"Think of it as a challenge":

Problematizing Pedagogical Strategies for Progression when Assessing Web-based University Courses in Literary Studies

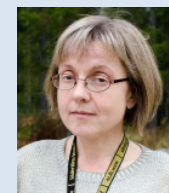### Anette Svensson

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse how a taxonomy-based course design can support students' qualitative learning processes in online university courses. The paper presents a case study based on two online courses in comparative literature in Swedish and English. A document analysis has been applied to analyse the empirical material, which includes the syllabuses, study guides, and examination assignments connected to the courses. Socio-cultural aspects of learning processes, assessment and feedback, course design using a taxonomic structure (SOLO), and a progressive theory of literary studies (Langer's theories of *envisionment*) function as a framework. The results show that the examination assignments aim to further the students' educational processes from stage 2 to stage 5 of the SOLO-taxonomy and, at the same time, through Langer's four stances. While the course structure has a positive effect on the students' general as well as literary progress, there are some pedagogical challenges with online teaching in literature that are discussed. In addition, the examination assignments could have been used as ways to strengthen the students' socio-cultural learning. Furthermore, with little alterations, the examination assignments, which were all used as means of summative assessment, could also have been used formatively to assess the students' progress.

Introduction

Following the digital revolution in education, Swedish universities increasingly give students the option to study partly or fully online. For students, web-based alternatives offer freedom to choose from a larger selection of courses and give them a chance to participate regardless of location. A further effect is that universities are able to present themselves to a larger student base than what is provided by the immediate geographical environment.

One implication of the digital revolution is the increasing number of students, which places demands on universities and teachers to deal with a larger diversity concerning students' individual prerequisites, needs, and their expectations. In order to improve the quality and guarantee the validity of examinations in web-based courses, it is crucial to identify the pedagogical challenges specific to online teaching and learning.

One such challenge is assessment. Formative assessment is a pedagogic tool that provides the teacher with continuous information regarding the students' learning processes as well as hint at areas that need to be adjusted in order for the students to reach the set goals for the course. In addition, a strategic course design focussing on progression increases the students' qualitative learning processes. Qualitative learning is a result of

learning-focused activities; transparent learning objectives, appropriate tasks and their assessments, collaborative work, and fruitful dialogues are tools for qualitative learning (cf. Biggs and Tang, 2011). However, one also needs to consider how errors in the course design might affect the students' learning processes.

Web-based courses pose a challenge to universities due to the large student groups and the ensuing heterogeneity especially noticeable in the difference between various students' prerequisites and needs, which means that the course creator and/or teacher will find it difficult to anticipate the students' prior knowledge and foresee possible obstacles (Högskoleverket, 1999. See also SUHF, 2012 and SFS, 2013). The increased risk of students dropping out gives rise to careful considerations regarding examination strategies and teaching methods when planning and implementing web-based courses.

The aim of this study is to analyse how a SOLO-taxonomy-based course design can support the students' qualitative learning processes in online university courses. This article discusses digitized teaching, learning, and in particular assessment in connection with online courses in comparative literature in Swedish and English in order to give insight into a continuously expanding and highly criticized area of education. Based on a case study, this article presents and problematizes pedagogical strategies concerning assessment, thereby it contributes to the awareness of pedagogical challenges prevalent in web-based examination and education.

Method

The current case study functions as an initial pilot study aiming to explore focal areas for further studies in the field of examination and assessment in online courses. The case study is based on the two courses "The Vampire Story from Dracula to Twilight" (L0035S) and "Popularizing the Classics: From Elizabeth Bennet and Alice to Bridget Jones and Neo" (E0022S) given at Luleå University of Technology during the summers of 2010 and 2011. The two courses are fully web-based summer courses of 7.5 credits each, where the time frame of each course consists of 10 weeks with 50 per cent study pace. In this study, these particular courses were selected because of the intentions to systematically develop a particular didactic design of web courses as they are constructed in accordance with the SOLO-taxonomy on the one hand, and in accordance with Judith Langer's (1995) theories of literary learning on the other. Hence, these courses, which are a convenience sample, form the basis of a discussion of difficulties with formative assessment in online courses.

Both courses have a literary focus; while "The Vampire Story" falls under the discipline Comparative literature with the working language Swedish, "Popularizing the Classics" is a course in English literature and the working

language is English. The material that has been used in this study consists of the course material for the two courses: two syllabuses (L0035S: Syllabus; E0022S: Syllabus), two study guides (L0035S: Study Guide; E0022S: Study Guide) and eight examination assignments, which are found in the study guides.[1] Further material included in this case study is course evaluations made by the students (L0035S: Course Evaluation; E0022S: Course Evaluation[2]) and reflections made by the teachers. All instructions and material related to the courses were placed on the web-based platform used at Luleå University of Technology.

Since the empirical material of this case study encompasses the syllabuses, study guides, and examination assignments connected to two courses, a document analysis is deemed the most appropriate method with which to conduct the study. To be able to analyse a range of different documents, we used the following modified version of Gunnar Berg's (2003) model for document analysis as can be seen in Figure 1:

Category/level	Questions
Content	What content is visible/is described in the course documents?
Subject	How is literature delineated in higher education? How is literary learning described in the course documents?
Ideology	How is the relationship between theoretical and practical competences described? How is the agent that can be seen in the documents described?
Internal level of organization	How are the courses organized?
External level of organization	What kinds of relationships are manifested between the courses and higher education in general?
Rules and regulations	How are learning outcomes phrased? What kind of criteria for assessment and examination are used?

Figure 1. Modified version of Berg's model

In *Att förstå skolan*, Berg describes his model for analysing different kinds of texts and documents predominantly related to an educational context, for example, syllabuses and policy documents. This model functions as a means to understand the school system in a cultural context (Berg, 2003).

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[1] Hereafter, the documents will be referenced as L0035S: S and E0022S: S for the two syllabuses, and L0035S: SG and E0022S: SG for the two study guides.
[2] Hereafter, the documents will be referenced as L0035S: CE and E0022S: CE for the two course evaluations.

One advantage of Berg's model, which makes it a fruitful tool for the analysis of course-related documents in this study, is that it makes it possible to analyse data/documents without hierarchizing them. While Berg's model focuses on analysing documents concerning compulsory school, the questions for each category/level have been modified to better suit material related to higher education such as the targets of analysis in this study. The first five levels in the model are of main concern for the analysis. The questions related to each category/level in the organization of education can be used as starting points for discussions on and problematizations of pedagogical challenges concerning assessment in web-based courses. In addition to Berg's model of document analysis, the course-related documents that are part of this study are analysed in relation to theories concerning the SOLO-taxonomy and Langer's theories of literary progression. Furthermore, the results are discussed in relation to theories of socio-cultural learning.

Since the objects of analysis are not only documents relating to the two courses "The Vampire Story" and "Popularizing the Classics," but also the execution of them, the analysis is influenced by the teachers' experiences of constructing and teaching these courses. Hence, there are elements of experience and shared practice that play a part in the discussion of the results of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This case study is based on theories of educational psychology, which is noticeable primarily in the connections to socio-cultural aspects of learning processes, assessment and feedback, course design using a taxonomic structure, and a progressive theory of literary studies.

The significance of socio-cultural learning is often emphasized in research about teaching and learning (e.g. Säljö, 2010; Säljö, 2005; Ramsden, 2003). From a socio-cultural perspective, learning and cognitive development are considered cultural processes, shared within communities (e.g. Säljö, 2010). Knowledge is thus a process that is constructed in an educational context by students and teachers in combination (e.g. Säljö, 2005). Therefore, dialogue and interaction are prerequisites to a fruitful learning process (e.g. Ramsden, 2003).

The socio-cultural learning theory focuses on the idea that understanding is created through the students' activities, their processing of the material, and their awareness of how significant the context is for the learning process. Teachers who apply a socio-cultural teaching perspective will see and use exams as learning opportunities (e.g. Ramsden, 2003). Examination assignments are thus regarded as having other functions besides measuring what and/or how much of the required knowledge the student has acquired, for example, to inspire and provide different learning

strategies and methods. When teaching and learning are regarded as social processes, it is vital to emphasize not only the content, but also the progression of learning.

In addition to a socio-cultural learning perspective, educational psychology includes a range of fields, such as instructional design, curriculum studies, organizational theory, etc. In Sweden, the Higher Education Ordinance states that it is compulsory to use a system of objectives, that is, certain set goals that the students need to reach, when constructing university courses (Högskoleförordningen, chap. 6, sections 14-15). Therefore, the students' progresses are assessed based on their abilities to reach these objectives. It is thus vital to keep an alignment between the intended learning outcomes on the one hand, and the learning activities and examination assignments on the other (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Constructive alignment has been adopted as a guiding principle for universities, not only when constructing a curriculum but also in the realization of the education.

Assessment plays a decisive role in how students experience the curriculum (Ramsden, 2003), as it has an influence on what the students learn (Biggs and Tang, 2011). According to Boud (2007), assessment determines *what* students do and *how* they do it. Consequently, students value quality feedback (Hyland, 2000), a process that is vital for learning (Hattie, 1987). Therefore, assessment can be described as a catalyst for changing students' learning processes (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997), and as a requirement in meeting students' expectations (Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2002).

Because assessment in the Swedish educational system is based on a number of criteria formed in relation to set goals for each module or course, summative assessment, that is, the final evaluation of a student's learning process, is an obvious part of the assessment process. However, this system does neither exclude the possibilities of, nor the need for, formative assessment, that is, the continuous assessment intended to improve a progressive learning process. On the contrary, summative assessment could function as a point of departure for a formative assessment (Sadler, 1989; Jönsson, 2013).

Feedback is a crucial part of the learning process as it aims to "provide information […] that fills a gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood" (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p. 82). Thus, feedback is important and can be provided in different manners, but it must be an integral part of the course design (Hernández, 2012).

A structured education, where the students systematically and frequently receive feedback and where the objectives of the course are clearly defined, gives better learning results (Holmberg, 1998). Hence, design and structure are key elements in a web-based education where the students are

separated by space and time not only from each other, but also from the teacher(s).

Designing a course is not merely a question of pedagogical planning; which modules or learning activities to include, or how to assess the students. It is also a question of how learning is structured and sequenced. This can be done using a taxonomy system (Larkin and Burton, 2008; De George-Walker and Keeffe, 2010; Newton and Martin, 2013). The Structure of Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) taxonomy describes a progression of a person's learning process, with particular focus on the progression of competences and skills, as portrayed in Figure 2:

The SOLO-taxonomy (Structure of Observed Learning Outcome, Biggs and Tang 2011, 123)				
Misses point	Memorize Identify Recognize Count Define Draw Find Label Match Name Quote Recall Recite Order Tell Write Imitate	Classify Describe List Report Discuss Illustrate Select Narrate Compute Sequence Outline Separate	Apply Integrate Analyse Explain Predict Conclude Summarize Review Argue Transfer Make a plan Characterize Compare Contrast Differentiate Organize Debate Make a case Construct Review and rewrite Examine Translate Paraphrase Solve a problem	Theorize Hypothesize Generalize Reflect Generate Create Compose Invent Originate Prove from first principles Make an original case Solve from first principles
Prestructural	Unistructural	Multistructural	Relational	Extended abstract
←　Quantitative phase　　→←　　Qualitative phase　　→				

Figure 2. The SOLO-taxonomy

As can be seen, the taxonomy system distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative phases in the learning process. This distinction could be compared to the difference between surface and deep knowledge, first articulated by Marton and Säljö (1976). Hence, there is a relationship between the main thoughts in the SOLO-taxonomy and qualitative learning focussing on transparent learning outcomes and collaborative work (Biggs and Tang, 2011), the latter a key factor in socio-cultural learning (e.g. Säljö 2010, Säljö 2005, and Ramsden, 2003).

Another way to design a course where the competence level of comparative literature is in focus, is to use Langer's theories on literary learning. She uses the term *envisionment* to describe the understanding a person has and/or gains about a text (1995), and refers to the different steps of understanding a text as *stances*. These stances can quite easily be connected to the different aspects of learning outcomes presented in the SOLO-taxonomy.

The stances include four stages. The first stance places the reader outside a text, but stepping into an envisionment. "In this stance, we generally begin to develop envisionments by using our knowledge and experiences, surface features of the text, and any other available clues," Langer states (1995, p. 16). The second stance takes the act of understanding further: "In this stance, we are immersed in our text-worlds. We take new information and immediately use it to go beyond what we already understand – asking questions about motives, feelings, causes, interrelationships, and implications. This is the time when meaning begets meaning" (Langer, 1995, p. 17). The third stance is essentially different from the others, as "we use our developing understandings, our text-worlds, in order to add to our own knowledge and experiences" (Langer, 1995, p. 17). Finally, in the fourth stance, "we distance ourselves from the envisionment we have developed and reflect back on it. It is here that we objectify our understandings, our reading experience, and the work itself. We reflect on, analyse, and judge them and relate them to other works and experiences" (Langer, 1995, p. 18). Although mentioned progressively and also drawing on one another in a progressive way, these stances do not represent stages in a linear development of literary competence, but are used differently in various contexts. Hence, Langer's theories are one way of pinpointing disparate qualities in learning. By teaching the students to focus on certain aspects, narrow down a subject, develop ideas, link ideas that originate in reading the fictional works to ideas from communications and experiences, and by providing new and less obvious ways to think about fiction, the students will develop their literary competence, Langer claims (1995).[3]

Altogether, theories concerning socio-cultural learning, theories concerning the SOLO-taxonomy, and theories concerning Langer's ideas of literary progression form the theoretical basis of this study. Since the aim of the study is to analyse how a SOLO-taxonomy-based course design can

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[3] In 2011, Langer re-published her ideas about envisionment with a particular focus on knowledge in *Envisioning Knowledge: Building Literacy in the Academic Disciplines*. Although her focus in this book is on academic literacy across the disciplines and not on fictional text, she adds here to the four stances discussed above, yet another level in Stance 5: 'Going Beyond' (Langer, 2011, p. 56). This stance points towards contextualisation and aims to open up the reading experience to a world beyond the fictional text. However, since this stance is not used predominantly with a literary focus, it is not part of the discussion in this paper, and since this last stance was published after the two courses were constructed, it is not part of the course design analyzed in this study.

support the students' qualitative learning processes in online university courses, there is a need for a theorisation of *how* people learn, and *what kind of quality* the knowledge they gain represents. Finally, Langer's theories of literary learning are applied to provide a picture of what is particularly specific with literary studies. However, there is no absolute linear progression neither when it comes Langer's theories nor the SOLO-taxonomy. Instead, these theories constitute a framework that enables concretisations and simplifications of educational processes.

Results

When analysing the syllabuses and study guides for the two courses in this study, it is obvious that they have a similar outline with three 1.5-credit modules and one 3-credit module each (L0035S: S; E0022S: S; L0035S: SG; E0022S: SG). The first modules are introductions to the course contents. The learning outcomes in the syllabuses state that after completing the course, the student should be able to "describe the development of the vampire story" (L0035S: S, our translation) and that the student should "have acquired knowledge about both canonized literature and popular culture in a selection of English language literature" (E0022S: S). The active verbs used in the syllabus (*describe* and *acquire knowledge*) place the learning outcomes of these modules on the scale between unistructural and multistructural learning in the SOLO-taxonomy system, that is, stage 2 and 3, which is further emphasized in that the learning outcomes also focus on memorising, recalling, and describing. The generic competence aimed at in these modules concerns reading and understanding texts, a phase that Langer (1995) refers to as "Stance 1: Being Out and Stepping into an Envisionment," and which focuses on learning to read and understand texts" (p. 16). The content can, when using Berg's model (2003), be described as traditional and basic knowledge in literary learning, due to the active verbs (*describe* and *acquire knowledge*). However, the content and the subject can also be described as non-traditional because of the genres that are focal areas in the courses, that is, vampire literature and popularized versions of the classics. For both courses, a quiz is used to examine the students' knowledge development after the first module (E0022S: SG; L0035S: SG, our translation). These quizzes were automatically marked in the platform, which meant that the students received immediate, digitized feedback. The grading scale was pre-set and presented in the study guides (E0022S: SG; L0035S: SG).

According to the study guides, the students must put their knowledge into practice in the second modules. Ideologically speaking, it means that there is an expectation on the agents (the students) to show that they can link the theoretical knowledge with the practical (Berg, 2003), in this case by interacting in literary discussions. The learning outcomes in the syllabuses, and the grading criteria in the study guides state that after completing

these modules, the students should be able to discuss, compare, and analyse texts (L0035S: S; E0022S: S; L0035S: SG; E0022S: SG). The verbs (*discuss, compare,* and *analyse*) reflect multistructural and relational knowledge processes in the SOLO-taxonomy system. The structure of the modules thus makes it possible for the students to progress to stage 3 and stage 4 of the learning outcomes of the SOLO-taxonomy during this module. In addition to improving the students' learning outcomes according to the taxonomy, the aim is to improve the students' literary competence which Langer refers to as "Stance 2: Being In and Moving Through an Envisionment" (1995, p. 17). This correlates to a deeper and more developed understanding in which the readers "are immersed in [...] text-worlds" (1995, p. 17), and where personal experiences as well as the text and its context are used to further a person's thoughts/views and to generate new ideas. Therefore, the second modules use a blog entry and two correlating comments on other students' entries as the means through which the students' knowledge development is examined (L0035S: S; E0022S: S; L0035S: SG; E0022S: SG). In terms of the internal level of organization (Berg, 2003), it is clear that the course designers wanted the students to produce literary knowledge of their own, and share it in the blogs and ensuing discussions.

The third modules aim at developing applied literary skills and competence. As in the second modules, the learning outcomes state that the student should be able to analyse and interpret fictional texts after completing the modules (L0035S: S; E0022S: S). These verbs (*analyse* and *interpret*) are related to relational knowledge processes according to the SOLO-taxonomy system. In terms of organization, both internal and external (Berg, 2003), the formulated outcomes in the syllabuses indicate that the course designers were aware of the general aims of higher education, as expressed in the Swedish Higher Education Act (SFS 1992:1434, Sections 8 and 9), when constructing the courses. Hence, the progressive course structure has strengthened the outcomes on stage 4 of the SOLO-taxonomy in the third modules of the courses where the students' interpretation skills and analytical competences are in focus. This correlates with Langer's idea in Stance 3: the student ought to be "Stepping Out and Rethinking What One Knows" (1995, p. 17). In this stance, the students use their developed understanding in relation to their own and others' knowledge and experiences. As can be seen in the study guides, the third examination assignment is differently constructed in the two courses where one is a reflective text about basic literary motifs (L0035S: SG), and the other is a wiki where the students collaboratively focus on a selected aspect of the course literature (E0022S: SG). However, one central aspect of both these assignments is response. Though constructed differently, both assignments require active contribution and involvement of the learner.

The use of response thus functions as a means to further the intended skills and competence levels (cf. Redecker, 2009).

The fourth modules focus on critical analysis using a critical, scientific approach. As the analysis of the syllabuses and study guides show, the learning outcomes state that the students should be able to apply literary concepts and methods in order to compare, analyse, and interpret texts after completing the courses (L0035S: S, E0022S: S, L0035S: SG, E0022S: SG). The learning processes that these verbs (*apply, compare, analyse,* and *interpret*) refer to are, in the SOLO-taxonomy system, classified as relational (stage 4) and extended abstract learning (stage 5). The results show that the course structure makes it possible to reach the fifth and last level of the SOLO-taxonomy in the fourth module. Thus, the students put into practice the theoretical and practical tools that are required for performing a literary analysis at a basic academic level. These requested competences are signs of the course constructors' ideological views of how theoretical as well as practical knowledge support the students' qualitative learning process (cf. Berg, 2003). Langer refers to this phase, where a literary analysis at a basic academic level is performed, as "Stance 4: Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience" (1995, p. 18). In both courses, the examination assignment is an analytical essay where the idea is that the students will by then have gradually increased their abilities to see patterns and structures and base their arguments in the readings and interpretations of the fictional works rather than describe or summarize the plots (L0035S: SG, E0022S: SG).

The structure of the two courses of 7.5 credits and of four modules and four examination assignments each thus allows for a progression from stage 2 (*describe* and *acquire knowledge*) to stage 5 (*apply, compare, analyse,* and *interpret*) of the learning outcomes stated in the SOLO-taxonomy and, at the same time, a movement through Langer's four stances.

Analysis and Discussion

The aim of this study is to analyse and discuss how a course design can contribute to the students' qualitative learning processes in online university education focussing on two courses in comparative literature (one in Swedish and one in English). Hence, the theoretical starting points of a socio-cultural learning perspective are discussed in conjunction with course design and qualities of learning. A socio-cultural theory contributes to the understanding of learning as a social process, whereas the SOLO-taxonomy functions as a structuring principle of learning qualities, and Langer's theories of literary learning is a tool that facilitates understanding of how students can develop the expected literary competence. Course design is particularly challenging when it comes to web-based courses and examinations. The design of the two courses, expressed in the syllabuses and the study guides, including the examination assignments that are the

objects of analysis in this study (L0035S: S; E0022S: S; L0035S: SG; E0022S: SG), is seen as a pedagogical tool as well as a pedagogical challenge. The document analysis model provided by Berg (2003) clarifies the connections and the differences that contribute to these pedagogical challenges.

Learning progression in a socio-cultural context

The results show that in the two courses, the students' learning progression followed the SOLO-taxonomy from a unistructural (stage 2) to a relational (stage 4) and extended abstract (stage 5) learning level. The structure of the examination assignments mirrored this learning process, even though the assignments, quizzes, in the first modules did not explicitly connect to a socio-cultural learning theory. Instead, the focus was on the content/genre, and immediate feedback was prioritized. The contents of the quizzes correspond to the learning outcomes, and the learning qualities addressed in these assignments are predominantly unistructural (stage 2) and, to some extent, also multistructural (stage 3). There was an ambition to make the quizzes more complex by using a varying number of correct alternatives, thus minimizing the chance of passing due to lucky guesses. Although most of the questions mainly emphasized the contents in the literary texts and thus did not demand that the students reflected upon what they had read, some of the questions were of a more analytical nature. Consequently, it was considered a didactically appropriate examination assignment by the course constructors.

A socio-cultural learning context was more pronounced in the second and third examination assignments, that is, the blog and the wiki/reflective text. These tasks required that the students interacted to some degree; they had to communicate and collaborate digitally, they received direct feedback in the form of digital comments on their blogs from their peers, and they received digital feedback from the teachers. These assignments focused on the learning outcomes at the same time as they mirrored the progression in the learning qualities illustrated in the SOLO-taxonomy, namely multistructural (stage 3) and relational learning (stage 4) (cf. Figure 1). Both the blog and the wiki assignments use activities for Web 2.0, the Social Web, that is, "communities of interest […] and […] a disposition to share and participate" (*Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World*, 2009, p. 9). The interaction was imposed on the students, and it varied qualitatively and quantitatively on group level as well as on individual level.

Blogging can be used with a view to support learning in a digitized teaching context. However, students are not always entirely positive to blogging, as is shown in a study by Kerawalla et al. (2007). In their study, a majority of the students did not perceive of the use of blogs, especially the contents of

other peoples' blogs, as particularly helpful. Clear guidelines are thus essential when blogging is used for examination assignments.

The use of wikis in order to promote learning and to support collaborative learning has been tried on many levels in the educational system and has also been described in a number of studies. Wikis have been perceived of as useful for sharing information and knowledge (Elgort, Smith and Toland, 2008). They have also been found to have the potential to facilitate learning through collaboration (Wheeler, Yeomans and Wheeler, 2008), "supporting a constructivist and collaborative approach to learning" (Hadjerrouit, 2012, p. 21). Furthermore, the wikis' publicly viewable space helps students increase their writing competence (Wheeler and Wheeler, 2009). However, wikis will best support learning when there is an incongruity between an individual's knowledge and the information that a wiki contains (Moskaliuk, Kimmerle and Cress, 2009).

The blog and the wiki are not perfect examination assignments if one aims to perform a more systematic implementation of socio-cultural learning online, as neither assignment task necessarily challenges the students to further their learning process. However, with a clearer focus on feedback in these group activities, the assignments could support the students' learning processes in a socio-cultural context. This idea is supported by Cacciamani, Cesareni, Martini, Ferrini and Fujita (2012), who show that participation, metacognitive reflection, and a teaching style aimed at supporting participation promote the students' learning.

From a socio-cultural learning perspective, the final examination assignments, the analytical essays, must regarded as taking a step back when it comes to socio-cultural learning, but a step forward in learning progression. The assignments measured the learning outcomes, which focus on relational (stage 4) and extended abstract learning (stage 5). At an advanced stage of a course, albeit a course on a basic level, students are expected to demonstrate a higher degree of independent thinking and skills. Independence could, in some instances, be considered synonymous with individual work. This aim for independence lead to a situation where the students were not explicitly encouraged to cooperate, or to make use of peer learning strategies, nor were they forbidden to do so, but the fact that it was not mentioned explicitly possibly contributed to individual work. Even though there was an intention to increase the scope for socio-cultural learning, it is likely that traditional aims for independence in higher education influenced the organization of the examination assignment. In hindsight, it is clear that peer learning strategies could have been promoted, as they benefit autonomy or progression in learning. Although the analytical essay could be constructed with more attention paid to socio-cultural learning aspects and thus focus on the writing process with continuous feedback from teachers and students, this assignment brings

out questions relating to the alignment of traditional academic values, such as becoming an independent expert, and the benefits from working in a socio-cultural context and developing skills that are highly valued in the contemporary society, such as team work.

Creating multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and promoting interaction among and between students are two examples of what can be described as a universal design for online courses (Rao, Edelen-Smith and Wailehua, 2015). In web-based courses, meeting places must be created to a higher degree than in face-to-face communication. The learning platform will have a decisive impact on the structure of these meeting places. In the two courses analysed in this study, meeting places were created by the use of technological aids such as an online chat with the teachers of the course and a web-based forum where the students discussed, in writing, amongst themselves and/or posted questions to the teachers. On a similar note, pictures of the teachers, digitized lectures and a highly structured mail service with the teachers were tools used to create an atmosphere in which the students would feel at home in the academic context, thus encouraging and strengthening a socio-cultural learning environment. The wiki was a group assignment, which aimed to create structure and a sense of community, as related to Salmon's theories (2003). The students were given the opportunity to experience a sense of community, in accordance with the advice given by Laurillard (2002) on how to create an interactive learning environment. This proved to be appreciated as one student explains: "Without these opportunities to listen to the other students I would have felt a bit lonely" (E0022S: CE). A forum for oral presentations and discussions could have supplemented the meeting places that were provided. The learning platform used for "The Vampire story" and "Popularizing the Classics" did limit this opportunity, as did the vast number of students registered on these courses and the teachers' lack of technical know-how and support. The digitization over the past years has made it easier for teachers and students alike to take part in discussion forums, and has offered better opportunities to make use of technology for a didactic purpose.

The results of this study show that the design and structure of the examination assignments are of utmost importance in order to motivate learning, facilitate assessment, and provide a learning progress in accordance with a socio-cultural teaching perspective (e.g. Ramsden, 2003). This result is supported by Sung and Mayer (2012), whose study shows that social respect, social sharing, open mind, social identity, and intimacy through sharing personal experiences are key factors in experiencing a social presence in an online learning environment.

The examination assignments used in the two courses relied on multimodality and were constructed in accordance with the Web 2.0 users'

"preference for quick answers", as well as the employers demands for "networking, teamwork, collaboration and self-direction" (*Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World*, 2009, p. 9). The implementation of synchronous chat communications with teachers, synchronous chat communications and a discussion forum for students, replies to e-mails within 24 hours, freedom to choose in which order to study the second and third modules, and the encouraged interactivity between students in the blog and the wiki assignments served as multimodal, collaborative, and self-directing activities and examination assignments.

Progressive literary learning

Langer's (1995) theories on how readers gradually create meaning and understanding were taken into consideration by the course constructors when planning the courses. Langer calls the phases in literary learning "stances", and the word reflects the reader's attitude to the text and the cognitive activities triggered by different attitudes. In order to motivate learning and regard each assignment task as a learning opportunity, two pedagogical strategies for the courses "The Vampire Story" and "Popularizing the Classics" were selected by the course constructors.

First, a progressive development with regard to the level of difficulty was chosen in order to create a successive bridge to more complex and less subjective assignments. As can be seen in the results, the students were encouraged to step into an envisionment through the first examination assignments, the quizzes. This proved relatively easy, as many students who registered for the two courses analysed in this study were familiar with, or even fans of, the fictional texts that were used as course literature. The challenge was to ensure that the students did not remain in this phase of literary learning. Therefore, the quizzes were not only based on the fictional texts but also on research connected to them, which challenged the students to read and understand their favourite genre in new ways (L0035S: SG, E0022S: SG). Hence, the students developed from fans to readers with generic literary competences.

Second, the students were given the chance to become immersed into the text-worlds, and to go beyond what they already knew due to the selection and design of the second and third examination assignments, the blogs and the wiki/reflective texts (L0035S: SG, E0022S: SG). The students discussed given themes in the course literature, and had opportunities to develop their understandings of what they read and wrote. As a result, they learned to argue for their interpretations and help each other develop their critical and analytical competences. They were also forced to motivate their arguments and find support in the primary (and sometimes also secondary) sources, which resulted in a progress from a subjective to a more objective chain of thought. Furthermore, the blog assignments aimed to make the students aware of issues that were appropriate to discuss in

fictional texts, by emphasising areas where they were not clear enough, showing how to enter and structure a discussion, connect ideas, broaden their perspectives etc., competences all of which are considered significant in academia, combined with digital learning contexts.

In addition, the students were provided an opportunity to distance themselves from the fictional texts through the final examination assignments, that is, the comparative analyses. They were expected to objectify their understandings; analyse, reflect on, and evaluate the reading experience as well as the fictional texts. Hence, they had the chance to reach the fourth stance of literary learning in accordance with Langer's (1995) theories.

Initially, many students were inclined to reiterate the content of the literary texts or to discuss the texts from a subjective point of view. Therefore, the challenge was to make each examination assignment a stepping-stone towards the more complex knowledge – a move through the four different stances as discussed by Langer (1995). The progressive selection of assignments resulted in a majority of students achieving this level, and the course evaluations show that the students appreciated that the assignments required a high level of commitment (L0035S: CE; E0022S: CE). A few students seemed to be reluctant to leave their previous perspectives as fans, and in these cases extra support was required to help them come to terms with the differences between an academic literary analysis and an ardent love for the novel/film/TV series and other mediated forms of the narrative text in question.

The variety of assignments was considered a positive feature according to the course evaluations where one student wrote: "Interesting and varied examinations. They complemented each other in a good way. To write a wiki together was fantastic! When Iread [sic] the instructions for the assignment, I was worried and did not know how to do it… but the virtual room and the group collaboration was a true experience" (E0022S: CE, our translation). The carefully considered examination strategies that focused on progression on double levels – using the SOLO-taxonomy for a progressive learning competence and Langer's stances for a progressive literary competence – helped the students to develop and reach the intended level of generic competence.

Challenges and pedagogical strategies – a conclusion

As described in the results, a summative assessment strategy was privileged in the courses. At the end of each module, the students completed an examination assignment, thus allowing the teachers to evaluate the students' learning processes in relation to the learning objectives. Formative assessment, aimed at helping students identify areas that needed work, was implicitly included in the assessment process, in

particular in the modules where students either discussed or interacted with each other during the assignments.

Designing an online university course requires a certain degree of reconceptualisation, as is shown in a study on educational variables for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) by DeBoer, Ho, Stump and Breslow (2014). They argue that conventional approaches to enrollment, participation, curriculum, and achievement are insufficient when designing MOOCs. Though the two courses in the present study did not attract the vast number of students that MOOCs draw, we had to deal with a less limited time of enrollment than commonly accepted. Due to the number of students taking the two courses, and the diversity of students, we also had to handle different degrees of participation; a wider variety of students who registered for the course, and completed one, two, three or four assignments. The traditional framing of units with deadlines also had to be reconceptualized. Hence, we chose to compromise as the students were asked to start with one particular module (1), and to finish the course with another particular module (4), but they were free to take the other two modules (2 and 3) in the order of preference. Sinclair, Boyatt, Rocks, and Joy (2015) summarize some issues with MOOCs, such as the need for direction and support, problems with attrition, the lack of etiquette of other participants creating problems for students, and plagiarism. These issues are not unique to MOOCs, but in online courses with many students, some of these pedagogical challenges are amplified. The two courses in our study, presented similar problems as Sinclair, Byuatt, Rocks, and Joy discuss in relation to MOOC, for example, when students were asked to work collaboratively in groups, and some students did not participate as expected.

Having access to all documents posted on the platform, teachers were able to monitor the progress of each student in order to provide on-going feedback in addition to the response of the examination assignments. However, this was not a systematic process; rather, it was carried out at the initiative of individual students asking questions and requesting feedback. The large number of students participating in these courses, coupled with the fact that the courses were given during the summer break with only a skeleton crew on duty, meant that the teachers had limited time to carry out any additional feedback. Consequently, only the students asking for on-going feedback received it. In light of the results, it is safe to conclude that students taking these courses and teachers dealing with the workload would have benefited from an organized and continuous formative assessment strategy.

In a classroom context, formative assessment can be incorporated in a variety of ways, for example, discussions, different types of questioning, admission or exit cards, learning or response logs, and peer or self-

assessment. These activities can be incorporated into web-based courses as well, though the vast number of students taking these courses must be taken into consideration when organizing the activities that open up for formative assessment. Even though the examination assignments used in the two courses analyzed in this study were not used formatively, but rather as summative assessments, they have the potential to be used in a formative way. Quizzes can be used to determine whether or not the students have the adequate subject knowledge and point to areas that need to be studied further before the examination. Similarly blogs offer a good opportunity to give and receive on-going feedback. Used formatively, wikis have a potential to develop the students' learning processes as they include discussions as well as provide formative assessment throughout the creative process. Blogs and wikis are asynchronous tools. While participation was an objective of both assignments, the choice of asynchronous over synchronous tools was made in order to encourage the students to engage in these assignments. The use of asynchronous tools might, however, have both advantages and disadvantages. A study by Oztok, Zingaro, Brett and Hewitt (2013) shows that the students' use of synchronous tools, such as private messages, were shorter, but also easier to read than public messages. However, in the case of the two courses analyzed in the present study, synchronous tools were primarily used for communication and not for assignments. Literary analyses in the form of essays can advantageously be used formatively. Focussing on the process of writing essays with a response system that includes feedback from the teachers as well as from the other students is a beneficial way of working with formative assessment and thus develop the students' competences.

The pedagogical choices that are identifiable in the analysis of the course documents of this study can be said to correspond to at least five levels in the document analysis model: content, subject, ideology, and the two levels of organization (Berg, 2003). Not only do these choices make the content of the courses visible, but they also reflect the course constructors' views on literary competence and literature in higher education, one such view is that it is fruitful to combine traditional literary learning models with modern technological learning methods and tools. Furthermore, the choices expressed in the construction of the courses also indicate how the course constructors position themselves ideologically, as the learning activities embrace both theoretical and practical competences. Finally, the learning outcomes, expressed in the syllabuses and the outlines of the grading criteria in the study guides, bear witness to the levels of organization in higher education.

As pointed out, the focus of this pilot case study has been students' qualitative learning processes in conjunction with a specific course design. In order to expand the result of this study, more data from online courses

and universities is required. Nevertheless, a few conclusions can be drawn from the results of this particular case study.

The pedagogical strategies discussed in this article, in particular in conjunction with the examination assignments, promote a progressive and complex learning development and create a sense of community in web-based literary courses, despite the fact that formative assessment was not incorporated. The structure of the assignments, based on the SOLO-taxonomy and Langer's theories of literary learning, is significant for the result of the course. It is equally significant that these assignments are accompanied by instructions that guide the students. This is especially true for courses with numerous participants where the majority of the students are new to the academic environment. A clear and informative study guide thus functions as a teaching tool that benefits everyone involved in web-based education. A student confirmed this in the course evaluation: "I'm also impressed with the clarity of the instructions for all modules, there was no confusion, on my part, what was expected from me and about any of the due-dates" (E0022S: CE). However, there are pedagogical and practical problems with online courses – problems that must be addressed.

Web-based education offers advantages for universities as well as for students, but this form of education also makes demands on the university administration, the teachers, and the students. The university administration has to consider the consequences caused by the development towards a web-based educational environment, for instance the increased number of students who place demands on universities and teachers to handle the larger diversity concerning students' individual prerequisites, needs, and expectations (Högskoleverket, 1999). Clearly, there might be a discrepancy between the students' and academia's expectations, particularly when it comes to courses such as those analyzed in this study, that is, courses in popular cultural phenomena attracting students (sometimes fans) who might not otherwise contemplate academic studies. Then again, all universities in Sweden face the same challenge: meeting students who are not necessarily accustomed to academic expectations. This particular challenge increases due to web-based education.

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