

EVA INSULANDER & STAFFAN SELANDER:
Designs for learning in museum contexts

JUDITH MOLKA-DANIELSEN, MATS DEUTSCHMANN
& LUISA PANICHI: *Designing Transient Learning Spaces
in Second Life - a case study based on the Kamimo experience*

KARIN LEVINSEN: *A Didactic Design Experiment
- Towards a Network Society Learning Paradigm*

FREDRIK LINDSTRAND: *Interview with Staffan Selander*



DESIGNS FOR LEARNING #2/09

Interview with Staffan Selander

By FREDRIK LINDSTRAND

This issue of Designs for Learning features an interview with professor Staffan Selander, who has contributed in important ways to the shaping of the field we talk about as “designs for learning”. In the interview that follows we hope to give some further insights regarding interests, influences and experiences that have formed a background to the development of his theoretical approach to issues concerning education and learning.

Staffan Selander is professor in Didactic Science at the Department of Didactic Science and Early Childhood Education, Stockholm University. He is also honorary professor at The Academy of Turku, Finland. A major part of Selander’s research has focused learning from hermeneutic, socio-cultural and semiotic perspectives, especially on questions concerning interpretation, transformation and representation. In recent years he (and his research team) has developed the approach called “designs for learning”. Staffan Selander has been in charge of various research projects concerning multimodal texts, toys, aesthetic learning processes, digital learning resources and learning in various contexts. He has also for many years been the president of IARTEM (www.iartem.no). Among his recent publications (in English) are *Designs for learning and ludic engagement* (2008), *Designs for learning and the formation and transformation of knowledge in an era of globalization* (2008), *Socio-cultural theories as ideology? The need for a design-theoretic, multimodal approach to learning* (2008), *Coordinating multimodal social semiotics and an institutional perspective in studying assessment actions in mathematics classrooms* (with Lisa Boistrup-Björklund, 2009) and *Nordic identities in transition – as reflected in pedagogic texts and cultural contexts* (ed. with Bente Aamotsbakken, 2009).

FL: Perhaps we could start by talking a bit about where you come from academically. Where it all started?

SS: Yes. The first subject I studied was education. I remember that I had a question very early on that had to do with how we organize, represent and mediate our understanding of the world and how we transmit that understanding to younger generations. And I remember a discussion with a peer student where I pointed at a tree and asked “how do we know that we actually talk about the same kind of tree here?” And that was long before I ever read Saussure or anything. So I went into education, but didn’t find very many answers to that kind of questions. I continued to anthropology, sociology and philosophy of science. Part of my anthropological interest was to go and see

phenomena in other countries. I went to China in 1971 to study education and then to Brazil to study alphabetization, and that was very interesting – to go further into a culture you knew almost nothing about and a language you didn’t quite understand. And try to figure out “how are they doing things here?”. Then I came back to and continued with education. So that was my starting point.

FL: Interesting. Did you pick something specific up from those early travels that led you further in relation to your initial questions and interests?

SS: I think it was the insight of missing more precise theoretical tools, to do those things I had in my back head to do. At the time I had Ulf Lundgren as my supervisor and he worked with frame factor theory, which is oriented towards organizational issues in education. That gave me some kind of framing for my own thinking at the time. Basil Bernstein was visiting our department back then and we had several seminars with him. I became interested in the role of language in different social contexts. There was also tension in this, because frame factor theory was rather structuralistic and rather deterministic. And so were parts of Bernstein’s thinking. But in his thinking was also more space for what we now call agency. So that was a very early question, about structure and agency. That was one main contradiction to detect for a young student. The other one was “how can you both have an idea of a structure, while you do analysis at a certain point of view, and have a historical understanding of changes?” How can you both study change and structure? Education was very dull back then, due to the influence of behaviourism – everything you read about learning was behaviouristic – and most of my student fellows did investigations that came out of method. You have a method of variance analysis or factor analysis and then you try to find a problem that you can solve with that kind of method. And I was at the other end, so I was lucky to come to Stockholm and come to this environment where you could test thinking in different ways.

There were only two possibilities at the end of the 60’s: either the behaviourism – we read everything about Thorndike, Bandura, Bloom, Skinner, you name it – or phenomenography. If you didn’t like behaviourism you could go to phenomenography, which had some kind of phenomenological rooting. But they focused on mental perceptions of things as they were presented in talk and then they thought, or still think – I don’t know – that what people say is a true representation of what or how they think, without discussing the mediating role of language. That is some kind of one to one relation that is impossible for me to understand. So I was not interested in learning at the time. I was more interested in social regulation and social classification, institutional arrangements.

Next step for me was when I left the idea of frame factor theory. That first question came back: how do people in different contexts conceptually

organize and represent their world. Frame factor theory could say nothing about that, so I started to get more interested in the interface. Since I was in a school context at the time, my focus was on the interface between school as an institution and the pupil. The interface, as I saw it, was not about legal regulations, economy, ideology, or whatever you talked about. It was the text. So I went into the study of text and all my colleagues asked “what does that have to do with education?” I think a reason to why I took an interest in that was also partly because I was never only interested in schooling. For me schools and schooling was but one possible area to study this more basic question within. To study text, and especially school text, is to study how we, in a society, signify and classify the world. What is in the centre, in the periphery, what are basic root metaphors and so on.

So I had to leave the institutional arrangement I was in and I went from Stockholm to Härnösand where I started an institute for pedagogic text research, which at the time was a bit odd (however, I became involved in developing a Centre for Pedagogic Text Research at University College of Vestfold in Norway, which now has three professors in the field). Härnösand was “far away”, but I got some financial support and some students. That was one strand - trying to understand how we organize texts as representations of different knowledge domains.

And the next step was then to go into a broader concept of text, not only analysing what was in the text. Because that was also the interesting first question: “what is in the text?” And the more I read about hermeneutics and social semiotics, the more I understood that there is nothing in the text. Instead, I became interested in how texts are interpreted and used in different contexts (which actually also was the question in my dissertation about how “Paulo Freire” was conceived and discussed in Sweden in the 70’s). This interest was triggered further by my very early meeting with Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress, at a conference in London 1990. I have collaborated with them in different ways over the years, first with Theo in a project about toys and now with Gunther in a project about museums.

So that was the idea of trying to understand these phenomena not only in school contexts. How do we arrange a toy world for the children and what do they do with it? How do we arrange the collective meaning of society in museums and what do visitors do when they go to museums?

In a way, I have moved from frame factor theory, down to text, to pictorial illustrations, and to more concrete objects and environments. Very late – some five or six years ago – I came back to the idea of learning. And now, as I go back into the learning environment, I find this very interesting; to try and understand arrangements for learning, institutional framings of learning and what people are doing in that. How do they interpret, work with and design their own understanding? That also led into two types of theoretical perspectives. I mentioned social semiotics, especially the work done by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen and their development of the thinking

from Halliday. They have done something very important in pointing at the richness of communicative patterns or communicative situations – the multimodality of communication. It took me long time to understand because I came from a verbally based theoretical understanding of the world. But once I started to get a grasp, it really was enriching because it also gave a possibility to go into more detailed social micro-situations and see how meaning is socially constructed in corporation or co-operation. But at the same time you go down into details and one problem is that much of the thinking about the environment or the context is taken for granted.

And then I could mirror that with my old interest, which is much closer to what is nowadays called socio-cultural thinking. Based on Vygotskij, which in a way is very funny, because Vygotskij is only a name for a group of thinkers – you have Bakhtin, Volosinov, even philosophers like Gadamer (in hermeneutics) and Cassirer and a lot of other thinkers at the time. Vygotskij had some marxist connection so there was in his understanding a social part. But Vygotskij himself was more interested in the little child, the development of thinking or what happens with thinking when language develops. And then he is the father figure for all kind of socio-cultural thinking.

Socio-cultural theories are very important in the way that they are trying to understand, on a collective level, how we represent the world. How we relate to technological development, how we use tools in different ways and also how these tools encapsulate social and historical memories. But then you are still on a very general level in understanding communication. So then I started to think, since I had two perspectives here – the social semiotic and the socio-cultural – that they don’t seem to talk about the same thing. Socio-cultural theory takes the micro-situation very much for granted and are very much focussing on the situated activity, which often becomes the same as “the situation”. Social semiotics take the context for granted and say we can’t talk about the context, we can only see how context is mirrored in communication, or constructed in communicative events. Then how can you see what is reconstructed if you don’t have any idea about the context? As I said, when I went to China I had very few clues of how to understand communication. How could I understand communication if I didn’t both know something about language and historical context? For example how they reacted to me as a white foreigner. Why did the old man turn around and spit on the ground when he saw me? How can I interpret that situation without understanding its historical context and the role of “white, long-nosed intruders”?

So out of that, in the group I work with at Stockholm University, we started to discuss and develop a thinking around how we can understand learning that is situated, historically rooted, institutionally arranged and individually interpreted. Out of that came the idea of learning designs. And I think that learning design has the advantage of being able to say something about how learning is designed, how we in different situations design learning situations.

Once I also worked in West Africa, in Guinea-Bissau, where I tried to

support a master program in teacher education. Suddenly, after three weeks, everyone disappeared. They went out into the bush, to perform their own rituals that would transform the young boys into men. And that is really another design for education and learning. Perhaps it also points at some parts that are too narrow in our daily talk about education, because education is not only about effective remembering. It is about being incorporated in an environment and being able to do things meaningfully there. And thus it is also related to identity construction. How do you build up an identity as a part of this group? If you are somebody outside the group you are no one in that society, and I think even in our society. If you are out of a group you are none. You do not exist. So I think we should look at our educational system from that point of view. How do we actually construct and develop identities as social members in different fields, with different kinds of competencies and possibilities to take part.

That was one part of the design concept – how we design for. For example we do that through buildings. We have certain kinds of school buildings, but why do we construct these specific buildings? We do it by textbooks or by educational resources on the net. We do it by having teachers with certain kinds of education. We do it by socially grouping pupils. We do it by dividing time in a certain way. We actually design a lot for certain types of education.

But that can not explain what actually is happening for every individual. As I see it, we have to understand how an individual in that situation designs his or her own way and makes that situation meaningful. And that is why it is important for me both to understand the context – what is designed for – and to understand the situation. But not the situation as a separated individual not-connected-to-anything-else situation, but a situation that is related to the situation that was before and that is heading for the situation that will come. And that is why I think that the understanding of sequence – and to analyze sequences in learning in order to understand learning – is very important. That is why we started to discuss in terms of learning design sequences.

FL: You mentioned that you conceptualized the text as the interface between the learner and the educational system. At some point you widened the notion of the interface, since you included all these other aspects.

FL: Yes

FL: When was this and what happened? Was it the meeting with social semiotics?

SS: Yes, it was. I think that perhaps it is because of my peculiar and distant way of looking at things but when I became interested in texts many people reacted and said: “that’s not important”. What is important in school is what the teacher is doing. And I quite couldn’t understand that. The text was seen

as a glass-window – totally transparent and without significance. As we began to study different educational settings it was obviously so that the teacher went by the text very much. That was even the norm for what was going to happen in the tests afterwards. If you are not in school as a student you have to read the text. And you should read that text and not other texts. And then it is interesting to see today, when we have the computer. Suddenly, in school contexts, the text is no longer a given. And suddenly it has become of interest again to study school textbooks again. I find that interesting. The notion of text was for me the verbal text, for a very long time. We worked in a project and there was a teacher in art education who always told me not to forget about the pictures. And I thought “well, she says that out of aesthetic reasons, because it is so important for her”. Then we did a project about Racism and discrimination in school textbooks? and we started to look for verbal expressions of how we humiliated others. As it turned out, we couldn’t find anything like that in the verbal text. And then we looked for more evaluative statements and it was in mostly texts saying either nothing or very positive things. According to the text books immigrants came with labour force; they built up our society; and they brought interesting music, good food and interesting clothing with them.

And then, at a particular time we had all the books on the floor and suddenly we noticed the pictures. And we saw that the black man – most often it was a man – was either naked or half naked. He was sitting on the ground, or on a chair. And the white man was always half a metre higher up, giving things, supporting the black man. All these pictures of Africa reminded of textbook representations of the Stone Age. There were no hospitals, no roads, and no cities. I started to think that those pictures tell us a lot about our relation to the Other. In the pictorial illustration there was another language than in the verbal text. And then I started to think: “what is the most important here?” What they say in the text or what you see, what they “do”, so to say. So that was my first step toward a multimodal understanding, that you have a language in pictorial illustration that differs from the verbal one. It could support, contradict, whatever – it did other things. So I got more and more interested in that: how we express our relation to the world and our engagement in the world through different kinds of modes. That was my first step, to see that pictorial illustration and verbal language are two kinds of expressions, communicative expressions. And then I started also to talk with Theo van Leeuwen and at the time he was becoming interested in three dimensional objects. And then we decided to do this toy project. Toys are also a manifestation, or design, of an understanding of the world. If you go into a toy shop and say “what kind of toys are here? What kind of toys for boys and what kind of toys for girls?” And we detected in that project that dolls are mostly used by boys (!), not by girls: the war dolls. And then of course, today, you have all the different kinds of games. What are they actually telling you about the world and what is good and how can you relate to the world? What is accepted? So that was my travel from the verbal to the pictorial elements to three-dimensional objects and

then, as a next step, was to talk about the museum, which is an institutional arrangement of objects, a collective representation of the world.

It is very interesting when you go into some kind of philosophical scientific thinking you start to see the world in a certain way. And structuralism was like “Aha!” to me. They had an interest of trying to detect basic structures behind or beneath or under what you could see. For Claude Levi Strauss it was very obviously so. He went to Brazil and fifteen years later he wrote *Triste Tropique*. He tried to understand indigenous Brazilian customs in relation to other indigenous people from other parts of the world, and he actually tried to reveal underlying structures. And I remember discussions we had: “Are structures out there?” And then came the critique saying that “well, it is actually we who construct the structure; there is no structure at all out there. We are constructing.” That is a very interesting tension and I was thinking of that now, in trying to understand learning. And I don’t know if you actually solve this problem because there seem to be some structuring principles, some kind of more or less stable pattern. Not structure, but structuring principle.

At the same time it is obviously so that we are constructing and naming aspects of those structuring patterns. And someone else could name some other interesting structuring patterns. And I think that in the scientific work, for me it is important to have the openness for trying to understand this kind of tensions in our thinking, or in my thinking. Why are there uncertainties? What do I think I have explained and what have I not yet explained? And what have I taken for granted in what I explain?

Another thing I would like to mention is that I also started to read hermeneutics at the time, and soon came to Paul Ricœur. What fascinated me was that he could sit for one year and read for example Aristotle and then he could sit one year and read someone else, Augustine for example. And then he says Aristotle talks about poetry and drama and narratives. But he doesn’t talk about time. Augustine talks about time, but he doesn’t talk about narratives. What happens if we take the question of time into the narrative? And then he wrote *Time and Narrative*. For me that was interesting, both because I learnt about earlier thinkers but especially his way of doing it. The openness for different theoretical understandings, as well as for the question: What happens when you relate them to each other out of a new kind of question.

That was very important and encouraging when I started to think “well, I have some basic insights in socio-cultural thinking, I have started to think more social semiotically. What happens if I take the question of conditions for learning and learning processes into these fields?” Socio-cultural theories focus learning and social semiotics communication. But on the other hand they talked about transformations and designs, which socio-cultural theories didn’t talk about. What happens if they meet? So for me, learning design was a meeting point of two traditions, trying to develop – which it seems – something new out of it. And for me that is the most thrilling intellectual adventure. Not to be “in”, to do the right thing, but to challenge the borders. I did that

when I started with the pedagogic texts and I think we do it now, when we go into learning designs. And I must underline that learning designs, in our conceptualization here, is not the same as instruction. It is not the normative part, even though we could say that there is an opening in a design perspective, not only to analysis but also to take part and discuss the conditions for doing things differently. Not to say how they should do it – this is important – but to go into dialogue: what does it mean to think in this way and if we think in this way, what are the consequences for praxis? And that is also one of my concerns here.

In very much contemporary research in education we talk about praxis, without discussing the differences between “praktik” and “praxis”. And I remember, when I read Husserl and then Derrida’s critique of Husserl, because Husserl (at least the young Husserl) had the idea that you could get direct access to reality. And when Derrida talks about *différence* he says there is always something coming between the world and me, and that is language. When I see something my language intervenes and does something to my perception of the world. It’s a very important thing, never talked about in educational contexts. Praxis is just that you get access to reality by talking to those working in that specific field. For me this is problematic, because discursive practices, by way of classifications, symbolic systems and metaphorical expressions, stand between us and what we see and what we do. And to discuss that is a means to discuss the conditions for what you do.

FL: So it’s back to the tree, basically..?

SS: Yes (laughter)

FL: I mean, it’s a good metaphor for the kind of questions that you can always work with.

SS: Yeah

FL: What are you working with right now?

SS: We have published a lot, theoretically and empirically, from the Learn-IT project about digital artefacts seen from a user oriented perspective. Especially aspects like the setting of the scene, designs for and by learners, representations of knowledge, interaction and transformations during Learning Design Sequences and the making of new representations has been used here.

We are about to finish a rather large project about “museums, exhibitions and visitors” where we use a design-theoretic and a multimodal approach to scrutinize exhibition designs, visitors’ involvement and their “signs of” learning

and engagement. Here we also discuss the changed role of the museum as an institution today. This has been part of our cooperation with, besides Umeå University and Kerstin Smeds, the Institute of Education in London, especially with Gunther Kress and Carey Jewitt.

A rather new cooperation has started with DPU in Copenhagen (Aarhus University) and Birgitte Holm Sørensen, concerning theoretic development and research cooperation in relation to a design-theoretic perspective of learning. We will in the future also cooperate around the journal *Designs for Learning* and the biannual conferences. So the next *Designs for Learning*-conference is planned to take place in Copenhagen 2012.

Besides of that we, as a research group, also cooperate with Gunther Kress in London, Roger Säljö in Gothenburg, Birgitte Althans in Trier and Cristoff Wulf in Berlin, and their research groups respectively. We call ourselves “The New Learning Group”, a forum for re-conceptualizing learning in relation to basic questions like: How to cultivate alternative education for future generations? This question entails aspects like: the consequences of cultural diversity, the role of technology/media for learning (not the least in relation to mobile technologies), forms of knowledge, the need for a new conceptualization of the child and of the learner in relation to “agency”. Learning does not only refer to skills and propositional knowledge, but to a wider range of issues related to identity formation.

My interest in conditions for, and ways to, organize and mediate social understanding in a way started with the “tree” outside the university building in Lund. This interest is, as you noticed, still a driving force to me in my work to try to develop “new” (which of course always is a dangerous word) ways to theoretically conceptualize learning in a global and changing world, and to do empirical research out of this perspective.

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Det kommer med tiden. Från lärarstudent till matematiklärare. [It takes time. From teacher student to mathematics teacher]. ELISABETH PERS-SON, Stockholm University.

The main purpose of this thesis is to investigate future pre- and primary school teachers change their approaches to mathematics and mathematics education during their subject studies, and also how this view has affected their teaching of mathematics after graduation. An institutional oriented theory has been used in this work, supplemented by a design theoretical approach. The following methodologies have been used: a qualitative interview method, observations, field notes, sound recordings, video recorded mathematics classes and learning resources produced by the teacher.

The results show that the vocabulary about mathematics teaching and learning had changed over time. But whilst the mathematics education gave a consistent image of mathematics teaching, this image was confronted with quite another picture of mathematics education and collaborative work in schools. These two types of activities were conceptualized as different “thought styles” and resulted in the fact that the students felt insecure. However, this insecurity became much less stressed after they had been working one or two years in the schools.

Att ge form åt musikaliska gestaltningar. En social-semiotisk studie av körledares multimodala kommunikation i kör. [Shaping musical performances. A social semiotic study of choir conductors' multimodal communication in choir]. RAGNHILD SANDBERG JURSTRÖM, University of Gothenburg.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify and describe how musical interpretations and performances are semiotically designed and performed by choir conductors in their interaction with choir singers during rehearsals and concerts.

Theoretically, the multimodal perspective is combined with the perspective of designs for learning in terms of representations, transformation processes and the forming of new representations and performances.

The data consists of video-recorded rehearsals and concerts with six Swedish professional choir conductors and their choirs. The video films are transcribed with focus on gestures, gazes, body movements, singing etc.

This thesis brings light to the complexity and multiplicity of an audiovisual culture, and shows among other things a collective and local musical language is constructed, but also the role of productive leadership.

