Always on Duty: 
The Contradictory Working Conditions of Online Tutors

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Abstract
This paper discusses the working conditions of teachers who work in online higher and adult education. It is based on questionnaire data from Swedish Net university teachers and an analysis of online postings in a sample of online courses in Swedish adult education. Our analysis suggests that a major consequence of going online is that the anticipated collective exchange of experience is marginalised and replaced by increased individualism. Meeting the ‘needs of the student’ means that the teacher is always on duty in a pedagogical call centre and giving more time to individual students than to the collective. Is this phenomenon an artefact of our research methods? Is it a transient consequence of the introduction of online education? Or is it a function of the highly individualised society that celebrates this consumer-led ‘always on duty’ culture of teaching?

Introduction
Higher education in Sweden is increasingly dependent on the market of students. Universities have had to redefine their activities and innovate to attract students. Accordingly, a competitive educational market has developed in Sweden. And competition for students has become a core activity in Swedish higher education. This has led to a change in the power relations among academics in higher education: “the once unquestioned right to decide the canons of professional skill and competence [is] fast slipping out of their hands” (Bauman, 2001, p. 130).

Among their innovations in the competition for students, universities have turned to distance education using information and communication technologies. Equally, there has been a convergence of adult education and university education, insofar as adult education can provide courses that give students access to higher education. Thus, the Swedish Net university operates in tandem with adult education on the net.

During the twentieth century Swedish adult education offered the possibility of personal and collective self-education for citizens who lacked other pathways of social mobility. This educational activity came to be known as folkbildning. It highlighted the role of study circles, book boxes and circulating libraries through which participants could read, listen, and discuss science, literature and current affairs. A feature of folkbildning was the emphasis placed on group meetings and discussion as a means of developing, collectively, participants’ knowledge and competence. Thus folkbildning acquired a democratic responsibility. But how was this responsibility to be sustained when folkbildning transferred face-to-face meetings to online face-to-interface transactions?
In general, educational practice never takes place in a vacuum. It is always mediated by changes in the circumstances of teaching and learning. In this case, digitalisation has redefined what constitutes a teacher, and what counts as teaching (cf. Castells’, 1998, view of how technology has impacted generally on work processes). Such mediation, following the work of Marshall McLuhan, has given rise to a fundamental truth of educational history: instrumentation affects orientation.

Our starting point is that online education has fostered an orientation among tutors that can be described as an ‘always on duty’ or ‘call centre’ culture. But what is the wider significance of this orientation? Is it evidence of an intensification or proletarianisation of the working conditions of teachers? This view stems from a critique of the ‘scientific management’ ideas popularised by Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911). Such critiques can be found, variously, in Raymond Callahan’s Education and the Cult of Efficiency (1962), Harry Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital (1974), and Easthope and Easthope’s “Intensification, extension and complexity of teachers’ workload” (2000). Intensification, then, is linked to a lack of time to update skills, a diversification of expertise, and a shift from time spent with students to time spent on administrative tasks (Hargreaves, cited in Easthope & Easthope, 2000, p. 44). This intensification argument is also supported by Swedish studies of higher education teachers (Högskoleverket, 2003; Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2002). Further, this intensification is claimed to be greater in online teaching, with researchers claiming that online teaching is more time-consuming (e.g., Bennet & Lockyer, 2004; Gustafsson & Gibbs, 2000). Nevertheless, Bates and Poole (2003) suggest that this last consequence arises from the fact that in online education, as in the remainder of higher education, the unit of resource (i.e., the staff/student ratio) has reduced.

The validity of intensification arguments, however, is limited. While the unit of resource may have changed in Sweden, official statistics also suggest that teachers have adjusted their class-contact times in accordance with their contracted working hours (i.e., larger classes are met less frequently). Intensification arguments are also troubled by the lack of comparative, before-and-after data and by the fact that such claims emanate from critics selectively seeking data to support their pre-conceptions. Overall, then, it is difficult to substantiate the claim that successive generations of teachers have worked harder than their predecessors. Accordingly, we examine a more limited claim in this paper — namely, that successive generations have merely worked differently.

The call centre or always on duty orientation derives, we feel, from the attempt to relate education more closely to industry, its ideals of economic rationalism and the ‘audit’ culture that has grown up around these practices (see, for instance, Power, 1999). The assumption is that education practices, and their associated human relations, can be coordinated in the same way as a moving production line. At the same time, there is a celebration of flexible learning in fluid times. It is claimed that students are able to choose the time, place, speed and form of their studies. In the process, they acquire an online ‘presence’ which upsets conventional educational relationships. The following paper discusses one instance of educational mediation at the turn of the 21st century — the working conditions of tutors in higher and adult education.
The Studies

Our analysis, as noted, derives from a study of online adult education in Sweden and a questionnaire study of Swedish Net university teachers. The data in the adult education study were collected 2002 and more than 3500 postings from eight online adult education courses in Sweden were analysed (earlier results have been published in Hult, Hamilton, Dahlgren, & Söderström, 2005; Söderström, Hamilton, Dahlgren, & Hult, 2006).

The eight courses were organised via the Internet and included both award-bearing and non award-bearing courses. Communication was organised with the help of a version of so-called ‘forum’ or ‘conference’ software known as FirstClass. A range of ‘conferences’, where participants could confer, was created on the basis of the course content and task-related conferences and ‘café’ sites were created where participants could work on common topics and contribute to the life of the course.

The courses examined in our study varied in length between 10 and 17 weeks, the total number of course members was 111, the number of participants per course ranged from 9 to 22, and the course guide expected participants to communicate, via message posting, for about five hours per week.

The second study was an evaluation study of Swedish Net university teachers, initially reported in Söderström and Westerberg (2005). A electronic questionnaire was distributed in 2005 to 310 teachers on 27 two-year or longer university programmes. The questionnaire focused on the teachers’ experiences of ICT-based distance education. They were asked to judge statements, for instance, on course organisation, course communication, and their own and the students’ course work. Questionnaire responses were received from 158 teachers (51%).

Findings

Activity Patterns Online
The adult education courses reveal that course postings were spread out over the whole week, with least activity at weekends. One explanation is that the students worked to a weekly rhythm linked to weekly tasks, whose results were communicated to the teachers according to that rhythm.

The responses of the Net university teachers, however, did not reflect the same pattern. Thirty-one percent reported working more at weekends, while 45% reported the opposite (Söderström & Westerberg, 2005).
Besides their weekly working rhythm, the postings of the adult education teachers also
demonstrated that they also worked irregular hours (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Teacher and Student Posting Activity during the Week (%)
Sixty-seven percent of their postings were made during the conventional working day for Swedish university teachers (08.00–17.00hrs, in Sweden). Thirty-three percent of the teachers’ postings were made outside these hours. And 42% of the Net university teachers reported that they spent more time working outside the conventional working day when teaching on online courses than when they taught face-to-face, on-campus courses. In sum, the activity patterns illustrate in general that online teachers’ work was biased towards outside of conventional working hours.

Communication Patterns

These activity patterns are easily interpreted if we consider how online teaching is organised. What is apparent from the posting data is that the teachers were very active. The 8 adult education teachers contributed almost 30% of the course postings compared to the 111 students. And 50% of the Net university teachers judged that they were active on daily basis on the Internet, compared to 19% of their students. Besides contributing most of the postings, the teachers also read all postings from the students, something which was not essential for the students. Indeed, 26% of the adult education students who posted messages during the first month did not read any other students’ postings (Söderström et al., 2006). By comparison, Net university teachers estimated that 25% of the students read other students’ messages.

Furthermore, the teachers had a direct impact on course communication. Thirty percent of the adult education teachers’ postings initiated a new line of discussion or a new topic, whereas only 13% of the student postings took this form (Hult et al., 2005). Similarly, 23% of the Net university teachers were of the opinion that initiating discussions in online courses took more of their time than in comparable face-to-face, on-campus courses; and they estimated that only 30% of their Net university students had initiated a new topic.

When it comes to patterns of communication, more than 70% of the Net university teachers said that their feedback was predominantly on students’ posting and course content. A majority (57%) of them felt that student postings were primarily directed towards themselves (Söderström & Westerberg, 2005). Nevertheless, 30% were also of that opinion that students also communicated with other students. A majority (55%) of the Net university teachers also commented that individual feedback was more time consuming than face-to-face, on-campus courses. Posting data from the adult education courses suggests that 24% of the students’ messages were directed to the teacher and 32% to the other students and that the remainder was directed to all participants, teachers as well as students.

Response time data from both adult education and Net university courses show that teachers responded promptly to students’ messages, with a majority of responses sent within 24 hours (see Table 1).
Table 1: Teachers’ Response Times to Postings

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Response times</th>
<th>Net University teachers (%)</th>
<th>Adult education Teachers (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within 24 hours</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3 days</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3 days</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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The empirical data for the adult education courses shows that the students’ responses were not as swift as the teachers’, with 32% taking more than three days.

To sum up: data from Swedish adult education and Net University courses portrays teachers’ work as a major part of the activities associated with online courses. Moreover, teachers’ work not only steers such courses, much of it also takes place outside the conventional working day.

**Discussion**

Our analysis is based on a small sample of courses. In addition, we are aware of that the data collected in each study are not equivalent since they comprised, respectively, postings and questionnaire responses. Equally, our data do not support the claim that, in itself, online education is more time consuming than other forms of teaching (Bennet & Lockyer, 2004; Gustafsson & Gibbs, 2000). Instead they raises a variety of second-order, or pedagogical, questions about online education, themselves related to the ‘always on duty’ or ‘call-centre’ orientation of teachers. In the remainder of this paper, then, we comment on our data from such a perspective. Moreover, we would argue that even if our results are merely straws in the wind they may point to an approaching and educationally regressive reality.

The results from this study seem to indicate that the collective exchange of experience between students is marginalised. It is in the process of being replaced by increased individualism, which has consequences for how teaching is enacted (Dahlgren, Hult, Söderström & Hamilton, 2004; Lindberg & Olofsson, 2005). This pedagogic displacement can be understood in the light of theories about late-modernity, an epoch where individuals are confronted with increased demands, that they take greater responsibility for organising and managing their lives. The earlier responsibilities of the state, church and other welfare organisations have been transferred to the sphere of personal responsibility (e.g., Bauman, 1991, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991, 1996). Value systems that, previously, had been stable and enduring are now in transition — a state of affairs that contributes to the feelings of uncertainty (and intensification) that pervade late-modernity:

Every single orientation point that made the world look solid and favoured logic in selecting life strategies: the jobs, the skills, human partnerships, models of
propriety and decorum, visions of health and disease, values to be worth pursuing and the proved ways of pursuing them — all these and many more once stable orientation points seem to be in flux. (Bauman, 2001, p. 125)

One source of uncertainty in late-modernity is the emphasis given to individual responsibility and personalised learning. For example, when the Swedish Centre for Flexible Learning was created in 2002, it launched itself under the banner: New times, New Learning (Swedish Centre for Flexible Learning, 2002). Flexible learning, it suggested, should be:

an educational form where great attention is given to the student’s own circumstances and wishes. Flexible learning gives the student the possibility to chose the time, place, speed and form of their studies. The individual stands in the centre; the organisation changes its pedagogy, structure and technique to meet the needs of the student.

Is it logically possible for students to chose time, place, speed and form of their studies if they are to become part of a community of practice and engaged in the practices of a so-called ‘good meeting’? Do the wishes of the students mean that they meet their own needs at the expense of others? The data described above supports this view. Meeting the ‘needs of the student’ means that the teacher is always on duty in a pedagogical call centre (Gustafson & Gibbs, 2000). Such an education becomes individualised — a situation where the collective may be seen as irrelevant to the individual's search for self-education. Students are more like customers of an online learning service than members of an online learning community. ICT-based education, in this respect, mediates the commodification of education, in the same way that Braverman claim that the capitalist mode of production also impoverishes collective learning in favour of activities that corresponds to the needs and desires of its stake-holders (Braverman, 1974, p. 82) As a result, teaching is oriented towards delivering a commodity among other commodities (Bauman, 2001, p. 135).

Communication is reduced, that is, to a form of consumerism. Education is the exchange of information rather than a process that fosters knowledge creation. Students strive for immediate responses which confirm their self-identity, while the teachers’ adaptive behaviour fosters a “highly reactive teaching strategy.” A hazardous learning situation arises where dialogue is reduced to forms of contact that correspond to the transmission of signals, rather than the exchange of meaning (Resnyansky, 2002). Easthope and Easthope point out:

The demands in terms of increased workload and teacher stress are such that teachers will be forced to adapt to changes imposed upon them. (2000, p. 55)

The pedagogical consequence of this one-to-one communication is, we suggest, that there is no collective exchange of experience between students and consequently no learning community (Söderström et al., 2006). The more teachers work to satisfy their students’ immediate demands, the less time they have for creating learning communities and fostering higher forms of learning. Constructivist dialogue, based on the negotiation or recreation of meaning is limited, in our cases, to a minority of students. Consequently, both student learning and student satisfaction are jeopardised (Trimbur, 1989, p. 607).
The new work force of higher education comprises, in Castells’ terminology, ‘project’ men and women who are expected to adapt flexibly to new challenges. In other words, they are to act pragmatically, like call centre workers. They have short-term goals (sorting out the students’ problems), such that they have limited opportunities to pay attention to the long-term, developmental or cultural values of higher education or lifelong learning (i.e., Bildung). Reactive teaching, where the delivery of information takes priority over the exchange of meaning, may have the consequence of repressing the C in ICT, driving educational practice back to the mechanistic, behaviourist and, ultimately, dehumanized routines of programmed learning.

At times, distance education has been projected as part of the progressive forward march of modernity (Evans, 1995, p. 169). But even, as suggested above, the most progressive forward march can turn on itself. If there is a place for C in ICT, then there is also a place for educators to be reactive and reflective. As Evans reminds us, “educators and researchers have important parts to play in shaping the emerging late-modern forms of education, and thereby, of shaping late-modernity itself” (1995, p. 177).

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References


