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## Coming Back to Basic Concepts of the Context

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### **Abstract**

*The use of ethnographic approaches to explore innovative learning contexts places the concept of context at the centre of discussion on basic categories. Further, ethnography in Online-learning within a virtual context as well as shifts between online- and off-line contexts presents a challenge for ethnographic methodology and analysis. In this article I set out to address the challenge and reflect on the categories and models for empirical analysis. Going back to the basic concept of context and 'text-in-context' my aim is to discuss the ethnographic significance of the learning context thereby shedding light on the strong context markers. Examples will be adduced in relation to previous fieldwork in IT-upper secondary schools as well as-in relation to current fieldwork in scholastic-, profession-oriented and academic learning contexts.*

### **Background**

In previous fieldwork detailed analyses of innovative strategies in upper secondary schools and university education were performed, thereby showing the socio-cultural meaning of Academia for the scholastic and academic learning context (Borgnakke, 1996, 2005, 2012a). The current fieldwork was carried out in the sector of nursing education following development work and inter-professional projects in the health care sector (Røn Noer, 2014, Borgnakke & Lyngsøe, 2014, Borgnakke & Sand Nielsen, 2015). In what follows the impact and the socio-cultural meaning of professions and of 'becoming a professional' will be shown by means of the empirical analysis of profession-oriented learning alongside the shift between the scholastic and clinical practice context. In these research projects the main platform for ethnographic studies, which are focused on educational innovation and organizational development, are shared. These differ in focus – whether groups of professionals, teachers, supervisors or students. We propose a relatively–straightforward definition of field (such as–the field of nursing education) room and space (such as the classroom).

Related to the ethnographic principle of “following the field of practice,” we also–share the need to renew the concepts of field and space in a digital environment, while remaining based on the classic ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995; Borgnakke, 2010). In accordance with the interpretation of ethnography in online-communities (Leander & McKim, 2002, Hammersley, 2006, Borgnakke, 2013a, 2013b) the need to re-think, and move beyond, place-based ethnography should be emphasised, but we still need the fieldwork to be grounded and situated. Thus in research terms–‘following the field,’ is defined as following courses across online- and offline spaces; – tracing the flow of objects, texts and the embedded multiple contexts. Against

this background our objective is to clarify the ethnographic significance of the flow of objects, texts and multiple contexts.

In terms of overarching theories this clarification draws upon concepts and categories of 'The field' (Pierre Bourdieu) 'Discourse' (Michel Foucault) 'Paradigm' (Thomas Kuhn) and 'communicative interactions' (Jürgen Habermas). As for classic models, I draw on Sender – Text/Message – Receiver, such as it is originally used by Roman Jacobsen and Karl Buhler and the basic maxim for mass communication: "Who says what to whom in which channel and to what effect?" such as it originates in Lasswell's maxim (1948). In *Educational Field Research and Process Analytic Methodology* (Borgnakke, 1996) I transformed the basic concepts and models to a process analytical framework for empirical analyses of the educational field of practice, the discursive and communicative practice and the 'text-in-context' circuit (1996: Vol. 2: 25-51).

The framework is based on empirical investigations of the process of educational changes followed through milestones and mapped from the political and the institutional level to the practical level for teaching and learning. Against this background fieldwork and the data and text-collections refer to the whole process of implementation. The odyssey from alternative ideas and strategies to educational practice is hereby covered as well as the flow of conflicts between ideas and intensions and the institutional embodiment of it.

This process analytic framework has first and foremost produced an overview to the living dynamic processes in the educational field and has produced detailed knowledge about the academic context and learning strategies. Having shown the empirical benefit it is possible to emphasise the process analytic framework as a fruitful background for the current fieldwork. But if ethnography in Online-learning, 'tracing the flow of object through different contexts' calls for a process analytical approach, the present challenge is that it also demands a renewed context-analytical framework starting with the clarification of the context in it-self.

In the fieldwork starting at the Danish reform university in Aalborg<sup>i</sup> where the process analytic framework was developed the academic context was visible. The reform university, the alternative project pedagogical paradigm and the project room were places and spaces to be in and places for acting and observation. The process was to be followed and analytical reconstructed. But the process was not visible in itself. In current fieldwork in online-learning it seems to be the other way around. The process – or at least the course – as well as the milestones are almost visible, but the context needs to be followed and analytical reconstructed. Now it is the context being 'not visible in itself'.

Against this background the context requires clarification as 'a place' to be in, to observe and regard as an analytical object. With a view to clarification this paper begins by focusing on the context in terms of a learning context. In accordance with previous empirical findings and models, (Borgnakke, 2010, 2013a) the paper further provides examples of the ethnographic challenges related to what constitutes strong context markers and dominant paradigms and trends in the discourse. Moreover,–the interactive and communicative patterns in different learning contexts will be highlighted.

### **Strong context markers**

In relation to fieldwork on IT-based learning in upper secondary education the first important statement concerns the context as a school-context. The second statement concerns the fact that the school context refers to political

discourses at a macro-level and the ongoing innovative strategies at a meso-level; this statement goes on to refer to different organizational levels and micro-levels. The third statement concerns the new important text, namely the homepage and the menu. The homepage is information and storytelling 'About us' and provides the essential information on the school, the image, history etc.

Carrying out fieldwork in a field surrounded by 'ICT & learning', the classic ethnographic concept of the context is challenged not only by new IT tools, but also by the different organisational levels for professionalization and development of school culture. Consequently, the challenge consists of providing a multi-level organisational and pedagogical description. Next, the innovative strategies must be regarded as a process of acquiring digital literacy or what I have called technacy (Borgnakke, 2012a). At an organisational level interview with teams of leaders and teachers and observations of meetings showed how school culture is re-constructed as organizational techno culture. Officially the learning management system (for example Lectio and Fronter) is in the center, but on a daily basis all kinds of devices and social media are in use. On the next level Classroom observations showed how blended learning and flipped classroom became a renewed part of the teaching strategies and the constructed learning models. Further, mingling with students showed how the students create their own strategies for self-directed common space for interaction and communication. In the analysis this is regarded as a learning space characterized by informal learning, oriented towards peers and youth culture and hence related to use of social media (Borgnakke, 2012a:165).

The above-mentioned empirical findings confirm the important statements. The school-context is (per se) the context while a series of school texts from the homepage, the LMS-content curriculum and text-books to the student assignments comprise 'the text'. Through an analysis of the series of 'text-in-school-context' the discourse, the organizational levels and the innovative strategies can be viewed as strong context markers. These markers make visible what the innovation involves. But it also makes evident what it means for IT-upper secondary school and for IT-based learning to be firmly anchored in culture of academic school subjects and to be placed close to the centre-of a former elite education.

Today the former centre-forms part of the late modern course and discourse: Kindergarten, University and the elite institution of the grammar school *Gymnasium* will be challenged by a new role enhancing the bridge-building between compulsory school (Folkeskolen) and university. Meeting such challenges the cases from upper secondary education provide a picture of how IT-based learning creates build-bridging in terms of concrete meeting places and spaces in the light of the sphere of education, but also in the light of youth culture. In this context social media are not only 'media' but a significant part of facebook, twitter and youth culture.

The impact of youth culture and the contradiction between school culture and youth culture are important in a conceptual analysis. As a context marker 'culture' is eloquent since it indicates formal activities, such as an educational programme, relating to academic culture or an informal and student-based activity as being 'more like youth culture'. At the same time the cultural dimension is the context-bordering factor, which in turn points at a sphere unrelated to the school context and the educational sphere.

### **Context-bordering factors**

The current fieldwork on profession-oriented learning confirms the context markers, thereby increasing their strength in relation to the sphere. Online-

nursing education stresses, for example, the need for a learning context going across the sphere and bridging the gap between the sphere of education and the sphere of professional work and culture. Further, the professional perspective is reformulated in the light of lifelong learning, which is traditionally understood as context bordering. Against this backdrop it is possible to state that context-border settings seem to be typical for lifelong learning and for Online-education. Of especial interest, however, is the fact that the learning activities are still to be regarded as context-sensitive. Since the online-learning activity is related to a specific context it is in turn related to either the culture of scholastic, academic or professional work and repertoire of practices. The practical logic can be summarised as follows:-When online-education refers to the scholastic context functions carried out by 'a class' with 'student/teacher-relations' are expected. When the reference-point is the clinical practice functions done by a 'team of health care professionals' with a 'supervisor-apprenticeship-relations' or newcomer/old-timer-relations are expected. Thus context, functions and relationship between actors are accentuated by the context.

The ethnographic mapping and empirical analysis confirm the relations outlined (Borgnakke 2013b, Borgnakke & Lyngsø, 2014). Inspired by-Basil Bernstein it could be claimed that a concept of re-contextualizing is confirmed (Bernstein, 2000) and that the theoretical informed procedure is outlined for an overview of the 'text-in-context' and close-up analysis of the strong context marker. At present ethnographic studies in veterinary education make clear the necessity of re-contextualizing (Nielsen, forthcoming). By sharpening the analysis a picture of the conflict between the scholastic setting (a university course in a class with a student/teachers-relationship) and the professional practice-oriented setting (a farm, in a pig-pen with professional veterinary/farmer-relationship) emerges. At the same time the genuine re-contextualizing became clearer. Observations of the professional learning situation in the pig-pen show that as far as communications, interactions and relations are concerned 'the classroom' and the scholastic learning context with its typical student/teacher-relationship are re-contextualized. The typical teacher/students' relationship and their actions recur.

Strong context markers are, for example, the discursive practice. The actors talks and interact as they would in a classroom thereby-illustrating what re-contextualizing is about. The ethnographical point is related to context-bordering, the pig-pen and profession-oriented learning. But since the pig-pen is not a classroom it must be described in relation to the work sphere. A synthesis of the statements about context-bordering factors in which the conditions for the profession-oriented learning are recalled necessitates highlighting the contradiction between the educational sphere and the professional sphere of work. Against this backdrop the consequences for the ethnographical field analysis is stressed as being challenged by the fact that coping with the learning context is tantamount to coping across spheres.

## **Coping with the learning context is to cope across the spheres**

The analytical framework puts relations between the educational field, political discourses, practical innovation and learning strategies into focus. Maintaining the focus means coping with the flow of objects and consequences going across the sphere. In the case of analyses of IT-based strategies it confirms that the empiric data represent a course of implementation involving a flow of objects going across the organizational levels. For analyses-of the practical process it confirms that the result of fieldwork and the empiric data collection represent a case going across the institutionalized spheres. But as illustrated below it also shows that going across spheres is challenged by a

'new' set of basic categories, closely related to the sphere as a kind of sphere-based education, socialization and qualification.

## Coping across the spheres

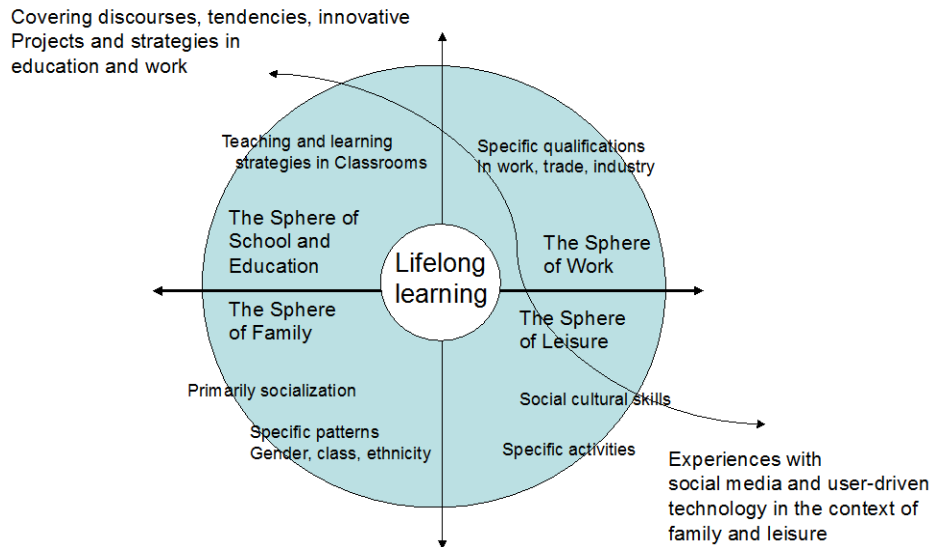


Figure 1. Coping across the spheres

In coping with a case across spheres and being confronted with lifelong learning in the centre—it is possible to argue that research in the learning contexts should not stray from classic fieldwork. Classic participatory observation, interview, conversation and material collection constitutes a suitable framework for both place-based covering and coping across the spheres. The basic principle 'following the field, following the case, following the actors' (Marcus, 1995) is indeed strongest if you stick to the fieldwork tradition and follows the group of learners through the different contexts. In former research on adult education was the principle of following the actor highlighted as 'going across the spheres' also a strong argument for the ethnographic turn in educational research (Borgnakke, 1999). Currently, PhD projects are eloquent examples of the strength in fieldwork where the observations also are being carried out in the workplaces concerned or in the informant's homes. To enter the sphere of family or participate in the sphere of work is both a challenging and a necessary going across the spheres, as exemplified in projects on nursing education (Røn Noer, 2014, Borgnakke & Lyngsø, 2014, Borgnakke & Nielsen, 2015). Further, net-based ethnography and research carried out within online- communities per definition is going across the spheres.

In terms of methodology the conclusion seems to be that ethnography, albeit challenged, is well suited both to place-based fieldwork and—net-based fieldwork provided that the relation between place and life-sphere is clarified. The need to move beyond place-based ethnography has been underlined by Leander & MacKim (2002) and the present author; the indication is that in ethnographic research on online-learning is the place losing relevance. However, it is also my contention that 'going beyond the place' is at the same time a coming back to the sphere of-education, work, family or leisure in which conditions for learning, qualification, socialization etc are conceptualised. It should not be forgotten that fieldwork still needs to be grounded in the lived life; 'the case in study' also needs to be related to political discourse and tendencies. Combined with the sociological tradition for identifying tendencies

and practical consequences on levels described as the societal macro-level, the institutional mezo-level and the practical micro-level also allow us to refer to empirical analytical strategies. Further such strategies can be strengthened by inspiration from critical communication and discourse theory put forward by Jürgen Habermas (1968, 1978, 1981), Michelle Foucault (1966) and Norman Fairclough (1995, 2005). In this sense the challenge is related to the development of a combination of a critical discourse and practice analysis that makes reference to the political level, as well as institutional and practical levels.

Since the ethnographic work I refer to belong to this research tradition the challenge has been an empirical one. It has also been an analytical challenge to cover the shifting system and the organizational perspectives; likewise, the shift between life-spheres and the voices between teachers and learners has been an almost exemplary challenge (Borgnakke, 1996, 2005). In literal terms, the research projects are faced with living versions of the conflict between the educational system and the life-world of young and adult learners in line with conceptions set down by Thomas Ziehe (2004).

To refer to the above-mentioned concepts in research which explore the most recent learning issues means casting them in theoretical terms. Concepts of life-sphere and conflicts between system and life-world are in a theoretical analytic sense basic categories and these provide a strong platform for renewing the empirical analytic framework. In what follows it remains to be stressed that in order to enhance the empirical analytical framework, the relationship between sphere, field, place and space requires consideration. Furthermore, the presence of a specified context is a prerequisite for the analytical approach. As illustrated below, 'the context' must be defined and the underlying principle of contextualization made evident.

## **Contextualizing**

Focusing on 'the learning context' in the centre allows firstly the contextualization as the ethnographic answer to the question of basic concepts to be stressed. Secondly it can be stressed as a metaphor as follows: Contextualizing is a journey with stages and milestones for coming closer/maintaining a distance to the context. Thirdly, the characteristic repeated movement between context and shifting context can be stressed. But in all events it is of importance that going across context and participating in a shifting context still refer to a context in a practical sense. The same can be said of place and space. The learning context is the learner's context. But this context also refers to the fact that the journey of contextualizing traverses the school- or work-place as a place to be in to be in as shown in the following diagram:

# Contextualizing

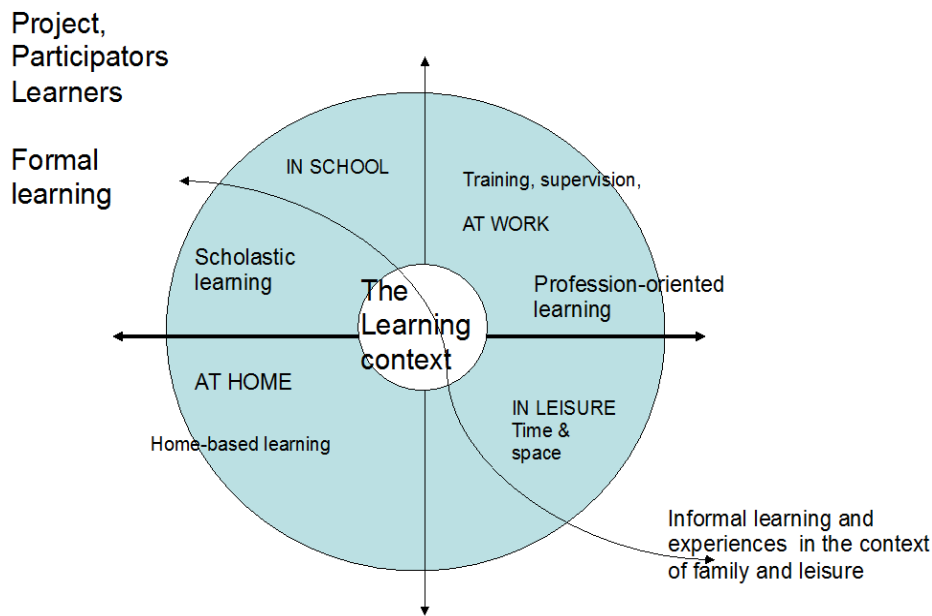


Figure 2. Contextualizing

In the following sections I set out to state the repercussions by current discourse and paradoxes related to innovative scholastic learning, which is focused on 'The project and the participators'.

## Discourses and paradoxes among innovative projects and participators

Doing fieldwork in innovative school development by observing scholastic learning represents a contextualised version of the current discourse 'Enhancing IT & Learning.' The IT-upper secondary school's programme and the online-nursing programme are a recent case in point.—This provides a learning context with a high IT-score, numerous IT tools as well as having several interests for the latest system or single tool. As a previous case analysis has shown (Borgnakke, 2011, 2012a, Borgnakke & Lyngsø, 2014) we can refer to newly constructed schools which are crammed with technology from cellar to ceiling, as well as full-scale online-education. It is also possible to refer to observed enthusiastic discussions among leaders and teachers concerning the LMS system, including Lectio, Fronter or Moodle, discussing the IT didactic consequences and use in school subjects as well as the use of podcast, iPhones and iPads. For the participators at all levels the main theme for discussion was also formulated as the questions: how much, how early and how often should the IT-tools be used and how can the learning outcomes be expressed and measured?

These questions proved to be open-ended;-compared with the enthusiasm for IT as expressed in political discourse research into-the learning outcomes can be bristling with unexpected remarks, such as 'no effect, no significant enhancing'. Statements such as 'IT- tools are *unused*' can be underlined in national reports (Drotner, 2009, Laugesen, 2009, Brink, 2010) as well as 'no measurable effect' can be a headline in international reports on One-to-One Laptop Programmes (see Greaves & Hayes, 2008; 2010).

The open-ended question contains a paradox:—While reports claim "surprisingly little use" just a view on kids every day behaviour will point at the



Ipad-generation, the I-generation, thereby highlighting technology and media in use “24/7”. The I-generation is the closest we get to the impact of the concept of ‘digital natives’ (Prensky; 2001). But the notion of digital natives enables us also to rediscover the adult generation as IT-illiterate or ‘IT-immigrants’. The layer in this paradox requires further reflection while the position of participators and learners should be singled out for consideration. Examples are taken from my case studies at US-campus’ in 2009 - 2013 (Berkeley, Stanford, University of Michigan, University of San Francisco).

The ethnographic framework was defined as: reading about the campus (the homepage, the website) participating in guided campus tours for next years students and their parents, collecting materials, visiting the centre for university teacher training, IT & learning, and research groups followed by interviews with leaders and participators. This rich yet focussed empirical collection is aimed at the analyses of the (US-) campus as a case exemplifying the academic learning context with innovative projects and upfront participators as its main focus. The case of ‘innovation and upfront participators’ is the main result of the US-campus studies. But the chief impression should not be forgotten and this is related not to ‘the upfront’ but to ordinary conditions and everyday life. Just being there, mingling with different campus-citizens and groups, taking part in events or just ‘going bush’ gave the impression of a multi-ethnic campus with quite relatively young citizens (age 20-25). This made new ordinary conditions visible as a fact. The fact remains, that every streets, cafes and classrooms, i.e. the entire campus, was to be seen as sitting, talking, walking groups and bodies holding a laptop under the arm having a mobile-phone ready in the pocket. The end result was that throughout ‘anno 2013’ every community of practice, groups of students or activity includes computers and social media. Thus, IT-tools and social media are in use 24/7 and integrated in the young student’s life on campus.

The second example refers to Online-learning situations where everything by definition is digitalised. Integration of the latest technology is the *raison d’être*. This is confirmed by field studies in online- education in health care (Borgnakke & Lyngsø 2014). But field studies also show how, as part of an innovative project, online-teachers at the same time depend on “sticking to the conventional procedure” requiring routines and “business as usual”. Further, this logic was stressed by teachers involved in the development of online-courses in dentistry at University of Michigan. While working with the curriculum, the teacher teams asked the institution: “not to renew during the process”. The teachers stressed: “We depend on stability”, and one of the teachers went on to state: “Actually, we are very sad when something “new” happens on the UM platform” (Borgnakke, 2012b, field notes Campus study UM).

Following the teacher’s voice there is a version of the innovative IT-based scholastic context where questions about ‘new, newer and newest’ makes professional participators sad and where “business as usual” makes this group happy.

A glance at such examples (see further Borgnakke, 2015) sheds light on the new life conditions and the inherent paradoxes. In state of the art terms there are no evidence-based answers to the question concerning learning outcomes; the series of open-ended questions and different voices marks the diversity of the participators and the innovative projects. If the next step is to allow a pattern in diversity to emerge a context-dependent generational pattern among the participators becomes apparent. The youngest generations are born as digital natives (among the generation of students and peers) with the vast range of IT-tools, while older generations are invited to enroll in IT-classes, as IT-immigrants (among the generation of teachers and parents). The generational gap can be regarded both in the light of formal education and in

the light of family, leisure, peers and informal learning. The political discourse about 'enhancing IT & Learning' appeals to professional participators in the school context. The appeal, or rather the political demand, is that professionals need to deal with the generational gap and the above-mentioned paradoxes about IT and social media, which have 'too little and already too much impact'. Since the paradox is authentic it will not disappear. Moreover, it seems to have an impact on the learning situation by challenging the prevalent professional pedagogical reflection and action. Excessive IT-use requires greater rigorous educational justification, but the same can be said of the absence of IT use. Further, it demands a professional handling of new combinations of blended learning and flipped classroom as well as the rediscovery of the scholastic resources related to the textbook, the lecture and face-to-face conversation.

Crucially, this means that such context-dependent patterns force professionals to cope with the paradox of re-contextualizing everyday conditions. Currently it means coping with the online/offline shift, blended learning and the flipped classroom in a mix with conventional classroom teaching depending on the context and conditions.

The ongoing ethnographic research that maps the field explores how organisational and pedagogical development in practice cope with paradoxes and dilemmas in IT-based and innovative educational projects. But as the following example demonstrates it also means that we rediscover the paradox in the learning context itself. The example shows how the latest trend in online-learning and possibly the new ideal type of academic and profession-oriented learning is contextualized. Going beyond the net-based place we see how the picture of Academia anno 2013 reaches back to the classic academic institutions of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Currently MOOC as Massive Open Online Course and the e-learning platform Coursera makes classic academia the strong context marker.

### **The new ideal type and the classic context marker: Coursera**

Since the start in 2012 Coursera is developed as an education platform that partners with top universities and organizations worldwide to offer courses online free of charge. The ideas behind as well as the pedagogy are in a case study (Stenbæk, 2013) characterised as a new form of availability and education methods. But at the same time the so-called Coursera pedagogy partakes of conventional learning theories, Bloom and behaviourism and the teaching methods correspond to conventional classroom teaching. In this sense the first analyses of Coursera teaching demonstrates a new trend but also how the trend re-contextualises the conventional classroom, as Bernstein puts it (Bernstein 2000).

The first dilemma we can add to the process of contextualizing and to 'the list of paradoxes' is that the Coursera pedagogy is touted as a new online and university pedagogy yet to a large extent it remains based on conventional classroom teaching. The second dilemma concerns the educational democratic profile and the new brand: Education to the world. The philanthropic precept regarding the provision of education to the world is undermined by the facts that most of the Coursera participants already have higher education (Stenbæk, 2013). Thus one of the paradoxes is that ideas about 'education to the world' would seem in practice to be a matter of enhancing life-long learning in order to enable people who have already benefitted from H.E. to improve their competencies.

Fieldwork in net-based education produces new knowledge both about e-pedagogical practice and this sheds lights upon the way the digital educational

world refers to the life-world by shifting the reference to life spheres and learning places. Shifting the references allows the e-learning platform to represent the new learning context. But at the same time Coursera underlines the strong context marker that is so reminiscent of the classic academic learning context thereby reconstructing the communicative patterns between university lectures and students.

Entering Coursera on the internet, means entering the front door and the introductory page with its constantly shifting references to the university partners<sup>ii</sup>. The visible part - in terms of videos, pictures, logos and images - is basically the picture of the august university building. The course introduction is often delivered by the professor surrounded by academic images, various classical volumes, their leather spines prominently displayed. Even though it is expected that the academic context is present on the website, there is a surprisingly high degree of reference to the classic conservative elite university. The reference is enhanced by the discourse 'the world's leading university' established almost as a brand.

When entering the course description the narrative composition is recognized as

1. The course, the case, the theme (as for example 'Health Care as a Global Challenge')
2. Background intro to the university presented by the professor
3. What is to be learned gained by following the course

This composition would appear to be as simple as any other flyer and course description from any other course description drafted by the university. But the net-based version reconstructs the communicative patterns related to both one-way mass communication and the institutionalised supervision and communication between teacher and student. In similar fashion to television and commercials and with a high degree of personalization one-way mass communication holds sway. This is imbued with a strong context marker, namely classic academia. The professor addresses his/her audience directly and in a highly personalised manner and invites members of the audience 'you' to the course. This appealing dramatic intonation is a part of the double reference to the mediated academic context. While this is one-way mass communication it is also like having a face-to-face meeting with the professor or joining a seminar as a privileged student.

It goes without saying that the reference to factuality is that in online-learning there will be thousands of students 'out there' or in the Coursera courses and networks. The mediated and trustworthy aspect is that the online-situation and communication are managed under the aegis of the classic World-leading-university and the faculty.

In the case of ethnographic studies that follow the field of practice starting with the front door and its important gatekeepers this Coursera welcome is a somewhat surprising welcome back to Academia.

## **Addressed to professionals**

In the US campus case study carried out 2013 in San Francisco I had occasion to speak to the Dean about UCSF's participation in Coursera. The subjects I wished to raise were i) The new phenomena, Moocs and Coursera, ii) Organizational challenges, iii) Pedagogical challenges. As summarised below in my fieldnote the Dean elaborated on these themes.

"The Dean stressed that UCSF participating in Coursera had been a deliberate choice and commitment, though the institutions so far had

had to spend extra money. They have new recruits in the library and new teaching assistants (TAs). But generally, the Dean was keen to stress that it had been a success. In response to the question about the perceived benefit for institutions the Dean mentioned the two most important factors as:

- 1) Message across the world, a reference to the course about caries and health care
- 2) UCSF branding, possibly it is unnecessary but it is always good, as the Dean makes clear.

Further the Dean stresses the innovative factors, such as the chat room and the fact that the participants intermingle as fellow professionals. The participants on his course work predominantly in health care but with many different branches of the health care sector. “  
(Fieldnotes, US-campus study, UCSF, Borgnakke 2013c)

In the conversation the Dean confirms there was a tendency for students and teachers already involved in health care studies to participate as Coursera-students. The potentials as further education are hereby stressed. In response to the question about the pedagogical challenges the Dean stressed first and foremost that the format presented is a challenge. As he went on to explain:

“As an individual teacher I have learned to break the lecture down into sequences of ten minutes in length. A teaching video, for example, will have 10 minutes of assignment-oriented teaching. I have found this highly instructive. I have even started to break down my conventional class and teaching into 10-minutes sequences.”  
(quote from leader conversation, USf, Nov. 2013c)

As indicated by the Dean and Coursera-teacher the impact is not only related to the online-course and the online-students but also to the conventional classes. And when I asked for a comment about the academic and professional level the answer was:

“The level is indisputably as high as at the ordinary university courses, due to the targeting. After all, the course is addressed to professionals”.  
(quote from leader conversation, UCSF, Nov. 2013c)

The development work related to Coursera is in a highly innovative and experimental phase. But the tendencies on which to reflect can nevertheless be identified and listed as follows:

- Coursera students already possess degrees and professional experiences within the academic learning context
- the Coursera pedagogy strengthens the conventional strategy for academic teaching and learning
- there is interaction between the online- and the conventional teaching practice
- there seems to be mutual reinforcement between the late modern and the classic ideal type

If, against the above-adumbrated backdrop we regard Coursera in an ethnographic sense, the Coursera platform is the place and classic academic learning is the context. Further, the Coursera innovation and strategies can may be regarded as a contribution to life-long academic learning addressed to professionals.

## Summary

In campus studies the university both place and context are of foremost importance and the online-university programmes are literally speaking a re-

contextualizing. But as far as space and references to sphere are concerned, new tendencies can be recognised. The Coursera and the online-university as a phenomenon refer to all the four spheres. In crossing spheres analyses show the extent to which Coursera echoes the discourse of classic academia. In a context of analysing, this means that 'going beyond the place-based ethnography' replaces the online-learning context on the internet and in the whole digital circuit of 'text-on-text' and 'text-in-context'. It also means that in the case of Coursera the entire digital circuit can be divided-into phases and interactive and communicative processes related to the academic learning context. What is more, it means shifting between online and offline activities. In an analytic sense a return to the basic concept implies a coming back to models of the communicative process. 'Sender - text/message – receiver' still represents the basic model and the conflict between the intention and the action is to be regarded as the key conflict. Intention/action can be expressed in terms of a conflict between System/life-world, official agenda/hidden agenda, and can be seen in terms of ideas and goals/practice or as the process from vision-mission to practice. It is worth noting that different levels and symbolic constellations the development of the analytical framework remains rooted in the tradition of Habermas' critical communication strategy (Borgnakke, 1996, Habermas, 1978, 1981). Being receptive to critical discourse analyses (Fairclough, 1995) and Bernstein's concepts of re-contextualizing (Bernstein, 2000) further development of the strategy may provide a basis for empirical reconstruction of the online-learning context and the digital circuit. Likewise, it may serve as a basis for exemplary analysis of milestones in the interactive and communicative course. But in order to maintain a 'solid' basis it is crucial that the learner's context is put in perspective.

### **In the learner's perspective**

By sharpening the focus on 'the learner' online students serve to place ethnographic principle:-'following the field' in perspective. Tracing the learner means crossing contexts and seeing the process from the learner's vantage point. As underlined in the ethnographies concerned, there will always be eloquent examples of both the learner's standpoint and shift in perspective. But currently the challenging examples are represented in the profession-oriented learning context. In this context focusing on the learner implies focusing on a fundamental contrast between the scholastic and the clinical context as well as the contrast between 'theory and practice'. The context markers link 'theory' to 'the school' and 'the classroom' and 'practice' to workplaces, such as 'the clinic'. In the discourse there are strong markers and forceful references to what is to be learned 'at school and in theory' and what is to be learned 'at the clinic in practice'. But the strongest marker is the contrast meaning 'both-and' learning situations and meaning 'the scholastic context *versus* the clinical practice context'. As illustrated below, this means that to identify the learner's context is to recognise the contrast. The line of reasoning becomes clear if it is underlined that ethnographic exploration of the learner's context is already defined as a practical contrast.

# Exploring the learning context

...in the practical contrast

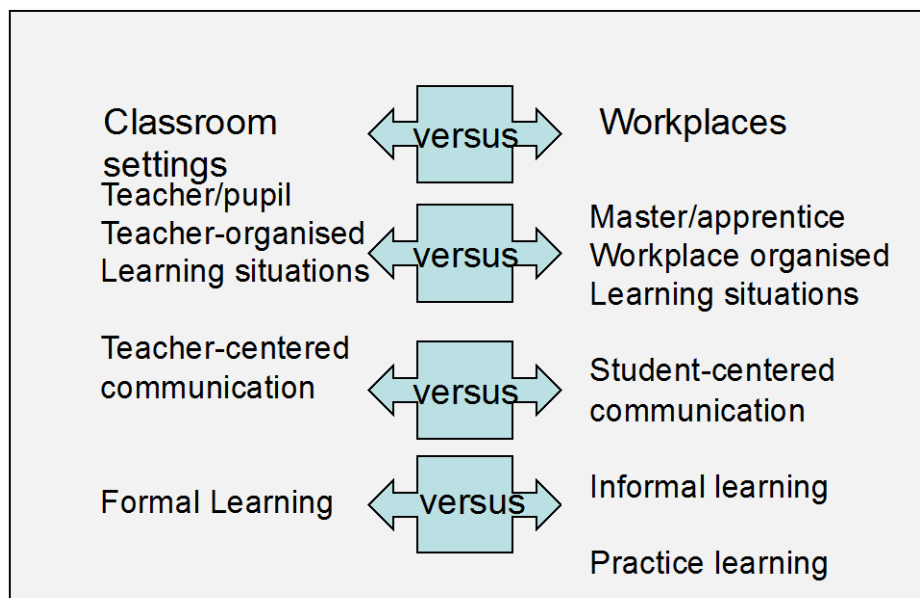


Figure 3. Exploring the context

Fieldwork focusing on nursing-students' study life and study balance is methodologically challenged by the contrast (Røn Noer, 2014) as well as the fact that the two contexts are experienced as two separate forms of scholastic and professional learning. Fieldwork carried out in the net-based nursing programme is challenged in additional ways (Borgnakke & Lyngsø, 2014). Firstly it is challenged by the e-pedagogical settings and online/offline learning situations, which shift between teacher-centered and student-centered communication. Secondly it is challenged by the shifting reference to formal learning strategies (learning through school-subject, textbooks, e-tivity) to informal learning (self-directed learning strategies, at home, the peer-oriented use of social media) and to practise learning (learning at the clinic oriented towards the professional action repertoire). The process of following the learner through the different phases of profession-oriented education with a view to collecting empirical data from the course is in itself a strong marker, which refers to both the ongoing process, the contrast and the flow in learning object. In this sense the basic ethnographic principle 'following the field' means not only a return to the context, but also a return to the ongoing learning process. As made clear in the following summary this could be regarded as the starting point for the empirical analysis.

## **A starting point for the empirical analysis - tracing the flow of object**

In the most basic sense "following the field" reaches back to research strategies for multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995, Borgnakke, 1996). Further, the principles regarding ecological validity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) and the study of online cultures (Hammersley 2006) recalls the basic reflection in the empirical analytical framework.

As previously stated (Borgnakke, 2013b, 2015) the empirical analysis refers to the fact that most of the new settings are not exclusively online; rather they comprise a blended mix of online- and offline situations and a flow of texts and multi-modalities. This flow of objects is to be analysed within the context but in the light of a medialized learning culture. In this broader perspective the ethnographic place, space and the life spheres witness the impact from the medialized culture (Hjarvard, 2008).

Summarizing the principle of ecological validity, the starting point for the empirical analysis can be regarded as the medialized mix but also as an “authentic mix” mirroring IT-based strategies positioned at the different organizational levels and used by different parties. Referring to empirical collections, which derive from the political and institutional macro-, meso- and micro levels “the authentic mix” will possess ecological validity referring to policy documents, laws, programmes and strategies followed by material of curriculum and plans for the process of teaching. In the case of net-based analysis the salient fact is that the materials in question are included in the websites of the various organisations/institutions, the intranet and the LMS system as well as in a whole range of devices currently in use.

Tracing the flows of objects means that the process of learning can be followed across different situations and contexts. In an analytical sense this going across contexts is a starting point. But it is also the driving force to clarify the ethnographic meaning of the study of learning as a coming back to the learner’s context.

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<sup>i</sup> The ethnographic fieldwork was carried out as classic long term fieldwork at the Danish Reform Universities. The project-organized education at Aalborg University Centre (AUC) was in focus in the first fieldwork (1981 – 83) and the Open University of Jutland (JÅU) was in focus in the second fieldwork (1983 - 1985). The mentioned fieldwork in IT-upper secondary schools was carried out in 2001-2003 and in 2006-2009.

<sup>ii</sup> The description of Coursera on the internet refer to the homepage 2012 – 2013. Currently the described tendencies though in ongoing development are confirmed by visiting Coursera presentations April 2015 at <https://www.coursera.org>