Expressing Professional Identity through Blogging

A Case Study of Blogging in the Study of the Subject of Norwegian in Pre-School Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article shows how blogging was used in a course in Norwegian in pre-school teacher education, and investigates how professional identity was expressed in the blogs. We investigate the students’ use of the affordances of the blog medium, and connect their expressions to the five competencies of preschool teachers expressed in the Norwegian framework plan for this education (subject, didactic, social, developmental and ethical competence). Connections between professional identity, subject content and uses of ICT are thus drawn up.

Keywords

pre-school teacher education, blogging, professional identity

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing research interest in the uses of ICT in Norwegian teacher education (cf. Instefjord 2014; Lund, Furberg, Bakken & Engeli, 2014; Johannesen, Øgrim, & Giæver, 2014), and also a growing body of research related to digital competencies of children in kindergartens (cf. Carlsen, 2013; Sandvik, Smordal & Østerud, 2012; Leinonen & Sintonen 2014). However, there are still few studies on the uses of ICT in Norwegian pre-school teacher education. The increasing importance of ICT in all parts of the education system renders it necessary to not only investigate the potential and uses of specific digital resources and practices in this specific type of teacher education, but also to investigate uses related to specific subjects. In this article we will do so by addressing blogging in the subject of Norwegian pre-school teacher education (PTE). We will report on how blogging was used didactically as part of the literacy practices in an in-depth course in the subject study of Norwegian in pre-school teacher education, and we will show and discuss how the students’ blogging entails expressions of professional identity as pre-school teachers.
Among the aims of the PTE programme is to provide support for the students’
development towards a professional identity. A profession is characterized by
having an explicit focus on the specific institutions and user groups at which the
professional competence is directed. In professional education programmes,
students are expected to develop both subject-specific competencies, task-ori-
ented competencies and attitude-oriented competencies (cf. Blom, 2007). This
means that personal engagement is of importance for professional identity,
alongside subject-specific knowledge. Furthermore, Heggen (2010) argues that
knowledge, skills and professional commitment can be developed through the
education programme. It thus becomes a question of importance for PTE edu-
cators to deploy methods and forms of work that can combine students’ subject
knowledge, personal development and task competencies in ways that can lead
to developments towards pre-school teacher identities. In this study, we con-
sider blogging in the context of professional identity.

In the Norwegian framework plan for pre-school teacher education, the devel-
opment of five professional competencies is stated as being central to the PTE
programme: subject competence, didactic competence, social competence
(stressing care and mastery), adaptive and developmental competence, and
professional ethics competence (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet,
2003). These core competencies are to be regarded as important parts of the
content in PTE students’ emerging professional identities.

The five core competencies are related to all parts of the PTE education,
including the study of various subjects. In order to investigate expressions of
professional identities as pre-school teachers in blogs, this study will relate the
professional competencies to the study of the subject of Norwegian and to
didactic blogging. By doing this, interesting connections between professional
identity, subject content, and uses of ICT can be drawn up.

PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Programmes of professional studies characteristically focus explicitly on
direct experiences from the field of practice, and also characteristically lead to
a formal qualification for a specific profession. These programmes are hence
required to produce graduates who not only display mastery of theoretical
ideas, but also have competence in applying theory to future complex work-
place settings, and have professional dispositions that foster ethical and reflect-
ive professional practices (Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2011, p. 1). Due to the
strong connection between the educational programme and a specific profes-
sion, a professional identity is conspicuous in programme descriptions, curric-
ulum regulations and course plans, and is thus a conscious part of both teach-
ers’ and students’ understanding of the study programme and what the study

1. The empirical data for this study is gathered within forskolelærerutdanning, which was
regulated by this plan. This programme was from autumn 2013 reformed and replaced by
barnehagelærerutdanning.
programme is supposed to qualify the students for. However, defining what professional identity actually means and involves is debated and constantly changing (Trede, Macklin & Bridges, 2011).

The literature on identity is substantial, and covered in different scientific disciplines, e.g. psychology, sociology, social anthropology and philosophy. In sociology and psychology, identity is often defined as a person’s conception and expression of one’s own (inner) self-identity, and others’ individuality or group affiliations (like national, ethical or cultural identity) (Delamater & Ward 2013). Even though the concept of identity is complex and different meanings are evident in different scientific disciplines, the term identity always includes a basic duality: the individual or personal identity on one hand, and on the other hand what are referred to as social identities (Turner & Oakes, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Both personal and social identities are in different ways formed in relation to other people, to specific situations and events, and therefore include both individuality and community. Hence, the concepts of identification and negotiability are core concepts in understanding what ‘identity’ implies. While identity is a label, identification refers to a classifying act itself. Identity is thus best construed as being both relational and contextual, while the act of identification is best viewed as inherently processual (Rummen, 1993). Negotiability refers to the process in which the individual learns social roles through personal experience, and negotiates with others regarding the meaning of different identities (Goffman, 1959; McCall & Simmons, 1966). A particular professional study programme formally qualifies a student for a particular professional role. Through this, the kinds of competencies that are necessary for being in a specific profession could be regarded as being decided through a negotiated understanding at a societal level. But even though completing the study programme formally qualifies someone for acquiring a professional identity, another important part of professional identity could be explained by how professional identity is understood at the individual level. What makes a student come to identify with a specific professional identity on an inner, personal level?

In Wenger’s major works on ‘community of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the concepts of participation and reification are key to understanding the negotiation processes that on an individual level create a sense of belonging within a community of practice. Even though this does not specifically relate to ‘professions’, but to learning in a social domain, it still fits quite well in our context. Participation implies an active process which is ‘both personal and social’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 56). Reification is the use of artefacts such as lesson plans, guidelines or a curriculum to impose or affect others’ behaviour, but also broadly refers to ‘a wide range of processes that include making, designing, representing, naming, encoding, and describing, as well as perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding, and recasting’ (Wenger 1998, p. 59). In a context like ours, examples of reification could be the use of artefacts associated with children’s culture, like well-known games, children’s programmes on TV, book covers from literature for children, playing activities, etc.
The literature on *professional identity* is also quite substantial (see for instance Reid, Dahlgren & Petocz, 2008; Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2011). *Professional* could, like the term identity, be understood from both a personal and a social angle. Professionalism involves the willingness and ability to identify with a certain profession and take on tasks and deploy attitudes related to this profession. On a *personal* level, then, a *professional identity* is here understood as an identity defined by how a person, through his or her personal and individual personal aptitudes and knowledge, is socialized into a specific profession, through education and experiences from the field of practice. Eventually, the person will define herself as belonging to a community of practice (cf. Lave, 1991): ‘I am a preschool teacher.’ On a *social*, or communal, level, *professionalism* is understood as fulfilling formal requirements and regulations defined and accepted by the community as belonging to this specific community of practice.

A programme for the study of a profession expresses a specific understanding of what formally qualifies the student for the profession (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003). At the same time, personal attributes are also emphasized during educational training in a number of ways, for instance through supervision, academically and practically, which involves the question: ‘How could *I* become the best pre-school teacher that *I* can become?’ The objectives of the study programme are therefore both to educate qualified professionals, in the sense that they meet the demands and expectations expressed in regulations, laws and plans, alongside expectations for the professional role that are found in the specific culture in which the profession exists; and, at the same time, to support the personal development of the individual who is on her way into this profession.

In her research on how the use of new media literacies, such as blogging, can support learning, Luehmann has studied how teachers blog for their own professional identity development, and how classrooms blog to transform norms of participation (Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Borasi, 2011; Luehmann et al., 2013). In her 2008 article, Luehmann follows Gee’s (2001) definition of identity, using the term to mean being recognized by the self and others as a certain kind of professional. Discourse is central to Gee, defined as ‘ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity (Gee, 2005, p. 46). Luehmann further points out that even though participation within professional discourses is necessary in order for professional identities to develop, it is in the interpretation or recognition of that participation, by the self or others, that identities are actually formed (Luehmann, 2008, p. 293). In our study, we pay particular attention to how both social and personal aspects of emerging professional identities could be traced in students’ blog posts. We trace expressions of professional identity by focusing on how didactic blogging creates room for participating in a community of practice, inviting identification and negotiation, specifically stressing signs of professional identity at a formal level by
addressing how, for instance, the use of recognizable artefacts linked to the pre-school profession supports formal competencies as these are described in the Norwegian framework plan for pre-school teacher education (reification).

**DIDACTIC BLOGGING**

A blog, or a weblog, is a regularly updated website consisting of dated posts which are presented in reverse chronological order (Walker, 2008). Following Lüders, Protz & Rasmussen (2010), we understand a blog as a medium, enabled by a certain *technological platform* – the Internet. This medium is based on certain software and templates, and it is often used as a personalized medium, allowing for the individuality of its users to become visible (Grütters, 2011, p. 25). This apparent personal dimension renders the blog medium apt for the construction and negotiation of a professional identity. We have labelled the blogs ‘didactic blogs’, as the main common function and content of the blogs is reflections on didactic work in kindergartens, and also in order to emphasize the blogs as part of the didactic practice in the Norwegian course in pre-school teacher education.

The interest in higher education for uses of Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs, is increasing (Kerawalla et al., 2009). From an educational perspective, developments in media technology have provided new possibilities for work forms, collaborations and modes of expression. Earlier research has suggested a range of different potential benefits of blogging, amongst them supporting and developing collaborative activities (Oravec, 2002; Tretiakov, Kashek & El-Qawasmeh, 2007), encouraging reflective thinking (Herring et al., 2004; MacColl et al., 2005; Oravec, 2002), facilitating effective communication (Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg, 2005), promoting interactivity and active learning (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004), and creating or supporting a classroom community (Luehmann & Borasi, 2011; Luehmann et al., 2013). It has also been suggested that blogging allows for self-direction, since it provides personal space for learning that does not impose a communal learning agenda and learning style, at the same time as it allows for the benefit from community feedback, validation and further development of ideas (Efimova & Fiedler, 2004, p. 493).

Even though proposed benefits, like the allowance for self-direction and opportunities for reflection and metacognition (Efimova & Fiedler, 2004), and perspective-making and interaction with an audience (Moor & Efimova, 2004), have been put forward, the challenges of educational blogging have also been reported on. These include minimal communication between students through their blogs; poor quality reflection on the course materials as evidenced in blog content (Krause, 2004); lack of student awareness about how to use blogs alongside other e-learning tools; students’ lack of understanding about what to write in them and why (Divitini et al., 2005); and lack of understanding of purpose of the blogging on the part of the students (Farmer, 2006; Efimova, 2003). Educators therefore have to be aware of how...
the possibilities of blogging and blogs can be matched to appropriate learning activities that enable students to achieve the learning outcomes of the specific course in question (Divitini et al., 2005)

From a sociocultural perspective, the blogging is seen as part of the overall literacy practices of the PT education programme. This means that reading and writing, whether digital or analogue, are not regarded only as skills or abilities, but also as something people make use of in different ways in different social situations. Barton and Hamilton (1988) distinguish between the overall literacy practice, i.e. the values, attitudes, social relations, norms and ideologies in a community, and the literacy events, i.e. the events where literacy, usually involving written texts, plays a role. The text is an important part of a literacy event. Texts are seen as multimodal artefacts in which a variety of semiotic resources, e.g. writing, photography, animation, video, music, are nestled together (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt (ed.), 2009; van Leeuwen 2005). Furthermore, we follow Gunther Kress in seeing knowledge and texts as linked (Kress, 2010, p. 23). Knowledge is thereby linked to representation: ‘Knowledge is made and given shape in representation,’ Kress claims (Kress, 2010, p. 27). Thus, the students’ didactic blogs are seen as a series of literacy events (that are part of an overall literacy practice) in which knowledge is construed through their representations. This knowledge embraces a variety of competencies (subject competence, didactic competence, social competence, adaptive and developmental competence and professional ethics competence) which together can be identified as important parts of the students’ professional identities as pre-school teachers.

Different media technologies offer different possibilities, or affordances, for representation and communication. The medial affordances have to do with what you can easily do with the medium, given its materiality, and cultural and social history (cf. Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 14f). The two most important affordances of the blog medium are multimodality and user-to-user interaction. Blog templates make a variety of semiotic resources relatively easily available for use, and for possible combination, in bloggers’ meaning-making activities, e.g. written verbiage, still images and hyperlinks. Interactivity here refers to the possibilities for interaction between users (cf. McMillan, 2006). In blogs, interactivity especially relates to the possibilities for contributions from fellow bloggers in the comment field. By investigating the students’ use of these affordances, one can gain insight into how their identity as pre-school teachers are expressed, as well as how it is negotiated with other students.

DATA AND METHODS

Research Design

This is a qualitative study of subject-specific use of ICT by students who are on their way in developing a professional identity as pre-school teachers. The empirical data consists of 8 blogs composed by PTE students who had chosen
a 30 ECTS in-depth course in Norwegian in their sixth and final semester of their study programme. Thus, the study is a case study (cf. Yin, 2014) based on text analysis.

Our research design involves repeated close reading of the blogs, both individually and together. In this close reading, we have been looking for semiotic expressions of professional identities as pre-school teachers. We have then connected these expressions to the main affordances of the blog medium and to the five competencies in the national framework plan for pre-school teacher education: subject competence, didactic competence, social competence, adaptive and developmental competence, and professional ethics competence.

The text analytical approach can be described as hermeneutical and semiotic (cf. Bryman, 2008). The hermeneutical perspective means that the analysis is based on our interpretations of expressions of professional identity in the blog texts. In all hermeneutical approaches, the interpretations are inevitably linked to the interpreters, i.e. the researchers. Consequently, other researchers may arrive at other interpretations of the same data (cf. Østbye et al., 2007). In order to make the study reliable, it is therefore important to make the basis for our interpretations transparent. We have tried to achieve this by anchoring the analysis in specific quotes from the blogs.

The analysis will be presented in two sections. In section 1, we will connect the expressions of professional identity in the didactic blogs to the use of the main affordances of the blog medium, i.e. multimodality and interactivity. In this section, we will present quantitative overviews of their use of the affordances and quotes from the blogs. In section 2, we will present examples of how professional identity is expressed in the blogs, but here we will connect the expressions to the five core competencies of pre-school teachers, as these are expressed in the national framework plan. The analysis of each of these will depart from specific quotes, in order to make the empirical ground visible.

**Data Collection and Presentation**

The blogs were written during one semester. One of the authors of this article was one of the teachers in the course, although with a minor role in it. In one of the last weeks of the semester, this researcher presented orally to the class information about the study, and handed out letters of information. The students were given informed consent forms, and asked to fill these out and hand them in to one of their other teachers if they would volunteer to participate. Ten students signed and submitted the consent form. The students also had to provide access to their password-protected blogs, and eight of the ten students did this. Thus, the empirical data for this study is eight blogs belonging to students who had given informed consent and given us access to their blogs, along with reading list, semester schedule, etc. for the course. The eight blogs were downloaded to one of the researchers’ computers, and all traces of personal information were removed from the documents.
We have given all the eight bloggers fictitious names, and all the names are female because the study programme is heavily dominated by female students, and we regard the inclusion of any male names a risk of anonymity being compromised. This means that there might be some male students amongst these eight, or there might not. Consequently, matters of gender will not be addressed.

The researcher who gave a few lessons in the course was also responsible for one of the blog assignments. For practical and ethical reasons, her comments are not included in the analysis of the data.

The blogs were written in Norwegian, but will be quoted in English only. Even though the blogs are password-protected, we regard this ethically necessary to further diminish the possibilities for the public to search for and find the blogs and the identity of the bloggers. The project has been discussed with and approved by the Norwegian Data Protection Official for Research.

**Methodological limitations**

As this is a small case study based on text analysis of the students’ blog texts, there are several limitations on how the results can be read. Importantly, the results cannot be generalized to analyse the uses of blogging in educational practices in general. Furthermore, the text-analytical approach means that we do not have access to the students’ reflections other than those written in the blogs. Hence, we cannot make claims about how the students regard their blogging activities, about what they think of the blogs as sites for construing professional identity, or about their views on professional identity as pre-school teachers in general. Neither do we have access to how the main teacher assessed the blogging, for instance to what degree the blogging matched the expectations of learning assessments and developments towards professional identities during the course period. Even though the perspectives of the teacher and students could have broadened the scope of the analysis, matters of identity are also manifested in the ways we write and design texts, and, consequently, can also be identified and discussed through text analysis.

**ANALYSIS: EXPRESSIONS OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN PTE STUDENTS’ DIDACTIC BLOGS**

**Case description**

The blogging was part of an in-depth course in the study of the subject of Norwegian. The course had lectures three days a week, and blogging was introduced by the main teacher in the second day of the first week. The blog software chosen by the teacher – WordPress – was then introduced, and all the students present had created a blog by the end of this session. They agreed to keep their blogs password-protected, meaning that they had to ask for and be permitted access in order to read and comment on each other’s blogs.
The content in the study of the subject of Norwegian mainly derives from two academic disciplines: linguistics (e.g. language development, literacy, second language learning) and literature studies (e.g. picture books, textbooks, lyrics), which in PTE combines with didactic perspectives. In Rammeplan for barnehagens innhold og oppgaver (The Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011), regulating kindergartens in Norway, seven so-called learning areas are described. The learning area called ‘language, text and communication’ is the most significant for Norwegian in PTE.

The term schedule, in addition to content and recommended readings for each session, also included a ‘non-mandatory blog assignment’ for every ordinary week on campus. These assignments were related to the topics of the week, for instance to reflect on the importance of subject-oriented prose in kindergartens (week 4), and to reflect on what activities and work forms may be used for enhancing the language development of minority-speaking children in a systematic way in the everyday life of kindergarten (week 6). There were twelve assignments distributed over eleven weeks. All the students started blogging, although some students, including our informant Bente (cf. Table 1), stopped after a few weeks.

Section 1: Professional identity and the blog medium

Multimodality and expressions of professional identity

The blogs provide a site for the students to multimodally give shape to and represent their knowledge, including representations of features of professional identity, by selecting and combining the available semiotic resources. Table 1 presents a quantitative overview of what semiotic modes the eight students used in their blogs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Images</th>
<th>Hyperlinkes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>11 (13*)</td>
<td>5800 (6900)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bente</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>525</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4500</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagny</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4700</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5300</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grete</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilde</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4600</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table shows that they have not used a wide range of resources, but mainly written language, which in some posts is accompanied by some still images and/or hyperlinks. The images they have used are illustrated expositions in which a phenomenon, e.g. a book cover, an author, or a character from children’s popular culture, is displayed. There is somewhat more use of hyperlinks than images. These are explicitly asked for in several assignments, for example in week eight: ‘Write a short presentation of the individually chosen picture-book. You are encouraged to include links related to the book.’ It might be possible to interpret the images and hyperlinks as multimodal signs of professional identity, but written language is nevertheless undoubtedly the most significant resource in the representations in the blog texts, including representations which can be interpreted as signs of professional identities. Thus, the students’ expressions of professional identity in the didactic blogs are mainly realized through verbal language.

Interaction and expressions of professional identity

The blog medium makes it possible and easy to textually engage in dialogue by participating in the comment field, and Table 2 presents a quantitative overview of the interaction in the comment fields.

**TABLE 2. OVERVIEW OF INTERACTION IN THE COMMENT FIELDS IN THE DIDACTIC BLOGS.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Students’ comments</th>
<th>Teachers’ comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>11 (13*)</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bente</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dagny</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grete</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilde</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that the possibility for dialogic interaction is not used much by the students, only four times in total. The main teacher, on the other hand, has responded to most of the blog posts which the students have composed. The example below is from the main teacher’s response to Eva’s post about Astrid Lindgren’s books, and shows how the teacher verbally relates to the student’s reflections:

Hello, Eva, and thank you for a beautiful reflection.

In particular, I like what you say about how different child readers and adult readers can be. Maybe this is something we can discuss during the Astrid
Lindgren week? Because a lot of Astrid Lindgren’s books may be characterized as books for all ages (allalderbøker) – the books have something to say to both the child and the adult. In case I should forget about this, please initiate a discussion about this theme in class.

Kind regards,

Tina ☺

In this response, as well as in most of the other comments from the teacher, two dimensions of the students’ development as pre-school teachers are in focus. The first is the expression of a positive, personal and encouraging attitude. In the example above, this is evident in the greeting with the student’s personal name, giving thanks, offering positive appraisal (‘a beautiful reflection’), and in the closing phrase (the use of personal name and smiley). The second main function is to expand on the subject content, in the example achieved by introducing and explaining a relevant technical term (allalderbøker). In this way, the comment field functions as a site where the teacher supports the development of the individual student’s subject knowledge on a personal level, thereby also enriching the development of professional identities.

The possibilities for hyperlinking and illustrating by using different modes apart from verbal language, give room for signs of professional identity at different levels. Some of the students have, for instance, included in their blog posts pictures from children’s books, pictures of well-known authors of children’s literature, excerpts from descriptions of TV programmes directed at children, as well as pictures of popular characters from children’s programmes on TV. In using artefacts associated with knowledge of the professional field like this, the student shows that she identifies with competencies regarded as important for a pre-school teacher, and negotiates this with her fellow students. In some of the blog posts, it is mentioned specifically that the author is going to present her views for the rest of her fellow students in the classroom as well, and that she is excited to get feedback on her views and interpretations. Both participation and reification are thus central elements in these situated learning processes. The multimodal affordances and the expanded register of arenas for interaction seem potentially rewarding.

Section 2: Professional identity and the five competencies of the pre-school teacher

Subject competence

Subject competence has to do with knowledge of children, childhood and pedagogic work with young children, and knowledge of theories and work forms within and across subjects (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 13). In the representations of subject competence in the blogs, the use of subject-specific terms appears as an important resource. The students’ use of a subject-specialized lexicon is however not distanced or impersonal, but merged with personal and affective linguistic resources. This is evident in the
example below, from Eva’s post on a picture book illustrated by the Norwegian artist Per Dybvig:

( … ) The iconotext is characterized by multimodal redundancy, that is, image and text express a lot of the same information ( … ) Personally I like Per Dybvig’s illustrations. They are both charming and funny ☺

Eva’s reflections include a highly specialized lexicon, with terms like ‘iconotext’ and ‘multimodal redundancy’. These terms are important in the subject of Norwegian for developing a precise meta-language about picture books, which is the most important medium of literature for kindergarten children. This specialized lexicon combines with the use of affective and personal verbal resources, i.e. the evaluative adjectives ‘charming’ and ‘funny’, and also with non-verbal resources, i.e. the smiley and the multimodal display of the blog. These selections and combinations of verbal resources are signs of a professional identity in which subject-specific theoretical knowledge and personal commitment is not separated, but integrated.

Didactic competence

Didactic competence has to do with the ability to assess, plan and carry out adaptive preventive education for children with and without special needs, and to implement preventive actions (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 13). Didactical reflections are clearly present in all blogs, and they appear highly intertwined with subject-specific knowledge and work. An example of this is Anna’s reflections on how she would work with a particular subject-oriented prose book about different occupations:

( … ) By reading the book, children will get insight into many new words that are important for the children’s life-long semantic development. Literary works offer a richer language than everyday language, and this should be exploited in the work with the book. For instance, you could talk about what an 'apprentice' and a 'scaffold' is if the children group is reading about carpenters, or 'medicine' and 'prescription' if you read about doctors. ( … ) By reading the book and talking about it, you will in this way stimulate the language of the children. If the book inspires to role-playing, the children participating in the play will be further stimulated. ( … )

Her reflections on working with the book are related to subject-specific knowledge, especially evident in the phrase ‘life-long semantic development’, combined with suggestions for practical approaches to the book. In this way, Anna’s theoretical knowledge is combined with practice on how to arrange situations in which the kindergarten children can engage with the subject content. Her blog texts thus indicate that for the pre-school teacher, subject-specific theoretical knowledge and didactic competence are inseparably intertwined.
Social competence

Social competence involves understanding the importance of an environment of care and learning characterized by interactions, warmth, creativity, joy, humour and the experience of mastery of language for everybody, and the ability to conduct close collaborations between kindergarten, home and other parties, and knowledge of and skills in leadership, collaboration and pedagogical guidance (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 13–14). In the blog texts, the dimensions of care and mastery are especially emphasized. This is evident in an example from Frida’s blog post about second language learning in kindergarten:

( … ) Children learn a lot in playing, and also together with and from other children. It can therefore be important to integrate the minority children in kindergartens. Minority children often prefer rule-governed play while they are still weak in the target language. ( … ). Another good thing about rule-governed play is that often there is one person who is saying a fixed sentence which governs the action of almost all the other children. It could be nice to give this sentence to a child from a minority, because then the child may feel mastery of the language (even though it is not so much mastery). This can then lead to positive feelings about the language, which then again makes the child even more interested in learning it. As the child/children develop within the target language, they can join in in more advanced kinds of play. This will also show the other children that the minority child is competent enough to play with them. ( … )

In her reflections, Frida connects subject content related to second language learning in kindergartens with the social interaction between minority children and adults (adults supporting the children’s vocabulary acquisition), as well as between minority children and majority children (the latter recognizing the former as competent playmates). This means that to her as a pre-school teacher, children’s experiences of care and mastery of language are not limited to the quality of the interpersonal relationship, but are integrated with subject knowledge on second language development, as well as with didactic competence.

Adaptive and developmental competence

Adaptive and developmental competence relates to the ability to assess the development of the organization, and the societal changes relevant for kindergartens, to initiate and manage changes, and to influence the development of kindergartens (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 14). The blog posts that concern this dimension are mainly related to an assignment about ICT in kindergarten, in which the student bloggers, after presenting and recommending web sites for children, are asked “to reflect on your opinions about what role ICT should have in kindergarten”. This means that they are invited to state their own positions on the role of digital media in kindergartens. An example from Frida’s reflection can illustrate this:
I think all children should be somewhat acquainted with ICT. All children should have some experience with using a computer before they start school. I believe this because it is very common to use a computer to do a lot of things in our everyday lives. Consequently, I think it is important to focus on children who don’t have so much experience with ICT to gain such experiences in kindergarten. It is also important not to use it too much. That is why it is important to be conscious of when you allow for the use of a computer, and important to use a computer yourself (as a pre-school teacher) together with the children. ( … )

In her reflections, Frida relates the increasing social importance of ICT and digital media to the work in kindergartens. By the extensive use of the phrase ‘I think/I believe’ (‘Jeg synes’), her reflections become grounded in personal, subjective beliefs and attitudes. These reflections cannot solely be attributed to developmental competence, but are closely connected to social competence and care, through connecting the work with ICT, to provide children who lack experience with ICT such experiences.

Professional ethics competence

The fifth core pre-school teacher competence concerns the ability to reflect on the basic values of kindergartens and schools, on one’s own values, attitudes and manners, and on ethical challenges in the profession (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2003, p. 14). The students’ blog writings involve a lot of value-based reflections, as already shown, especially in the sections about social competence and adaptative developmental competence. An example from Anna’s blog post about resources for mapping children’s language development, including a resource called ‘Minokart’, can throw additional light on this:

( … ) Personally I liked MINOKART the least. This was mainly because I felt its methods were very test-like. I think the observation was too staged, and that it did not take place in a natural situation for the child. It is also demanding to learn the method. They lack suggestions for what measures to take in the work with language, even though they point out that the mapping has no value if it is not followed up with measures. On the other hand, it is positive that they emphasize collaboration with parents. The reason why I think so is that parents often have another picture of the child, which can enrich the kindergarten. The child may act differently in different contexts, and the kindergarten may not get the total picture of the child. The fact that the kindergarten also provides parents with possibilities for participation I think is positive for subsequent collaboration. ( … )

In this post, Anna reflects on tools for language mapping, which is an important matter in the study of Norwegian in PTE. Her reflections are highly concerned with ethics: What is a natural situation for a child, why map if there will be no follow up, what is the importance of kindergarten-home collaboration,
how can we gain knowledge about a child, etc.? In this way, professional ethics competence appears indissolubly intertwined with both subject competence, didactic competence and social competence (care).

It is quite conspicuous how the students draw on different kinds of professional knowledge in addressing the issues drawn up in the blog assignments. Readiness for action to support formal requirements in plans and regulations is repeatedly stressed in describing how they picture their future work in a kindergarten, accompanied by showing how they reflect taking the view of the child, thereby displaying personal engagement and care towards the child. For instance, when discussing negative consequences by imposing maladaptive test resources in kindergarten observation situations, the student shows readiness for participating and negotiating professional issues that are important for future development of kindergarten tasks. What should be mapped, and how should it be followed up? She also associates with the professional identity as pre-school teacher in describing the importance of kindergarten-home collaboration for the benefit of the child.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we will discuss didactic blogging as part of the development of a professional identity as pre-school teacher, focusing on what resources are used for expressing and negotiating professional identity, and how this relates to the expected competencies of a pre-school teacher.

Professional identity and the blog medium

The blog medium makes it relatively easy to integrate verbal expressions with other semiotic resources, such as photographs and hyperlinks. These multimodal affordances were however not much used by the students, and neither did they make much use of each other’s comment fields. Our methods cannot answer why these affordances were so little exploited, but a number of plausible reasons might account for this, for instance, instructions and examples given by the teacher in the introduction; students being uncertain about the subject matter and thereby hesitant to be creative, or to reveal to others their (potential) lack of competence; students being hesitant to comment on texts made by fellow students to avoid the risk of being regarded impolite or bold; or students being technologically unfamiliar with these affordances, or socially unfamiliar with such textual features as part of literacy events in higher education. It nevertheless seems fair to say that both multimodality and interactivity constitute untapped potential for expanding students’ professional identities in terms of expressing themselves digitally (multimodality) and engaging each other in dialogue (the comment field).

Some of the blog assignments explicitly invited personal views and opinions on specific subject matter in the course curriculum, which made room for per-
sonal narratives, reflections and feelings. The blogging hence encouraged a personalized ‘role-playing’, allowing for the students to express themselves in the role of a pre-school teacher. Expressions of identification with the profession in question are made conspicuous in this way. They are both relational, since the students are asked to consider the subject matter in relation to kindergarten children specifically; and contextual, since the subject matter at hand is discussed on the basis of plausible kindergarten settings (cf. Rummens, 1993). The personal and individual expressions of professional identity are consequently given much space.

The blog medium inherits affordances which allow for negotiating professional identity on a social level. The comment field is of special interest in this context, as it opens possibilities for different interactional expressions. Interaction related to professional identity could potentially take many forms, e.g. supporting, challenging, offering alternatives, or in general, negotiating (cf. Wenger, 1998) the role of pre-school teacher and the various ways of being, thinking, acting and speaking in that role. A blog universe like the password-protected group blogs could also increase the sense of community among the students with a common goal of becoming pre-school teachers, through shared understanding of what required knowledge is within a subject for that specific profession, and the vocabulary and culture that goes with it. That way, the comment field represents a highly suitable space for displaying participation (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, the blog literacy events inherit potential for displaying signs of the interconnected relations between the individual’s personal expressions of identification, as well as negotiations within the social group for what are recognized as signs of professional identity, which again together serve as ways of qualifying for membership in a ‘community of practice’, guided (to some extent) by the teacher as well (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). However, as such dialogic signs of professional identity were minimally identifiable in these didactic blogs, these potential benefits cannot be claimed in our study.

Professional identity and the competencies of the pre-school teacher

As the analysis has shown, the students’ blogs are characterized by a combination of subject-oriented content and personal engagement. A student’s blog expression thus can be characterized as a personal-professional voice. This voice is in line with Blom’s (2007) descriptions of professional identity in terms of integrating subject specific competencies, task-oriented competencies and attitude-oriented competencies. The subject content especially manifests through the use of a specific vocabulary. The blog assignments allow for deploying a specialized vocabulary, an opportunity which is absolutely embraced by the student bloggers who use terms like ‘age adequate mother tongue’, ‘target language’, ‘multimodality’, ‘children’s perspective’, ‘semantic development’, ‘first-hand knowledge’, ‘iconotext’, ‘encyclopedic textbook’, etc. These linguistic resources can be connected to the assignments
governing the blog posts, which are linked to specific subject content (e.g. children’s picture books, second language learning), as well as to the course content in general. As these terms are not specifically asked for in the assignments, but adopted on the students’ own initiative, they form important signs of identification and socialization into a field of study. Furthermore, as the subject-specific vocabulary appears integrated with didactic, social and ethical reflections, their expressions constitute not only signs of personal identity, but could also work as signs of a shared social identity, recognizable by the teacher and fellow student bloggers (cf. Tuner & Oakes, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The personal, affective engagement is especially evident through their uses of adjectival and appraising expressions, which are further supported by the multimodal and colourful displays of the blogs. The personal engagement can partly be understood as connected to the blog medium’s status as a personalized medium (cf. Grüters, 2011), and partly to how this series of literacy events was included in the literacy practice of the course. Importantly, the blogs were read and responded to by the main teacher of the course. These students usually communicate in writing with their teachers in order to meet mandatory requirements. The interaction is then limited to the two parties, where the role of the teacher includes that of the reader, the assessor and the gatekeeper (deciding whether it is a pass or a fail). In the didactic blogs, the asymmetrical relationship changed, towards symmetry, as the teachers related to the blogs not only as teachers, but also as authentic and sympathetic readers, as shown in the analysis. Furthermore, the students’ combinations of subject-relevant reflections in a subject-specific vocabulary, and expressions of positive attitudes about the content, worked as advice or tips to their fellow students: ‘This is important – here you have some ideas for how to work with it in kindergartens’. In this way, the role as a student in the blogs expanded into the role of a peer in a community of professionals, or in other words, they wrote not merely as PTE students, but rather as emerging pre-school teachers. In this way, the literacy event series functioned as a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which the students became participants who gave voice to their emerging professional identities, and were recognized as such by their main teacher.

Being a pre-school teacher is highly connected with giving care. As shown in the analysis, this aspect is highly visible in the didactic blogs, and intertwined in the way they reflect upon didactic work with various subject content. Care is shown, on the one hand, towards fellow students, by seeking to discuss the foundation of a common professional identity as a pre-school teacher, through reflections on subject matter related to the subject study of Norwegian, as well as to PTE in general; and on the other hand, by being supportive and caring towards children with whom they in the future will have a personalized professional relationship. Consequently, their reflections show a readiness for acting as pre-school teachers, which other members of the community of practice are invited to share. Importantly, care is not treated independently from subject matter, but quite the contrary: subject matter and care appear as interdependent.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this article has been to show how blogging was used as part of the literacy practices in an in-depth course in Norwegian in pre-school teacher education, and to investigate how signs of professional identity were expressed in the blogs. We have found that expressions of professional identity are realized mainly in the mode of written language, and that the students’ expressions of identity are seldom responded to and negotiated by fellow students in the comment field. At the same time, the comment field was used for personal and subject-oriented interaction with the teacher. Next, we have connected their expressions of professional identity to the five core competencies of a pre-school teacher, considered to make up the core content of the expected professional identity. We have found that the way the students reflect in their blog writings, professional identity involves an insoluble integration of subject knowledge, practical skills, social relationships and care, developmental strategies and ethical considerations. To these students, who are in their last semester of the PTE programme, the inclusion of blog assignments as literacy events in the course thus seems to have provided them with a platform where they can integrate reflections on core parts of their emerging identities as pre-school teachers, or, in other words, they can express themselves in the role of emerging pre-school teachers and be recognized by others as such.

In conclusion, we want to highlight two interdependent matters as especially important. First, that the uses of ICT in this study have been connected to the literacy practice of a specific subject, i.e. Norwegian, and to the professional identity as a pre-school teacher. Second, that the way the students write makes it evident that subject competence cannot be properly understood if it is separated from the other competencies. Thus, the digital practices in teacher education cannot be properly understood, nor improved, if they are not connected to the content of the specific subject studies the students are engaged in, nor if the subject content and the uses of ICT are treated as decontextualized from the overall aims of the education programme.

REFERENCES


