Tensions and Contradictions When Creating a Multimodal Text as a School Task in Mother Tongue Education

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Abstract

With digital technology it has become possible and relatively easy to create texts, which contain different kinds of expression, such as images and sound. This challenges the concept of literacy and what it means to create texts in education. By exploring tensions and contradictions in and between different components in the activity system of creating texts in classrooms this article attempts to illuminate conditions for transforming this activity. Activities are here conceptualized as activity systems where components at local and systemic levels influence and constitute each other. Tensions and contradictions at both levels, reflect general issues related to the concept of literacy, as they concern what kind of expressions are considered valuable and primary when creating and assessing texts in educational settings.

Keywords: multimodal texts, literacy, Cultural Historical Activity Theory, boundary
Introduction

With the increasing use of digital technologies in classrooms, it is now possible for students and teachers to engage in tasks, which were previously out of reach. Language education and mother tongue education in particular are sensitive to changes in the communicational landscape as the subjects deal with different ways of communicating, such as literature, film and other media (Jewitt, Bezemer, Jones & Kress, 2009). With the use of digital technologies the possible ways of communicating and expressing meaning have been altered, which in turn affects classroom activities.

Literacy has traditionally been associated with spoken and written language, but is currently also associated with other kinds of expression (e.g. New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Johnson & Kress, 2003; Turner & Katic, 2009). Barton and Hamilton (1998), for instance, write about the notion of literacy practices as a way, “of conceptualizing the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape” (ibid., p. 6). Literacy practices thus relate to and are affected by the context in which they take place. New Literacy Studies has likewise attempted to rethink literacy as local and situated, rather than as a set of skills or competencies that are acquired through education (e.g. Scribner & Cole, 1981; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1998; Jewitt, 2008). Conceptualizing literacy as a social phenomenon brings with it a paradigmatic change in how to research literacy. From the sociocultural perspective, literacies are always regarded as situated, which means that they have to be studied in their context (e.g. Gee, 1996). In this sense ‘new’ primarily refers to how we understand and describe literacy practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). ‘New’ in connection to literacy may also refer to changes in practices, which involve new “ways of producing, distributing, exchanging and receiving texts by electronic means” (ibid., p. 25). Lankshear and Knobel (2008) conceptualize a difference between conventional and ‘new’ literacies, where the conventional is connected to an individual view on learning and intelligence, while expertise is viewed as centralized. In ‘new’ literacies, knowledge is instead considered a collective practice and expertise is seen as distributed (ibid., p. 38). Related to this conceptualization we find changes in practices, which Gee (2004) terms ‘affinity spaces’ and Jenkins et al. (2006) refer to as ‘participatory cultures’. Compared to engaging in conventional literacies, these ‘new’ literacies are seen as being more collaborative and participatory (e.g. Gee 2004; Jenkins et al. 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008).

The New London Group (1996) argues for the need of a ‘pedagogy of multiliteracies’, in which diversity is accentuated. This concerns both the diverse and globalized societies of today as well as the variety of texts associated with information and multimedia technologies. Jewitt and Kress (2004) advocate a multimodal approach to literacy in which all modes are recognized as meaning making devices. Spoken and written language is viewed as merely one way of making meaning amongst others, rather than central and sufficient for learning. The multimodal texts referred to in this article are short films, which contain still images and recorded speech. The students use their own voices to create soundtracks to go with their multimodal texts. Transitions between images are used to create movement in the multimodal texts and music may also be included. Creating multimodal texts in language education may enable the students to make use of abilities connected to the use of technologies in activities outside of the educational setting (Erstad & Silseth, 2008). This could be a way of bridging the gap between the different textual worlds, in which students seem to live (Bergman, 2007; Olin-Scheller, 2006).

Tools and technologies have always been part of the educational setting, but they have changed over time. Previous practices, as well as possible future developments, are therefore embedded in...
the usage of tools and technologies in classrooms (e.g. Säljö, 2000). The introduction of new tools has often been accompanied by questions and discussions about their appropriate use in education as well as conceptions of how they will change education (e.g. Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Karlsohn, 2009). As tools and technologies have different affordances and constraints, an alteration of tools is likely to lead to changes in what classroom activities entail. To reach an understanding of the meaning of new tools and activities in an educational setting, this article argues that it is necessary to relate to a wider context where societies in general, but also the educational environment, are taken into account.

As an institution, education has its own history, which is mirrored in peoples’ actions and the activities carried out in this setting as well as in a common notion of what school is in a society (e.g. Säljö, 2000). The aims and goals of a national, educational system are stated in the national curricula, which is thus a document that influences activities in classrooms. Subjects taught and the respective core content, but also grading criteria, further indicates what teachers and students are expected to focus on. In language education there exist established practices of creating and assessing texts - mainly typographical texts written with pen and paper or on a computer (e.g. Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Turner & Katic, 2009). These traditions implicitly or explicitly serve as points of reference for students as well as teachers. Indeed, both guide and influence their actions and activities. Emerging practices will be influenced by norms and rules connected to older approaches. Therefore negotiations are necessary in order for the participants to understand what the new activities entail and how they relate to older, established practices. By studying emerging practices, such as the creation of multimodal texts in language education, insights may be gained as to how they relate to the established practices in which they appear.

In the present article, activities in a classroom are conceptualized as activity systems, which contain components at both the local and systemic levels. At the local level the components consist of the subjects engaged in the activity, the tools that are used and the goal of the activity, the object. The systemic level contains the community, rules, and division of labour (Engeström, 1987). Activities at the local level of the classroom are related to and affected by components at the systemic or structural level. However, Engeström (1998) points out the need to pay attention to a middle-level between the local and the systemic in order to understand classroom practices. Engeström (ibid.) considers processes at the middle-level to be fundamental as they involve how students and teachers perceive schoolwork. Historically evolving tensions and contradictions can be detected in or in-between the components in an activity system, but they may also arise between intersecting activity systems (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

By exploring tensions and contradictions at and between the three levels, the article contributes to an understanding of how emerging classroom practices, which relate to ‘new’ literacies (Lankshear & Knoble, 2008), are constrained or rendered possible. The process of incorporating several kinds of expression - some of which are closer to practices outside of education (Erstad & Silseth 2008) - into multimodal texts created in class work, are aspects belonging to the middle-level (Engeström, 1998). Indeed, this also counts for the process of assessing these texts. Tensions and contradictions may become evident at this level, since students and teacher negotiate how to perceive schoolwork in general and activities relating to the creation and assessment of multimodal text in particular. How these processes are negotiated at the local level of the classroom and how components at the systemic level affect these processes are analytically explored - both in connection to empirical data as well as to previous research.
Theoretical framework

This article adopts a sociocultural perspective on learning, which is considered as originating in social actions and subsequently mediated through interaction, and the use of various tools. Knowledge is considered as a resource for solving problems and managing situations appropriately (e.g. Säljö 2000; Wertsch 1998). As Lemke (2001) points out, sociocultural perspectives not only concern social interaction, but “are more significantly about the role of longer timescale constancies and how they constrain, afford, and intrude into moment-to-moment activity” (ibid., p. 19). The analysis of activities in classrooms must therefore be related to the sociocultural environment, in which they take place. An important aspect in a sociocultural perspective on learning is that mediational means are part of, and shape human actions. Wertsch (1991; 1998) even claims that actors could be seen as “individual(s)-acting-with-mediational-means” rather than merely ‘individual(s)’.

In Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), as conceptualized by Engeström, the prime unit of analysis is “a collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system” (Engeström, 2009, p. 56). Engeström (1998) calls the components: subject, object, and mediating tools ‘the tip of the iceberg’ as they represent the “visible instrumental actions of teachers and students” (ibid., p. 79). The less visible components in the activity system are community, rules, and division of labour. This formal systemic level contains the structure of school systems, whereas the local level relates to content and methods of teaching. CHAT focuses on how components in activity systems relate to and constitute each other. Engeström (1998) states that school reforms tend to focus on either the local or the systemic level. Conceiving the relationship between the systemic and the local level as dichotomous may be a reason why it is generally considered difficult to reform the culture of classrooms. Engeström (ibid.) argues for the necessity of paying attention to the middle-level as a strategic focus of change in classroom practices, since the processes at this level imply how schoolwork is perceived. Activity systems have historical layers and thus contain sediments of earlier history as well as ‘buds’ of possible futures (Engeström, 1993, p. 68). As activity systems are generated and transformed over time, intrinsic constraints and potentials must be understood against their own history (Engestöm, 2009). Activity systems are characterized by their inherent multivoicedness, which requires translation as well as negotiation, and is a source of both trouble and innovation (ibid.). When students in a classroom negotiate activities, these are then governed by how activities are usually carried out in that setting. Activities in a classroom have a history as certain rules and division of labour apply in that environment. The students, as well as the teacher, relate to these when negotiating the activity. There is therefore a ‘double dialogicality’, since both the local practice and the sociocultural practices of the educational setting are related to by students and teachers (Linell, 2009).

An activity commonly relates to several activity systems and may also be seen as constituting a smaller part in a larger system. The activity of creating a multimodal text in language education can therefore relate to activities outside education, such as creating and/or watching short films on YouTube, but can also be regarded as a minor part of the educational system as a whole. When several activity systems are involved, the object of the activity may be shared and can be seen as a boundary object. In a review of the literature on boundary crossing and boundary objects, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) define ‘boundary’ as “a sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction” (ibid., p. 133). They conclude that descriptions of boundaries as well as people and objects at the boundary show signs of ambiguity as “the boundary belongs to both one world and another” (ibid., p. 141). However, the boundary can also be regarded as ‘in-between’, belonging to neither one nor the other world (ibid.). This means that boundaries connect as well as divide the activity systems.

involved. People and objects at the boundary act as bridges between the related worlds, but may simultaneously also represent the division between them.

Contradictions are historically accumulated systemic tensions within and between activity systems. These are important in CHAT as they are considered the driving force of change and development (Engeström, 2009; 1993). They may appear within and between components in an activity system, but also between intersecting activity systems (Engeström, 1993; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). These contradictions generate disturbances and conflicts, but may also engender innovations, which attempt to change the activity system (Engeström, 2009). While contradictions relate to systemic tensions within or between activity systems, conflicts relate to individuals and may affect their short-time action (Sannino, 2008) Sannino (ibid.) considers the roots of conflicts to lay in contradictions. Conflicts at the local level, as well as dilemmas and local innovation, may then be seen as manifestations of systemic contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Sannino (2008) argues for innovations in school to be conceptualized as a “process of interplay between dominant and non-dominant activities which includes conflicts and almost unnoticeable transitional actions” (ibid., p. 329). By taking sideways actions, which cross boundaries between dominant and non-dominant activities, these transitional actions may lead to the activities merging and hybridizing (ibid.). Studying contradictions may provide insights into what the transformations involve as well as how and why they occur. CHAT can thus be seen as a framework for understanding transformation (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

If creating multimodal texts in language education is compared to the established practice of writing typographical texts, there are obvious changes in the components of the activity system since the tools, object, as well as the outcome, have been altered. When a component in an activity system acquires a new quality, tensions arise in and between this component and other components in the activity system (Engeström, 1993). Similarly, when elements from the outside, such as new technologies, are adopted in an activity system, this often leads to contradictions between new and old elements as well as between emerging and established practices (Engeström, 2009). In this article, activities at the local level of the classroom are put into a wider perspective by relating components at the local level to components at the systemic level. Alterations at the local level concern the tools and object of the activity and are tangible, while changes in components at the systemic level are more abstract. By relating empirical observations at the local level, but also discernible tensions and contradictions at this level to components at the systemic level, the aim of this article is to illuminate aspects, which enable and restrain transformations.

Methodology

The classroom studies on which this article is based were conducted in two cycles during 2009-2011; the participants created multimodal texts in Swedish language education, which was new to the students as well as to the teachers. The studies can be regarded as interventions done in collaboration with the teachers, where the researcher took active part in implementing the activities. As such, it closely relates to design-based research (DBR). Here the aim is to design, study, and subsequently refine theory-based innovations in realistic classroom environments, which then influence practices and gives rise to a better understanding of theory (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). The intent is, as Cobb et al. (2003) write “to investigate the possibilities for educational improvement by bringing about new forms of learning in order to study them” (ibid., p. 10). The intervention was therefore an attempt to bring about an activity relating to ‘new’ literacies, where students used multiple kinds of expression in their text. The main focus of attention in the first cycle of research was to study this activity and to develop a theoretical understanding of the processes involved. When analyzing and revising the results, the
importance of assessment in classroom practices became apparent. For this reason assessment of the multimodal texts became central to the second cycle of research. The cycles of research in these studies can be characterized as an iterative design process as the conjectures in the different cycles were changed underway (Cobb et al., 2003).

The first cycle of research, focused on how a ‘new’ activity in the classroom, which potentially facilitates ‘new’ literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), was enacted at the local level (Godhe, 2012; Godhe & Lindström, accepted). The second cycle of research was designed as a follow-up to the first cycle and the intention was to study the same students and teachers creating a second multimodal text. However, when the students were given a second assignment to create a multimodal text, they questioned how the multimodal text was to be assessed and how it related to the course they were taking in Swedish, but also grading criteria. Based on these questions, the design of the task was altered so that the students were given explicit grading criteria for the assignment at the start of their work. The students’ questions meant that the conjecture of the research changed, which in return influenced the focus of the second cycle so that how the multimodal texts were assessed became central.

In the first cycle focus was primarily on the local level of the activity system and how the components of subject, tools, and objects constitute each other. Student utilisation of different kinds of expression in their multimodal text was a concern in this analysis, as well as the incorporation of references from other contexts (Godhe, 2012; Godhe & Lindström, accepted). In the second cycle of research, focus was on assessment and how the process of assessment was enacted at the classroom level in interaction between teacher and students (Godhe, 2013; Godhe & Lindström, submitted). Both connections to contexts outside of education and assessment practices belong to the middle-level of the activity system (Engeström, 1998) and they relate to each other since references to other contexts, as well as different kinds of expression, were included in the assessment of the multimodal texts. Moreover, the activity of creating multimodal texts in classrooms, as an activity at the boundary, where the multimodal texts could connect intersecting activity systems, was an aspect which was relevant to both cycles, and which connected them.

The multimodal texts created by students in this study could also be called digital stories. However, as they are of different genres, both narrative and argumentative, they will be termed ‘multimodal texts’, rather than digital stories. Another reason why this term is not used is that digital stories are often created outside of classrooms, such as has been described by Hull (2003) and Hull and Katz (2006). When creating a text in a classroom, the institutional habits of creating texts in education will influence what students do, as well as how they do it (e.g. Heap, 1989; Erstad, 2007). The focus upon telling a personal story is less prominent in classroom settings and factors such as time constraints also affect the activity (Lowenthal, 2009).

The first cycle of research was done in four different classes in three upper-secondary schools in the south of Sweden. Altogether, thirteen students, working in groups of two or three, were video recorded while they made their multimodal texts. The topics given to students in different classes varied, but the students were mainly asked to create narrative texts. In the second cycle, video recordings were made in two classes at one of the schools, which had been part of the first study. Altogether, twelve students were video recorded in this cycle while they created their multimodal texts. In one of the classes the students were given a hand-out which aimed to clarify what was assessed in their work and which stated the different grading criteria at the start of the project. The
task was to create an argumentative, multimodal text and the students were given topics, which they had to argue for or against. Seven students from this class were recorded when they had subsequent assessment-talks with their teacher and they were also interviewed at the end of the project.

In line with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines for research (Codex, 2010), the students were given information about the research and were asked to fill in a form where they stated whether or not they consented to being video and audio recorded. If the students were under 18 years of age, the agreement had to be signed by their parents. Only groups where all students had given their consent to being video and audio recorded could be filmed, which meant that there were never too many pairs or groups to record. Consequently, the students who had been recorded had actively given their consent to take part in the study.

Following the data collection, all recordings were reviewed and transcribed. The transcripts were then colour-coded in order to discern what was in focus in the interaction and a number of cases were selected for further analysis. The first study questioned how the student texts were developed in interaction, and the second study questioned the assessment of the multimodal texts. The cases were chosen on the basis of these questions and involved multiple selection criteria.

The analysis of the interactions aimed at examining interpersonal processes (Mercer, Littleton & Wegerif, 2004) and how participants make use of the resources available to them in particular situations (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Neither context nor the artefacts that mediate activities can be separated from activities. For this reason analyses were concerned with the “content, function and the ways shared understanding is developed in social context, over time” (Mercer, Littleton & Wegerif, 2004, p. 203). Mercer (2004) points out that from a sociocultural perspective on learning, language is regarded as a tool for thinking collectively. In studies of interaction in classrooms, what students and teachers say, as well as how they act with different artefacts becomes central. The analysis is hereby grounded in data, thereby avoiding speculative interpretations of what people may think (Jordan & Henderson, 1995).

Tensions and contradictions when creating a multimodal text as a school task

In the following section, the tensions and contradictions of creating and assessing multimodal texts in a classroom are analysed. This takes into account how such tensions and contradictions can be discerned at the local and the systemic level of the activity system (Engeström, 1998). The point of this is to explicate how classroom activities are affected by tensions and contradictions at, and between the local, the middle-, and the systemic levels of an activity system, but also how this in turn affords and/or constrains alterations in practice.

As argued by Barton and Hamilton (1998), the link between activities in classrooms and the social structures, which they are part of, needs to be conceptualized in order to understand literacy practices. However, systemic components, such as curricula and the history of the subject, which affect classroom activities, are not always visible in the classroom (Engeström, 1998). In order to elucidate how systemic components affect what is done at the local level, the results will be presented in three steps. First, findings from the empirical studies of interaction in classrooms are compiled and key findings are explicated. Second, systemic components, which are embedded at the local level, are unpacked to substantiate how these components shape activities. Finally, the implications
of this study and how tensions and contradictions afford and/or constrain changes in classroom practices are discussed.

**Findings in the empirical studies**

In the first cycle of research, questions of what the activity of creating a multimodal text in language education involved was in focus. In the analysis of interaction between students and teachers during the process of creating multimodal texts, it was found that negotiations mainly concerned what the students were going to say in their multimodal texts (Godhe, 2012). Most of the students first attended to what they were going to say and only after having written that down, did they concern themselves with the other modes available. These other modes were, to a large extent, added as illustrations to the text they had written so that it was the written, and later spoken text, which was in focus in their interactions. This also governed the use of other modes. The tendency to use images and other non-linguistic features as illustrations of the text, is referred to by Sorapure as ‘mode matching’ (2006, p. 4). To combine modes so that they express something more or less equivalent can be useful when focusing on key ideas, but it diminishes the potential of creating a productive tension between modes in a multimodal text.

The skills of reading and writing typographical texts are emphasised and practised in language education. For this reason this is known to the students as being part of language learning activities within the school context (e.g. Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Since writing texts is something the students have done repeatedly in previous language lessons, they set off orienting towards this familiar action. However, the digital tools used by the students, enable them to employ and combine different modes. When the tools used in the activity system obtain new qualities this generates internal contradictions (Engeström, 1993). In this case, these contradictions mainly occur between components at the local level and components at the systemic level as the creation of multimodal texts differ from the historically established practice of creating texts containing written and/or spoken words in language education.

These results are similar to what Shin and Cimasko (2008) found in their study where English second language university students created web sites. Though encouraged to use different modes of expression, the students prioritized linguistic designs. “The data point to views of multimodal academic composition defined by traditional views of academic discourse in which the linguistic mode is dominant in all instances” (ibid., p. 389). To understand the students’ actions, when creating multimodal texts in a classroom, they need to be related to the structural or systemic level and the established practice of writing typographical texts in language education, which reflect the norms of disciplines as well as communities.

Assessment was the central issue in the second cycle of research. By studying interactions between students and teachers where they negotiate what assessing multimodal texts mean and imply, it is possible to discern how the process of assessment is enacted in the classroom. In these interactions the main topic was what the students said in their multimodal texts (Godhe, 2013). The same focus was found in the assessment-talks between student and teacher. What the students said was considered to be the content of the multimodal text and as such, the structure of it was important in order to get the message across (Godhe & Lindström, submitted). The use of other kinds of expression such as music, images, and transitions between images were not taken up to any great extent, but were usually only mentioned briefly.
In the interviews, the students indicated that it was the spoken argument in the multimodal text, which was evaluated in the assessment of their texts. They expressed an understanding of how the argumentation in their text had been assessed and were able to relate to, and understand what needed to be improved. Language teachers are trained to assess written texts and have experience doing this, but assessing other modalities is not developed to the same extent. Similarly, during their schooling, students have been assessed on their writing, but may not have had the same experience when it comes to the assessment of other features. This means that they cannot relate to former assessments as a point of reference when their multimodal texts are evaluated. The interactions among students and teacher showed few negotiations about what the assessment criteria actually meant in relation to the task of creating a multimodal text. As the meaning of the criteria related to the assessment of expressions, such as images and sound, were not negotiated, the students and the teacher did not share a common understanding of how to interpret the criteria (Godhe, 2013).

Opinions on the assessment of the multimodal texts diverged primarily when considering other modes of expression, such as images and sound. While the teacher and the students differed in their assessment of images and sound, student opinions were largely in agreement with each other. The students seemed to have a mutual understanding of the use of images in multimodal texts but they found it hard to relate to the assessment done by the teacher (Godhe & Lindström, submitted).

Tensions concerning how to assess multimodal texts can be discerned both at the local level and at the systemic level. The predominance of the spoken word in the assessment of the multimodal texts mirrors the predominance of the spoken and written word when creating the multimodal texts. Diverging opinions among teachers and students on how different kinds of expression should be assessed could be seen as a conflict between dominant and non-dominant activities (Sannino, 2008). Students appear to take transitional actions by crossing boundaries and creating multimodal texts, which incorporate references from several activity systems (Godhe & Lindström, accepted). The conflict between dominant and non-dominant activities displayed in the assessment of the multimodal texts, however, may affect the short-time action of students as the hybridity of the multimodal text is largely overlooked in the assessment (Sannino, 2008). Students may therefore be deterred from creating multimodal texts where the visual aspects are prominent, as this mode has been established as not valuable in the assessment of the multimodal text.

**Relating the local level to the systemic level**

There were discernible tensions and contradictions in the analysis of the local interactions, presented in the previous section. In this section, these will be related to components at the systemic level. The tensions and contradictions discerned at the local level concerned the use of several modes when creating a multimodal text in a classroom and how students and teachers related to modes not usually used in school texts, such as images and sound, during the creation and assessment of the multimodal texts. Assessment practices and connections to contexts outside the educational setting is seen by Engeström (1998) as examples of recurrent aspects of classrooms, which pertain to a level between the formal level of school structure and the local level of contents and methods of teaching. These aspects at the middle-level will be taken up when relating the empirical findings at the local level to the systemic level.

**The subject of Swedish and the notion of text**

The student preoccupation with what to say in their multimodal texts reflects certain traditions in the subject of Swedish. The subject of Swedish can be seen as a community, which - as a component...
at the systemic level of the activity system - affects what is done at the local level. As a mother
tongue subject, Swedish has traditionally viewed literature and language skills, for instance grammar
and spelling, as the main components (e.g. Johnson & Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008).
Studies, such as those conducted by Bergman (2007) and Olin-Scheller (2006), show that the
connection between texts that students consume and produce outside of school and the ones they
encounter in school is weak. According to Jewitt et al. (2009), there is a similar tension within the
subject of English as a mother tongue subject. A fundamental change in the digital landscape of the
classroom, together with a social shift where classroom activities need to be located in a broader
cultural frame, has opened up for texts from out-of-school contexts to connect to mother tongue
education. Simultaneously, however, a considerable amount of policies intended to modernize
education have been launched. The policy interventions are often in tension and appear to be moving
in contradictory directions to the technological and social change (ibid.).

Several attempts to broaden the concept of literacy, to incorporate texts from different domains as
well as texts consisting of different modes, have been made in past decades (e.g. Gee, 1996; The
New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Street, 1998; Jewitt & Kress, 2004; Lankshear
& Knobel, 2008). A similar attempt to broaden the modes of expression in educational settings was
introduced in the Swedish national curricula in the year 2000 as a broadened concept of text, which
included written and spoken language, as well as images (Skolverket, 2000). The broadened concept
of text has, however, been removed from the 2011 national curricula (Skolverket, 2011). In the
current Swedish language curriculum at upper-secondary school level, modes such as images and
sound are hardly mentioned (ibid.). When it comes to student writing, only the word ‘writing’ is
used and the relation to other kinds of expression are omitted. The abolishment of the broadened
concept of texts coincides with a widespread introduction of individual laptops in many schools in
Sweden. In the national curricula the core content of subjects as well as grading criteria are stated
and as such it can be regarded as a set of rules which influences educational settings. While students
are equipped with technology which facilitates multimodal texts, the curricula simultaneously
appears to narrow the meaning of text to primarily mean written or spoken language. This means
that working with multimodal texts could, to a large extent, be seen as an activity which is not
encouraged by the curricula. This, in turn, creates a tension when it comes to didactical
considerations among teachers on whether to include or exclude tasks where students create texts,
which incorporate a multitude of modes. As pointed out by Oldham (2005), teacher actions are
“linked in complex ways to how they define literacy and how they interpret the requirements of curriculum and of
assessment” (ibid., p. 180). The hierarchy in curricula and assessment, where representations of written
and spoken language are prioritised, limits teachers’ ability to recognize and reward students’
communicative skills in other modes (ibid.).

There are thus tensions between the systemic components of community and rules and the object
created, as well as the technological tools used at the local level. How these tensions and
contradictions are discernible in assessment, which belongs to the middle-level will be taken into
consideration in the next section.

Assessment of co-existing modes

The task of creating a multimodal text and the assessment of it is relatively new in a school setting.
In the assessment-talks between students and the teacher, what was mainly addressed and negotiated
was what the students say in the multimodal texts, whereas other modes of expression were only
briefly addressed (Godhe & Lindström, submitted). The students were given assessment criteria for
the multimodal text, but the meaning of these, in relation to the task, were not negotiated to any
great extent and the multimodal texts were largely assessed as if they were written or spoken texts
(Godhe, 2013). Whereas the assessment criteria stated in the curricula belong to the systemic level
of the activity system, assessment practices belong to the middle-level (Engeström 1998). The criteria
given to the students can be seen as material objects, which attempts to connect the systemic and
the local level. What the criteria actually mean, however, will have to be negotiated at the local level
and in relation to the particular activities that students and teacher engage in, if they are to be
understood by students as well as teachers.

In a study on teaching and assessment practices in English as a mother tongue subject, Oldham
(2005) draws the conclusion that “taught literacy practices are more complex than the existing assessment
arrangements allow” (ibid., p. 183). The study concerns how three different teachers relate to media
and representations in different modes in their teaching and in assessment. Oldham (ibid.) writes
that representations in other modes than written or spoken language cannot be assessed, since
current assessment frames recognize only speaking, listening, reading, and writing as valid modes
in English. The need to develop ways of assessing which incorporate several modes has been
discussed in previous studies. Hung, Chiu and Yeh (2012), for example, state that there is an urgent
need to “develop alternative ways of assessment in support of students’ new literacy practices in the digital age”,
because of the re-conceptualization of literacy (ibid., p. 10). Cope et al. (2011) write that profound
changes, which mean that it is not enough to represent something using words alone, is not reflected
in the literacy assessment done in education. Therefore “curricula and assessment in their traditional formats
and media need updating in order to make optimal use of the affordances of these digital spaces” (ibid., p. 84). The
suggestions as to what multimodal assessment should entail are, however, diverse. While Murray,
Sheets and Williams (2010) explore the possibilities of using a traditional writing rubric when
assessing multimodal assignments, Sorapure (2006) states that an overreliance on print conventions
may mean that, “the chance to see new values emerging in the new medium” is lost (ibid., p. 1). Although these
studies have been done in other contexts and at other levels of the educational system, the findings
are similar to the findings in this article as they point to the significance of developing assessment
practices where the assessment of several kinds of expression are accounted for and evaluated.

Rather than negotiating what the assessment of multimodal texts entails, the multimodal texts tend
to be assessed as written or spoken texts. Other kinds of expression are largely ignored and it is, in
extension, overlooked how they may contribute to the meaning of the multimodal text. Similar
results were found by Oldham (2005), who states that “the way we define literacy influences the measure of
it and vice versa”, which in turn means that multimodal knowledge among students is currently and
to a large extent unmeasured (ibid., p. 171). This creates an ambiguity where, on the one hand, the
students are invited to use modes of expression, which usually are associated to activities outside
of school, but on the other hand, these other modes are not assessed or valued in the same way as
the established modes of spoken and written words. The other modes are thereby established as
not being valuable when creating texts in language education, which, in turn, leads to a reinforcement
of written and spoken language as valued modes of expression, rather than an incorporation and
recognition of a multitude of modes.

Discussion

Findings from the empirical study of classroom interaction were, in the previous section, synthesised
and related to systemic components in the activity systems of creating and assessing texts in language
classrooms. The empirical study was designed as an intervention. Here an activity relating to ‘new’
literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) was studied as students and teachers in classrooms created and assessed multimodal texts. Bringing in tools and activities not usually employed in conventional literacies, such as digital technologies and activities where they are utilised, can lead to tensions and contradictions between emerging and established practices, but may also lead to change and innovation (Engeström, 2009). Contradictions occur both within and between components in an activity system, as well as between emergent and established practices, but also between neighbouring activity systems (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The contradictions found in activities at the local level were related to components at the systemic level. This was done in order to understand and perhaps explain the contradictions, their origins, and their influence on language education. In this section, the implications of the discerned tensions and contradictions will be discussed further.

The notion of literacy and what a text created in a classroom should or could entail were discerned as issues, which caused internal as well as external contradictions, at both the local and the systemic level. The usage of tools, which facilitate the creation of multimodal texts, challenges which features of expression should be considered valuable and primary when making meaning. In return this also challenges the concept of literacy. Education in general and language education in particular, has historically been associated with the ability to use written and spoken language to acquire, as well as display knowledge (e.g. Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996). Educational systems are, to a large extent, built upon discursive practices where the use of, and ability to use, written and spoken language is central (Säljö, 2010). Incorporating other ways of making meaning in these organisations involves an alteration of one of their core functions.

Creating and assessing multimodal texts are activities at the boundary (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) between conventional and ‘new’ literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). They are also at the boundary between activities of creating texts in and outside of an educational setting (Engeström, 2009). The displayed boundaries contain several contradictions. Boundaries may connect the activity systems involved so that practices potentially become more closely related to each other. However, boundaries may also represent the division between different activity systems. Boundaries and contradictions involve potentials for change, but if contradictions lead to conflicts they may also constrain individual action, which in turn restricts the potential for change (Sunnino, 2008). The teachers and students may take transitional actions so that activities merge and hybridize (ibid.), but they may also sense that they are in a dilemma, or a double bind, where the available possibilities are equally unacceptable (Engeström, 1993). Engeström (1987) argues for double binds to be solved by co-operative actions, which can “push a historically new form of activity into emergence” (ibid., p. 165). The dilemma or double bind connected to the creation of texts in language classrooms cannot easily be solved by individual actions by teachers or students, but must rather be considered and negotiated at a systemic level as well as at the local level. Whether the potentials for change inherent in contradictions and boundaries are fulfilled or not, depend on individual action at the local level and the activities engaged in, but also to what extent systemic components restrain or enable transformations. The contradictions and dilemmas discerned in this study may be more generally applicable when digital technologies are used to engage in unfamiliar activities in educational settings.

Even though the accessibility of technologies in classrooms in Sweden is generally good (European Commission, 2013), schools often seem to struggle with how to implement the technology in everyday practices in classrooms (e.g. Karlsøhn, 2009; Cuban, 2001). Lankshear & Knobel (2008) point out that educational ends are directed by curriculum while technologies often are regarded “as ‘mere’ tools, the task of integrating new technologies into learning is often realized by adapting them to, or adding
them onto, familiar routines” (ibid., p. 56). If instead digital technologies, and subsequently new ways to communicate, are seen as challenging the way we look at knowledge and how we organize education (Säljö, 2000), transformations are needed at both the local and the systemic level. Presently, however, transformations are taking place at the local level, at least in Sweden, as teachers and students at an increasing number of schools use tools and engage in tasks, which the available technology facilitates. What is done at the local level is, however, not supported by similar transformations at the systemic level. Instead, changes at the systemic level can be seen as discouraging or opposing the transformation taking place at the local level. This, in turn, leads to tensions and contradictions at the middle-level (Engeström, 1998) in relation to issues such as what is to be assessed and graded in a multimodal text.

The purpose of the intervention in this study was to explore the potential of engaging in an activity, which was facilitated by the use of digital technologies. However, the empirical studies at the local level discerned that the activity to some extent became encapsulated in ‘the game of school’ (Resnick, 1987, p. 15). If digital technologies are considered ‘mere’ tools, which in turn are added onto familiar actions and activities in classrooms, it has little or nothing to do with how digital technologies are utilised outside school (Engeström, 1991; Resnick 1987). Encapsulating activities in this way means that the potentials inherent at the boundary and in the contradictions are only partly fulfilled.

By exploring tensions and contradictions in activity systems related to creating and assessing multimodal texts, this article has attempted to display the complexity of transformations and the need to relate to all three levels of activity systems, in order to understand classroom practices. Relating tensions and contradictions to the history of the systemic components in the educational setting make it possible to understand the opportunities, as well as the constraints, connected to the introduction of activities relating to ‘new’ literacies in educational settings.

References


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1 It was only possible to re-visit this one class as two of the other classes that were part of the first study had finished upper-secondary school and in the third class the teacher was on maternity leave and their new teacher did not want to partake in the study. As only one class could be revisited a second class was also recorded at the same school in order to increase the empirical material.