the semantic structure it has a very precise meaning in association with the undifferentiation and potentialization of specific communication forms and communication outcomes (Luhmann 1995:72).

### **The flirt as dialogical seducer**

On the other hand, flirting can be seen as an "entrapping" element in (the) auto-poiesis: one party lures the other into reproducing the communication by means of compliments and humour. A particular strategy, though, is to give oneself an air of mystery or personified ambiguity.

Example no. 1: *A seductive dialogue as strategy*

Researcher: *How did you meet him?*

Hedda: *He had also written and managed to draw me out. I wasn't really all that interested in him either, not because he wasn't attractive but he had a dangerous look to him. And what he wrote was very cryptic and a bit weird, but all the same he managed to make me open up because he intrigued me. He was very insistent too and persuasive, so I agreed to meet him. And it was very interesting.<sup>iv</sup>*

In this example, the female dater sees herself as being seduced by the male partner's persuasive form of communication and equivocal self-presentation. First, she is enticed into writing about herself, then into meeting face-to-face.

In the context of pedagogical communication, the process of coaxing a dialogue into being is not an unknown phenomenon. The tutorial is a dialogical form of teaching in which the tutor is not expected to impart instruction and or to tell the student in direct terms what is right and wrong. In order to exercise criticism in response to, e.g. a student paper or dissertation, the tutor must encourage students to take the first step towards a critical appraisal of their own work. This requires students to reflect over their work in relation to the topic of study and thus demonstrate their understanding of the subject. Only after the student has had a chance to speak can the tutor engage in the dialogue and confirm or refute the argument. The method that tutors and lecturers use to coax their students into a dialogue is to ask questions. During lectures, the lecturer will often construct problems and related questions with which the students can identify. Only after the lecturer has succeeded in establishing a dialogue is there a basis for further academic discussion (Fritze, 2005).

Research on reading looks into how the reader seeks to find confirmation of his knowledge, while simultaneously being challenged and provoked in relation to his established views (Salvatori, 1983). Seduction occurs when comfort in assimilation is greater than the effort involved in reorganizing established schemes in the accommodation. To lose oneself in the text is to allow oneself to be seduced and is therefore a condition for allowing meaning horizons to merge. Seduction is a constructivistic activity involving both being seduced and allowing oneself to be seduced (Ricoeur, 1991; Nielsen, 1995). Only after this seduction and a maturing of thought will quiet reflection occur and an assessment be made of the love process. For example, we allow ourselves to be more readily seduced by teachers who use a register of seduction techniques, including humour, self-disclosure and authenticity (impulsive, topical and enthusiastic) (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 1999). Students who express themselves in similar ways also attract interest. Dysthe (2002) describes a session from an online discussion on a course in Business Ethics:

*One particularly simple example of good ethics equals good business in the longer term may be the use of condoms by prostitutes. In the short term there may be a lack of business. However, in the longer term, the more enlightened client is more likely to return when he knows that the product is safe. [Iris 2] (Dysthe, 2002 : 347).*

It is not difficult to see that if the average online student produces texts with equally lively associations, more fellow students will be keen to join in the discussion. Iris is the key figure in this group. Students who make communication work and elicit responses from fellow students obviously create interest and a certain amount of popularity. This type of student tends to produce more advanced ideas and hence stimulate reflection in the other students. Iris produces inviting texts and includes topics that are open to interpretation, e.g. she plays on double meanings and can be understood in a sense as flirting.

### **Can we learn anything from the development of trust in the romantic code?**

The concept of trust has been introduced as an element in this study because we believe that trust is an important component in helping to maintain communication systems and encourage the personal dialogue in an online dating forum to continue. It is also our experience from our work on distance learning that trust-creating measures often play an even more significant role in communication when the communicators seldom or never have direct contact with teachers and others in the educational institution.

#### **What is trust?**

Strictly speaking, Luhmann (1999:20) provides no definition of trust, but says that in a modern society the possibilities open to the individual have radically increased as society has grown, and is increasingly growing, in complexity. Confidence and trust are ways of reducing complexity, but in a social order characterized by complexity society loses its naturalness and confidence, so that the need for trust becomes even greater (Luhmann, 2000). In his analysis of trust, Luhmann distinguishes between personal trust and systemic trust as ways of relating to the growing risks in a modern, highly-complex society.

All communication is seen as risky, requiring a minimum of trust if we are to be perceived as we wish ourselves to be (Luhmann, 2000:9). Luhmann sees personal trust as a reciprocal process between two parties, which starts by one person giving trust as a "risky opening offer" (Luhmann, 1999:20). The other person responds to this proffered trust and confirms it. When we are shown trust we find ourselves, with no real obligation, in a special normative sphere that renders any breach of trust less acceptable (op.cit.:21).

In conventional teaching, the teacher develops personal trust in his meeting with the students, whereas in net-based teaching, the teacher must rely to a greater extent on institutional trust: a trust which can be generated by invoking academic weight and understanding. The online dater also creates a kind of institutional trust in him/herself by using the formal structure of the online dating site. Here, the website has assured its users that this is a safe country for self-disclosure. Through the person's user profile and possibly a photograph, a platform for trust is established. In the same way as the teacher creates a positive name for himself by choosing formulations likely to instil trust, either through prudence or self-disclosure, the online dater portions out information about him/herself with the same purpose in mind. Trust provides a basis for new forms of behaviour such as humour and irony, which in turn foster growth in one's trust capital (Luhmann, 1999:22). In online tutorials, we see that the establishment of a threshold trust value can create "the rhetoric of criticism", one in which openness and vulnerability are notably interchangeable qualities in each case (Fritze, 2005).

#### **(True) love by Internet**

It is our experience that romantic dialogue conducted online readily reproduces itself and appeals to the communicators to show personal trust. At

the same time, online dating presents obvious opportunities for dishonesty and breaches of trust.

We have operationalized one way of showing personal trust as making oneself known as a person – being honest in relation to who one is. For example, communicators can reveal who they are, where they live, what their interests are and other personal details. They can also choose to publish a photo of themselves and thus disclose their identity completely. On a website, this information is naturally open to more people than it would be if you were meeting one person in a bar. Your boss, your husband, your friends or neighbour can all find out about you. We have asked people if they are honest in relation to what they publish on the Internet about themselves:

Example 2a: Are you honest about what you say in your profile?  
Researcher: *You could simply set up a different profile, couldn't you?*  
Hedda: *Yes, you could, but you wouldn't gain anything by it. I don't think you'd make contact if you didn't have a photo. So I began by publishing an anonymous profile, not giving much away, and nothing happened. [...] Then I finally thought, after having tried to be anonymous and having written to the men... that the people out there want the same as me, after all. So, if my colleagues or friends or relations see me, they must be there for the same purpose. I thought: "What the heck – I'll add both photos and write a long, positive story about myself." And I almost died of fright and thought it was really stretching things.*

Example 2b: Are you honest about what you say in your profile?  
Researcher: *You can waste a lot of time on someone if you haven't told them about your bad points too, can't you?*  
Elise: *But don't you think you'll do that anyway when you meet them face-to-face? I do, at any rate. Don't try to gloss over anything, for sooner or later the truth will come out.*

It therefore seems that a number of our informants are willing to stake their identity in trying to establish dialogue with a potential partner. Many of them also tell stories about how they have opened up and confided strictly personal things to total strangers.

### **The physical meeting as a risky objective**

Internet daters envisage communicating primarily through textual presentation. It is also possible to use a webcam, which can compensate to some extent for the lack of physical presence, but the communicators will still be separated by distance and technology. In general, personal trust is thought to be closely associated with physical proximity between the parties, and is something to be developed over time. Someone who is within physical reach cannot escape from interaction. There is a kind of symbolic exposure in physical presence, since it is actually possible to harm each other (Qvortrup, 1998:182). There is no such possibility in online dating, with communication in this context possibly being considered relatively free of risk. The communicators may feel less constrained and breaches of trust are simpler to commit.

The production of trust over the Internet is therefore not directly hazardous. It is only when the communicators are about to meet for the first time face-to-face that the physical consequences of their communication can take on a dangerous turn.

A basis[...]in sexuality means that the parties attach importance to "being together", to immediacy and proximity, that they prefer those places where they can count on seeing each other (Luhmann, 1995:70).

One of our informants had this experience in connection with her first meeting with a man:



Example no. 3: Showing trust on the first live date

Hedda: *But this man here, no. 2, I knew clearly was a little weird, so I had decided that our first live date would be in the daytime and in some semi-public place [...] I drove right down to the beach, where we had arranged to meet at the ice cream stall.*

Researcher: *Were there many people there?*

Hedda: *No, there weren't in fact, because the roads weren't so good. So perhaps it wasn't actually the best place to meet. And so I stood there on the beach wondering if I would be able to see him, which direction he would come from. And if he came from the side I could pull my stomach in. Oh, I was just so nervous that I didn't know where to put myself. And it struck me at the same time that I had the wrong dress on and everything was just wrong. Then I thought I'll sit up here among the dunes. Then I can see him coming. It was time and he hadn't arrived, so I thought: "f..., now I've been stood up". Two seconds later I was assaulted by a roaring man who came charging down from the dunes and knocked me over.*

The story ended well, and with this practical joke, he challenged the prejudices many women have about meeting a totally strange man for the first time in a relatively deserted spot. These two had a short meeting on the first occasion, but met again two days later. Our informant relates the following about her experience of the second meeting (once more on the beach):

Example no. 4: Trust in spite of things

Hedda: *As I was driving home the following day, I thought to myself: If he had decided to slit my throat it would have been a whole week before anyone found me, because the roads were just so bad that there was no one around on the beach. It was rather chilling, but it was quite an adventure, one I'd never have imagined having through an online contact.*

Researcher: *But why did you do it, then?*

Hedda: *Because he was fascinating, a bit of a mystery, weird and way-out.*

The true nature of trust can be seen here, demonstrating that mutual trust can be developed in an interaction not in spite of, but because of the fact that both parties are free to act differently than the other might wish or expect. Consequently, we must decide to trust, with a full awareness that things can go wrong. In other words, trust only has [...] "functional social value if it affords the possibility of mistrust. As a strategy for the reduction of complexity, trust has a wider scope than mistrust. The person offering trust expands his potential for action substantially" [...] "Mistrust is a more constraining strategy" (Luhmann, 2000:169-171).

Although romantic communication employs a code involving highly personal communication, thereby fostering personal trust within this code, we must not disregard the fact that at the heart of this process lies a form of institutional trust, in the first instance, the trust the parties have in the website, that it is a reliable arena in which their disclosures will not be misused. However, it is also our impression that the parties tend to arrange to meet quite soon after the initial contact if their aim is to find a partner. They do not want to waste time, and are willing to risk their personal identity in their quest for the true "one".

Within the romantic code, online daters enter into an exploratory mode in relation to questions such as: How much should I tell?, How honest should I be?, What can I put a gloss on?, What will self-disclosure result in? or Where will trust lead to? These are considerations around the conversational elements that help to drive a conversation and which therefore carry a dialogical energy, like that which Eros is imbued with. Is it possible that this energy can have a transposable value?

## **Eros as the basis of education**

Our reluctance to bring Eros into the pedagogical discourse is of a modern nature. We tend nowadays to shudder at the thought of all the occurrences among priests, teachers and others that suggest paedophilia and illicit advances. However, it has not always been like that. To the contrary, the inviting dialogue and flirting have been fundamental to teaching. In ancient Greek educational history, a romantic attachment between the adult teacher and the child was an accepted starting point. The French educational historian Marrou (1956) describes “the loving teacher” as important in the development of the modern concept of teaching. The Greeks saw teaching primarily as the exercise of love and not as, e.g. the design of teaching programmes and the application of teaching methods for an increasingly complex society. The most important aim was to build relations between the older, experienced warrior and the younger apprentice soldier, entailing the teaching of survival techniques, attitudes and knowledge as a kind of caringly professional socialization for life as a warrior. Over the course of time, the content changed from the bellicose arts to more general topics such as spiritual enlightenment, philosophy and gymnastics. The warrior aristocrats took their traditions with them into civilian life and lent support to publicly-sponsored education in which the individual relationship between teacher and pupil could no longer be sustained. This is what Plato bemoaned and criticized in his dialogues. Relationships took on a more general tone, which according to Marrou nevertheless did not change teaching as an essentially passionate relationship:

For the Greeks, education - *paideia* - essentially meant a profound and intimate relationship, a personal union between a young man and an elder who was at once his model and his initiator – a relationship on to which the fire of passion threw warm and turbid reflections. [...] Throughout Greek history the relationship between master and pupil was to remain that between a lover and his beloved (Marrou, 1956:31-32).

As noted in the description of the Eros myth, the teacher’s desire to make himself immortal through his pupil can be seen as cultural reproduction (cf. Garrison, 1997). Socrates saw that the Greek urban community was also apprehensive about the teacher’s seductive role. In the 1970s, certain dialogues from Socrates were idealized, thus promoting the “majeutic principle” to canon status (Dale, 1972; Løvlie, 1984). However, critical studies show that Plato did not discount additional dialogical concepts. Gadamer points out that Plato adopted at least 10 different dialogical strategies and did not discount either the tirade, seduction or edification as elements in the rhetorical register (Gadamer, 1980). The notion of the “true dialogue” is hence a reflection of the Athenians’ Golden Age myth about the time past when learning could be passed on from teacher to pupil in Spartan warrior society. This was also a form of teaching with deeply erotic roots.

Jim Garrison claims that Eros offers an arsenal of concepts and practices that enrich our perception of learning and education. “We become that which we love” asserts Garrison, and the cultivation of desire towards noble ends is therefore an essential condition for education: an education leading to wisdom and the good, and to a filtration of the random towards the reflected. Rather than fearing to open the doors to sexuality, we should accept that it is through the sexual that love realizes its full pedagogical potential (Cho, 2005:81). “Love” implies the notion of the final fusion of two, but since that is not possible it is retained as the driving force in the notion. To put it in another way: Love is something created in the absence of the optimal and becomes the method by which one person identifies with the other. For this reason, the practice of love is the creation of the method for seeking knowledge and experience in the world, both jointly and simultaneously.

### **The erotic operationalization of education – or learning to learn**

There are many current proposals for a general description of the education

concept, but common to most of the different approaches is the notion that education cannot merely be limited to a few social graces such as bowing, thanking, dancing and eating nicely. There is a mention of adaptability, implying that we must not only possess certain skills and qualifications, but must also know what we should know if we wish to be educated, how to acquire this knowledge and how to use it. It is therefore very much a question of being better at acquiring strategies for how to learn in the most appropriate way. In this light, modern education implies a capacity for *learning to learn* and to be seen as a reflexive concept. For example, Qvortrup (2004) says that it concerns a conscious ability to reflect over the difference between what I am and what I could be, or between what I am and what others are. In this form of education, he proposes a principle of reflexive evaluation. Here, evaluation means that society still has values, but that we must choose some as our own.

As an educational concept in general, digital education can be seen in relation to the reflexive element. If ICT is used in a way that allows the learner to observe himself and induce reflection on this basis, it can then support a reflexive (digital) education (Nordkvelle et al., 2004). Under certain conditions, the dating process may be described as being at its heart a mutual educational process in which each party re-creates him/herself and the other in the idealized picture as belonging together. Each invites, flirts and initiates dialogues that are mutually explorative and self-presentational.

In the context of remote communication through the medium of technology, the transition from one arena (or medium) to another requires a re-thinking of communication because the new communicative situation offers a scope and communicative form different from those previously used. The online dater therefore finds himself in a situation in which he is called on to reflect not only on the use of the technology and its written form, but also on himself and how he relates to romantic communication as communication.

In traditional face-to-face romantic communication, lovers often speak in incomplete sentences and give verbal expression only to that which is not self-evident. By contrast, in written communication the communicator is obliged to express himself in more precise terms in order to create understanding despite physical separation.

Anyone writing for other readers must use adaptive techniques by putting himself in the reader's place. The content must be objectified [...] Writing creates a structural divide which provides the experience of greater knowledge, more precise concepts and language for particular purposes. Systems thus acquire an altogether different competence in considering themselves. Alphabetization and reflection therefore go hand in hand (Rasmussen, 2003:77).

In other words, this means that the communicator in an online dating context has to be more explicit if the other party is to understand his/her contribution to the dialogue, which is especially true during the initial dating phase. In turn, this has consequences for the communicator's reflection because the written communication form requires an observation of his/her own situation, thereby leading to a greater awareness of his/her communicative choices and often to a greater precision of formulation (Hoel, 2003). The written communicative form also makes it possible to sustain a more protracted argumentation.

We asked our informants if they had learned anything about themselves through online dating, if they had learned anything about dating through online dating or if they had perhaps learned anything about the use of new technology by using modern technology in online dating. We also looked for any sign of reflexive evaluation in the data.

### **Have you learned anything about yourself through online dating?**

Example no. 5: Online dating as an arena for learning about the world.

Stanley: *But it didn't come to anything, SO I decided to forget about the Norwegian websites altogether. I found out that the international sites were much more interesting. Not mainly to find a date. That wasn't really what I was after – I just wanted to make contact and learn something about the world. Learn how people think and about other cultures. It really helped me broaden my entire outlook on life. The world seemed bigger, somehow.*

Looking at this example, it could be true to say that Stanley is not only learning about the world from others. He is also telling us something profound about his own understanding of the world and how he is expanding his horizons in meaningful ways. This online dater has a wider purpose for his dating. He presents himself as someone who is keen to know more about the world, about other cultures and how other people live, and he uses Eros as the prime mover in his quest.

In this approach to education, the Internet dater uses technology to develop an understanding of the society around him and the relationships of which it consists, relationships clearly no longer constrained by geography, but negotiated through reading other people's texts and publishing his own in an enduring form. This publication builds bridges between emotion and cognition and leads to self-exceeding processes, in which one is both the producer and consumer of texts. According to the Norwegian sociologist Jon Hoem, this is a key phenomenon in modern digital education (2003). In this way, the online dater partly functions as a personal publisher (as a blogger) and as a letter writer (e-mail, messenger) in interchangeable modes. When the dater presents him/herself and is open in his/her search, the rhetoric is general and agapic. He reveals his human sympathies and values, and moves towards the erotic.

### **Have you learned anything through online dating about dating in general?**

Our respondents say that the romantic game improves their competence in written flirting and inviting communication:

Example no. 6: Learning the code

Kalle: *Yes, you learn a bit of everything. You pick up hints about what you should and shouldn't say. You gradually learn the codes. I didn't know if my strategy was good or bad, of course, but it seemed to pay off.*

Some of the interviewees stated that the experience they had gained from flirting, as well as the use of titillating double meanings, let them down when it came to face-to-face flirting. Some people felt that the online form of flirting was much better, in part because it helped to avoid the conventional meeting places one was usually referred to. Others felt that flirting techniques could be transferred to the physical meeting with a partner:

Example no. 7: Learning some useful tips

Researcher: *You said you were better at talking to girls after your experience of online dating. Can you tell us anything about the tips you've picked up?*

Håvard: *You realize what most of them want after you've paid lots of girls compliments on the Internet. But of course it's a lot easier to do that online than when you meet people in the normal way and say the same things. I'm shy like that. You pick up a few tricks, sure, but daring to use them is another matter.*

Our respondents talk about becoming more aware of their own thoughts and behaviour in such situations, and have developed strategies for tackling new challenges. They say that they would like to adapt, thus demonstrating the readiness to change that lies at the heart of education. Several informants also

tell us about a search for skills that would be useful for this learning process, in which they can acquire this knowledge and how they would like to use it. It is therefore very much a question of becoming better at learning strategies for how to learn in the most relevant way.

### **Have you learned anything about new technology through using it for online dating?**

Our respondents report that the technologically-conditioned arena for self-presentation, disclosure, trust-building and the nurturing of emotional ties can provide a positive basis for an exciting and developmental process, a process we regard as a timely and appropriate extension of education. While web etiquette prescribes conservative rules for what one should and should not do, this exploration of personal horizons involves the need to make one's mark in different ways and process one's identity in light of personal goals. Along the way, participants develop more general communicative skills, both for mastering computer technology and for expressing oneself in more precise terms – or in more ambiguous ones, if that serves the purpose.

The American feminist bell hooks believes that teaching is also a form of self-educating activity, one in which teachers must seek to find in themselves those passions likely to make teaching and learning more meaningful. bell hooks postulates that, *“To restore passion to the classroom or to excite it in classrooms where it has never been, professors must find again the place of Eros within ourselves and together allow the mind and body to feel and know desire”* (1994, p. 199).

Some of our informants tell us that they both explore their communication strategy, including that they expand their experience and reflection over their textual meetings with others, and that they gradually master the technology with the aim of satisfying their social and cognitive objectives in relation to online dating activities.

## **Conclusion**

According to Greek mythology, love/romance has its own self-creating/self-reproducing force through the drive to satisfy our desires. Luhmann also describes romantic communication as a communicative form with its own sustaining capacity. An example of this is when communicators are so strongly motivated to pursue the dialogue that the content becomes subordinate, which is a situation that would be unthinkable in teaching.

People who take part in online dating with the aim of seeking romantic involvement do so with motivation and commitment. In this activity, they describe themselves, read other people's presentations of themselves and establish contacts. They start a communication process that explores possible common interests, attitudes and topics of conversation, and in which means of furthering intimacy and reciprocity are applied. This requires communicators to think through the strategies and forms of expression they use to achieve contact. In doing so, they develop the ability to pursue the contact towards the goal of physical meetings and a more lasting relationship. All this takes place in a digital environment, in which cognitive and emotional presentations are processed and perfected with a view to romance. The communicators entice, flirt and seduce as best they can to reach the objective and get responses to these activities; in turn, they review their strategies and try again. Our respondents also see this as a process during which they learn about themselves and how they relate to others. Moreover, it can be seen as a self-education process in which the communicator continually takes risks, builds trust, chooses interpretations and re-formulations of him/herself in a chain of reflexive evaluation.

Transposed to a teaching context, this could mean that from an erotic standpoint, work on students' motivation for learning requires new insights and experience. Firstly, we must recognize that the student's *desire* and *yearning* stem from love, not just motherly, fatherly or brotherly love, but also erotic and sexual love. In one sense, teaching matter, the teacher and the skills the student masters are all objects of this desire or attractiveness. In Ancient Greek education, there were few obstacles to the realization of physical acts of love, though in the modern age, this is neither advisable nor permitted. Both in e-learning and on-campus education, the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. Passionate and seductive pedagogy has a potential that is often unrealized or poorly applied. Boredom and apathy figure prominently because we are afraid of failing to cultivate critical thought. We do not believe, however, that it is really possible to distance oneself from something that one has not taken seriously.

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<sup>i</sup> A Danish version of this text was first published in Paulsen, M. og Qvortrup, L. (red.) *Luhmann og dannelse*. Unge Pædagoger, København. This version has been revised and significantly altered for an international audience.

<sup>ii</sup> [www.storenorskeleksikon.no](http://www.storenorskeleksikon.no)

<sup>iii</sup> [www.wikipedia.uk](http://www.wikipedia.uk)

<sup>iv</sup> Our underlining.